



# What Art Is: The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand

*Michelle Kamhi, Louis Torres*

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What is art? The arts establishment has a simple answer: anything is art if a reputed artist or expert says it is. Though many people are skeptical about the alleged new art forms that have proliferated since the early twentieth century, today's critics claim that all such work, however incomprehensible, is art.

A groundbreaking alternative to this view is provided by philosopher-novelist Ayn Rand (1901–1982). Best known as the author of *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand also created an original and illuminating theory of art, which confirms the widespread view that much of today's purported art is not really art at all. In *What Art Is*, Torres and Kamhi present a lucid introduction to Rand's esthetic theory, contrasting her ideas with those of other thinkers. They conclude that, in its basic principles, her account is compelling, and is corroborated by evidence from anthropology, neurology, cognitive science, and psychology.

The authors apply Rand's theory to a debunking of the work of prominent modernists and postmodernists—from Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, and Samuel Beckett to John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and other highly regarded postmodernist figures. Finally, they explore the implications of Rand's ideas for the issues of government and corporate support of the arts, art law, and art education.

"This is one of the most interesting, provocative, and well-written books on aesthetics that I know. While fully accessible to the general reader, *What Art Is* should be of great interest to specialists as well. Ayn Rand's largely unknown writings on art—especially as interpreted, released from dogma, and smoothed out by Torres and Kamhi—are remarkably refined. Moreover, her ideas are positively therapeutic after a century of artistic floundering and aesthetic quibbling. Anyone interested in aesthetics, in the purpose of art, or in the troubling issues posed by modernism and post modernism should read this book."

—Randall R. Dipert

Author of *Artifacts, Art Works, and Agency*

"Torres and Kamhi effectively situate Rand's long-neglected esthetic theory in the wider history of ideas. They not only illuminate her significant contribution to an understanding of the nature of art; they also apply her ideas to a trenchant critique of the twentieth century's 'advanced art.' Their exposure of the invalidity of abstract art is itself worth the price of admission."

—Chris Matthew Sciabarra

Author of *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*

"Rand's aesthetic theory merits careful study and thoughtful criticism, which Torres and Kamhi provide. Their scholarship is sound, their presentation is clear, and their judgment is refreshingly free from the biases that Rand's supporters and detractors alike tend to bring to considerations of her work."

—Stephen Cox

University of California, San Diego

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