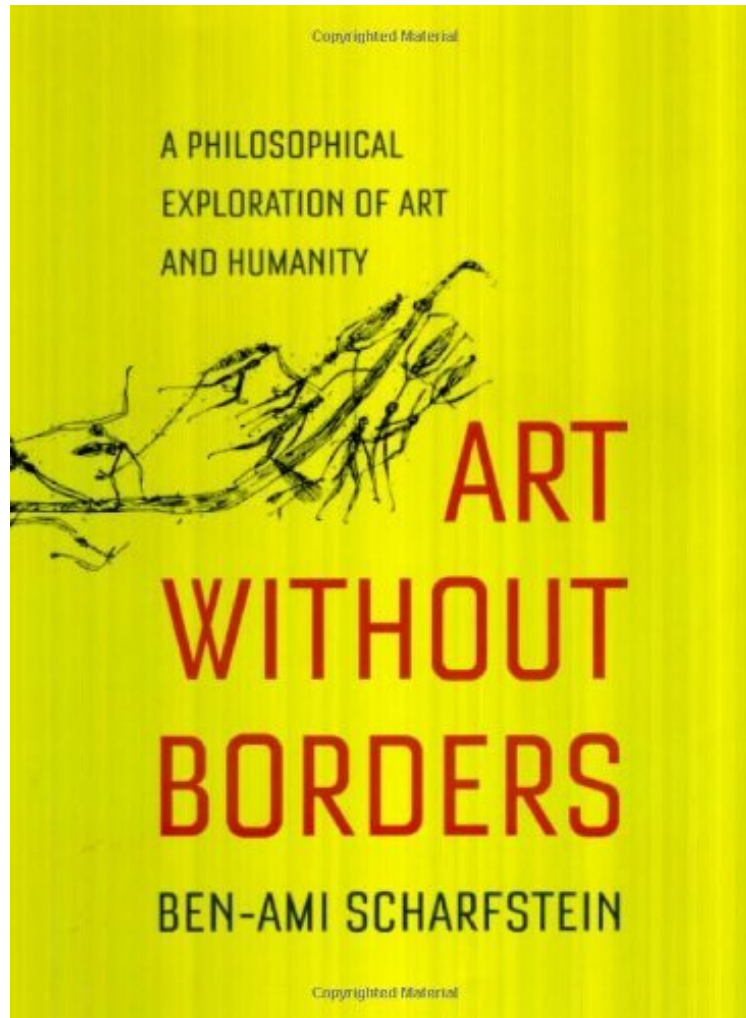


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Art Without Borders: A Philosophical Exploration of Art and Humanity

Ben-Ami Scharfstein

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Ben-Ami Scharfstein : Art Without Borders: A Philosophical Exploration of Art and Humanity before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Art Without Borders: A Philosophical Exploration of Art and Humanity:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Unique and Indispensable Contribution to Aesthetics By Jerome Langguth I am currently working my way through Ben-Ami Scharfstein's Art Without Borders, and my impression thus far is that this is one of the most important works in aesthetics to be published in the last fifty years. Scharfstein makes a quite compelling case for what he calls an open aesthetics, or "a view of aesthetics that is in principle relevant to all cultures". Scharfstein's knowledge of the anthropological literature relevant to this theme is quite staggering, and his use of examples of traditional art forms and practices from a wide variety of cultures makes this book

indispensable if one is interested in the human meaning of art. Every page is rich with provocative ideas and examples, and Scharfstein skillfully weaves together the anthropological material with a subtle and convincing philosophical aesthetics. I also very much appreciate the careful way in which Scharfstein makes use of interesting recent work in the area of "neuroaesthetics." Scharfstein treats this material as valuable and illuminating, while at the same time avoiding any kind of reductionism. 13 of 16 people found the following review helpful. Answer to NobodyBy B. Scharfstein

Answer to "Nobody" As uncomfortable as Nobody's review makes me feel, I can begin my answer with an honest compliment: I believe that he is, in his words, an "ardent amateur" and, like myself, full of curiosity about the subjects that interest him. He must be, as I have been for a lifetime, an incessant reader, and if he goes on, as he plans, to an MA in art history he may become a widely knowledgeable scholar. He intimates that he is already familiar with the art of Africa, China, Australia, Japan, and India. To know all these well at his age he would have to be a genius. To illustrate the reason for saying this, I will give just one example among very many: In discussing traditional Indian aesthetics I emphasize the importance of two pathbreaking critics, Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta. I see, by the books in my library, that the very basic literature on the two, in English alone, totals at least two thousand often technical pages, the gist of which becomes, in my account, about three quite untechnical ones. Nobody goes on to say that, having been educated in psychology, most of the psychological studies I cite can be found in elementary psychology and physiology textbooks. Since I haven't seen these textbooks, I can't tell if he is right or not, but I do know that I read and was impressed by the well-known researches and speculations of Semir Zeki, who shares my passion and Nobody's for art. In *Art without Borders* I discuss and in part disagree with Zeki's views. Guided by some hundreds of summaries of researches in art, I of course read the published form of other pertinent experiments. My opinion on such researches is hard-earned and my own. I don't want to exaggerate the virtues that Nobody exhibits in his complaints. But before I continue my criticism of him, I want explain how I came to review two of my books on 's site. The stimulus for them was, in both cases, 's own invitation. I see nothing wrong in accepting the invitations, in explaining why I wrote the books, and in making it plain that I feel that they are good, original books. When Nobody tells me I should have shortened the book, he is not aware that in 1988, New York University Press published a much shorter version of my views under the title *Of Birds, Beasts, and other Artists*. This title reminds me that when Nobody says that he wants to understand "what art means to our species," he might profit by reading my book called *Prehuman Art: A Study in Interspecies Aesthetics*. This (short) book has been published only in Hebrew, but, if he likes, I will gladly send him the English manuscript by e-mail. Now to continue my criticisms of Nobody's complaints. It never occurs to him that they may be a sign that he was unable to understand the nature and method of *Art without Borders* and looked in it only for what is not there. He may have been looking for glittering half-truths instead of the my careful, qualified generalizations about empirically complicated problems--generalizations he sees as dull platitudes. What he takes to be irrelevant facts may be uncomfortable exceptions or examples from different cultures to give empirical support to the generalizations. And what he takes to be merely the repetition of statements made by other persons may be quotations from authorities or important sources. I can't be sure what made him such an unperceptive reader because he does not give explicit examples or cite page numbers. He seems to be impatient to get rid of intractable problems and does not like them to be discussed patiently instead of vanishing in favor of quick, merely verbal "solutions." Otherwise how can he explain why the author of seventy "wonderful" pages suddenly degenerates on the seventy-first and from then on produces only disorganized banalities, summaries of others' ideas, and useless facts? If his copy of the book still had its jacket he would have to explain why his estimate varies so radically from that of the three eminent persons who endorse it on the jacket's back. One of them, Wilfried van Damme, is a pioneer of the now developing field of world art, who calls the book "the most comprehensive study of art and artists ever written and praises it for its warmth and humanity. Another, Howard Morphy, a specialist in the anthropology of art and a leading authority on the art of the Aborigines, says "Art without Borders is grand in conception, learned, and well researched--there is no other book like it." He also praises the book's lucidity and engaging style. The third endorser, Hilary Putnam, who is the world's best-known living philosopher, calls it "a masterpiece." At least one review of the book has been quite critical--Nobody can find it on the Internet. A review by Julian Bell, a painter and author of a book on world art, in *The New York Review of Books*, praises the book but takes dramatic exception to two of its passages. However, as it turns out, these exceptions are based on too hasty a reading, as Bell acknowledges without reservation in our personal correspondence. My favorite review of my book is much the shortest. It is the only review I've received in my whole life that I take to be too favorable. It is by the widely known Finnish philosopher Esa Saarinen, whose title is Professor of Applied Philosophy and Creative Problem Solving at the Helsinki University of Technology. Saarinen writes: "I love this book: An example of what the writing of a philosophy professor can be at its very best. Tremendously learned, wise, and finely-tuned, this volume of radiant beauty is "a philosophical exploration of art and humanity" (quoting the subtitle). The author's breadth of reading, understanding and, perhaps above all, sense for the subtle is just staggering. Scharfstein's spirit of warm wisdom flies in the sky and reaches out beyond borders." I can imagine reading this book for years and years, page-to-page and cover-to-cover, and each time gaining new insight. A gem, a treasure chest, a masterpiece, a significant source of inspiration for any student of the human condition. "That's too good, as I've said, but it's still another reason for being disappointed but not worried by Nobody's

disappointment. Ben-Ami Scharfstein December 16, 2010 1 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Rather boring By Erich Mistrik The book title and reviews on the net were promising. I had bought it because I expected to see new approaches towards history of art. Also the author's acknowledgement to Wilfried van Damme made me curious. But the book did not fulfill my expectations. The author would like to interpret general principles of all important art regions in one volume. China, Japan, Africa, Europe, etc. covered by set of principles, that sounds like nice idea because there could be something common in human art history. But this cannot be done in one book. I cannot say the author is not right in his ideas. But the findings are very general, one must say - superficial. Maybe trouble is in my mind: Being educated in art history and art theory I would expect much deeper view and also I would need it. For me the book was rather boring. Still, for somebody not educated in art the book findings could be rather new and throwing light on world art history.

People all over the world make art and take pleasure in it, and they have done so for millennia. But acknowledging that art is a universal part of human experience leads us to some big questions: Why does it exist? Why do we enjoy it? And how do the world's different art traditions relate to art and to each other? *Art Without Borders* is an extraordinary exploration of those questions, a profound and personal meditation on the human hunger for art and a dazzling synthesis of the whole range of inquiry into its significance. Esteemed thinker Ben-Ami Scharfstein's encyclopedic erudition is here brought to bear on the full breadth of the world of art. He draws on neuroscience and psychology to understand the way we both perceive and conceive of art, including its resistance to verbal exposition. Through examples of work by Indian, Chinese, European, African, and Australian artists, *Art Without Borders* probes the distinction between accepting a tradition and defying it through innovation, which leads to a consideration of the notion of artistic genius. Continuing in this comparative vein, Scharfstein examines the mutual influence of European and non-European artists. Then, through a comprehensive evaluation of the world's major art cultures, he shows how all of these individual traditions are gradually, but haltingly, conjoining into a single current of universal art. Finally, he concludes by looking at the ways empathy and intuition can allow members of one culture to appreciate the art of another. Lucid, learned, and incomparably rich in thought and detail, *Art Without Borders* is a monumental accomplishment, on par with the artistic achievements Scharfstein writes about so lovingly in its pages.

"This is the most comprehensive study of art and artists ever written. Not only does it range across the world's cultures in time and space, but it takes account of the latest findings in a variety of relevant disciplines, including neuroscience, cross-cultural psychology, and anthropology. Scharfstein's mastery of the literature of those disciplines is impressive, as is his command of scholarly writing on art worldwide. Timely, global, and open-minded, *Art Without Borders* evinces warmth and humanity as Scharfstein admirably highlights the makers of art, their individual lives, and their views on artistry."