SUSAN MAGSAMEN and IVY ROSS: *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us*. New York (Random House) 2023, 280 pp.

ANJAN CHATTERJEE: *The Aesthetic Brain: How We Evolved to Desire Beauty and Enjoy Art*. New York (Oxford University Press) 2014, 217 pp.

Art remains one of the most puzzling (and polarizing) things that humans do. Despite much effort by philosophers, artists, art critics, and others over a broad span of human history, there is no agreed-upon explanation of what art is, why humans create it, how art is able to elicit emotions, thoughts, and perceptions, what the connection is (if any) between art and beauty, the relationship between art and aesthetic experience, or what positive outcomes can reliably be attributed to art or aesthetic experience. Never mind. The field of neuroscience is on its way to figuring it out.

In the words of Semir Zeki, Professor of Neuroaesthetics at University College London, "No art historian or critic or philosopher, has been able to solve [the problem of aesthetic experience] but we [neuroscientists] have in a limited biological context, namely that we know that aesthetic experience correlates with activity in medial orbital frontal cortex regardless of its source" (qtd in PAK/REICHSMAN 2017).

Bravo neuroscience!

Readers of this review are no doubt believers in the power of the arts to achieve many positive things. As a cultural policy and cultural management researcher, I also support the notion of the arts as a public good (in the non-utilitarian sense—that is, the arts as something actually good for society rather than just a commodity-in-common). What is most needed, however, in the cultural management and cultural policy spheres, is good evidence on the effects of the arts, not effusive and inflated claims, which are sadly too common. Such claims neither contribute to policy making nor to the cause of the arts in general.

To give neuroscientists their due, a formal field called neuroaesthetics began in 1999 to look at the biological underpinnings of aesthetics with the aim of exploring potential therapeutic applications. Knowledge about neuroaesthetics, according to some researchers, can support the prevention of ill health, the promotion of learning and well-being, and the management and treatment of disease (FANCOURT/FINN 2019).

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Dementia patients, for example, seem to respond well (in terms of neural activity) to music and other artistic stimuli. There is also evidence of positive outcomes for other disorders. For example, "the arts can help" reduce the symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and other types of mental distress (MAGSAMEN et al. 2023: 2). The arts also appear to have positive impacts on some "neuro-developmental, cognitive, and neurological disorders and can protect against cognitive decline" (BALBAG et al. 2014; CHANCELLOR et al 2014; cited in MAGSAMEN et al 2023: 2). Further, it is said that "art and aesthetics can support" brain development, early-childhood learning, and maternal-infant bonding (MAGSAMEN et al 2023: 2).

Bolstering these claims, or perhaps as a result of them, the field of art in medicine—and art as medicine—has advanced greatly since the late 1990s. University degrees in art therapy and art medicine are no longer an anomaly, and prescribing visits to art events, exhibitions, and classes has increased as part of the practice of social prescribing (GLEASON et al. 2023). Doctors have noticed marked improvement in patients suffering from depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues (WHITENBERG 2020).

A point of departure for authors Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross in their recently published *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us* (2023*)* is their claim based, apparently, on neuroscience research—and an abundance of anecdotes—of "scientific proof that the arts are essential to our very survival" (MAGSAMEN/ROSS: ix). After an introductory bit of "some foundational science" (MAGSAMEN/ROSS: 3) the authors declare, moreover that "we now have scientific proof that the arts and aesthetic experiences will improve your health and well-being and enhance your ability to learn and flourish" (MAGSAMEN/ROSS: 3).

Magsamen earned her Master's in Applied Science at John Hopkins University, and is both founder and director of the International Arts + Mind Lab at the Center for Applied Neuroaesthetics at the same institution. Ross is vice president of design for hardware products at Google. Their book is not intended for a scholarly audience. That much is clear. Blanketing themselves in science, and science-y claims, the authors offer self-help and boosterism rather than serious (or scientific) exploration. Chapters on "flourishing" (MAGSAMEN/ROSS: 166), "cultivating well-being" (MAGSAMEN/ROSS: 27), and "amplifying learning (MAGSAMEN/ROSS: 135) provide advice on changing your life by promoting individual happiness, connection, self-empowerment, and body healing. The reader learns about the

rise in "personalized microdosing of aesthetics" (MAGSAMEN/ROSS: 239) and gains encouragement from experts like poet IN-Q who "believes that when you change your story you can change your life," adding that "trapped emotion… blocks your passion and curiosity" (MAGSAMEN/ROSS: 168). A back cover testimonial from David Byrne (of Talking Heads fame, no less) states that the book proves "art… is transformative beyond measure (MAGSAMEN/ROSS).

So, yes. The arts seem, by these accounts, to do wonderful things. Boosterism aside, however, the book has too many flaws, limitations, and bias to be of much value other than providing members of the (pro-arts) choir something to point to in arguments about the value of the arts.

To continue the pun, the authors sing the praises of the arts without much discernment regarding the many types of art—the good, the bad, and the ugly—that exist. The terms: art, the arts, and aesthetics are interchangeable throughout the book, and refer to many more things than just art. Magsamen and Ross explain, for example, how "a growing number of biomedical researchers" are "tapping into aesthetics, like sound waves" (MAGSAMEN/ROSS: 99). In another passage, art and aesthetic experience include both DJing and "changes in barometric pressure" (MAGSAMEN/ROSS: 116). And did you know that just one art experience per month can add ten years to your life (MAGSAMEN/ROSS)? I wonder if that holds true for performance artists, Mao Sugiyama and Peytr Pevlensky—both known for their use of extreme self-harm as artistic expression. Talk about your aesthetic experience!

In fact, one of the gravest flaws in this book is that the net cast over the set called art, is too limited. It's not that the authors don't include many diverse art forms, "sonatas of Mozart… the sounds of traditional Portuguese fado music… Persian calligraphy… film," poetry, and others (MAGSAMEN/ROSS: 19). Sometimes provocative—New Mexico, self-taught artist, Judy Tuwaletstiwa's *Continuing Painting* series for instance—Magsamen and Ross's examples, however, never cross the boundary into disturbing or objectionable. Don't expect a discussion of the therapeutic benefits (or even the potential for non-therapeutic consequences) of Sugiyama and Pevlensky, or the libertine novels of Donatien Alphonse François, even if the authors acknowledge that "One person's cacophony is another person's symphony. And your perception is your reality" (MAGSAMEN/ROSS: 19). Art here is taken to be only wonderful, beautiful, and transformative (the latter only in a positive way).

In great contrast, neuroscientist, Anjan Chatterjee, cited and discussed by Magsamen and Ross, understands that the goal of "relating

scientific aesthetics to art is to provide a framework broad enough to accommodate" (CHATTERJEE 2014: xxi) art of all periods past, present, and future as well as anything in the category that a critical viewer might strain to call art. Early in his work, *The Aesthetic Brain: How We Evolved to Desire Beauty and Enjoy Art,* Chatterjee relates a visit to the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Palma, Mallorca where he got pleasurably "lost" (CHATTERJEE: xvii) in the work of Picasso and Miró. Elsewhere in the museum, he happened upon art of more contemporary provenance, featuring "curtains of blood," (CHATTERJEE: xvii) and upside-down trees, which aroused feelings of "intrigue, annoyance, confusion, and even disgust" (CHATTERJEE: xx). Welcome to the world of contemporary art!

The point is that if one claims that art, the arts, and aesthetics have particular effects, then any account of them must cover all cases. The problem for Magsamen and Ross, and for neuroaesthetics in general, is that an understanding of these terms is constrained. Aesthetics is used most often in the limited sense of pleasure (CHATTERJEE 2014), artistic experience and aesthetic experience are conflated, and beauty is supposed to be a quality inherent to anything called art. Conclusions about the arts and their value seem to emerge from narrow understandings of such things as disinteredness and art for art's sake (as if there is, anyway, only one view on such things). Drawing on comments by art critic Blake Gopnik, Chatterjee—a professor at University of Pennsylvania's Center for Cognitive Neuroscience—notes that the field of neuroaesthetics might simply be "out of touch with art as it is practiced today (xxi). He includes discussion of the view of art as an "ongoing cultural conversation" that rarely has "anything to do with beauty and pleasure (xxi). Gopnik—quoted by Chatterjee, "thinks that scientists investigating art are preoccupied with aesthetic theories of the eighteenth century" (CHATTERJEE: xxi)—at the very least, I would say, since essentialist views (with roots in ancient Greece) are also on display. Chatterjee insists, nonetheless, that most people associate art with beauty and expect a pleasurable experience when they encounter art. Curtains of blood? Not so much. So, in the end, "contemporary art does pose a special challenge for scientists (CHATTERJEE: xxi).

In fact, not just in contemporary times, but over millennia, artists have managed, often enough, to outrage and repulse even the most ardent of art lovers. Things called art include the *Mona Lisa* (which pretty much everyone is okay with) but also the work of Doreen Garner, Cao Hiu, Isaac Cordal, Jana Euler, Artemisia Gentileschi, Jonathan Payne,

Hermann Nitsch, Francisco Goya, Théodore Gericault, Igor Stravinsky, Matthew Day Jackson, Jala Wahid, Otto Rapp, and many others who have managed to push the boundaries of art as beauty or pleasure. Exploring the grotesque, the disgusting, the painful, the frightening, the violent, and the horrifying is what some (if not many) artists do. Anjan Chatterjee, in fact, expresses trepidation in the preface to *The Aesthetic Brain* (2014) worrying that, a neuroscience inquiry of art and aesthetics might be "rushing in where angels fear to tread" (CHATTERJEE: xi).

I reiterate that art, the arts, and aesthetics pose problems for investigation, not the least because no one has come up with an entirely satisfactory account of just what they are. In the case of art, even so, the lack of a necessary-and-sufficient hinders artists very little in their ability to create. Cultural managers have need of a bit more precision (enough to make selections for exhibition and programming). Policy makers and neuroscientists have greater need to pinpoint what art is and what is covered by key terms such as art, the arts, and aesthetics—for one, to make effective policy, and for the other, to know what they are studying in order to draw valid and reliable conclusions.

Despite the challenges posed, philosophers, scientists, cultural policy actors, and many others continue to try—perhaps commendably, in the end, because art and aesthetic experience are an important part of everyday life. How you go about giving an account of the arts and aesthetic experience—and what account you give—in books, journal articles, and policy documents makes a difference. Scientific accounts purport to give—well—a scientific account, which can—wrongly or rightly—confer higher authority than other accounts. Researchers should be ethically bound, therefore, to deliver responsibly measured accounts rather than exaggerated and puffed-up wishful thinking.

Finally, it is well to consider that for whatever gains neuroscience has made, it "is far from being able to understand" the correlations between changes in the brain and genetics or environmental factors, "much less categorise them into discrete conditions, or explain why brains start to become disordered in the first place. Mental health is far more complex and mysterious than any doctor had ever admitted" (CARTWRIGHT 2024). According to Allen Frances, lead editor of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association, "there is no definition of a mental disorder. It's bullshit. I mean, you just can't define it" (FRANCES qtd in GREENBERG 2010). At minimum, what we might take from this is that mental disorders and art share similar problems of definition.

Your Brain on Art could be seen as part of a historical (and increasingly global) trend that sees the arts as panacea. In the United States, creation of the National Endowment for the Arts was pitched, in part, as a hedge against the horrors, both real and imagined, resulting from the World Wars and the Cold War (communism, unchecked use of technology, nuclear Armageddon). More recently, the arts are seen as a "force for social change" (RAJA/PETERHANS 2020) addressing such things as diversity, inequality, empowerment, freedom of expression, and community transformation. Policies position the arts as central to economic development (HOWKINS 2001; FLORIDA 2002; SEAMAN 2003; MARKUSEN/GADWA 2010; LAMORE et al 2013) and a driver of gains in GDP (CENTRE FOR ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS RESEARCH 2013; LUDEL 2023). Is there anything the arts can't do? And why do we place such high and varied expectations on the arts and not, for example, on education? I also wonder if such high expectations of the arts are more likely to diminish their value than elevate them. Is the point of experiencing art to increase your life span and to help you acquire the practical skills "to reflect about decisions and make critical and evaluative judgments; to engage and persist" (MAGSAMEN/ROSS 2023: 143) in tasks? Maybe. But to this reviewer, however useful the arts in making such gains, accounts like *Your Brain on Art* seem to be wildly missing the point.

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