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“INTRODUCTION: Modern, Postmodern, and Contemporary”

From *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (1996)

At roughly the same moment, but quite in ignorance of one another's thought, the German art historian Hans Belting and I both published texts on the end of art. Each of us had arrived at a vivid sense that some momentous historical shift had taken place in the productive conditions of the visual arts, even if, outwardly speaking, the institutional complexes of the art world--the galleries, the art schools, the periodicals, the museums, the critical establishment, the curatorial--seemed relatively stable. Belting has since published an amazing book, tracing the history of devotional images in the Christian West from late Roman times until about A.D. 1400, to which he gave the striking subtitle *The Image before the Era of Art*. It was not that those images were not art in some large sense, but their being art did not figure in their production, since the concept of art had not as yet really emerged in general consciousness, and such images--icons, really--played quite different role in the lives of people than works of art came to play when the concept at last emerged and something like aesthetic considerations began to govern our relationships to them. They were not even thought of as art in the elementary sense of having been produced by artists--human beings putting marks on surfaces--but were regarded as having a miraculous provenance, like the imprinting of Jesus's image on Veronica's veil. There would then have been a profound discontinuity between artistic practices before and after the era of art had begun, since the concept of the artist did not enter into the explanation of devotional images, but of course the concept of the artist became central in the Renaissance, to the point that Giorgio Vasari was to write a great book on the lives of the artists. Before then there would at best have been the lives of the dabbling saints.

If this is at all thinkable, then there might be another discontinuity, no less profound, between the art produced during the era of art and art produced after that era ended. The era of art did not begin abruptly in 1400, nor did it end sharply either, sometime before the mid-1980s when Belting's and my texts appeared respectively in German and in English. Neither of us, perhaps, had as clear an idea as we now might have, ten years later, of what we were trying to say, but, now that Belting has come forward with the idea of art before the beginning of art, we might think about art after the end of art, as if we were emerging from the era of art into something else the exact shape and structure of which remains to be understood.

Neither of us intended our observations as a critical judgment regarding the art of our time. In the eighties, certain radical theorists had taken up the theme of the death of painting and had based their judgment on the claim that advanced painting seemed to show all the signs of internal exhaustion, or at least marked limits beyond which it was not possible to press. They were thinking of Robert Rauschenberg's more or less all-white paintings, or perhaps the aggressive monotonous stripe paintings of the French artist Daniel Buren; and it would be difficult not to consider their account as in some way a critical judgment, both on those artists and on the practice of painting in general. But it was quite consistent with the end of the era of art, as Belting and I understood it, that art should be extremely vigorous and show no sign whatever of internal exhaustion. Ours was a claim about how one complex of practices had given way to another, even if the shape of the new complex was still unclear--is still unclear. Neither of us was talking about the death of art, though my own text happens to have appeared as the target article in a volume under the title *The Death of Art*. That title was not mine, for I was writing about a certain narrative that had, I thought, been objectively realized in the history of art, and it was that

narrative, it seemed to me, that had come to an end. A story was over. It was not my view that there would be no more art, which "death" certainly implies, but that whatever art there was to be would be made without benefit of a reassuring sort of narrative in which it was seen as the appropriate next stage in the story. What had come to an end was that narrative but not the subject of the narrative. I hasten to clarify.

In a certain sense, life really begins when the story comes to an end, as in the story every couple relishes of how they found one another and "lived happily ever after." In the German genre of the Bildungsroman--the novel of formation and self-discovery--the story is told of the stages through which the hero or heroine progresses on the way to self-awareness. The genre has almost become a matrix of the feminist novel in which the heroine arrives at a consciousness of who she is and what being a woman means. And that awareness, though the end of the story, is really "the first day of the rest of her life," to use the somewhat corny phrase of New Age philosophy. Hegel's early masterpiece, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, has the form of a Bildungsroman, in the sense that its hero, Geist, goes through a sequence of stages in order to achieve knowledge not merely of what it itself is, but that without the history of mishaps and misplaced enthusiasms, its knowledge would be empty. Belting's thesis too was about narratives. "Contemporary art," he wrote, "manifests an awareness of a history of art but no longer carries it forward." And he speaks as well of "the relatively recent loss of faith in a great and compelling narrative, in the way things must be seen." It is in part the sense of no longer belonging to a great narrative, registering itself on our consciousness somewhere between uneasiness and exhilaration, that marks the historical sensibility of the present, and which, if Belting and I are at all on the right path, helps define the acute difference, of which I think that awareness only began to emerge in the mid-1970s, between modern and contemporary art. It is characteristic of contemporaneity--but not of modernity--that it should have begun insidiously, without slogan or logo, without anyone being greatly aware that it had happened. The Armory show of 1913 used the pine-tree flag of the American Revolution as its logo to celebrate a repudiation of the art of the past. The Berlin dada movement proclaimed the death of art, but on the same poster by Raoul Hausmann wished long life to "The Machine Art of Tatlin." Contemporary art, by contrast, has no brief against the art of the past, no sense that the past is something from which liberation must be won, no sense even that it is at all different as art from modern art generally. It is part of what defines contemporary art that the art of the past is available for such use as artists care to give it. What is not available to them is the spirit in which the art was made. The paradigm of the contemporary is that of the collage as defined by Max Ernst, with one difference. Ernst said that collage is "the meeting of two distant realities on a plane foreign to them both." The difference is that there is no longer a plane foreign to distinct artistic realities, nor are those realities all that distant from one another. That is because the basic perception of the contemporary spirit was formed on the principle of a museum in which all art has a rightful place, where there is no a priori criterion as to what that art must look like, and where there is no narrative into which the museum's contents must all fit. Artists today treat museums as filled not with dead art, but with living artistic options. The museum is a field available for constant rearrangement, and indeed there is an art form emerging which uses the museum as a repository of materials for a collage of objects arranged to suggest or support a thesis; we see it in Fred Wilson's installation at the Maryland Historical Museum and again in Joseph Kosuth's remarkable installation "The Play of the Unmentionable" at the Brooklyn Museum. But the genre is almost commonplace today: the artist is given free run of the museum and organizes out of its resources exhibitions of objects that

have no historical or formal connection to one another other than what the artist provides. In some way the museum is cause, effect, and embodiment of the attitudes and practices that define the post-historical moment of art, but I do not want to press the matter for the moment. Rather, I want to return to the distinction between the modern and the contemporary and discuss its emergence into consciousness. In fact, it was the dawning of a certain kind of self-consciousness that I had in mind when I began to write about the end of art.

In my own field, philosophy, the historical divisions went roughly as follows: ancient, medieval, and modern. "Modern" philosophy was generally thought to begin with Rene Descartes, and what distinguished it was the particular inward turn Descartes took--his famous reversion to the "I think"--where the question would be less how things really are than how someone whose mind is structured in a certain way is obliged to think they are. Whether things really are the way the structure of our mind requires us to think they are is not something we can say. But neither does it greatly matter, since we have no alternative way of thinking about them. So working from the inside outward, so to speak, Descartes, and modern philosophy generally, drew a philosophical map of the universe whose matrix was the structure of human thought. What Descartes did was begin to bring the structures of thought to consciousness, where we could examine them critically and come to understand at one and the same time what we are and how the world is, for since the world is defined by thought, the world and we are literally made in one another's image. The ancients simply went ahead endeavoring to describe the world, paying no attention to those subjective features modern philosophy made central. We could paraphrase Hans Belting's marvelous title by talking about the self before the era of the self to mark the difference between ancient and modern philosophy. It is not that there were no selves before Descartes, but that the concept of the self did not define the entire activity of philosophy, as it came to do after he had revolutionized it and until reversion to language came to replace reversion to the self. And while "the linguistic turn" certainly replaced questions of what we are with how we talk, there is an undoubted continuity between the two stages of philosophical thought, as is underscored by Noam Chomsky's description of his own revolution in the philosophy of language as "Cartesian linguistics," replacing or augmenting Descartes's theory of innate thought with the postulation of innate linguistic structures.

There is an analogy to the history of art. Modernism in art marks a point before which painters set about representing the world the way it presented itself, painting people and landscapes and historical events just as they would present themselves to the eye. With modernism, the conditions of representation themselves become central, so that art in a way becomes its own subject. This was almost precisely the way in which Clement Greenberg defined the matter in his famous 1960 essay "Modernist Painting." "The essence of Modernism," he wrote, "lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." Interestingly, Greenberg took as his model of modernist thought the philosopher Immanuel Kant: "Because he was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism, I conceive of Kant as the first real Modernist." Kant did not see philosophy as adding to our knowledge so much as answering the question of how knowledge was possible. And I suppose the corresponding view of painting would have been not to represent the appearances of things so much as answering the question of how painting was possible. The question then would be: who was the first modernist painter--who deflected the art of painting from its representational agenda to a new agenda in which the means of representation became the object of representation?

For Greenberg, Manet became the Kant of modernist painting: "Manet's became the first Modernist pictures by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the flat surfaces on which they were painted." And the history of modernism moved from there through the impressionists, "who abjured underpainting and glazes, to leave the eye under no doubt as to the fact that the colors they used were made of paint that came from tubes or pots," to Cezanne, who "sacrificed verisimilitude, or correctness, in order to fit his drawing and design more explicitly to the rectangular shape of the canvas." And step by step Greenberg constructed a narrative of modernism to replace the narrative of the traditional representational painting defined by Vasari. Flatness, the consciousness of paint and brushstroke, the rectangular shape--all of them what Meyer Schapiro speaks of as "nonmimetic features" of what may still have been residually mimetic paintings--displaced perspective, foreshortening, chiaroscuro as the progress points of a developmental sequence. The shift from "premodernist" to modernist art, if we follow Greenberg, was the shift from mimetic to nonmimetic features of painting. It was not, Greenberg asserts, that painting had to become itself nonobjective or abstract. It was just that its representational features were secondary in modernism where they had been primary in premodernist art. Much of my book, concerned as it is with narratives of the history of art, must perforce deal with Greenberg as the great narrativist of modernism.

It is important that the concept of modernism, if Greenberg is right, is not merely the name of a stylistic period which begins in the latter third of the nineteenth century, the way in which Mannerism is the name of a stylistic period which begins in the first third of the sixteenth century: Mannerist follows Renaissance painting and is followed by the baroque, which is followed by rococo, which is followed by neoclassicism, which is followed by the romantic. These were deep changes in the way painting represents the world, changes, one might say, in coloration and mood, and they develop out of and to some degree in reaction against their predecessors, as well as in response to all sorts of extra-artistic forces in history and in life. My sense is that modernism does not follow romanticism in this way, or not merely: it is marked by an ascent to a new level of consciousness, which is reflected in painting as a kind of discontinuity, almost as if to emphasize that mimetic representation had become less important than some kind of reflection on the means and methods of representation. Painting begins to look awkward, or forced (in my own chronology it is Van Gogh and Gauguin who are the first modernist painters). In effect, modernism sets itself at a distance from the previous history of art, I suppose in the way in which adults, in the words of Saint Paul, "put aside childish things." The point is that "modern" does not merely mean "the most recent."

It means, rather, in philosophy as well as in art, a notion of strategy and style and agenda. If it were just a temporal notion, all the philosophy contemporary with Descartes or Kant and all the painting contemporary with Manet and Cezanne would be modernist, but in fact a fair amount of philosophizing went on which was, in Kant's terms, "dogmatic," having nothing to do with the issues which defined the critical program he advanced. Most of the philosophers contemporary with Kant but otherwise "precritical" have dropped out of sight of all save scholars of the history of philosophy. And while there remains a place in the museum for painting contemporary with modernist art which is not itself modernist--for example, French academic painting, which acted as if Cezanne had never happened, or later, surrealism, which Greenberg did what he could to suppress or, to use the psychoanalytical language which has come naturally to Greenberg's critics, like Rosalind Krauss or Hal Foster, "to repress"--there is no room for it in the great narrative of modernism which swept on past it, into what came to be known as "abstract expressionism" (a label Greenberg disliked), and then color-field abstraction, where, though the

narrative did not necessarily end, Greenberg himself stopped. Surrealism, like academic painting, lay, according to Greenberg, "outside the pale of history," to use an expression I found in Hegel. It happened, but it was not, significantly, part of the progress. If you were snide, as critics schooled in Greenbergian invective were, it was not really art, and that declaration showed the degree to which the identity of art was internally connected with being part of the official narrative. Hal Foster writes: "A space for surrealism has opened up: an impense within the old narrative, it has become a privileged point for the contemporary critique of this narrative." (14) Part of what the "end of art" means is the enfranchisement of what had lain beyond the pale, where the very idea of a pale--a wall--is exclusionary, the way the Great Wall of China was, built to keep the Mongol hordes outside, or as the Berlin Wall was built, to keep the innocent socialist population protected from the toxins of capitalism. (The great Irish-American painter Sean Scully delights in the fact that "the pale," in English, refers to the Irish Pale, an enclave in Ireland, making the Irish outsiders in their own land.) In the modernist narrative, art beyond the pale either is no part of the sweep of history, or it is a reversion to some earlier form of art. Kant once spoke of his own era, the Age of Enlightenment, as "mankind's coming of age." Greenberg might have thought of art in those terms as well, and seen in surrealism a kind of aesthetic regression, a reassertion of values from the childhood of art, filled with monsters and scary threats. For him, maturity meant purity, in a sense of the term that connects exactly to what Kant meant by the term in the title of his *Critique of Pure Reason*. This was reason applied to itself, and having no other subject. Pure art was correspondingly art applied to art. And surrealism was almost the embodiment of impurity, concerned as it was with dreams, the unconscious, eroticism, and, in Foster's vision of it, "the uncanny." But so, by Greenbergian criteria, is contemporary art impure, which is what I want to talk about now. Just as "modern" is not simply a temporal concept, meaning, say, "most recent," neither is "contemporary" merely a temporal term, meaning whatever is taking place at the present moment. And just as the shift from "premodern" to modern was as insidious as the shift, in Hans Belting's terms, from the image before the era of art to the image in the era of art, so that artists were making modern art without realizing they were doing anything different in kind until it began to be retrospectively clear that a momentous change had taken place, so, similarly, did it happen with the shift from modern to contemporary art. For a long time, I think, "contemporary art" would have been just the modern art that is being made now. Modern, after all, implies a difference between now and "back then": there would be no use for the expression if things remained steady and largely the same. It implies an historical structure and is stronger in this sense than a term like "most recent." "Contemporary" in its most obvious sense means simply what is happening now: contemporary art would be the art produced by our contemporaries. It would not, clearly, have passed the test of time. But it would have a certain meaning for us which even modern art which had passed that test would not have: it would be "our art" in some particularly intimate way. But as the history of art has internally evolved, contemporary has come to mean an art produced within a certain structure of production never, I think, seen before in the entire history of art. So just as "modern" has come to denote a style and even a period, and not just recent art, "contemporary" has come to designate something more than simply the art of the present moment. In my view, moreover, it designates less a period than what happens after there are no more periods in some master narrative of art, and less a style of making art than a style of using styles. Of course, there is contemporary art in styles of a kind never before seen, but I do not want to press the matter at this stage of my discussion. I merely wish to alert the reader to my effort to draw a very strong distinction between "modern" and "contemporary."

I don't especially think that the distinction was sharply drawn when I first moved to New York at the end of the forties, when "our art" was modern art, and the Museum of Modern Art belonged to us in that intimate way. To be sure, a lot of art was being made which did not as yet make an appearance in that museum, but it did not seem to us then, to the degree that the matter was thought about at all, that the latter was contemporary in a way that distinguished it from modern. It seemed a wholly natural arrangement that some of this art would sooner or later find its way into "The Modern," and that this arrangement would continue indefinitely, modern art being here to stay, but not in any way forming a closed canon. It was not closed, certainly, in 1949, when *Life* magazine suggested that Jackson Pollock might just be the greatest American painter alive. That it is closed today, in the minds of many, myself included, means that somewhere between then and now a distinction emerged between the contemporary and the modern. The contemporary was no longer modern save in the sense of "most recent," and the modern seemed more and more to have been a style that flourished from about 1880 until sometime in the 1960s. It could even be said, I suppose, that some modern art continued to be produced after that--art which remained under the stylistic imperatives of modernism--but that art would not really be contemporary, except again in the strictly temporal sense of the term. For when the stylistic profile of modern art revealed itself, it did so because contemporary art itself revealed a profile very different from modern art. This tended to put the Museum of Modern Art in a kind of bind no one had anticipated when it was the home of "our art." The bind was due to the fact that "modern" had a stylistic meaning and a temporal meaning. It would not have occurred to anyone that these would conflict, that contemporary art would stop being modern art. But today, as we near the end of the century, the Museum of Modern Art has to decide whether it is going to acquire contemporary art that is not modern and thus become a museum of modern art in the strictly temporal sense or whether it will continue to collect only stylistically modern art, the production of which has thinned down to perhaps a trickle, but which is no longer representative of the contemporary world.

In any case, the distinction between the modern and the contemporary did not become clear until well into the seventies and eighties. Contemporary art would for a long time continue to be "the modern art produced by our contemporaries." At some point this clearly stopped being a satisfactory way of thinking, as evidenced by the need to invent the term "postmodern." That term by itself showed the relative weakness of the term "contemporary" as conveying a style. It seemed too much a mere temporal term. But perhaps "postmodern" was too strong a term, too closely identified with a certain sector of contemporary art. In truth, the term "postmodern" really does seem to me to designate a certain style we can learn to recognize, the way we learn to recognize instances of the baroque or the rococo. It is a term something like "camp," which Susan Sontag transferred from gay idiolect into common discourse in a famous essay. One can, after reading her essay, become reasonably adept at picking out camp objects, in just the same way it seems to me that one can pick out postmodern objects, with maybe some difficulties at the borderlines. But that is how it is with most concepts, stylistic or otherwise, and with recognitional capacities in human beings and in animals. There is a valuable formula in Robert Venturi's 1966 book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*: "elements which are hybrid rather than `pure,' compromising rather than `clean,' `ambiguous' rather than `articulated,' perverse as well as `interesting.'" One could sort works of art out using this formula, and almost certainly you would have one pile which consisted pretty homogeneously of postmodern works. It would have the works of Robert Rauschenberg, the paintings of Julian Schnabel and David Salle, and I guess the architecture of Frank Gehry. But much contemporary art would be left

out—say the works of Jenny Holzer or the paintings of Robert Mangold. It has been suggested that perhaps we should simply speak of postmodernisms. But once we do this, we lose the recognitional ability, the capacity to sort out, and the sense that postmodernism marks a specific style. We could capitalize the word "contemporary" to cover whatever the disjunction of postmodernisms was intended to cover, but there again we would be left with the sense that we have no identifiable style, that there is nothing that does not fit. But that in fact is the mark of the visual arts since the end of modernism, that as a period it is defined by the lack of a stylistic unity, or at least the kind of stylistic unity which can be elevated into a criterion and used as a basis for developing a recognitional capacity, and there is in consequence no possibility of a narrative direction. That is why I prefer to call it simply posthistorical art. Anything ever done could be done today and be an example of post-historical art. For example, an appropriationist artist like Mike Bidlo could have a show of Piero della Francescas in which the entirety of Piero's corpus was appropriated. Piero is certainly not a post-historical artist, but Bidlo is, and a skilled enough appropriationist as well, so that his Pieros and Piero's paintings could look as much alike as he cared to make them look—as much like Piero as his Morandis look like Morandis, his Picassos like Picassos, his Warhols like Warhols. Yet in an important sense, not easily believed accessible to the eye, Bidlo's Pieros would have more in common with the work of Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and Sherrie Levine than with Piero's proper stylistic peers. So the contemporary is, from one perspective, a period of information disorder, a condition of perfect aesthetic entropy. But it is equally a period of quite perfect freedom. Today there is no longer any pale of history. Everything is permitted. But that makes the historical transition from modernism to post-historical art all the more urgent to try to understand. And that means that it is urgent to try to understand the decade of the 1970s, a period in its own way as dark as the tenth century.

The seventies was a decade in which it must have seemed that history had lost its way. It had lost its way because nothing at all like a discernible direction seemed to be emerging. If we think of 1962 as marking the end of abstract expressionism, then you had a number of styles succeeding one another at a dizzying rate: color-field painting, hard-edged abstraction, French neorealism, pop, op, minimalism, arte povera, and then what got to be called the New Sculpture, which included Richard Serra, Linda Benglis, Richard Tuttle, Eva Hesse, Barry Le Va, and then conceptual art. Then what seemed to be ten years of nothing much. There were sporadic movements like Pattern and Decoration, but nobody supposed they were going to generate the kind of structural stylistic energy of the immense upheavals of the sixties. Then all at once neo-expressionism arose, in the early eighties, and gave people the sense that a new direction had been found. And then again the sense of nothing much so far at least as historical directions were concerned. And then the dawning sense that the absence of direction was the defining trait of the new period, that neoexpressionism was less a direction than the illusion of one. Recently people have begun to feel that the last twenty-five years, a period of tremendous experimental productiveness in the visual arts with no single narrative direction on the basis of which others could be excluded, have stabilized as the norm.

The sixties was a paroxysm of styles, in the course of whose contention, it seems to me—and this was the basis of my speaking of the "end of art" in the first place—it gradually became clear, first through the nouveaux realistes and pop, that there was no special way works of art had to look in contrast to what I have designated "mere real things." To use my favorite example, nothing need mark the difference, outwardly, between Andy Warhol's Brillo Box and the Brillo boxes in the supermarket. And conceptual art demonstrated that there need not even be a

palpable visual object for something to be a work of visual art. That meant that you could no longer teach the meaning of art by example. It meant that as far as appearances were concerned, anything could be a work of art, and it meant that if you were going to find out what art was, you had to turn from sense experience to thought. You had, in brief, to turn to philosophy.

In an interview in 1969, conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth claimed that the only role for an artist at the time "was to investigate the nature of art itself." This sounds strikingly like the line in Hegel that gave support to my own views about the end of art: "Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is." Joseph Kosuth is a philosophically literate artist to an exceptional degree, and he was one of the few artists working in the sixties and seventies who had the resources to undertake a philosophical analysis of the general nature of art. As it happened, relatively few philosophers of the time were ready to do this, just because so few of them could have imagined the possibility of art like that being produced in such dizzying disjunctiveness. The philosophical question of the nature of art, rather, was something that arose within art when artists pressed against boundary after boundary, and found that the boundaries all gave way. All typical sixties artists had that vivid sense of boundaries, each drawn by some tacit philosophical definition of art, and their erasure has left us the situation we find ourselves in today. Such a world is not, by the way, the easiest kind of world to live in, which explains why the political reality of the present seems to consist in drawing and defining boundaries wherever possible. Nevertheless, it was only in the 1960s that a serious philosophy of art became a possibility, one which did not base itself on purely local facts--for example, that art was essentially painting and sculpture. Only when it became clear that anything could be a work of art could one think, philosophically, about art. Only then did the possibility arise of a true general philosophy of art. But what of art itself? What of "Art after Philosophy"—to use the title of Kosuth's essay—which, to make the point, may indeed itself be a work of art? What of art after the end of art, where, by "after the end of art," I mean "after the ascent to philosophical self-reflection?" Where an artwork can consist of any object whatsoever that is enfranchised as art, raising the question "Why am I a work of art?"

With that question the history of modernism was over. It was over because modernism was too local and too materialist, concerned as it was with shape, surface, pigment, and the like as defining painting in its purity. Modernist painting, as Greenberg defined it, could only ask the question "What is it that I have and that no other kind of art can have?" And sculpture asked itself the same kind of question. But what this gives us is no general picture of what art is, only what some of the arts, perhaps historically the most important arts, essentially were. What question does Warhol's Brillo Box ask, or one of Beuys's multiples of a square of chocolate stuck to a piece of paper? What Greenberg had done was to identify a certain local style of abstraction with the philosophical truth of art, when the philosophical truth, once found, would have to be consistent with art appearing every possible way.

What I know is that the paroxysms subsided in the seventies, as if it had been the internal intention of the history of art to arrive at a philosophical conception of itself, and that the last stages of that history were somehow the hardest to work through, as art sought to break through the toughest outer membranes, and so itself became, in the process, paroxysmal. But now that the integument was broken, now that at least the glimpse of self-consciousness had been attained, that history was finished. It had delivered itself of a burden it could now hand over to the philosophers to carry. And artists, liberated from the burden of history, were free to make art in whatever way they wished, for any purposes they wished, or for no purposes at all. That is the

mark of contemporary art, and small wonder, in contrast with modernism, there is no such thing as a contemporary style.

I think the ending of modernism did not happen a moment too soon. For the art world of the seventies was filled with artists bent on agendas having nothing much to do with pressing the limits of art or extending the history of art, but with putting art at the service of this or that personal or political goal. And artists had the whole inheritance of art history to work with, including the history of the avant-garde, which placed at the disposition of the artist all those marvelous possibilities the avant-garde had worked out and which modernism did its utmost to repress. In my own view, the major artistic contribution of the decade was the emergence of the appropriated image—the taking over of images with established meaning and identity and giving them a fresh meaning and identity. Since any image could be appropriated, it immediately follows that there could be no perceptual stylistic uniformity among appropriated images. One of my favorite examples is Kevin Roche's 1992 addition to the Jewish Museum in New York. The old Jewish Museum was just the Warburg mansion on Fifth Avenue, with its baronial associations and connotations of the Gilded Age. Kevin Roche brilliantly decided to duplicate the old Jewish Museum, and the eye is unable to tell a single difference. But the building belongs to the postmodern age perfectly: a postmodern architect can design a building which looks like a Mannerist chateau. It was an architectural solution that had to have pleased the most conservative and nostalgic trustee, as well as the most avant-garde and contemporary one, but of course for quite different reasons.

These artistic possibilities are but realizations and applications of the immense philosophical contribution of the 1960s to art's self-understanding: that artworks can be imagined, or in fact produced, which look exactly like mere real things which have no claim to the status of art at all, for the latter entails that you can't define artworks in terms of some particular visual properties they may have. There is no a priori constraint on how works of art must look—they can look like anything at all. This alone finished the modernist agenda, but it had to wreak havoc with the central institution of the art world, namely the museum of fine arts. The first generation of great American museums took it for granted that its contents would be treasures of great visual beauty and that visitors would enter the treasury to be in the presence of spiritual truth of which the visually beautiful was the metaphor. The second generation, of which the Museum of Modern Art is the great exemplar, assumed that the work of art is to be defined in formalist terms and appreciated under the perspective of a narrative not remarkably different from the one Greenberg advanced: a linear progressive history the visitor would work through, learning to appreciate the work of art together with learning the historical sequences. Nothing was to distract from the formal visual interest of the works themselves. Even picture frames were eliminated as distractions, or perhaps as concessions to an illusionistic agenda modernism had outgrown: paintings were no longer windows onto imagined scenes, but objects in their own right, even if they had been conceived as windows. It is, incidentally, easy to understand why surrealism has to be repressed in the light of such an experience: it would be too distracting, not to mention irrelevantly illusionistic. Works had plenty of space to themselves in galleries emptied of everything but those works.

In any case, with the philosophical coming of age of art, visibility drops away, as little relevant to the essence of art as beauty proved to have been. For art to exist there does not even have to be an object to look at, and if there are objects in a gallery, they can look like anything at all. Three attacks on established museums are worth noting in this respect. When Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnick admitted pop into the galleries of the Museum of Modern Art in the "High

and Low" show of 1990, there was a critical conflagration. When Thomas Krens deaccessioned a Kandinsky and a Chagall to acquire part of the Panza collection, a good bit of it conceptual and much of which did not exist as objects, there was a critical conflagration. And when, in 1993, the Whitney compiled a Biennial consisting of works that really typified the way the art world had gone after the end of art, the outpouring of critical hostility—in which I am afraid I shared—was by an inestimable factor unprecedented in the history of Biennial polemics. Whatever art is, it is no longer something primarily to be looked at. Stared at, perhaps, but not primarily looked at. What, in view of this, is a post-historical museum to do, or to be?

It must be plain that there are three models at least, depending upon the kind of art we are dealing with, and depending upon whether it is beauty, form, or what I shall term engagement that defines our relationship to it. Contemporary art is too pluralistic in intention and realization to allow itself to be captured along a single dimension, and indeed an argument can be made that enough of it is incompatible with the constraints of the museum that an entirely different breed of curator is required, one who bypasses museum structures altogether in the interests of engaging the art directly with the lives of persons who have seen no reason to use the museum either as treasury of beauty or sanctum of spiritual form. For a museum to engage this kind of art, it has to surrender much of the structure and theory that define the museum in its other two modes.

But the museum itself is only part of the infrastructure of art that will sooner or later have to deal with the end of art and with art after the end of art. The artist, the gallery, the practices of art history, and the discipline of philosophical aesthetics must all, in one or another way, give way and become different, and perhaps vastly different, from what they have so far been. [...]