



## From Philosophy to Art Criticism

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imperatives of the bleeding edge—“cutting edge,” I am told, no longer cuts deeply enough—is to risk the opprobrium of one’s colleagues. There’s too much invested—in terms of status, reputation, money, and even friendship—in the anti-art juggernaut to call it for the sham it is. So why not grease the wheel, sit back, and enjoy the ride?

Because, one might reply, a critic’s job is to slow down the ride, give it a once over, and judge, always judge. How well a critic functions at this task depends, if I can shift metaphors from turf to surf, on the ability to navigate the bewildering waters of contemporary art. Does a critic stem the tide or bob within it like the most compliant of corks?

The dull conformity of art criticism tells us that the latter is most decidedly the case. The prevalence of bobbing has been remarked upon for years, but mostly *sotto voce*. Recently, however, critics of critics have made themselves heard. In the summer 2001 issue of the *New Art Examiner*, for example, Mark Van Proyen, a professor at the San Francisco Art Institute, wrote that “for all its much proclaimed diversity of views . . . current [art] writing has been agreeably and passively sycophantic to [the art scene’s] revolving banality of changelessness for too long.”

He’s right. “Changelessness” is where we are and it’s nowhere. Then again, one man’s “changefulness” is another man’s poison. Still, it is a heartening sign that the appalling acquiescence of critics is being remarked upon. It suggests that what the culture needs is not open minds—an attribute that leads, as the old joke has it, to brains falling out—but those minds willing to stop, stand, and, if need be, say “No.”

Arthur C. Danto

## From Philosophy to Art Criticism

Since 1984, I have been the regular art critic for the *Nation*, a weekly magazine of opinion, which was first published on July 4, 1865. From its inception, the magazine took art seriously, due largely to the influence of John Ruskin on its early critics. Ruskin was drawn to the Pre-Raphaelites because of their concern for visual truth. Not long after I was appointed, I reviewed an exhibition of their American counterparts at the Brooklyn Museum. My earliest predecessor, Russell Sturgis, was a great enthusiast of the “Pre-Rafs,” as they called themselves. Without reference to Ruskin’s views, though, one would hardly have seen the Americans’ work as of much consequence. Their small, singularly unpretentious paintings might show two eggs in a nest, an apple on a branch, or a fern. They counted their pictures a success if someone praised them for looking as if they had been made with a camera. The contemporary work I deal with often has this in common with the “New Path,” as the American Pre-Raphaelite movement was called: its artistic merit cannot simply be identified with its visual interest, which may be minimal. My task as a critic is to provide the context my readers need to get much out of it at all.

The American Pre-Raphaelites, who thought of their art in political and even moral terms, were polemically engaged with the National Academy, which disregarded visual truth in favor of pictorial artifice. Clement Greenberg, the *Nation*’s art critic from 1942 until he resigned over a political disagreement in 1949, entertained a no-less-exalted hope for the avant-garde art of his time. He believed that it fortified the mind against kitsch, which he regarded as the favored aesthetic of totalitarianism. Much of what Greenberg dismissed as kitsch was redeemed as pop art by my immediate predecessor, Lawrence Alloway, who invented the term. Hollywood movies, popular music, pulp fiction, Alloway believed, can sustain the same critical examination as high art. I do not think I would have written a word about art had it not been for pop. But I wrote about it initially as a



J. W. Hill, *Bird's Nest and Dogroses*, 1867. Watercolor, 27 x 35 cm (10  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 13  $\frac{7}{8}$  in.). Collection of the New-York Historical Society

philosopher, long before art criticism became a possibility for me.

I came to art criticism directly from philosophy, which I had taught for thirty years at Columbia University and continued to teach for some while after my first byline appeared in the *Nation*. What had excited me about pop art was a philosophical question raised by Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*: Why was it an artwork when the soap carton it looked like was merely a soap carton? What meets the eye in both cases is more or less the same, and the difference between artwork and mere object cannot be defined on the basis of the residual visual differences. In fact, much of the avant-garde art of the mid-1960s—with minimalism, fluxus, and conceptual art, not to mention dance, as conceptualized by Merce Cunningham and the Judson group, or music, as reconceived by John Cage—prompted the same question.

Remarkably, philosophers and artists were independently seeking a definition of art in those years, as if the need for it had taken on a cultural urgency. What distinguished a blank uninflected wooden sculpture by Robert Morris from a packing case, or a line of bricks from a sculpture by Carl Andre consisting of a line of bricks? The most interesting criticism of that time came from the artists themselves and verged on philosophy. My 1964 article, "The Art World," advanced the view that in order to know one was in the presence of art, one needed to know something of the recent history of art and be able to participate in the defining theoretical discussions of the moment—not all that different from the situation with the Pre-Rafs a century earlier.

Until I came to write *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*—published in 1981—I had written nothing else on art, and in effect the 1970s passed without my being aware of what was happening in the art world. It was, I came to realize, a remarkably fertile period in which the present radically pluralistic configuration of the art scene was beginning to take shape. Little of the art made then entered public consciousness. There were no real movements, and the homegrown aesthetics of the 1960s was overtaken by intellectual imports from abroad—Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and the French feminists. The art of the 1970s was produced by the young for the young, who used to whatever degree they could the intoxicating obscurities of this writing. Certainly little of the earlier critical literature, most of it concerned with modernism and addressed to painting, had much bearing on an art scene in which the traditional media were being broken down and reconstituted. The decade was something like the Dark Ages, in which hidden forces were working to make a new world without anyone realizing that this process was taking place. The new art world was somewhat despairingly characterized in Theodore Adorno's 1969 work *Aesthetic Theory*: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident any more, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist." The role of art criticism for this world still remains to be identified.

In my philosophical writing on art, I consider works of art that are perceptually indiscernible from one another, like sets of monochrome paintings that differ greatly in



Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box*, 1964. Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on wood, 43.2 x 43.2 x 35.6 cm (17 x 17 x 14 in.). The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, Founding Collection Contribution The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts Inc.

meaning. Kierkegaard tells a joke about an artist who, asked to depict the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, painted a red square: the Israelites have safely crossed over and the pursuing Egyptians have all drowned. Kierkegaard then says his mind is like that painting: a single mood. In *The Transfiguration*, I imagined a whole gallery of red squares, belonging to different genres and with different meanings, but looking entirely alike. This led me to advance a rudimentary definition of art that stood me in good stead when I took up art criticism: something is an artwork if it embodies a meaning. The supermarket Brillo box is commercial art that proclaims and celebrates the virtues of its contents, namely soap pads. Warhol's *Brillo Box* looks just like this cartoon, but it is not about Brillo. It is perhaps about commercial art, or what Brillo itself means. So the two objects, outwardly similar, call for different art criticisms. To work through these criticisms, one has to find out what the objects mean and begin from there.

Luckily, there was an astute exhibition at the Whitney Museum on New York art from 1957 to 1964 when I was invited to submit my first critical piece for the *Nation* in 1984. The show featured pop and fluxus as well as re-creations of certain happenings. It was in connection with this particular work that I had forged my philosophy of art, and so I was able to write about the show in a convincing way. Obviously, if I were going to be an art critic, I would not be able to write about this sort of art exclusively, but the thesis that works of art were embodied meanings turned out to carry me a certain distance. It is an exceedingly general thesis. But one wants a definition of art that is general enough to cover everything—the art of the 1960s, Egyptian art, African fetishes, Chinese paintings, Raphael's *Transfiguration*, and the untitled stills of Cindy Sherman, which turned out to be one of the great bodies of work from the 1970s. And what I particularly valued in the thesis was that it entailed no stylistic imperatives and defined no path. Most of the criticism of the 1950s and 1960s was intended to exclude certain things from critical consideration, and to point the direction art must henceforward take. I felt that the time for exclusion was over, and that what marked the art world was the absence of directions. Art could look anyway at all. There were no constraints on what artists could do, so far as art was concerned.

“A painting must be a feast for the eyes,” Delacroix said in his *Journal*, “but that does not mean that there is no place for reason.” Contemporary art is rarely a feast for the eyes. It takes reasoning to bring it into being, and to explain what we are seeing. This does not rule out being bowled over by what one sees—but I don't believe that should be the test of good art. Mostly, a work of art releases its meanings and its methods slowly, rarely all at once. I still recall looking at a painting by Frans Hals in the Metropolitan Museum while the painter Knox Martin, having studied the work for close to forty years, explained what I was seeing. The main thing I can do as a writer is to exhibit a way of thinking about specific bodies of art. Probably I overphilosophize. On the other hand, unlike Russell Sturgis and Clement Greenberg, I have no artistic agenda. Art critics have, in the main, been articulate partisans of some prevailing style or other, have been what Robert Hughes impugned as “cheer-leaders.” I like to think that part of what sets my criticism apart is its nonpartisan character, which does not mean that I am without prejudices and preferences, but that I regard these as too subjective, too caught up in my personal history, to have great bearing on the way I want to think about art in the public forum.

Someone might say I have ideologized a form of pluralism, one which puts aesthetic preferences out of play. My response is that I regard pluralism as the objective structure of contemporary art history, in which nothing is justifiably preferable to anything else, at least so far as modes of artist production are concerned. That is equivalent to saying there



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #11*, 1978. Black and white photograph. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

is no objective direction for art to take. This does not rule out distinctions in quality, but only the tendency to believe that quality derives from the genre one supports, for example, visual truth or abstraction or minimalism. Painting, in part for political reasons, has been somewhat marginalized since the 1970s, but it would be inconsistent with pluralism to lead the cheering section for painting, though in my heart of aesthetic hearts, it is painting that moves me most powerfully. I don't see myself as the kind of advocate that the earliest critics for the *Nation* were. Pluralism is the view that criticism does not consist in saying that what one approves of as a critic carries a serious "ought."

Pluralism is a consequence of a philosophy of art history, and, if I am right, of where we now are in terms of that history. There is a lot I like, and a lot I don't like, but these preferences do not give me reasons either to defend or attack. I must some time discover why art criticism—why criticism generally—is so savagely aggressive against its target, almost, as Chekhov once wrote, as if the writer or artist had committed some terrible crime. When I first began to write, there was a certain amount of negativity in my pieces, but I increasingly believe this is a form of cruelty, and that cruelty is never permissible. A lot of work goes into an exhibition. The least the critic can do is to say what it is about and how its meaning is embodied, rather than to set it against a model that may be inappropriate. In my own experience, I often find that as I work my way through the art, it becomes part of me. I may even come to like it.

**Following is full caption information for images of critics featured on pages 2-3. All images are details. Clockwise from upper left:** Elaine de Kooning, *Harold Rosenberg*, 1956. Oil, 203.2 x 149.5 cm (70 7/8 x 58 7/8 in.). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; Peggy Bacon, *Henry McBride*, ca. 1935. Crayon on paper, 32.7 x 14.9 cm (12 7/8 x 5 7/8 in.). National Portrait Gallery; Phyllis Herfield, *Clement Greenberg*, 1984. Tempera on wood panel, 76.2 x 59.2 cm (30 x 23 3/8 in.). National Portrait Gallery; John Stevens Coppin, *Sadakichi Hartmann*, 1940. Oil, 152.4 x 86.4 cm (60 x 34 in.). National Portrait Gallery; Elaine de Kooning, *Tom Hess*, 1956. Oil on board, 58.1 x 40 cm (24 x 16 in.). National Portrait Gallery; Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer*, 1888. Plaster relief, 51.9 x 19.7 cm (20 1/2 x 7 3/4 in.). Courtesy U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, New Hampshire; Thomas Hart Benton, *Thomas Craven*, 1919. Oil, 96.8 x 76.5 in. (38 1/8 x 30 1/8 in.). Corporate Collection of UMB Bank, n.a., Kansas City, Missouri; Elizabeth McCausland, 1934. Detail of photograph portraying her with Gertrude Stein in Springfield, Massachusetts, photographer unknown. Elizabeth McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Winold Reiss, *Alain Leroy Locke*, ca. 1925. Pastel on artist board, 75.9 x 54.9 cm (29 7/8 x 21 1/8 in.). National Portrait Gallery, Gift of Lawrence A. Fleischman and Howard Garfinkle with a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. **At center, from left to right:** James Jackson Jarves, date unknown. Photograph from Francis Steegmuller, *The Two Lives of James Jackson Jarves* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), facing p. 34; Max Rosenthal, *William Dunlap*, 1897. Engraving after a painting by Charles Cromwell Ingham, 14.8 x 11.9 cm (5 7/8 x 4 3/4 in.). National Portrait Gallery, Gift of Cooper-Hewitt Museum Library; Henry Theodore Tuckerman, date unknown. Print reproduced from the *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, (New York: James T. White & Company, 1897): 7:234