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VOX HUMANA: Rooney knows what he likes.

At the risk of calling the kettle black, we tender this criticism of a recent commentary by CBS curmudgeon, Andy Rooney. On the January 2 *60 Minutes*, Rooney bellyached about public art – the oh-so-hot vogue of filling all our urban nooks with objects, some serious, some not, some permanent, some plastic. Bringing it up here is not about facing down mega-corporate media (can you hear the laughing on W. 57th St.?), denying Rooney his likes or dislikes (even without a crumb of critical insight for validation), or contesting the notion that some street art may lack merit. This rejoinder grapples with one specific failing of Rooney's screed.

While flashing images of rusting metal plates, painted hogs, donkeys, elephants, blobs, and, for all we know, Sponge Bobs, Rooney whined on about the worthiness of these urban baubles and their makers. When Rooney got to admitting that he was a “know-nothing boob,” the ice thinned. By saying “I want to see something traditional that a sculptor has done – something I can understand – before he gets a license to do this,” Rooney implied that *some* non-representationalists owned the right to sculpt or paint whatever, while others presumably, did not. He even said “license.”

Unlike the hoodwinkers, Rooney harangued, Picasso “earned the right to do anything he wants. His work is art whether I think so or not.” How's that? Rooney pictured a representational enough casting of a figure, followed by a welded-up construct of metal akimbo, thus implying that Picasso warranted the right to formulate his Cubist abstractions because he had been classically schooled. So Picasso's work is OK, even if Rooney despises it as deeply as Richard Serra's welded walls of rusty iron, because Picasso did authentic art at some point.

Nice to know that CBS eschews snobbery as Rooney speaks up for all the “know-nothing boobs” everywhere who sit back and pout, “I may not know much, but I know what I like.” Shouldn't that go, “I like what I know!”

Of course, Rooney cites no evidence that any of his subjects do *not* have classical training. That, however, is still off the point. His real wrongdoing is confusing training with style. By Andy Rooney's yardstick, someone like Olivier Messiaen had no right to offend the public ear because he never wrote in an academic style of, say, Bach, Schumann, or Mendelssohn. (And doesn't it seem just absurd to read a sentence mentioning Andy Rooney and Olivier Messiaen together – what's next, Oprah Winfrey and Jehan Alain?) By this logic, would Rooney also dismiss Bach as “pretentious nonsense” because he never wrote in the style of Palestrina? Palestrina because he never published early works resembling Machaut? Come on Rooney, let's hear you whine about J.S. Bach from coast to coast some Sunday night.

If spawning stylistically agreeable art is the hook that snags public trust and thereby accredits artists willing to challenge public taste or comprehension, isn't that a good thing? As a mentor said years ago, "If you want to be a successful church musician, first earn trust by playing the organ well. Then you can go ahead and rock the boat."

Consider this. Just as there should be no correlation between prior schooling and artistic merit, pedigree, reputation, or status cannot simply validate new or untried art. Ever hear of the Emperor's new clothes?

The real issue is this: we judge, debate, accept or deny artistic merit based upon elements in the art itself devoid of external validating insignias. The greatness of Picasso's welded iron does not depend on another of his bronzes. Richard Serra's "leaning slab of rusting metal" got chopped and removed without considering the sculptor's pedigree. The sublime beauty of the Beethoven op. 133, *Grosse fuge* at the end, has nothing to do with the stellar craft of the op. 18, no 1 quartet near the beginning.

Earning the public trust probably suits those "playing" the art circles or seeking top dollar for their work. We can thereby dupe this Rooney-sympathizing public. Be a good guy, a trustee of the public, and no matter what you do artistically, it will be deemed good. Is this our standard? If we dutifully play the "Old Rugged Cross," or "Onward Christian Soldiers" on demand, does it consequently validate a postlude by, say, Naji Hakim? Of course not. At best, linking meaty art with mindless treacle deflects the issue. It silences debate and cuts off the authentic questions regarding the intrinsic merits of any of these works.

In the end, some of Rooney's conclusions might hold up. Some of today's public art may well be inferior (and then again, it just may be a whimsical flight of decorative fancy that humanizes our urban spaces), but the intellectual process by which he arrives at his determination of worthiness carries more rust than the junk he lambastes.

- Haig Mardirosian