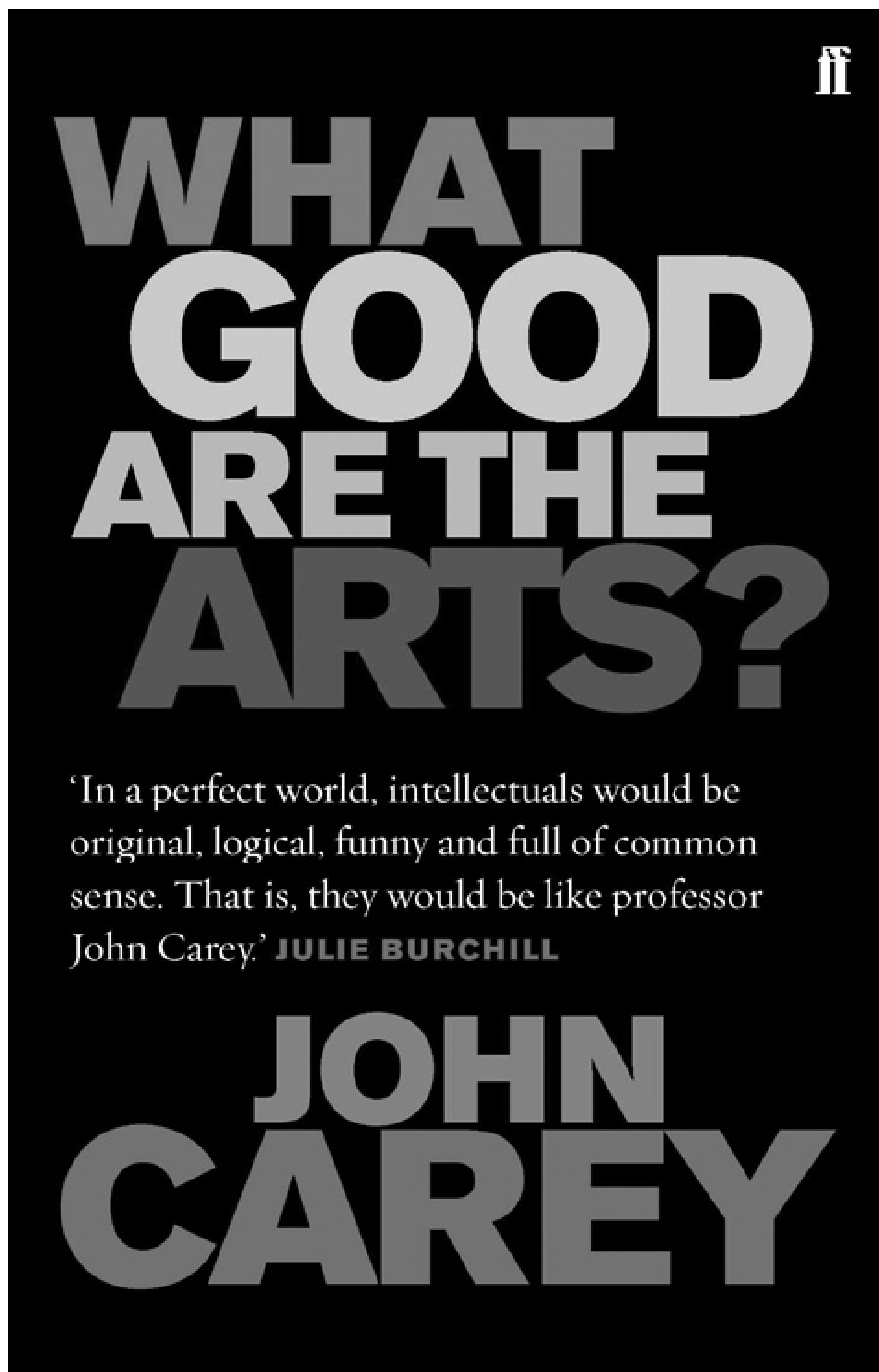
# Late Expectations




Both pages: Front covers for John Carey's *What Good Are The Arts?*

PETER SUCHIN

John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?*, Faber, 2005 ISBN: 0571226027

"My answer to the question 'What is a work of art?'", writes John Carey in the opening chapter of *What Good Are the Arts?* is "a work of art is anything that anyone has ever considered a work of art, though it may be art only for that person." "Further", he continues, "the reason for considering anything a work of art will be as various as the variety of human beings. So far as I can see this is the only definition wide enough to take in, on the one hand, the *Primavera* and the Mass in C, and on the other, a can of human excrement and a child's blue-painted tie." (: 29–30)

The last example in this list is an imaginary object borrowed from the pages of Arthur Danto, whose influential, pseudo-Duchampian ideas pertaining to the intentionality of the artist Carey is keen to dispute. Danto has consistently argued that the only common property of the multifarious things we now term 'works of art' is their very labelling as such things; it is the fact that they have been designated as artworks that conveys cohesion upon an otherwise entirely disparate body of objects. But Danto supplies a proviso—in his view it is the artist's intentions which carry, along with the authority of established art institutions, the power to transfigure commonplace objects. The tie painted by the child as a gift for his father is not, in Danto's account, a work of art at all, since the child had no intention of producing 'art'. Although Carey spends many pages criticising Danto's ideas as well as various other models or definitions of art he never gets beyond his own irritatingly tautological assertion that art is anything anyone says it is, the emphasis on *anyone* being his somewhat trite contribution to this now rather tired debate. I call it trite because it is solipsistic and unconvincing. Although it clearly is the case that the definition of what may be the constituent elements of a work of art has expanded greatly over the last hundred or so years, it is not at all apparent that the pertinent institutions, including that of the artist him or herself, have undergone a parallel democratisation. Indeed, it could well be argued that art as an *institution* is more entrenched than ever, with all those things that we today place together under the umbrella of conceptual art only being regarded as such because the bodies of which the artworld is comprised have such a powerful hold. "Works of art", suggested Roger Taylor in 1978, "are identifiable as such simply because the social processes, within the form of life that art is, have fixed onto them the label 'art'... art, now, is nothing over and above what the... high-bourgeoisie... the group that manufactures the ideology of the class... calls art...".[1] This view echoes that of Danto and like Danto Taylor understands that it is meaningless to claim that the ability to label something as art is void of a mechanism that would make such conferrals 'stick'. Carey refuses to recognise or admit that the giving of the status of art is extremely tightly controlled, perhaps because he would then have to admit to being a member of this privileged group. To claim that art is anything anyone wants it to be may appear rampantly democratic but it is simply not true.

*What Good Are the Arts?* is a pompous title and Carey's account is indeed pompous and self-serving. The volume is in two sections, the first a long haul through a series of arguments about the visual arts in a sustained effort to debunk both the arguments and art itself, the second proffering the view that "literature is superior to the other arts and can do things they cannot do." (footnote: 173) Part One is comprised of chapters asking 'What is a work of art?', 'Is 'high' art superior?', 'Can science help?', 'Do the arts make us better?' and 'Can art be a religion?' In Part Two ("The Case for Literature") we are given chapters on 'Literature and critical intelligence' and 'Creative reading: Literature and indistinctness'. As their headings imply, the chapters in the first section of the book take us through a series of complicated questions regarding the value of art, its meaning and practical purpose vis-à-vis human history, and social exchange. But why exactly a neat, academic definition of art is, in the first place, required is never explained, 'art' being presented as some kind of scurrilously evasive mystery that requires comfortable classification. Arguing that art can be anything one says it is does not prevent Carey from chasing after the elusive monster in order to pin it to the deck. He runs through a substantial range of

historically-important figures in philosophy and criticism (Schopenhauer, Kant and Greenberg are but three examples), sneers at them, then moves on to tackle anthropological and religious interpretations of the place and function of art. The matter of 'high' and 'low' artistic forms is also addressed—popular art, we are told, "emphasises belonging, and so seeks to restore the cohesion of the hunter-gatherer group." (: 36) Carey can't just let artistic practices be there as part of human life—everything has to be laden with gravitas and meaningfulness and brute functionality.

The problem with much of *What Good Are the Arts?* is the attitude enshrined in the title of the book itself. Carey's radar is always out to receive confirmation of his idea that art is pragmatically engaged, and this despite his emphatic scepticism over art *per se*. Rather than look at art itself he mainly focuses upon what various 'experts' have written about it, checking their overt generalisations against his own. X claims such and such—no, he's wrong; Y suggests this or that— no, she's wrong too. Abstract art, he declares, is, as with music, void of all meaning, so interpretations are of no use either. When you get to Part Two and Carey fleshes out his belief —a very subjective belief as he repeatedly notes—that the most important of all the arts can only be literature, it comes as no surprise. Carey is, the book's dust jacket informs us, "a professor of literature at Oxford", and much of the second section is an extended but conventional exercise in literary criticism. This is somewhat disappointing given the totalising import of Carey's overall approach.

The central claim made in Part Two for literature's value and importance has two key aspects. In the first place, literature is the most indistinct of the arts and it is this volatile but racy vagueness which "empowers the reader… my thesis is that literary indistinctness generates multiple individual readings…" (: 214) This production of plural readings, Carey emphases, is a good thing:

> *As the indistinctness of a text increases, so the reader's imaginative effort has to intensify. In extreme cases, the reader has to take on almost all the responsibility for giving the text meaning.* (: 224)

The second aspect of literature that Carey foregrounds is to do with the role it plays as regards cognition and critique:

> *literature is a field of comparisons and contrasts, spreading infinitely outwards, so that whatever we read constantly modifies, adapts, questions or abnegates whatever we have read before. All we can be sure of—and this is what makes it different from all the other arts—is that moral questions will never be far away.* (: 195)

And, furthermore,

> *literature gives you ideas to think with. It stocks your mind. It does not indoctrinate, because diversity, counter-argument, reappraisal and qualification are its essence. But it supplies the materials for thought. Also, because it is the only art capable of criticism, it encourages questioning, and self-questioning.* (: 208)

Then we get a blast of the canon—Bacon, Johnson and Swift, Milton and Keats, Donne and Conrad; "Shakespeare, of course, has more ideas than any other writer" (: 247). Well, of course. Carey does supply a summary of what he means by 'literature' but it is not very satisfactory. "My definition of literature is writing that I want to remember—not for its content alone, as one might remember a computer manual, but for itself: those particular words in that particular order." (: 173–74) English literature as a model, which is really what Carey is proposing as the only right and true road to self-knowledge, is not, however, the only entity to which his thumbnail definition might apply. One might cite in its place the work of any number of writers (whether 'literary' or not). As for his description of the indistinct as a formal mode which through its openness encourages the individualism of the reader, Carey manages to avoid any mention of the most obvious proponents of the openly productive text—Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Mikhail Bakhtin (especially his work on Dostoevsky), or even William Empson, who celebrated the matter of the polysemic poem in his seminal *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, first published in 1930.

In the end, then, it is the usual cast of 'Great Works' that Carey promotes here—precisely those texts that need no further reiteration or defence. Although Carey makes a good case for the importance of reading as a means to inculcate a critical and interrogative attitude towards both literature and the broader culture in which this discipline resides, all he does, finally, is shore up the established hierarchies, and this notwithstanding his occasional asides in defence of the self-educated, super-literate worker or his attacks on the British Art's Council's entrenched snobbery. He points out, for example, that:

> *The contention that the money available for the arts should be reserved for 'quality institutions' such as the Royal Opera House, rather than being spread through the whole community, automatically relegates the public to the role of passive art-worshipper. It is not a decision that would be countenanced in any other area. The proposal, for example, that the money available for education should in future be spent only on the supremely gifted would immediately arouse opposition.* (: 255–56)

This critical strand to the book might have been further expanded at the (welcome) shredding of some of the more tortuous, philosophically sloppy passages therein. Carey repeatedly directs us, for example, to the concept of imagination without ever explaining what precisely he might mean by such a term. And just what exactly is he going on about in the following passage?

> *Sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures in literature are all indefinite compared to photographs or symphony concerts, but this means that they are reader-adjustable. As we read, we draw on our personal memory-store of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures, and this adds to our sense that the text belongs to us.* (: 238)

Visual and aural works of art are no less 'indefinite' that Carey's (notably capitalised) 'Literature'. His little dig at the ultra-vagueness of conceptual art in the closing pages of *What Good Are the Arts?* could be applied without too much tweaking to many other art practices. Carey's general reading of the arts frequently misses the point as far as the recognition of art as a material practice is concerned. It is too literal and literary, overly caught up in ways of looking that neglect the particularity of those arts he regards as being, in effect, no good.[2] To defend reading and literacy in a culture that is increasingly dominated by the *reductio ad absurdum* of the corporate and the commercial is no bad thing, but dismissing the visual arts in the process is a cheap—and I would suggest unnecessary—shot.[3]

Notes

[1] Roger L Taylor, *Art, an Enemy of the People*, Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1978: 49

[2] Roland Barthes, in his brief but important essay 'Rhetoric of the Image', states that precisely the opposite of what Carey claims for the visual image and for writing, is true. It is the visual image that is indeterminate, ambiguous, open to the drift of meaning that Carey so passionately wants to be the province of the written word. The text is included in Barthes' *Image–Music–Text*, London: Fontana, 1977

[3] For a theory of reading and thinking that takes its incentive from the visual, as opposed to the textual sphere, see Gregory Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology: Post(e) Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985