Against a "Life Hack" Approach to Art Education

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Abstract: This paper critiques de Botton and Armstrong's *Art as Therapy* project (2013-2015), a collaboration with art museums in Canada, the Netherlands, and Australia, in which labels in the gallery, as well a catalogue and website, explain how viewers might use works of art to serve therapeutic purposes in their lives. The paper argues that, instead of making art more accessible to those who, allegedly, do not find access to art on their own, the *Art as Therapy* project undermines the force and richness of art by first declaring it useless and inaccessible and then repurposing it as therapeutic *life hack.*

Keywords: Museum education; aesthetic experience; pedagogical intervention; interpretive freedom.

Introduction

In recent years digital media have exploded with *life hacks*: lists of creative tricks and shortcuts to solve common problems. The "100 Life Hacks That Make Life Easier," for example, include tying a coloured ribbon to a suitcase so that it is easier to retrieve on the airport luggage carousel or using a folded pair of sunglasses as a smartphone stand (Lee, n.d.). The term, *life hack* was coined in 2004 by technology writer Danny O'Brien to describe software scripts that developers use as workarounds for problems. These scripts are not the official software that is made public, and they are often not polished or elegant, but they 'do the trick.' The term has since been used in popular media to disseminate the shortcuts and workarounds many of us use to fix everyday problems.

From an educational angle, publishing life hacks could be seen as a form of informal education—a democratic way of teaching each other practical solutions to everyday problems and annoyances. In addition, life hacks save money by repurposing cheap or freely available materials, making life hackers more self-sufficient and less dependent on purchasing expensive gadgets. There is, however, a flip side to the popularity of life hacks, not to be blamed on the software developers who first created them, but on the spread of life hacks into other realms. This more negative flip side is that the proliferation and popularity of life hacks can reinforce the expectation of the practical, instrumental utility of what we are taught, what we study, and what we learn.

In this paper I focus on a recent example where visual art was treated in such an instrumental fashion: the "Art as Therapy" project of British philosophers Alain de Botton and John Armstrong (the latter is also an art historian). In this project, de Botton and Armstrong worked with the Art Gallery of Ontario (Canada), the Rijksmuseum (the Netherlands), and the

National Gallery of Victoria (Australia). On large yellow Post-it notes on the walls they explain how viewers might use works of art to serve concrete therapeutic purposes in their lives. The project includes the print book-cum-catalogue *Art as Therapy* (2013) as well as the accompanying website artastherapy.com (n.d.). While de Botton and Armstrong do not use the term "life hack," I argue that their approach to art education illustrates a life hack approach. It could be argued that this approach is both bad therapy (see, for example, Smeyers, Smith, & Standish, 2007) and bad education (see, for example, Dewey, 1938). In the interest of space, I will focus specifically on how their approach undermines the force and richness of the art they seem to want to redeem.

"Art as Therapy"

de Botton and Armstrong open *Art as Therapy* (2013) with the promise that the book offers a solution to the common problem of unsatisfactory encounters with visual art: "We are likely to leave highly respected museums and exhibitions feeling underwhelmed, or even bewildered and inadequate, wondering why the transformational experience we had anticipated did not occur" (p. 4). They offer a solution by proposing "that art (a category that includes works of design, architecture and craft) is a therapeutic medium that can help guide, exhort and console its viewers, enabling them to become better versions of themselves" (p. 5). In particular, they identify seven common "psychological frailties" that human beings are prone to, and that works of art can remedy. I summarize the frailties here in my own words; the titles of the solutions are direct quotations (pp. 64-65):

human frailty	*purpose of art*
forgetfulness	a corrective of bad memory
loss of hope	a purveyor of hope
suffering	a source of dignified sorrow
lack of balance	a balancing agent
lack of self-knowledge	a guide to self-knowledge
closed-mindedness	a guide to the extension of experience
desensitization	a re-sensitization tool

They proceed to give examples of how works of art can provide the seven remedies above. For example, in response to the human frailty of hopelessness, they note that artists have created works that can remind us of the possibility of repair, redemption, and renewal: "Art can help us with our tendency to lack hope because we think the best kind of behaviour is too far above us, too difficult and too hard" (p. 212). If we live in a country with a traumatic and violent past, they propose, art can help us process this difficult history and regain a sense of hope. One work that does this, argue de Botton and Armstrong, is Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work *Wrapped Reichstag*, which was realized in 1995:

> Jeanne-Claude and Christo did not change the Reichstag; but by covering and then unveiling it, they set up a grand public opportunity for renewal of the nation's relationship to its foremost political building…The *Wrapped Reichstag* was a secular political form of baptism. Baptism is a symbolic moment in which past wrongs are put aside and the individual is rededicated to the future. Political art has a pivotal role to play in allowing nations to learn to start again even while they acknowledge their guilt for past sins. (p. 215)

The discussion of the *Wrapped Reichstag* is in a section of the book and website titled "Politics," which sits alongside five other areas of our lives for which art offers a "cure": love, self, work, anxiety, and free time. I do not have space to discuss all of them, but let me give one more example from the area of love. In relation to the human frailty of desensitization, the authors discuss Édouard Manet's *Bunch of Asparagus* (1880):

> When considering how we could re-evaluate and re-desire our partners, we might find it instructive to look at the ways artists learn to resee what is familiar…To rescue a long-term relationship from complacency and boredom, we might learn to effect on our spouse much the same imaginative transformation which Manet performed on his vegetables…There are lessons for long-term relationships in the way that Manet approached asparagus. (pp. 124-125)

Clearly, de Botton and Armstrong emphasize the lessons this painting offers viewers for their personal lives. Later in this paper I will discuss how this emphasis distracts from the aesthetic experience the work offers, and how de Botton and Armstrong's approach, more generally, devalues aesthetic experience as worthwhile in itself by insisting it needs, minimally, to be supplemented by therapeutic experience.

Critiques of the "Art as Therapy" project

de Botton and Armstrong's curatorial intervention in art museums has been critiqued fiercely. Before writing off such critiques as the inevitable highbrow protestations of art critics unwilling to think outside the box, it is worth paying attention to the focus of their critiques and how seriously they take art education.

Critic Carel Peeters (2014) mocks the assumption with which de Botton and Armstrong (2013) approached the project: that viewers often have unsatisfactory experiences in art museums that leave them "underwhelmed" or "bewildered." Peeters responds incredulously: "Would all those people who line up for museums not know what they are doing there?" (para. 11). Peeters interprets the Post-it notes as a sign of disrespect for the museum visitor: "What museum visitor wants to be followed by a therapist in a white coat who whispers his sicknesses in his ear at every work of art? What museum visitor wants to be treated like a patient?" (para. 10). Indeed, de Botton and Armstrong seem to assume a lot about visitors and provide little evidence for, or self-doubt about, their claims: who is the "we" who leave museums and exhibitions feeling underwhelmed? Do museum visitors necessarily expect a transformational experience?

Where Peeters focuses on the project's disrespect for the visitor, British art critic Adrian Searle (2014) addresses the project's disrespect for the art. He writes:

> With their smarmy sermons and symptomology of human failings, their aphorisms about art leading us to better parts of ourselves, de Botton's texts feel like being doorstepped. But art contains concentrated doses of the virtues! You could coerce any art at all into his cause of mental hygiene and spiritual wellbeing. de Botton reduces art to its discernible content. He doesn't make us want to look at all. (para. 11)

Searle's focus on de Botton and Armstrong's treatment of art is the line of critique I want to pursue here. Instead of making art more accessible to those who, allegedly, do not find access to art on their own, de Botton and Armstrong end up telling visitors what they find when they get there, thus, in fact, eliminating the need for a visit in the first place. They are so focused on the instrumental value of an artwork's purported message that they disregard the work's form and the aesthetic experience it gives rise to. Later in the article I will explain in greater detail, with reference to the work of Noël Carroll, that an aesthetic experience—that is, an experience that involves attention to a work's material presence, its formal and expressive qualities, and how

these affect us—is not the only kind of experience we can or should have of a work of art. However, considering a work of art *as a work of art* (and not a work of something else) minimally needs also to involve aesthetic experience.

Art as intervention in perception

Let us return to the *Wrapped Reichstag* and *Bunch of Asparagus*. I want to suggest that there are many other and open-ended ways of engaging with both of these works. There is nothing wrong with highlighting that one way to interpret *Wrapped Reichstag* is by focusing on the symbolic significance of "covering and then unveiling" (de Botton & Armstrong, 2013, p. 215). It is quite possible that many viewers associated the wrapped Reichstag with a building undergoing renovation, or wondered, "What is the significance of the Reichstag?" But these are not the only or most important aspects of the work to attend to. de Botton and Armstrong are so focused on the content and message of the work, that they ignore the possibility that part of the content might be in the work's very form and surface: the fabric. As Christo and Jeanne-Claude (2015) write on their website:

> Throughout the history of art, the use of fabric has been a fascination for artists. From the most ancient times to the present, fabric forming folds, pleats and draperies is a significant part of paintings, frescoes, reliefs and sculptures made of wood, stone and bronze. The use of fabric on the Reichstag follows the classical tradition. Fabric, like clothing or skin, is fragile; it translates the unique quality of impermanence. (para. 6)

One might look at the *Wrapped Reichstag* and notice the contrast between the hardness of the stone and the softness of the fabric, the masculinity of the angular building and the femininity of the draped folds, the seriousness of the political institution, and the frivolity of dressing it up. If someone had come away from looking at the *Wrapped Reichstag* not having thought about renewal, redemption, or hope, if they had not experienced the work as therapeutic in any way, would they have failed to have a worthwhile experience of this work? Not at all. In my view the work did its work *as work of art* if it intervened in any way in how the person *looked* at the Reichstag—full stop. If the viewer could make no personal connection between their life and the work, but paused to look at the Reichstag because they had never seen it this way, wrapped in cloth, the work would have given rise to an aesthetic experience. I am not advancing the strict autonomist position that works of art should *only* ever be judged on aesthetic grounds (see Carroll, 1998, p. 127). However, I do believe that works of art, insofar as we consider them

works of art, must *also* be judged aesthetically, regardless of whatever else—for example, their investment or therapeutic value—we judge them for. By treating the *Wrapped Reichstag* as a tool for finding hope about a country's redemption, de Botton and Armstrong gloss over the aesthetic dimensions of the work.

The same holds for Manet's *Bunch of Asparagus*. The painting does not need to be redeemed by showing how it can teach us something about seeing the familiar with fresh eyes, in general, or seeing a loved one with fresh eyes, in particular. Manet's asparagus is just fine being what it is: a painting of a bunch of asparagus in which there are many things to see. One viewer might be interested in the strange greens that the asparagus sits atop of. Someone else may notice that the asparagus tips are closer to the right edge of the canvas than the cut ends sit to the left edge. And someone may look up the painting in an exhibition catalogue and learn about the amusing story of Manet selling this painting to Charles Ephrussi for 800 francs, Ephrussi paying with 1,000 francs, and Manet returning, instead of the 200 francs he owed him, a painting of a single asparagus with the note, "There was one missing from your bunch" (Musée d'Orsay, 2006). My point here is the same as the one I made above: an oil painting of a bunch of asparagus is not inherently a tool for rekindling romance, even if it may have that effect on de Botton, Armstrong, or other viewers. It is a work of art, an object available for aesthetic experience. In saying this I agree with Carroll (2000), who, while acknowledging that a therapeutic experience *can be* an "appropriate way of experiencing an artwork" (p. 194), also observes: "The almost exclusive monopoly of the message in the contemporary artworld is giving rise to the apprehension that something is being left out. Another corrective is in the offing. And the name for that corrective is aesthetics" (p. 192). Carroll offers an expansive definition of an aesthetic experience as "one that involves design appreciation and/or the detection of aesthetic and expressive properties and/or attention to the ways in which the formal, aesthetic and expressive properties of the artwork are contrived" (p. 207). Attending to a visual artwork's formal aesthetic, and expressive properties requires that viewers suspend their personal concerns or desire to learn something, and pay attention first to what there is to see.

The examples I have given of other ways of engaging with the *Wrapped Reichstag* and *Bunch of Asparagus* are not exhaustive. They are merely a glimpse into the possibilities of engagements that rely on attention to the works themselves, not to discoveries about the works' instrumental uses for therapeutic or other ends. As I have put it elsewhere, "the primary role of

the arts is to intervene in human perception" (Ruitenberg, 2014, p. 191). The point of such interventions is precisely that: to intervene. Leaving aside other forms of art appealing to other senses, visual art can help us see things differently from how we ordinarily see them. It can present an ordinary person, object, or scene in the most exalted way, highlighting a beauty that we might not otherwise notice. It might present a celebrated person, object, or scene in the most debased way, highlighting an ugliness we might not otherwise notice. Sometimes we experience the intervention in the way we commonly perceive things as welcome relief, as comforting or healing. At other times we experience art's intervention as an unwelcome interruption, as insulting or disturbing. And the same work of art may be experienced as comforting by one person and as disturbing by another.

I agree with Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee (2005) who write that "fundamental to the experience [of visual art] are moments of contemplation, of silent meditation upon the works of art. We ask visitors to turn away from their immersion in everyday concerns and to slip into the world of the object" (p. 68). de Botton and Armstrong, by contrast, ask the object to slip into the world of the viewer. Burnham and Kai-Kee stress that an experience of a work of art is, first and foremost, about the work of art. In the hermeneutic pair of artwork and viewer, de Botton and Armstrong place more emphasis on the viewer's desires and psychological needs, which risk overshadowing the work's ability to show us things we do not anticipate, do not need, and cannot use for our own instrumental purposes.

Conclusion

I commend de Botton and Armstrong for their premise that art is not the exclusive preoccupation of the cultural cognoscenti, but can have a bearing on anyone's life—as long as we're willing to let it. I also commend them for highlighting that art is not a purely cerebral affair, that works of art do something to us, and that the emotions are involved in this doing. My main criticisms of their approach are that they predetermine what bearing art can and should have, and that they privilege the therapeutic over the aesthetic value of art.

There is an important difference between a life hack approach in everyday life, where household items are repurposed but also retain their original use-value, and a life-hack approach to art, where the practical utility of "repurposed" works offers *redemption* for purported uselessness. Life hacks typically repurpose discarded or cheap materials; people don't turn objects they already value into life hacks. de Botton and Armstrong's message seems to be that

art is useless, but that with the help of their commentaries, these useless works can be turned into something viewers can benefit from.

Whatever else art is and does, it offers an aesthetic experience, which is to say that it *intervenes in perception* ("aesthetic" is derived from the Greek verb *aisthesthai*, meaning to perceive, sense). This intervention may have various further effects, including therapeutic ones, but art is not useless if its effects are not therapeutic. Art may make us laugh or cry or leave us indifferent. It may disturb or console us, give us nightmares or fits of giggles. It may do this and a whole host of other things—but it does not inherently need or mean to do any of them. When de Botton and Armstrong cite the "art for art's sake" credo, they dismiss it as saying that art has no purpose. That, however, is not what the credo says. That art is done for the sake of art suggests that art has no purpose other than to *be art*—and the latter is quite a bit of purpose.

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