

Review of Hans Maes, *Conversations on Art and Aesthetics*

When I say that Hans Maes' *Conversations on Art and Aesthetics* is excellent, this is no mere attempt to make it onto some future dust-jacket (also, did I mention? Very affordable!). Maes interviews ten of the most influential aestheticians of recent years: Jerrold Levinson, Arthur Danto, Cynthia Freeland, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Jenefer Robinson, Roger Scruton, Gregory Currie, Paul Guyer, Noël Carroll, and Kendall Walton. In conversations paired with portraits of the interviewees by Steve Pyke, they explore numerous topics, both personal and philosophical. The book glides across analytic aesthetics, taking in swathes at altitude, then dropping down to scrutinize its many landmarks. Maes is its affable and erudite pilot, expertly accelerating and slowing as the topography demands, adjusting elevation where the air gets too rarefied, and radioing back to the control tower... okay, metaphors have to end somewhere, but you get the idea.

Conversation invites openness. Among the book's most satisfying differences with ordinary scholarly fare is the taste it offers of what its participants are really like. Danto is occasionally rambling, frequently funny; Freeland's conversation sparkles with wit and playfulness, especially true on page 99 (fortuitous since Maes quotes Ford Madox Ford's advice to reveal a whole book's character by opening to that very page); Korsmeyer is a model of intellectual humility, something Maes himself notes; Carroll's conversation is wonderfully hyperbolic as peer-reviewed articles rarely are.

This candour has benefits, as when Carroll entertainingly compares himself to the Allies in World War II. Just as they purportedly fought to make the world safe for democracy, Carroll sees himself 'railing against the aesthetic theory of art and enlightenment formalism'—making the world safe for socio-politically engaged art (p. 264). This, of course, would make formalists the Nazis of aesthetics, a comparison I think we can all agree is more than fair.

It also has its drawbacks. Scruton, uniquely, comes off as a little prickly, perhaps not realizing (or caring?) that his unshorn pronouncements amount to a succession of *faux pas*. Danto's 'death of art' idea he dismisses as 'cliché', unlike Hegel's, which 'meant something serious' (p. 183); Richard Posner's *Sex and Reason* he calls simply 'bad philosophy' (p. 195); Maes' question, how one distinguishes between good and bad taste, is apparently 'glib' (p. 184); the writings of contemporary aestheticians 'seem so shallow' for failing to appeal to religious experience (p. 190); asked about research finding (surprising) relations between aesthetic judgements and 'mere exposure', and of experimental aesthetics in general, Scruton remarks he is 'not very impressed by a discipline that produces such banal and predictable results' (p. 193). Criticism is fine, of course, and I'd like to think these remarks were meant in a constructive spirit that doesn't manifest in print. But I confess this reading is difficult to sustain.

One also learns something about the trajectories the discussants took before and during their careers and with that some anecdotal sociology of the field. Perhaps most striking is just how many of our luminaries came to aesthetics via an entirely different field. Freeland began as an ancient historian, specializing in aesthetics only as a professor; Robinson as a philosopher of language; Currie as a philosopher of science; and Walton worked first on conceptual schemes.

The book makes pleasant reading, as Elisabeth Schellekens observed at the 2017 annual meeting of the ASA, especially given the detail with which it occasionally tackles its subject matter. Partly, I suspect, this is because it's just more stimulating to read a dialogue than a treatise. It's easy to glide from the highly technical to the personal within and between conversations, as happens most markedly in the turn from Danto's fascinating anecdotes and personalities to Freeland's sophisticated theorizing. And, like the best dialogues, Maes and his interlocutors occasionally probe unexplored areas. Korsmeyer's conversation is particularly like this, as are others Maes notes in his Introduction. Happily, *unlike* the best dialogues, *Conversations* isn't peopled with Athenian yes-men barking 'Certainly, Hans!' to Maes' every suggestion (they'll have to wait for his next book).

Another reason *Conversation* trips along is its participants' charm. Though humour often bombs in print, there are moments of genuine levity, all the more fun for their spontaneity. For instance, when Maes puts it to Danto that good writing is 'a bonus' that 'doesn't make you a better philosopher' during one of the many exchanges on continental aesthetics, Danto whips back: 'You've got to live with yourself, on the other hand', a blistering line (p. 74). On progress in philosophy, another topic the book revisits, Maes suggests to Carroll that lack of philosophical consensus is frustrating. Carroll demurs: precisely this fact keeps him in a job (p. 275). On progress in *art*, Freeland complains that it's 'all been downhill since Velázquez and Goya, really', a delivery so dry that a scandalized Maes must be reassured: 'No, that was a joke. [Laughs] That was definitely a joke' (p. 109).

The book is not merely good fun. Though lacking the usual academic heft, it's a more useful research tool than it pretends to be. First, the Further Reading sections capping each conversation, while nothing new, have been very carefully assembled. Combined with the breadth of topics, ideas, and artworks touched upon, they are excellent aids to study. Conversation also has a way of teasing out received wisdom hard to find in print. Philosophy often begins with the *endoxa* (accepted opinions), as Aristotle noted, and problematizes them; having conversations transcribed, therefore, can be useful for confirming that there *is* an *endoxon* at all. Readers may also be surprised how often the conversation addresses their own research. Taking my interests in aesthetic moralism as an example, Levinson's insights into the ethico-aesthetic value relationship (especially p. 22) and Robinson's criticism of William Lyon's 'cognitive-evaluative' emotion theory (pp. 150-151) are particularly germane. Finally, most of the conversations summarize some of each thinker's main ideas, which has obvious utility, Walton's especially, owing to the pedagogical circumstances under which it was originally conducted.

The book isn't perfect. One of the disappointments is, ironically, aesthetic. The book's sales pitch, if it has one, is juxtaposing each philosopher's mind with her face. But while the conversations consistently deliver, the photography suffers in two respects.

First, and most significantly, the print quality of the photographs is poor. Rather than print the images onto glossy inserts, or even with more suitably high contrast inks, the images are rendered in a washed out toner. Even where one can tell that an image goes fully black, as Pyke's portraits often do, it presents as an underwhelming, grainy grey. The pictures are also frustratingly small. This is partly understandable, since they are square and printed onto portrait-format pages. But it's also the result of maintaining the same margins for the photos as for the text, unnecessarily as far as I can tell.

Second, while Pyke is undoubtedly a first-rate photographer, the quality of the chosen¹ portraits is inconsistent (though my judgement here is compromised by the issues just raised). There are some gems. Danto's portrait, eyes half-closed in apparent contemplation, is an unmistakable classic. Scruton's and Currie's exquisitely capture their physiognomy in a way that transcends the printing limitations. Another good shot is Guyer's, his forehead looming in an apparent tribute to the most famous oil painting of Kant, Guyer's muse. A less impressive portrait is Robinson's, in which the focal point misses the face and plops like a dollop of mustard on her right lapel. Focus isn't everything, of course, and some of Pyke's work has benefited from playing with it (e.g. his 1996 portrait of Iggy Pop), but Robinson's picture yields no reward through the blur. Freeland's and Maes' portraits are mirror images of one another, one bespectacled eye centred, the remaining face receding into the darkness, or the light. But whereas Maes' picture achieves an intensity that makes the viewer unsure whether to worship his intellect or engage him in a bar fight (or both?), Freeland's seems overexposed and comparatively flat. Carroll's portrait, I should note, was produced by a different photographer.

A more important worry concerns the identities of *Conversations'* subjects, particularly as Maes wishes to 'provide a broad and accessible overview' (p. 2) of aesthetics and 'to reflect the rich diversity of research in the field' (p. 3). Of the ten aestheticians interviewed, all are White and able-bodied, for instance, and men outnumber women seven to three. Naturally, since the book's goal is to represent ten 'world-leading philosophers of art', and given the well-documented sociological facts about our discipline, the demographics are unsurprising, if nonetheless avoidable. But then this just redirects the worry toward the book's goal, rather than its make-up.² To his credit, Maes exhibits some sensitivity to these issues in the Introduction, emphasizing that the survey provided is not exhaustive. Still, the result is that in some respects the book represents the breadth of analytic aesthetics a little like CNN's *Crossfire* represented the breadth of US political opinion—though, mercifully unlike *Crossfire*, establishment molluscs Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson make no appearance.

Eminence in the field also skews toward older philosophers—those who, as Andrew Huddleston gently puts it, 'completed their PhDs in the 1970s, perhaps give or take a few years' (Huddleston, 2018). This brings its own problems concerning representativeness. It may also explain occasional philosophical hyperopia, as when Danto remarks 'I don't feel as though something's happening in art [now]' (p. 53)—a statement that will surprise scholars working on computer games, virtual reality, and street art. But it has considerable advantages, too. One feels as though guided by 'old hands' situating the sub-discipline as only those who has lived through its changes can (Guyer's encyclopaedic historical knowledge is the exception that proves the rule, unless he is secretly 300 years old). Danto's entertaining reminiscences and Korsmeyer's discussion of how feminism has altered philosophy (pp. 119-120) stand out. But lots of similar exchanges occur when the Big Questions surface—the differences between philosophy and science, the possibility of philosophical progress, and how social changes have impacted the academy.

On these questions and more, this is an entertaining and informative book from which I learned a great deal. I'm certain others will too (also, did I mention? *Very* affordable!).

¹ Some contributors exercised veto power over their portraits.

² I have benefited from Anne Eaton, who made much the same criticism in her comments at the 2017 annual meeting of the ASA.

Bibliography

Huddleston, A. (2018, February 20). Review of Hans Maes' 'Conversation on Art and Aesthetics'.
Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews.