

WHAT IS ART FOR?—PART 1

On July 12, 2006, on her sizzingly intelligent blogspot (<http://deborahfisher.blogspot.com/>), the artist and writer Deborah Fisher made an entry that, in a way, was the equivalent of taking a deep breath after several days of fairly intense discussion, give-and-take, and commentary about the first chapter of *A Nation Gone Blind*. Here's her entry:

The question that I need to keep coming back to, which is also [High, Low and In Between's](#), [Ashes'](#), and [Art Powerlines'](#) question, is about the social role of the artist. Sure, [Eric Larsen](#) can come in here and get everyone all whooped up about the Age of Simplification. . . but what does it mean to art?

I don't know. But HLIB has [started the conversation](#) nicely:

“I'm increasingly concerned with the notion of survival—my beliefs, my preferences and my prejudices and what these mean for an artist. Who is the moral personality behind the work? Do I have the ability to be virtuous in the face [of] an ideology of debasement or what Larsen calls simplification? Can I understand beauty and justice?”

And [Ashes](#) takes HLIB's question and smacks it right out of the park:

“The point of course is to understand beauty and justice independent of the ideology of debasement and simplification.”

Beautiful, just beautiful. But where is this independent place where moral artists can understand beauty and justice? Between people's blogs? Can it exist elsewhere? Out in the real world? In art? And is it independent, or does it depend on a community of similarly independent folks? I'm going to go make some dinner, and I know what I'll be thinking about. . .



I powerfully admire what I've seen of the intelligence, passion, and talents of Deborah Fisher and those who have gathered around or been drawn to her blogspot (as I've now been too). But at the same time, I can hardly help but step in as critic, or as a kind of corrective voice, since the questions being asked (what's “the social role of the artist,” and whether the artist can embrace or “understand beauty and justice”) are questions so deeply rooted and so thoroughly pervasive in *A Nation Gone Blind*.

And so here goes. I'll try to be blessedly brief by pointing to a couple of things without going into them fully. No point in re-writing the book.

Still, a person can't help but notice that Deborah Fisher's question seems to go un-analyzed, unchallenged, and unquestioned. The assumption among her respondents appears to be that, yes, the artist *does have* a social role, when in fact that may not be the case at all—as I myself think it is not (more on that in a minute). But HLIB assumes not

only that there *is* such a role but that it includes the artist's being "virtuous" and "moral" ("where is the moral personality behind the work?"). In addition, both HLIB and ASHES automatically equate beauty with justice: "Can I understand beauty and justice?" asks HLIB, while ASHES declares that "The point of course is to understand beauty and justice independent of the ideology of debasement and simplification."

Now, believe me, I don't want to sound offensive, snooty, or, god forbid, professorial, but I must ask ASHES whether what she says the point is really *is* the point. I've also got to ask what exactly is it that beauty has to do with art? Is beauty even *necessary* to art? Is, say, Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece "beautiful"? And then one last and equally enormous question: exactly in what way is it that beauty and justice are related, let alone are—as both ASHES HLIB imply—*equal*?

A Nation Gone Blind argues that it's exactly this confusion between art and "good" that leads to the weakening both of art *and* of the social-political wish or ability to do good. Here's the quintessential double premise: the function (or duty) of the artist is to create art; the function (or duty) of the citizen or of *any* good person is to strive for and implement the good and the just.

And here are four corollaries of that quintessential double premise: a person can be a great artist and a rotten person; a rotten artist and a great person; a rotten person and a rotten artist; or a great artist and a great person. There are lots more near-corollaries if you allow for shadings like an artist who's fairly good, a person who's near-great, and so on. But the essence of the matter is that no clear, no essential, no necessary relationship exists between art on the one hand and good on the other, or between art on the one hand and moral truth or justice on the other.

Hardly *anyone* believes this anymore, although a great, great many believed it up until the time I was, say, thirty or thirty-five years old—that is, until the early or middle 1970s or so. They not only believed it, but they could also see the logic, wisdom, tradition, and practical good sense of such a separation both for the aim of maintaining *moral* strength politically and *aesthetic* strength artistically. Nowadays, for all the reasons that *A Nation Gone Blind* goes to great effort to dissect and describe, hardly anyone—certainly hardly anyone in the academic humanities or in publishing—even believes that there *is* such as thing as aesthetic strength in and of itself, or that the very concept of *the aesthetic* can conceivably be justifiable in itself or have any justifiable meaning *unless* it lends itself to or serves *some* kind of social, political, or ostensibly moral end.

In its third and last chapter, *A Nation Gone Blind* talks at length about how the loss of this art/morals distinction, or this art/politics distinction, led directly to the huge changes in academia that came along with the establishment of "victimology" or "victim studies"—Black Studies, Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, Gender Studies, and so on. These programs themselves, whenever they touch upon or attempt to engage the arts, reveal the almost absolute absence of the aesthetics vs. morals distinction, and they serve, promote, and in fact, according to their own internal logic, *necessitate* the demoting of serious art to the level of servitude to one moral cause or another.

That's why it's so astonishing, and, in my view, so rare, so important, and so obviously a thing to celebrate, when someone like Deborah Fisher writes a passage like this ("Fuck the Artist's Statement") on her blogspot on July 3, 2006:

I make art specifically because I am trying desperately to understand something that my verbal self can't touch. Writing a statement about what my own work means is therefore an unhelpful enterprise. This is not because I am an illiterate artist, but because I am compelled to make visual art for specifically nonverbal reasons. I want to embrace paradox, not resolve it. I want to ferret out all those fat spaces of uncertainty and becoming that an essay cannot get at.

Deborah Fisher, according to these words, is passionately involved in what we now, for purposes of clarification, need to call art-art, separating her from the millions who are involved in politics-art, or morality-art, or social-causes-art, or victimology-art, and so on. If Deborah Fisher's art is not verbal, if it has no origins in the verbal, and if it cannot be *made* verbal, how readily would it be possible for it to be made partisan, "moral," or socially tendentious either for good or for bad? The literary arts can be a harder example, since words are what they're *made* out of, but the same pernicious and dubious principle or belief or attitude is at work here too, spreading the notion that there's no meaning in art-art or literary-literature and no justification *for* it. That's not the only reason but a very big part of the reason why what's still called "literary fiction" has in general grown as weak as it has, becoming, as *A Nation Gone Blind* puts it, "a depleted, imitative, unimpassioned, unoriginal, essentially *unthinking* literature."

And so here's the answer to Deborah Fisher's question: The social role of the artist *is the same as the social role of anyone else whatsoever insofar as any of them is a good person or citizen as opposed to a bad one*. If art or the work of an artist grows appealing and alluring and exciting to people because of or through whatever meanings and characteristics the art possesses in and of itself (remember, Deborah Fisher "[wants] to embrace paradox, not resolve it"), and if the art, as a result, gains stature and a growing audience, and if, as a result of *that*, the artist herself or himself gains eminence or even fame and can consequently exert a powerful influence on others, even on many others, in regard to one or another political, social, or moral cause, case, or event—well, then, fine and good, so long as the *person* is good. But what's important is that *the same thing is true of anybody else who might gain equivalent fame or prestige, whether they be investor, inventor, or potato chip maker*. The question isn't, what is the social role of the artist. The question is, what is the social role of people.

The stakes are high, the subject is a real one, and the losing of strength and independence in its arts is incredibly detrimental to all and any peoples and to all and any nations. In that third chapter of *A Nation Gone Blind*, there's a passage about the symbiotic yet deleterious relation between victimology studies and people's often badly distorted senses of what they think of as their "rights." That subject, really, is the same in kind as the one we've been talking about here, since both here and there we're talking about the loss of one kind or another of a vital distinction. To end on a note suggesting how serious all this is, and how seriously it must be taken, I'll close by quoting two paragraphs from "Consumerism, Victimology, and the Loss of the Meaningful Self" (pp.

185-186 in the book). I realize that I haven't really answered the question in my title for this piece—what's art for?—but I'll get to it later. This is enough for now.

Here are the paragraphs:

Still, nothing comes from nothing, and a fair part of what happened in the 1970s had its beginnings elsewhere and came from afar. To look into the origins of the “rights” movement, in fact, necessitates looking into other American cultural forces, one reaching far back indeed—that is, seventeenth-century New England Puritanism—and another much more recent—namely, the development of the mass media through the twentieth century.

The joining of these two historic elements into one hyper-powerful cultural stream has had remarkable—and ruinous—results. Over a period of not much more than thirty years, the union between them has come close to destroying American higher education, has reduced whole ranges of American literary culture to insignificant and self-contented pablum, and has made a shambles of the American political system. Once the envy of all who loved and sought dignity, justice, and freedom, our country has been transformed into a tyranny that's more despised, by the free and shackled alike, than any other nation or power in the world.

Eric Larsen
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