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Whose Art Is It?



Synopsis

Whose Art Is It? is the story of sculptor John Ahearn, a white artist in a black and Hispanic neighborhood of the South Bronx, and of the people he cast for a series of public sculptures commissioned for an intersection outside a police station. Jane Kramer, telling this story, raises one of the most urgent questions of our time: How do we live in a society we share with people who are, often by their own definitions, "different?" Ahearn's subjects were "not the best of the neighborhood." They were a junkie, a hustler, and a street kid. Their images sparked a controversy throughout the community and New York itself over issues of white representations of people of color and the appropriateness of particular images as civic art. The sculptures, cast in bronze and painted, were up for only five days before Ahearn removed them. This compelling narrative raises questions about community and public art policies, about stereotypes and multiculturalism. With wit, drama, sympathy, and circumspection, Kramer draws the reader into the multicultural debate, challenging our assumptions about art, image, and their relation to community. Her portrait of the South Bronx takes the argument to its grass roots—provocative, surprising in its contradictions and complexities and not at all easy to resolve. Accompanied by an introduction by Catharine R. Stimpson exploring the issues of artistic freedom, "political correctness," and multiculturalism, Whose Art Is It? is a lively and accessible introduction to the ongoing debate on representation and private expression in the public sphere.

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Customer Reviews

The tension among artist, art and patron is one of the enduring subjects of modern culture. Whether

the patron is pope, millionaire or modern community center, the artist working in an arena not bounded by personal conscience faces vexing questions about the relationship between artist and the larger society. Patrons, too, face vexing questions: Am I buying a commodity for my personal (or community) pleasure, or am I to put up with whatever springs from the artist's imagination? Kramer (Europeans, Unsettling Europe), addresses these issues in an essay about Bronx-based artist John Ahearn that originally appeared in The New Yorker. The artist received a 1991 commission to place three sculptures in front of a local police precinct-house in the nation's poorest congressional district. Kramer thoughtfully tells the complex story of this white artist in a black and Latino community and how that environment informs Ahearn's artistic vision. When that vision runs into strident criticism from African American and Latino residents and bureaucrats, Ahearn decides to dismantle the sculpture. Kramer lets all the relevant voices in this saga speak their piece, emerging with a tale of the conflicts and confusions attendant to the construction of a multicultural society. Illustrations not seen by PW. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Selections from Kramer's superb "Letter from Europe" series in the New Yorker--challenging, informative models of intellectual journalism for the general reader--have been collected in several books (Europeans, 1988, etc.). This single-article reprint launches Public Planet Books, a series edited by Kramer, Dilip Gaonkar (Rhetoric/Univ. of Illinois), and Michael Warner (English/Rutgers) that aims to "combine reportage and critical reflection on unfolding issues and events." This short volume is Kramer's account of the furor provoked by white artist John Ahearn's sculptures of residents of the South Bronx--one of New York City's urban ruins. Kramer's article (originally published in the New Yorker), which prompted charges of racism and stereotyping, touches on the hyper-charged subjects of multiculturalism and political correctness. The author addresses these questions with her customary sensitivity to nuance and the human dimensions of social issues. Rutgers University dean Catharine R. Stimpson (Where the Meanings Are: Feminism and Cultural Spaces, not reviewed) provides an introduction that, while not as elegantly written as Kramer's text, usefully puts the debate into historical context. -- Copyright ©1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

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