Art in Public

Politics, Economics, and a Democratic Culture

Why should governments provide funding for the arts? What do the arts contribute to daily life? Do artists and their publics have a social responsibility? Challenging questionable assumptions about the state, the arts, and a democratic society, Lambert Zuidervaart presents a vigorous case for government arts funding, based on crucial contributions the arts make to civil society. He argues that the arts contribute to democratic communication and a social economy, fostering the critical and creative dialogue that a democratic society needs. Informed by the author's experience leading a nonprofit arts organization as well as his expertise in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, this book proposes an entirely new conception of the public role of art with wide-ranging implications for education, politics, and cultural policy.

Lambert Zuidervaart is Professor of Philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, and an Associate Member of the Graduate Faculty in Philosophy at the University of Toronto. He is the former president of the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His book *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* (1991) was the first major study in English on Adorno's aesthetics. His most recent books with Cambridge University Press – *Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure* (2004) and *Social Philosophy after Adorno* (2007) – received Symposium Book Awards from the Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521130172

First published 2011

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
Zuidervaart, Lambert
Art in public: politics, economics, and a democratic culture / Lambert Zuidervaart.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-521-11274-1 – ISBN 978-0-521-13017-2 (pbk.)
1. Goverment aid to the arts. 2 Democracy and the arts.
3. Arts and society. 1. Title.
NX720.Z85 2011
700.1′03–dc22 2010030603

ISBN 978-0-521-11274-1 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-13017-2 Paperback

For Ron Otten

You are a gift.

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Preface

The initial impetus for this book came from my study of Theodor W. Adorno's socially critical and modernist aesthetics. I argued in *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* that his conception of artistic truth has much to offer aesthetics today, but it employs an autonomist theory of art that is both flawed and outdated. In making this argument I drew on Jürgen Habermas's insights into the paradoxes of modernization. Yet I found Habermas's social philosophy insufficiently attuned to the concerns of contemporary artists.

Having learned from both Adorno and Habermas, I set out to develop a social philosophy of the arts that addresses cultural controversies. This has required two volumes. The first, titled *Artistic Truth*, examines the aesthetic, linguistic, and epistemological frameworks of contemporary art. Discussing both analytic and continental philosophies, it weds Adorno's idea of artistic truth with Habermas's emphasis on communicative rationality, while modifying both. The second volume is the book you are now reading. *Art in Public* provides a social philosophical context for the first volume's claims about artistic truth, and it employs those claims to develop a new understanding of art's role in civil society. Together the two volumes aim to provide a comprehensive critical theory that breaks the grip of modernist aesthetics without discounting the importance of modernist ideas.

Early indications of what this aim entails occurred in two essays published in 2000. Substantial portions of Chapters 8 and 9 herein stem from these essays: Chapter 8 from "Creative Border Crossing in

New Public Culture," in *Literature and the Renewal of the Public Sphere*, edited by Susan VanZanten Gallagher and Mark D. Walhout (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); and Chapter 9 from "Postmodern Arts and the Birth of a Democratic Culture," in *The Arts, Community and Cultural Democracy*, edited by Lambert Zuidervaart and Henry Luttikhuizen (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000). These materials are reproduced here with the permission of Palgrave Macmillan. Linda Nemec Foster's poem "Immigrant Children at Union School," quoted in Chapter 8, comes from her collection *Amber Necklace from Gdansk: Poems* and is used with the permission of Louisiana State University Press. I thank these publishers for their permissions.

Nancy Fraser once observed that cultural theorizing in North America is "largely dissociated from social theorizing." She urged critical theorists to adopt a "bivalent" approach, one that integrates "the social and the cultural, the economic and the discursive." Although many scholars now recognize the need for a bivalent approach, surprisingly few work it out in detail. It rarely occurs among philosophers who specialize in aesthetics. This book and its companion volume aim to be an exception. They seek to provide a cross-disciplinary philosophy of the arts that addresses not only issues within philosophy and the humanities but also questions of social theory and cultural policy.

Although *Art in Public* discusses social scientific literature and cultural policy debates, my approach is theoretical rather than empirical. I am especially interested in uncovering and elaborating conceptual frameworks. Rather than simply take one side in ongoing debates about government funding for the arts, for example, I ask what the advocates and opponents assume with respect to the arts, the state, and a democratic society. I also offer a normative critique, questioning the social vision within various theoretical models and policy positions and articulating a different social vision. Both commentary and critique serve a constructive purpose. I aim to develop a new sociocultural theory, spelling out the premises and conclusions not only of the positions I challenge but also of the positions I hold.

Philosophical interventions in public debates about cultural policies cannot be neutral. Necessarily philosophers will have positions that align them with one side or another, and preferably they will

announce and defend those positions. As a scholar, as a citizen, and as a participant in the arts, I have political and cultural allegiances, and these inform my views about cultural policies and the theoretical questions they raise. Yet I disavow narrow-minded partisanship. Intellectual integrity and the norms of democratic discourse require that a scholar who addresses issues of public debate does so with care, attending to possible objections and alternative voices, and acknowledging genuine insights, no matter where these arise. The persons with whom one disagrees, and the institutions one criticizes, should receive the same degree of respect to be claimed for one's own contribution. I hope to have shown such respect in the current volume.

Perhaps there was a time in North American public life when a scholar's explicit denial of nonneutrality would not have been acceptable, just as an explicit disavowal of narrow-mindedness would not have been necessary. If there was such a time, it has faded into cultural myth or memory, calling forth mixed interpretations. Whereas for some the new forms of positional and oppositional inquiry signal intellectual decay and societal fragmentation, for others they promise an era of intellectual creativity and societal transformation. I incline toward the second reading. At the same time, however, I share a concern that the new forms of inquiry will not sustain genuine creativity unless intellectuals and the cultural institutions they inhabit forge new patterns of democratic discourse and inculcate an ethos of mutual recognition.

Two organizations in particular have nurtured this concern. They have also taught me what socioculturally engaged and cross-disciplinary inquiry should be like. The first is the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) in Toronto. I have been associated with ICS for nearly forty years, originally as a graduate student and most recently as a faculty member. ICS is an independent graduate school for interdisciplinary philosophy with sources in a transformational branch of Dutch Calvinism. Most of ICS's operating income comes from members and supporters who have not attended graduate school but enthusiastically endorse the organization's mission. While this fact makes ICS vulnerable to economic pressures, it also fosters an ethos of collaboration and commitment that is unusual in the academic world. Combined with ICS's conviction that philosophy should address the central issues of life and society in dialogue with

other disciplines, this ethos makes ICS an incubator for the sort of inquiry that I pursue. Were it not for my long association with ICS, I might never have dreamed up this book, not to mention actually writing much of it during the release time ICS granted.

My association with the second organization began more recently but has had an equally profound impact on my scholarship. As the preface to *Artistic Truth* mentions, my interactions in the 1990s with artists, volunteers, staff, board members, and a broader public at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts (UICA) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, have permeated my reflections about the role of art in civil society. This is readily apparent in the current book, where several examples come from my experience as UICA's board president and capital campaign co-chair, including the "UICA Story" told in Chapter 6. This experience has convinced me that vibrant civic-sector organizations are crucial in a democratic society and that art needs such organizations in order to thrive. Like ICS, UICA has demonstrated patterns of democratic discourse and mutual recognition that socioculturally engaged scholarship and art require. Here I simply record with appreciation my indebtedness to both organizations.

I also am grateful for funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The Standard Research Grant I received from SSHRC supported the work of three doctoral candidates at ICS: Allyson Carr, Michael DeMoor, and Matthew Klaassen. I thank all three of them for their valuable research and timely advice. Matt also prepared the index for this book, as he had done for *Artistic Truth* and for *Social Philosophy after Adorno*, a book published in 2007 that articulates the central ideas in my social philosophy.

Last year Matt and Allyson joined me in organizing a conference at ICS, co-sponsored by the Centre for Ethics at the University of Toronto, on "The Arts and Social Responsibility." Held in March 2009, this conference provided a congenial setting to explore themes that *Art in Public* makes prominent. I wish to thank all of the conference participants for their lively and informed discussions, especially keynote speaker Mary Devereaux and fellow panelists Sara Diamond, president of the Ontario College of Art and Design, and Melissa Williams, director of the Centre for Ethics at the University of Toronto.

My colleague Rebekah Smick chaired our conference panel. Rebekah occupies the position at ICS in Philosophy of the Arts and Culture once held by Calvin Seerveld. Cal, who has been my mentor since I began graduate studies at ICS in 1972, offered extensive and insightful comments on several draft chapters. I am grateful to both Rebekah and Cal for their encouragement and support. I also am thankful for the love and understanding of Joyce Recker, my partner for life. Perhaps more than anything else, Joyce's work as an artist and volunteer at UICA in the 1990s inspired my conception of art in public.

Twenty years ago, on the occasion of my fortieth birthday, I received a present from Ron Otten. He gave me *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* by Lewis Hyde. Inscribed on the inside cover of the book are the following words: "Lambert, you are a gift." That present and Ron's friendship launched a voyage of philosophical and sociocultural exploration that only now is reaching a harbor.

In the immediately preceding years, Ron had received an MFA in acting at York University. Convinced, as Hyde was, that the arts are primarily gifts, not commodities, he then established a new not-for-profit troupe in Toronto. The Joker Man Theatre Company did not last long. During its final months Ron and Joyce and I, along with our cat Ebony and dog Rosa, lived together for a semester in Toronto. I taught at ICS, Joyce pursued her art projects, and Ron worked for TVO, a provincially funded broadcaster. As the three of us shared meals and daily conversations, and as we watched with mounting frustration the destructive spectacle now known as the "First Gulf War," the compass for this book was set.

In subsequent years my travels frequently took me to Amsterdam, where Ron had moved. Conversations with him there provided the inspiration and challenge I needed to continue the journey he had helped me begin. Now, with the end in sight, and on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, I take delight in returning his favor. I inscribe this book to him: Ron, you are a gift.

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June 17, 2010