Alain de Botton has filled the Rijksmuseum with giant yellow Post-it notes that spell out his smarmy and banal ideas of self-improvement—but leaves us no room to look at the art,' wrote Adrian Searle, chief art critic of London’s Guardian. Searle’s scathing response is typical of the way many art professionals have reacted to the recent book by Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, Art as Therapy (Phaidon, 2013).

Whatever art professionals, such as myself, or Searle, may think of the idea that looking at art can, or should, be an exercise in self-improvement, the fact remains the book has been a huge bestseller. The reviews by ordinary customers on the website of bookselling giant Amazon are almost all positive, and the positive ones are not just enthusiastic, they are positively effusive. Clearly, the book has hit a nerve. If the reviews on Amazon are any indication, people are indeed finding wisdom and consolation in this book and a new way of looking at art. One reviewer said it made him or her want to rush to the nearest museum. In other words, we (by which I mean art professionals) need to heed the response to the book, if not the message.

De Botton and Armstrong’s chief criticism of curators and art historians is that we don’t make art relevant to audiences. We either talk amongst ourselves (fair cop), or we supply arcane factual information about images that apparently no-one wants to know (I’m a little more skeptical about this). They give an example of such uninteresting information: a wall text from the Metropolitan Museum in New York about Juan de Flandes’s Christ Appearing to His Mother (c. 1496). Their criticism is as follows: ‘At the very moment when it has the best opportunity to guide the response of the beholder, the gallery gives priority to certain facts: by whom an earlier version of the image was owned, the location of a monastery and when Queen Isabella died.’ Here is the crux of the book’s argument to which the authors continually (and it has to be said rather monotonously) return: museums and art historians are not telling audiences why they should care about art. I’m prepared to grudgingly accept this indictment.

The solution they propose is that instead of telling audiences why a work is aesthetically, historically or politically interesting, the work of art should be related to ‘what is going on in our lives’, as they put it. The canon of art, they state, is ‘disconnected from our inner needs’. If the canon cannot deliver relevance or interest, what can? Their answer is to consider not what we can do to become more attuned and responsive to art but, rather, what art can do for us: ‘To discover the purpose of art, we must ask what kinds of things we need to do with our minds and emotions, but have trouble with. What psychological frailties might art help us with?’

They list seven such functions, which they describe as the most ‘convincing and the most common’: remembering, hope, sorrow, rebalancing, self-understanding, growth, appreciation. For them, art is primarily about healing the self; art, they assert, ‘compensates for our flaws’. Taste in art should be guided by these flaws, hence they advise: ‘Before one reaches the work of art, it will therefore help to know one’s own character, so that one knows what one might be seeking to soothe or redeem.’ Hegel’s claim that art ‘presents man with himself’ is reinvigorated for the self-help age.

Essentially the version of therapy that underpins this book bears no relationship to any recognisable professional
conception of therapy. It is shorthand for the sort of advice peddled by self-help books, another prospering genre of contemporary publishing. A significant amount of *Art as Therapy* is in this genre, offering balms and chatty advice for such First World problems as relationships, intimacy and commitment. For example, according to the authors, the dwindling role of sex in long-term relationships is to be redressed via architecture. Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer’s own home Casa das Canoas (1953) is proposed as the ideal site for reigniting desire.8

In the final sections of the book, where the unrelenting concentration on the self finally eases, the authors turn to the broader question of art and politics. Here they unknowingly reiterate the claims and aspirations of a very large percentage of avant-garde artists of the twentieth century. They say: ‘The ultimate ambition of our engagements with art is that we should find ways to enact the values of art in the world.’9 In other words, art should enter life; serve as a model for a better life, and our environment more generally. One wonders if the authors have ever heard of the Russian constructivists, the Bauhaus, Mondrian, to name just a few of the many artists and groups of artists who have espoused precisely this aim. Perhaps if the authors were a little more attentive to what artists have ever heard of the Russian constructivists, the Bauhaus, Mondrian, to name just a few of the many artists and groups of artists who have espoused precisely this aim.

A number of criticisms of the book should by now be glaringly obvious: the book proposes a utilitarian approach to art; and the accounts of both art and therapy are reductive and fairly simplistic. These main criticisms aside, in the hostile world of Australian politics where utilitarianism of another stripe rules, can we nonetheless learn from this book how to defend humanistic values? For such purposes, the book could be very easily reframed. Discarding the self-help rhetoric, its real achievement could be understood as a revivification of the moral and ethical issues involved in the quest to lead a good life. That audiences are interested in these issues and can appreciate that art is part of this longstanding philosophical project is, then, very heartening. The important provocation of the book is to speak to that public.

3. ibid., p. 66.
4. ibid., p. 5.
5. ibid., p. 72.
6. ibid.
9. ibid., p. 230.

*Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, Art as Therapy*, Phaidon, London, 2013, 239 pages, AUS$45; the authors have also collaborated with the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) to present a specially curated program at the NGV until September 28.