

Introduction

Philosophy and Contemporary Art

IT HAS BECOME CLEAR to me that even during the composition of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), I was possessed with the history of art as a philosophical problem. I mean by this something stronger than the consideration that artworks themselves have a certain historical identity, where the problem is how the knowledge of this affects how we interpret and respond to those works. The question instead is why works of art in fact form a kind of history themselves, beyond the mere circumstance of their being made in a specific temporal sequence. From that perspective, two books must have exerted a far greater influence upon me than I was altogether conscious of at the time: Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (1960) and Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Gombrich's problem can be given an almost Kantian formulation: How is a history of art *possible*? The horizons of Gombrich's agenda as an art historian, together with the boundaries of his taste in art, meant that he transformed his powerful question into a restricted version of itself, namely: How is a history of *representationalist* art possible? And to this he gave an answer which owed a great deal to his philosophical peer, Karl Popper, who thought of the history of science as constituted by certain creative leaps disciplined by the criterion of falsification. Gombrich saw the history of art as similarly

constituted of creative leaps from form to form of representation, disciplined by the criterion of matching representations against the appearances of the visual world. Gombrich was able to deduce a dictum of Heinrich Wölfflin as a consequence of his theory, in that he could explain why everything was not possible at every time. Because representation has a history, an artist early in the history of increasingly adequate schematisms of representation simply would not have had available the representational powers of a later time. Each of us learns through experience, and the history of art realizes that very dynamic through the growth of representational adequacy, almost as if Art were some superordinate being who learns, through the centuries, how to represent the world.

Although Popper was an immeasurably greater philosophical thinker than Gombrich, he very largely lacked, as most of the positivists did, any especially vivid sense of historical change. His focus was on the philosophy of scientific method, and he polemicized tirelessly against the view that induction—the inference from sample to population, or to a universal generalization from a finite set of observations—was the way science arrived at its best hypotheses. He was interested in the formation of scientific hypotheses, irrespective of the historical circumstances in which this occurs, but failed to ask the question parallel to Gombrich's of how it is possible for science to have a history in the first place. That would have required him to explain how scientific representations evolve from less to more adequate, other than through the modifications made in response to the efforts to falsify them. Like most methodologists, he was interested in what is everywhere and always the case. He and Kuhn were in essential agreement that hypotheses are arrived at by acts of creative imagination, rather than by what President Clinton not long ago referred to as “bean counting.”

At one point, Kuhn argued that the history of art had been held up as a demonstration that there genuinely is progress in human affairs, and although Gombrich had shown that the progress in question was not linear and smooth, but punctuated by leaps (in a manner very like evolu-

tion itself, understood on the model of “punctuational equilibrium”), he would have had little doubt that there was genuine progress in the history of art from the relatively primitive representational schematisms of the early Renaissance to those of the nineteenth century: from Cimebue, say, to Constable. It would be progress only if those later in the sequence were able to perform more effectively the same tasks as those earlier in the sequence; otherwise there would merely be a change of agenda (which would in effect have been Panofsky’s view of history, in which one set of symbolic forms gives way to another without this in any sense constituting a progress).

Had modernism not occurred, there would have been little to fault in Gombrich’s analysis; but the operations of “making and matching” do not easily capture the shift from the impressionists to the postimpressionists, or from Cézanne to the cubists and the fauves. They do not easily capture the shift from representational to abstract art. They do not in any sense account for whatever it was Duchamp thought he was doing after his declaration that painting was finished. The dynamisms Gombrich worked out in such detail and with such ingenuity seem to have little to do with the directions art began to take after the mid-1960s. Indeed, what Gombrich accounted for was a history of representational art which Vasari would have been able to accept without changing in any particular the concept of art with which he worked. It would have been a predictable response, for someone wed to a theory that accounted for the art he was also by temperament attached to, that Gombrich would disparage an artist who, like Duchamp, is perhaps the most influential artist of the last third of the century. Gombrich did, to be sure, work out an interesting theory of ornament in *The Sense of Order* (1979). But Duchamp was neither representational in the ordinary sense, nor in any sense whatever an ornamentalist. So how is one within Gombrich’s framework to deal with an artist like Duchamp without simply refusing to take him seriously?

A thinker whom I have come to admire greatly for the scope and originality of his thought was the American critic Clement Greenberg. It was

greatly to his credit that Greenberg worked out an entirely novel theory of modernism, according to which that movement arose when art became conscious of itself as a problem, and undertook a quasi-Kantian investigation into its own foundations. It was Greenberg's thesis that with modernism, art became the subject of art, which undertook to create foundations for itself by seeking that which was unique to each of the arts. In the case of painting—to which it is, he felt, central that a flat surface be in some degree covered with color—flatness became the defining character, and the canvases of the first modernist painters—Manet in particular, but Cézanne as well—incorporated this discovery, which inevitably made them appear distorted. Flatness differentiates painting from sculpture, which possesses a true third dimension. This means that illusion disappears as a *beau idéal* for painting, which instead aspires to abstraction as a final state. With Manet, the history of art took a critical turn, away from the appearances of the phenomenal world to the reality of art itself conceived of in material terms—that is, so far as painting goes, as flat panels of defined shapes, covered with pigment. Greenberg's credibility as a thinker was enhanced by the authority of his famous discoveries, particularly of the genius of Jackson Pollock. But no more than Gombrich was Greenberg able to deal with art *after* modernism, and certainly not with pop, to which he was by temperament antipathetic, and which he dismissed as mere novelty for novelty's sake. I heard him lecture in 1992, when he said that the history of art had never moved so slowly as in the past thirty years. For thirty years, he contended, *nothing had happened at all!*

I of course was obsessed with pop, and felt that the most important task a philosopher of art could discharge would be to account for it, as I sought to do in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Gombrich addressed art as a historian, Greenberg primarily as a critic. I approached it as a philosopher, feeling that there was a philosophical problem with pop in that it raised acutely the philosophical question of why an object like Warhol's *Brillo Box* of 1964 was art when the countless Brillo cartons of the supermarket world were merely cartons for shipping soap pads.

How could it be art when things that resembled it to any significant degree were what I termed “mere real things”? I began to notice that the form of the question was one with the form of a whole class of philosophical questions, for example the question, obsessive for epistemologists, of distinguishing dream from waking experience when there is no internal criterion for doing so. It seemed to me that pop, however unlikely it may have appeared to those unsympathetic with it (to most of my friends who were artists, for example) had finally discovered the true form of the philosophical question about art. Pop had made it possible for philosophers to address art philosophically! Instead of attempting to define art as such, the problem, far more tractable, was to distinguish philosophically between reality and art when they resembled one another perceptually.

My effort, in *Transfiguration*, was to begin the task of framing a definition of art, and the book lays out a few conditions for such a definition which aim to be universal, addressing art as art, whatever its provenance or situation. Still, I was haunted by the question of what, in the history of art, made it possible for art to be addressed philosophically, with no fear that anything that was to come in the future would limit my analysis in the way in which modernism limited Gombrich’s, and pop and what came after limited Greenberg’s. If there were to be no future counterinstances, then, it seemed to me, this history of art had in some important way ended. It had, if I may put it somewhat obliquely, ended with the disclosure, with the coming to consciousness, of its philosophical structure. It was as if art had, through its own resources and certainly with no help from philosophy, arrived at a philosophical understanding of its nature. It was up to philosophers now to lay out the structure of this concept—and it was up to art to do whatever artists now cared to do. Art had entered the posthistorical phase in which everything was permitted—at least artistically. Naturally, like any human endeavor, it was externally constrained by moral impermissibilities. Internally, however, it had opened into an end state of total pluralism. And the mark of this pluralism was the fact that purity almost immediately stopped being the

goal of the arts. Puritanism and modernism really did go together. Greenberg had that right. But with the end of modernism, art could be as impure or non-pure as artists cared for it to be. It was only when this was perceived, primarily by artists themselves, that an adequate philosophy of art could properly begin. And I shall take the license this introduction offers to explain why this is so.

The chief mark of *contemporary* art—contemporary not simply in the sense of the art being made at the present moment but in the further sense that “contemporary” names an overall *style*, which the characteristic art of our times exemplifies—is its extreme and total diversity and openness. It is a style unlike that of any previous period in that no criteria can be offered for it, and hence no way of telling whether something is “contemporary” through recognitional capacities of the kind called upon by such stylistic terms as “baroque” or “classical” or “mannerist.” This is because it is open to contemporary artists to use historical styles to whatever ends they may have, making those styles the subject of their art. So a contemporary work could look quite like something done centuries ago and in another culture. In no previous period of the history of art can this have been true, and only under this total disjunctiveness would it have been entertained as a serious possibility that *anything* can be an artwork, which became a not infrequent claim in the 1970s.

Since we are aware that some things are *not* works of art, the philosophical problem for contemporary aesthetics is to explain what makes the difference. This problem becomes acute when we consider works of art that resemble, in all relevant particulars, some object that is not a work of art, such as Warhol’s *Brillo Box*. In this case it would be unreasonable to argue that such material differences as may exist between the artwork and the soap-pad packaging suffice to explain why the one is a work of art while its utilitarian look-alikes are not.

When the diversity in art first came to general awareness, there was an understandable tendency to say that objects are works of art when the artworld decrees them to be. This is the gist of the so-called institutional theory of art. But in view of the philosophical problem of why one of an

indiscernible pair of things is art while the other is not, the act of conferring the status of art on one and not the other must seem as arbitrary as the bestowal of grace according to Calvinist theology. It is a foundation of moral theory that equals must be treated as equals; in this sense, two persons or actions cannot be said to differ merely in that one is good and the other is not (the way in which one thing can be *red* and something else not, even if the two should be alike in every other way). The Calvinist God cannot, consistently with his omnipotence, be thought of as limited in this way, which means that of two individuals, alike in every relevant particular, one may receive grace and not the other. It would hardly be suitable to view the artworld, as a status-conferring institution, in these inscrutable terms. So, as in moral judgment, the designation of something as art must be justified, through a discourse of reasons, and cannot, without becoming unacceptably arbitrary, consist simply in declarations. Even the most powerful critics are not, after all, gods.

The upshot is that the diversity of contemporary art is not equivalent to the idea that anything goes. That assertion must at first appear inconsistent, so it is a next task for the philosophy of art to dissolve this impression. The diversity is due to the fact that there are no *a priori* limits on what *can* be a work of art. Down the centuries there have always been such limits—whether photography was art was a border controversy from the moment of its invention until well into the twentieth century. These internal boundaries have disappeared from the concept, however, leaving only the boundary that divides art from everything else—a fact hidden from aestheticians throughout the previous history of art. It is this lack of internal boundaries that opens the concept up for works of art of radically different sorts. The concept of art is *not* like the concept, say, of cat, where the class of cats do pretty largely resemble one another, and can be recognized as cats by more or less the same criteria. In precontemporary periods, the class of artworks was much like the class of cats. But with modernism it became less and less easy to identify something as art, simply because of the discrepancy between modernist and premodernist works, which is why, in part, responses to the former so often,

and so characteristically, held that some outrageous canvas was not art at all, but a hoax or a symptom of madness. The great modernist critics had to evolve a theory of art that would accommodate these unaccommodating objects, without at the same time disqualifying what had previously been acknowledged as art. They did this, often, by defining art in formalist terms, which applied indifferently to a still life by Cézanne or a crucifixion by Giotto. But a work such as *Brillo Box* cannot obviously be distinguished, on formalist grounds, from the ordinary object it resembles: a photograph of Warhol among his boxes looks just like a photograph of a stock boy among the cartons in the stockroom. A pile of felt scraps by Robert Morris need look no different from a pile of felt scraps in some mill or workshop, where no claim whatever is made to the status of art. If there is to be a definition of art that fits contemporary art as well as all previous art, it has to be consistent not only with the fact that there are no limits on what can be art but also with the possibility that artworks and mere objects can resemble one another to any degree whatever. For better or worse, that helps show that the concept of art is different from the concept of moral goodness, where such a possibility cannot arise. And it helps show how the concept of art differs in its logic from the concept of cats—or of any so-called “natural kind.”

These considerations demonstrate that we cannot define art in terms of how things look. But they in no sense entail that we cannot define art. We can, but we must do so in full recognition of the problems generated by contemporary art. In my 1995 Mellon Lectures, published as *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (1997), I argued for two criteria: an artwork must have content, that is, it must possess *aboutness*; and it must *embody* that content. So what *Brillo Box* is about is an important first question to ask, and whatever answer one comes up with, it will have to differ from what *Brillo* cartons are about—in case we recognize that the shipping carton is, after all, a piece of commercial art. The design of the box proclaims the virtues of its *literal* contents, namely soap pads. But one may be certain that this is not what *Brillo Box* is about. Similar questions arise for piles of felt scraps, whether presented as art

or merely left over after the sheets of felt are shaped in the cutting room. These issues belong in what I term the “discourse of justification,” and while the definition will doubtless need to be carried further, these two conditions explain how two things may look alike but one of them not be art. To be art is to be internally connected with an interpretation, which means precisely identifying content and mode of presentation. These are first steps in art criticism as well, whatever further needs to be said. However, it is one thing to connect the definition of art with the practice of art criticism, another to define art in terms of what critics happen to say. Critics, after all, are often locked up in earlier moments of art history, with formalism, for example, which applies with such difficulty to contemporary art. It is this difficulty, indeed, which makes contemporary art itself seem, well, *difficult*.

The two criteria, however primitive, help validate the idea of a parallel philosophical structure between persons and artworks. Persons embody representational states, as artworks embody their contents. There is more to the two categories than this, but the overlap between the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of art at the very least connects this volume of essays with its companion volume, *The Body/Body Problem*. It justifies, I hope, my own philosophical agenda of developing the philosophy of these two domains in parallel ways. The main thought, so far as the present volume is concerned, is that contemporary art meets the philosophy of art halfway, so that one can speak of the *art itself* philosophizing. This is especially perspicuous in the work of Warhol, whom I treat here as if a philosopher in “The Philosopher as Andy Warhol.” It is interesting to contrast that essay with the one on Robert Motherwell, who, for all his generosity of spirit, found very little good to say about Warhol. My assertion at one point that Warhol was closest to a philosophical genius of any twentieth-century artist very nearly cost me Robert’s friendship, and he pointed out to me that Warhol rarely said more in front of a painting than “Wow.” But that of course is just my point: the philosophy was in and through the *work*, and not in what was said in front of the work. There is in my view a great deal in Hegel’s

belief that art and philosophy are deeply affined—that they are, in his heavy idiom, two moments of Absolute Spirit. The wonder of Warhol is that he did philosophy as art, in the sense that he defined false boundaries by crossing them. Since no philosopher of art in 1964 recognized the kinds of problems Warhol raised, he could not have had a philosophical language in which to explain it. So, perhaps, “Wow.”

Motherwell, however, had worked toward an advanced degree in philosophy, and took it upon himself to articulate the philosophy of the great school of painting to which he belonged (and which he named the “New York School”). His writings have a philosophical richness we would not expect to find equaled in Warhol’s verbal remnants. But his work nonetheless philosophizes, in that there were internal philosophical reasons he could find for why the paintings came out as they did. So the volume begins with his philosophical search, his effort to understand his practice. And one might join to the essays on Warhol and Motherwell the one on illustrating a philosophical text (the formulation is Mel Bochner’s), which means to find images *equivalent* to philosophical theses and then use these to illustrate the text which asserts them. It was fascinating to work through the ways in which Bochner’s drawings for Wittgenstein’s text *On Certainty* seek to make the kind of point Wittgenstein himself makes, graphically rather than verbally. In some sense, Louis Kahn’s architectural creations can be seen as illustrations of a philosophical text—or a group of such texts—very close to Platonism. His own writing expresses the philosophy his buildings illustrate, and explains why the buildings went one way rather than another. Which came first is difficult to say, but Kahn clearly had the philosophy he needed when he entered the period of his greatness with the art museum he designed for Yale University.

The expression “philosophizing art” is deliberately ambiguous as to whether the art does the philosophizing or is the object of philosophizing, and the essays here can be loosely partitioned along such lines. “Moving Pictures” attempts to elicit at least a fragment of the medium’s philosophy by proceeding as Warhol did, imagining films which he

showed to be possible but which, for perhaps obvious reasons, never were made. The principle of imagination, however, is in every instance that of conceptual discovery, and my sense of the philosophy of film is seriously different from what is accepted as film theory in the academy today. Something like this is true also for the curious essay "Gettysburg," which considers ways in which one can think of battlefields as works of art, for which Civil War memorial statuary holds the key. The essay on chairs brings to consciousness what must be true for pieces of furniture to be works of art, and does so by considering chairs *in* art as a guide to how to think of chairs *as* art. Each of the essays "philosophizes art" from somewhat different angles. My great hope is that by conjoining discussions of works with a relevant piece of philosophy, the art in question is opened up for critical analysis, precisely in the terms specified above. One looks for the content, and then the mode of presentation. And then one sees where one is.

The essays gathered here are from very diverse and often quite obscure sources, read by quite different audiences, very few of whom could be counted on to know the other venues in which my essays appeared. Unlike the critical essays that appear with some regularity in the *Nation*, of which I publish collections from time to time, these would languish in the back files of such publications as the *Print Collector's Newsletter* or the *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* or *Grand Street*, or as catalog essays for certain exhibitions, such as the inaugural exhibition of the Andy Warhol Museum or a wonderful exhibition of Motherwell's works on paper, organized by David Rosand for the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University in early 1997. In these essays, the relationships between philosophy and art are made more explicit, and carried further over a wider array, than I have been able to achieve in any other place, and this justifies bringing them together. My great hope is that their readers will get a more vivid sense of philosophizing criticism than my regular critical pieces make possible.

One last word. I have sometimes been interpreted as saying that the history of art ends when art turns into philosophy. That is not my view.

The history of art ends when it becomes possible to think philosophically about art without having one's philosophy held hostage to the future. Art ends when one is positioned to ask, as could not have been done at earlier moments, the proper philosophical questions about it. Only in rare cases, Warhol's being exemplary, is the art itself philosophy, doing what philosophers do but in the medium of art.

Very little of contemporary art is especially philosophical in this way. Still, it was through the deep pluralism of contemporary art that an adequate philosophy of art—a philosophy of art compatible with everything everywhere that is art—became possible. So there is after all a connection between contemporary art and the philosophy of art, which leaves it open to art to philosophize or not. That is the realm of freedom the artworld exhibits, even if pressures to do or not to do certain things remain. We are human beings, after all.