

After Taste
Arthur C. Danto

BEFORE READING THE BRILLIANT ESSAY by Gregg Horowitz

and Tom Hahn, I had more or less resigned myself to at best a fragmentary understanding of my thought by my contemporaries. Art writers in general have too weak a grip on philosophical analysis to examine with an appropriate level of critical power an argument sustained over several pages, and philosophers, again in general, have too little interest in art or too scant a knowledge of it to be able to appraise an argument that, like mine, derives from a certain intimacy with its recent history. That intimacy, for better or worse, would have required, as Horowitz and Hahn vividly intimate, a closer relationship than most academic philosophers have had with New York City, where, after all, so much of that history has unfolded. It is one of the immense blessings of a professorship at Columbia University that one has the great city at one's doorstep, as well as a certain institutional tolerance toward faculty drawing intellectual sustenance from the world outside its walls. John Dewey, Lionel Trilling, Meyer Schapiro, I. I. Rabi and even my teacher, Ernst Nagel, exemplified the excitement of thought that flourishes in the space between scholarship and life.

With so much happening in the artwork from the late forties, when I moved to New York, until this very moment, it would have been impossible for me merely to philosophize with the canonical aestheticians, from Plato through Kant to Nietzsche and Heidegger, who for all their conceptual muscularity lacked the privilege of living with the art of the late twentieth century.

Because my writing is so stained by this history, I have had little hope that future readers would be any better equipped than my contemporaries to deal with my texts. Partly through inclination, partly through the same order of inadvertence with which stray bits of reality get captured by a photograph (Saul Steinberg loves the way old postcards show dogs crossing piazzas in front of the daunting monuments, or figures unsuspectingly captured through windows in the marvelous facades) my texts have at times been so closely linked to the immediacies of New York experience that my chief work in the philosophy of art, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, now seems to those closest to my writing—the philosopher and critic David Carrier, for example to be in increasing need of annotation. In very little time indeed, the culture of the late seventies when that book was written (it was published in 1961) has slipped away from the common consciousness, and increasingly needs the kind of footnotes my translators conscientiously insert when something too arcane or too intractably American crops up in my prose. This is the penalty one pays for historical immediacy, and much the same thing must be true of the encounters and responses embodied in my critical essays, as these have appeared in response to exhibitions in the years I have been the art critic for *The Nation*.

So it was almost with the sense of having been rescued from a certain kind of darkness that I followed the marvelous way in which Horowitz and Hahn assembled and totalized those of my philosophical writings that bear on the ontology and history of art, and on my practices as a critic. I have had sympathetic and acute expositors along the line, but never until now had anyone gotten inside the system and brought it all together in a way I would like to have done myself, had I the required gifts. I feel that they know the way my mind works better than I do, and have constructed a piece of prose which in its own right manifests the attributes of clarity, of consequence, and of wit that have always been my values and ideals as a writer. In view of the gratitude I owe them, I am unlikely to quarrel greatly with what they have said. Rather, I will freely recommend their text to anyone anxious to know what I have been up to over the years. Their exposition and criticisms, together with the texts they have used to illustrate and validate their points, will communicate my perception better than anything I could have written. I feel indeed that my thoughts have found a kind of monument, not so much for eternity as for preserving and illuminating them for my contemporaries and post-temporaries—if there is such a word in whom some future way styles would have been explained when they were used rather than tested may be provoked. Beyond that, Horowitz and Hahn have mounted a challenge to me at least to clarify something they felt was obscure or ambiguous. Criticism seeks to identify the reasons for those decisions, and perhaps even wrong in my philosophy of criticism. The least I can do in the critic's evidence comes from the space between artist and subject. appreciative acknowledgment is to say a few afterwords on taste.

The artist Cindy Sherman fills the space, one boundary of which are the styles of music with the look in her subject. Certainly it is inconsistent with the concept of taste that one like everything, for it is in the nature of taste to be discriminating. It is true that, following something Jennifer Bartlett once said in an interview, I can "like it all," which sounds like a will not to be guided by taste at all, essentially formalist, and troubled to treat art as a piece, as if every formalist grounds, though sorted out on the basis of historical styles. Horowitz and Hahn situate themselves within a Kantian framework in its enabling document was "The Intentionalist Fallacy," a reasonable which taste is not, or not merely, a matter of preference, but of prescription 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 Author," 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 it is a return to the decisions and the reasons that explain works of art. For even if we come out as saying that everyone ought to like everything, 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 abstracts 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 Michael Rasmussen). 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, appropriationist—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 had drawing and had painting, since these, being designated, tell us only what kind of point the artist who appropriates then intends, not what kind of artist she or he is. Cornell, to return to 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 of illustration. We are all somehow between the glass and the subject. That interiority is the subject of the critic. Likes and dislikes fall by the wayside.

In the discussion period following the CAA panel, I was queried about my actual likes and dislikes, which of course define me as a person, even if I cannot allow them to define me as a critic. As a critic, I am obliged to deal with work that is often so distant from my schedule of preferences from my tastes that I have little to work with other than a sense of obligation to identify what is going on, and what the work can mean, and within that, tentatively to offer some sort of appraisal. By doing this I think my understanding grows, but my tastes grow very much more slowly than understanding does, and their boundaries will probably never coincide. Indeed, were I to go by taste alone, I would be a very conservative little person, disposed to find enjoyment in Chardin and Manet, Vermeer and Verelock, Matisse and Cezanne, but hardly any pleasure at all in art I know to be important, and in urgent need of critical analysis. The imperative of taste implied by "I can like it all" does not entail an imperative to widen my circle of preferences to coincide with the boundaries of art. The space between these two spheres is what, among other things, underlies my effort to extrude aesthetics from the definition of art though out, of course, from the experience of art.

There is a limit on what we can do, given the internal connection between what we like and who we are. All that pluralism excludes is that I should dislike something on grounds of stylistic advocacy. But that goes for moral pluralism as well, with its corollary imperatives of tolerance. I cannot, as pluralist, rule out other forms of life on the basis of my values alone, without this entailing that I would be willing or able to live forms of life other than my own. It is clear that I like the essay of Horowitz and Hahn very much indeed, but the liking is complex. In one of its dimensions—the dimension of adequacy, sympathy, clarity, and truth I would accept the universalizing function of the Kantian system and say that everyone ought to like it as well, by the criteria that make interpretative essays good. In the other dimension of liking, no one other than me and those closest to me can like it, for the immense gratification of having been understood, explained—rescued. For that I am boundlessly grateful. At the universal level we must be grateful if any views have that degree of importance that justifies the immense amount of thought these writers have devoted to them?

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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 postmodernism, 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—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 artist, 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 beatitude of lightness, 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 confining 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 incidentals. The lesson taught was that the definition of art must equally and indifferently be exemplified by Cornell's Arary boxes (which were the components of the Egan exhibition and the topic of Hess's review) as by the paintings 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 that 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 standpoint 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 been through self-consciousness, cannot be explained in whatever way styles would have been explained when they were used rather than designed. They exemplify in every case the result of artistic decision: they exemplify in every case the result of artistic decision. They exemplify in every case the result of artistic decision. They exemplify in every case the result of artistic decision.

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A good example of criticism as tacit advocacy is cited by Deborah Solomon in her recent biography of Joseph Cornell. The quote is from Thomas B. Hess, as it appeared in *Art News*, January 1950, and concerns Cornell's debut exhibition at the Egan Gallery. Cornell, Hess wrote, "has taken the surrealism 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." Talking, especially from surrealistic patients; carpentry; after-dinner; conversational; witty; precious; diverting; limited. These belong on a checklist of critical negatives, the antonyms of which partially define artistic significance circa 1950 in New York: original; American; impulsive; nonverbal; 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, which Solomon, in fairness, observes. But at that moment in time, 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 politicizing the capitalist entrepreneur, or, in my own field, celebrated the scientist in conjunction with demonizing the metaphysician.

Five or six years later, Cornell's employment of commonplace objects—joined Willem de Kooning's "Truth Street touch" on the checklist of good-making artistic attributes when Robert Rauschenberg shattered point on a stuffed gust 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 Truth Street touch no longer became the certificate of artistic legitimacy, and indeed fell off the list altogether. The Truth Street touch, as bearer of all of 1950's 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 Truth 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,

