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criticism, advocacy, and the end-of-art condition: a working paper

by Arthur C. Danto

[Dubuffet] was, I believe, entirely right to contend that creativity alters its character once the creator is made aware of the expectations or aesthetic standards of other people.

- Roger Cardinal, "Toward an Outsider Aesthetic"

A good example of criticism as tacit advocacy is cited by Deborah Solomon in her recent biography of Joseph Cornell. Written by Thomas B. Hess, it appeared in *Art News*, January 1950, and it concerned Cornell's debut exhibition at the Egan Gallery: Cornell, Hess wrote, "has taken the surrealist construction...has combined it with patient carpentry and after-dinner conversation wit...and comes up with an art form which is personal, precious, diverting, and almost insignificant.... How far anyone can go in this most limited of fields is problematic."

Taking, especially from Surrealists; patience; carpentry; after dinner, conversational; witty; precious; diverting, limited: these belong on a check-list of critical negatives, the antonyms of which partially define artistic significance circa 1950 in New York: original, American, impulsive, non-verbal, universal, profound, and compelling, and whatever state of being is after-dinner's contrary. These made for artistic goodness, and their contraries for its contrary.

Hess was to change his mind about Cornell, Solomon in fairness observes. But at that moment his "enthusiasm for the new American painting left him with little patience for anything that did not conform to that movement's bullying orthodoxy." Thus the tacit advocacy in the criticism. There was, Hess was not alone in believing, just one historically mandated way for art, and Cornell's path led elsewhere. The intolerant New York critics of 1950 -- Greenberg and

Rosenberg as well as Hess -- wrote in the prophetic mode of a philosophy of art history under much the same matrix of criticism and advocacy that elsewhere exalted the proletariat while polemicizing the capitalist entrepreneur -- or, in my own field, celebrated the scientist in conjugacy with demonizing the metaphysician.

Five or six years later, Cornell's employment of commonplace objects joined de Kooning's "Tenth Street touch" on the check-list of good-making artistic attributes when Robert Rauschenberg slathered paint on a stuffed goat with a tire round its neck; and this made it possible for Hess to think better of Cornell and, correlatively, more doubtfully about historical mandates. Just a few years later the Tenth Street touch no longer became the certificate of artistic legitimacy, and indeed fell off the list altogether.

The Tenth Street brush-stroke, as bearer of all of 1950s positive attributes, was subject to lampoon in paintings by Roy Lichtenstein which were eager to exemplify all the attributes which would have consigned them to critical hell in 1950. And since that time the Tenth Street touch has fallen from what we *must* use, if we aspire to credibility, through what we *may* use, finally to what at best we can designate (or "mention") since the time for its use has passed. It has fallen from style to manner.

This descent is not a special punishment reserved to Abstract Expressionism. It is, rather, what I think of as an end-of-art condition, which is characterized by the fact that style becomes subject matter, and hence is something shown rather than used -- and by the further fact that all historical styles, the most recent ones included, are available to artists, but only as something they can show, or designate, or mention, or refer to -- to bring together a number of roughly interchangeable terms. Of course there are subjects available to artists other than styles, but the transformation of past styles into subject-matter has been the central definition of Post-Modernism, which accordingly makes the latter into a particularly vivid example of the end-of-art condition.

Other examples, no less vivid, are provided by most of the arts of multiculturalism: they are as a general rule separated by self-consciousness from the culture of which they make art, which is accordingly their subject rather than their style. The moment, however, these styles become subjects in this way, they become available to every artist, irrespective of whether the artist belongs to the culture in question. They may, for complex reasons, not always have a *right* to such an appropriation, which might be considered a form of cultural cross-dressing. But rights belong to a different discourse altogether.

Since all styles are available as subjects, it is a further mark of the end-of-art condition that contemporary art is neutral with respect to all visible styles. All end-of-art artists are in this respect alike. Everyone, rights to one side, belongs to the identical artistic culture, which is accordingly neutral with respect to visible styles. This is

the price -- or it is the reward -- of stylistic self-consciousness. The moment we seek to bring to consciousness what we are, we at once quote ourselves and in the process make the attributes of our identity available to others as subject-matter. Mimesis and masquerade remain the prerogative of the artist, even the artists, the attributes of whose identity, having been brought to consciousness, are no longer theirs alone. Those with a taste for despair may describe this as a condition of alienation, but I see it instead as the bearable lightness of being, where, like astronauts, we walk free from the pull of cultural space. And in truth the search for identity is evidence for this condition of lightness.

If there is a punishment in the edifying episode of Abstract Expressionism's fall into the subject-matter of art, it is the harsh, intolerant critics of that moment who are its recipients. Their mistake lay in confusing what was after all only a style, with what they believed were the defining attributes of art -- as if what history had revealed, finally and forever, was what art, understood as painting, truly is. Since Cornell's boxes were only incidentally painted, they could not be art save through those incidentalities. The lesson taught was that the definition of art must equally and indifferently be exemplified by Cornell's Aviary boxes (which were the components of the Egan exhibition and the topic of Hess's review) as by the painting of Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko, both of whom, inevitably more perceptive than their critical advocates, admired Cornell as an artist.

Where does this leave criticism today? Critics today should be the beneficiaries of the philosophical fiasco of the critics of 1950. They should have learned to separate stylistic advocacy from philosophical analysis into the nature of art, and in particular to resist assimilation of the essence of art to what are but some of its instances. In this sense they should be tolerant along precisely the dimension through which their predecessors were intolerant. I am speaking, of course, of tolerance as a logical virtue rather than a personal one: it is too much to demand of one another that we be tolerant, only that we recognize that tolerance is the only defensible end-of-art virtue. (That the call to art criticism so often renders those summoned intolerant is a topic for moral psychology).

It is the only defensible virtue because critics share with artists the neutrality of the present moment, the neutrality that follows from the fact that we are all alike in being at the same logical distance from the styles which have become our subjects. But the critics have the advantage that just as all styles are in principle available to all, there is no defining style available for critical advocacy from the stand-point of the contemporary moment, where styles have become the subjects of works of art. The only relevant critical question in regard to styles is why an artist today addresses them, which, since it has to have been through self-consciousness, cannot be explained in whatever way styles would have been explained when they were used rather than designated. They exemplify in every case the result of

artistic decisions. Criticism seeks to identify the reason for those decisions, and the critic's evidence comes from the space between artist and subject. The artist Cindy Sherman fills the space, one boundary of which are the styles of the movie-stills that she took as her subject.

It will be useful, from this perspective, to contrast contemporary with Modern and then Postmodern criticism. Modernist criticism was essentially formalist, and tended to treat art as of a piece, as if every museum was a museum of modern art, in which art was admitted on formalist grounds, though sorted out on the basis of historical styles. Its enabling document was "The Intentionalist Fallacy," a reasonable enough position since in most cases we don't know the intentions of artists in Africa or elsewhere, whose art we nevertheless admire by formalist criteria. Postmodern criticism replaced taste with interpretation, and its enabling document was "The Death of the Artist," which meant the irrelevance of intentions even if they could be known, and which enabled the free play of interpretation, and the irrelevance of truth: all interpretations were permissible, the more outrageous the better.

Contemporary criticism is a return to truth because a return to the decisions and the reasons that explain works of art. For even if the reasons cannot be known, they have to be postulated in order to understand what we are looking at. Contemporary criticism acknowledges the modularity of common-sense psychology, which operates with a model of explanation that abducts from external products to internal processes -- from what is visible to what must be inferred. And interpretation stands or falls with the truth of our inferences. The museums of modern art are replaced with the museums of "inferential art criticism" (the term was coined by Baxandall). And of course against this framework quality is very much in issue -- not as a judgment between styles, which leads to advocacy, but a judgment within styles, in which we can rank better and worse against the same framework of decision we invoke to identify and explain what we see.

It may be objected that not all art today is appropriationist. Still, appropriationism, which defines the end-of-art condition, is pretty much the defining principle of our moment, putting, as it does, everything and every combination of things at the service of art, even including bad drawing and bad painting, since these, being designated, tell us only what kind of point the artist who appropriates them intends, not what kind of artist she or he is. Cornell, to end where I began, is a good example of how to make visual poetry out of scraps and bits taken from distant styles for which being behind glass was a brilliant metaphor, where the space between the subject and the glass was infused with his mysterious interiority. I cite him not in the spirit of advocacy but in that of illustration. We are all somehow between the glass and the subject. That interiority is the subject of the critic. Likes and dislikes are by the way.

This text was delivered at the 85th annual conference of the College Art Association in New York on the panel "Art Criticism: Valuation and Reevaluation," organized by the United States Section of the International Association of Art Critics.

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