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The End of Art by Donald Kuspit

Review by: Thomas Leddy

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The book is meticulous and challenging, then, and I for one cheerfully back its demand for an “aesthetics without iconoclasm” (title of Chapter 5). Even there, however, I remained puzzled as to what the unmarked terms ‘art’ and ‘history’ amounted to, and exactly how philosophy is to pay heed to their individual integrity when they are themselves—both as concepts and as phenomena—thoroughly historical! (Art historians for their part seem none too sure about these questions.) Or is it that ‘art’ and ‘history’ are a kind of Adornian or Zizekian “remainder” that will always be there to keep us (philosophers at least) honest?

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KUSPIT, DONALD. *The End of Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 208 pp., 41 b&w illus., \$28.00 cloth.

The End of Art is well worth the attention of philosophers of art as well as artists and art critics. However, to get the most benefit from it, the readers of this journal might have to overcome some initial difficulties. The strangest thing about the book is that Arthur Danto, famous for his thesis about the end of art, is not mentioned here. Kuspit, a professor of art history, and well-known art critic, is trained both in philosophy and in psychoanalysis. He surely must be aware of Danto’s work. He must know, for example, that the title of his book is also the title of one of Danto’s most famous essays and has been a key phrase in Danto’s writings for almost twenty years. (Amazon.com even packages his book with Danto’s *After the End of Art*!) However, once one gets beyond this, the book emerges as a fascinating indictment of much of late-twentieth-century art, particularly of postmodern art, and even as an implicit critique of Danto. A second difficulty is that the book is polemical and given to black-and-white judgments. It seems that for Kuspit *nothing* about postmodern art could be right or useful. This, however, provides for sharp relief and makes the book discussion-worthy. Finally, the reader should be warned that Kuspit often makes his points through a pastiche of quotations, making it sometimes hard to see where he stands personally. For example, the first chapter explicates Frank Stella’s fierce opposition to the “Modern Starts” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Only later do we realize that most of the views Stella expresses are also held by Kuspit himself. Nonetheless, behind this unphilosophical style is a coherent, complex, and challenging view of the visual art of our time.

Kuspit means something very different from Danto when he says that art has ended. Whereas Duchamp and Warhol are heroes of Danto’s story, they are the enemy for Kuspit. Art ends not because it has found its own essence in Warhol’s Brillo boxes, but because it *abandons* its own essence in the work of Warhol and other “postartists.” (The cover of the book features a work by Damien Hirst—consisting of cigarettes in an ashtray—as an example of postart.) Art does not end because it comes to know itself as not essentially aesthetic, but because it loses itself by becoming *unaesthetic*. Art continues after its end not because it can now at last serve human ends, but only because what Kuspit calls the New Old Masters are now doing work that synthesizes Old Master values with those of the modernist avant-garde. The end of art means that artworks lose their special status and become everyday objects. Warhol’s magic was not, contra Danto, transfiguration of the commonplace into art but reduction of art to the commonplace. Kuspit can also be seen as taking on Walter Benjamin (whom he does mention). Yes, the aura of art is lost in the age of mechanical reproduction, but this is not a good thing, for aura is replaced by matter-of-fact social spectacle committed to a simple-minded objectivity. Similarly, reproduction of a modernist painting, for example, by Cézanne, strips it of its strangeness, making it just another example of visual culture.

Many will dismiss this book as merely reactionary, since Kuspit still believes in the high-art/low-art distinction, in the idea of greatness in art, in quality, in aesthetic value, in expression, in creativity, in autonomy, in originality, in humanism, and in self-transcendence. I think that such a dismissal would be premature.

For Kuspit, modern art begins with the unconscious. Without interest in the unconscious, postmodern art became uninspired. The unconscious, he thinks, is the source of art’s vitality. Uninspired art is decadent, which is to say, in decline. Postart looks to theory for a foundation, reducing the unconscious to an ideology. In postart, dreams, feelings, and subjectivity are all demeaned: society, rather than subjectivity, motivates art. Postart is banal art: it glamorizes everyday reality even when it claims to be critical of it.

For van Gogh, painting was a faith, the religion of art replacing ordinary religion. To be an artist was to take a vow of poverty, to suffer, and to live spiritually. Van Gogh felt empathy for his subjects and advocated universal empathy. He believed self-sacrifice was necessary to gain a higher more authentic self. He was willing to lose his life for art. No artist would do this today. Postartists sacrifice themselves neither for art nor for life, and they devalue both. Socially critical art (a form of postart) simply preaches. It has fallen on hard times since Beckmann,

Dix, and Grosz, who revealed human tragedy in social action—who served mental health. (Kuspit thinks that the works of Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, for example, entertain rather than enlighten, despite their intentions.) Once art was seen as a lofty calling. Now it is only cynically seen as a career. It is all business. The rise of Pop Art was the moment when this became self-evident, when art lost its idealism and its empathy. Kuspit insists that art and money belong to radically different realms: they cannot be related in a genuinely dialectical way. Warhol confused them, claiming that they were essentially connected. But money is existentially irrelevant, and its union with art is perverse. Postmodernity's implicit claim that all art is commercial undoes the tradition of high-art, art that is an existential end in itself. In modernity, art is the only genuinely spiritual practice. Postmodern art robs art of its spirituality and its integrity.

For the modernist, life is only justified as an aesthetic phenomenon (to use Nietzsche's phrase). But in postart, aesthetic contemplation, beauty, eternity, and freedom are all considered old-hat. At best, art can become a social event, as when Madonna gave the Turner Prize to Martin Creed for a work that consisted of an empty room in which a light turned on and off. Controversy substitutes for contemplation. For postmodernism, art is dead. So it is not surprising that various postart movements look like corpses, that Neo-Expressionism looks like the corpse of Expressionism. Art no longer "seduces us to life," to use another Nietzschean phrase.

Kuspit rightly observes that a characteristic feature of postart is a fascination with excrement. Tom McCarthy's defecating elves, Mike Kelly's soiled stuffed toys, and Kiki Smith's crawling woman with a tail of excrement are examples. The positive charisma of art is combined with the negative charisma of excrement to increase the marketing charisma of both. Kuspit sees this as a regressive attempt to deconstruct life by focusing on the obscene lower side of humanity. It subverts the possibility of a higher side.

Although the book is largely negative, Kuspit offers hope for art in the "Postscript." Here he argues that traditionally the studio was the place of thoughtful solitude and inner drive. This was the place to create a masterpiece. But in postart (as in an installation piece by Bruce Nauman), the studio becomes an empty space littered with garbage in which entropy has triumphed. Yet, Kuspit argues, there are masterpieces again today—the studio has revived. A new breed of *post*-postmodern artists once again believes in imaginative refinement of raw material toward a transformative vision.

This hope takes the form of a list of contemporary painters, the "New Old Masters." They bring together

spirituality, humanism, innovation, and criticality, and have complete mastery of their craft. For them, art is both conceptual *and* material. Their art is aesthetically resonant and visionary. They transfigure the unhealthy ugly into the aesthetically satisfying, stripping ugliness of its social and metaphysical overlay and letting irrationality "stand forth in all its inevitability." The New Old Masters bring a new harmony out of the tragedy of life.

I enjoyed Kuspit's frank advocacy of a Nietzschean/Freudian aesthetic. Much else of interest happens, including psychoanalytic discussion of Duchamp. However, the book fails to see the good that arguably exists in much of late modern and postmodern art. Moreover, it seems blind to the bland and kitsch qualities of some of the author's favored artists, for example, Odd Nerdrum. (Ironically, Kuspit himself uses a painting by Nerdrum to illustrate a point about excremental art.) In the illustrations, Warhol's *Dr. Scholl* is still more convincing and alive than New Old Master Vincent Desiderio's *Pantocrator (Tryptich)*. His tendency to black-or-white thinking leads to a failure to consider in-between possibilities: for example, in Kuspit's view, there is nothing between the autonomy-seeking individual and the autonomy-denying crowd. He seems to have no concept of community or of a social role for art.

I think this is a necessary book, but the true debate of our time is between modernism and postmodernism, and the dialectical synthesis that results from that will be something else, not just a synthesis of early modernist values and premodernist traditionalism. We really cannot go back.

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KIERAN, MATTHEW and DOMINIC MCIVER LOPES, eds.
Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts. New York:
Routledge, 2003, 320 pp., \$80.00 cloth.

Matthew Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes organized a conference at the University of Leeds in July 2001 called "Imagination and the Arts"; they invited the speakers to give papers on topics of their choice. Eleven of the seventeen essays included in this anthology came out of that conference, and the anthology has the breadth and scope that one would expect when philosophers are given significant freedom in what to write about. All the essays are new, written for this volume, and many are by relative newcomers to the field of aesthetics or to the profession.

The anthology is therefore rather like a very long special issue of this journal: a collection of