

The End of Art, Donald Kuspit

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Emmet Cole - Interview with Donald Kuspit on *The End of Art*

A photographic detail from the Hirst installation *Home, Sweet Home* – consisting of a clutter of fag ends, beer bottles, coke cans, coffee cups and sweet wrappings on a table – graces the cover of *The End of Art*. Valued at around \$7000, *Home, Sweet Home* was famously binned by humble cleaner Emmanuel Asare, who afterwards explained, to the amusement of the Press, that he did so because he “didn’t think for a second that it was a work of art.” Neither does Donald Kuspit. Indeed, *Home, Sweet Home* is so far beyond what can properly be considered art, Kuspit believes, that he uses the term “postart” to describe it. And, like Asare, Kuspit engages in a spot of enlightened cleaning in an attempt to remove the postmodern clutter that threatens to swamp our artistic landscape.

Kuspit traces the genealogy of the postart aesthetic from Marcel Duchamp’s announcement of an “entropic split” between intellectual expression and animal expression (which led to the reification of concept over form, and from there to a nihilistic pessimism) through Warhol’s commercialism (which blurred the line between art and business) to Hirst’s installations (which reflect postmodernism’s preoccupation with the banal objects and situations of our everyday lives). Whereas modern art consisted of revolutionary experiments motivated by a desire to express aspects of the newly-discovered “unconscious mind,” Kuspit argues, postart is shallow, unreflective banality motivated by the desire to become institutionalized; that is, part of the mainstream (along with the commercial reward that such co-opted acceptability brings). In this regard, the messianic zeal with which Van Gogh approached his work represents an ideal because it demonstrates the kind of authentic and individualistic commitment to artistic expression that today’s commercialized postartists lack. The crucifixion has become a cabaret. Kuspit points out that it was to a very different kind of institution – the psychiatric ward – that modern artists were drawn. In an attempt to understand how the unconscious and madness can affect the creative process, modern artists turned their attention to the artworks of psychiatric patients. Modern art went on to find its greatest glories in the dark and mysterious world of the human unconscious. This is the anti-Allegory of the Cave, an emergence into night.

Acknowledging that modern art’s engagement with madness produced imperfect (but important) art, Kuspit’s new book attacks the postartists for substituting modern art’s authentic engagement with madness for the cozy passivity of the television documentary. Fearful of the dark and unpredictable world of the unconscious (largely because they are ignorant of it), postartists engage in mimicry of madness. The failure of creativity that characterizes postart, Kuspit notes, is highlighted in the way that postartists fail to imagine that there is a flicker of madness inside us all. Typical postart values include: a tendency to mock posterity, a tendency to elevate the banal to the status of the enigmatic and the scatological to the status of the sacred, and a preference for concept-driven art. Postart is art at the service of the mind and the product of joyless, “clever, clever” theorizing. Entertainment value and commercial panache are valued more highly than artistic ability or aesthetic worth and painting is perilously close to becoming a sub-genre of performance art. Kuspit blends psychoanalytic criticism, philosophy, and non-technical art history to make a powerful and compelling case for dismissal of the postart aesthetic. *The End of Art* will appeal to anyone who has ever felt cheated by the produce of the postmodern establishment. If there’s a criticism to be made, it’s that Kuspit’s description of the New Old Masters is largely confined to a

postscript. This group, which includes Lucien Freud and Jenny Saville, might be our artistic saviours, Kuspit claims, inasmuch as they represent values that simultaneously evoke the spirituality and humanism of the Old Masters and the innovation and criticality of the New Masters, enabling them to transcend the suicidal intellectualism and socio-political fixations of postart. In an interview conducted over email during May 2004, Donald Kuspit discusses some of the themes explored in his new book.

The Modern Word: What is postart and what is the relationship between postart and postmodernism?

Donald Kuspit: The concept of “postart” was developed by the happening artist Allan Kaprow. Simply put, it involves the “blurring of the boundary between art and life,” to use the title of his collection of essays. I would add, based on his idea that life is much more interesting than art, at the expense of art. I think postart is the gist of postmodernism, as the view that it involves the blurring of the boundary between avant-garde and kitsch suggests.

What brought the visual arts to this point? Is postart a point of no return?

Postart is not a point of no return, as I indicated in my Postscript, and in fact there are many fine artists who continue to make important art. But it was perhaps inevitable that “fine art,” that is, the idea that a kind of art could be made that would exist to mediate aesthetic experience (but not exclusively), would be attacked as elitist (aristocratic) and narrow (not in the service of some collective *Weltanschauung*). (The idea of fine [aesthetic] art was developed in the 18th century by Reynolds and Kant, among others, and didn’t stand a chance in so-called democratic and collective society.) But a larger issue informs the development of anti-aesthetic postart, namely, what T. S. Eliot called the “dissociation of sensibility,” that is, the separation of thinking and feeling (ratiocination and sentiment were his terms), which he thought (correctly) was a pervasive issue in modernity. Duchamp’s preference for what he called “intellectual expression” (“art in the service of the mind”) over “animal expression” suggests that his anti-art is an example of such dissociation. The integration of thinking and feeling remains a general issue of selfhood, all the more so in modernity, when the split is celebrated and thinking elevated over feeling. This occurs in art with the split between minimal-conceptual art and expressionism, with the former regarded as inherently superior to the latter, at least in some quarters. I personally think the former is not as intellectual as it looks and the latter is not as animal (“*Neue Wilden*”) as it is supposed to be.

You write admiringly of Van Gogh's quasi-mystical, messianic zeal and despairingly of the capricious motivations of artists like Warhol and Hirst. Does art save souls? Surely artists are neither little gods, as Van Gogh would have us believe, nor invisible workers on a postmodern (re)production line?

DK: Art doesn’t save souls, but the best of it does have a cathartic effect, as Aristotle said, that is, makes us conscious of unconscious fantasy by way of a complex process of symbolization and identification. Van Gogh, among others, believed in the religion of art, which, whatever else it involved, made it clear that art is more than the sum of its material characteristics and not simply a reflection of everyday life. This is the reason Jacques Barzun celebrated it while acknowledging its limited appeal in a psychoaesthetically indifferent and materialistic society. As you say, artists are neither little gods nor (pseudo-proletariat) workers on a postmodern (re)production line, but they do

have and represent certain values and attitudes, for which they are responsible whether they know it or not. I prefer the values and attitudes that van Gogh (and others) represents rather than those Warhol and Hirst represent. The former conveys respect and concern for the all too human – and shows how art can make us aware of it and become all the more convincing as art by doing so (indeed, showing how such concern can catalyze creativity and innovation) – while the latter are profoundly indifferent to it and produce an indifferent art, more of interest as a social symptom than as a vehicle of insight into (and thus psychic transcendence of) the materialist society and social indifference it is symptomatic of. Their work suggests the cheapness of human life and the dumbness of art, while van Gogh's suggests the preciousness of life and art's empathic engagement with it.

Is it possible that when a postartist presents an unmodified everyday object – an ashtray, for example – as a work of art that she or he is engaging in a kind of quasi-mystical self-obliteration equivalent to that Van Gogh expounded? Aren't postartists the New Martyrs?

No, postartists are not “the New Martyrs.” Presenting “an unmodified everyday object – an ashtray, for example – as a work of art” does not mean it is a work of art (although it supposedly encourages debate about what is a work of art while showing the futility of such debate). Nor does it involve “a kind of quasi-mystical self-obliteration equivalent to that van Gogh expounded.” First, van Gogh wasn't obliterating himself but discovering himself, more particularly, certain repressed parts of himself. Second, the artist who presents his ashtray as a work of art is not obliterating himself in a quasi-mystical way but rather presenting trivial souvenirs of himself, suggesting that unconsciously he thinks little of himself, or that he has only as much self as the people who regard the ashtray as a work of art thinks he has. Since they don't know they mean when they call an ashtray a work of art, he doesn't know what he means when he calls himself a self or for that matter an artist (except that he's part of some “art system”).

Who are the New Old Masters? The term 'New Old Masters' implies a return to an exalted past and the possibility of future originality in equal measure. How can this be achieved? And what distinguishes the New Old Master aesthetic from that of the postartists?

As I've said in my book, New Old Master art is an attempt to integrate Old Master and Modern Master aesthetics. Since there are many kinds of Old Master and Modern Master aesthetic modes, there is no one New Old Master aesthetic. At the least, it involves the recognition that the Old Masters, whom many Modern Masters dismissed (Marinetti's repudiation of them summarizes their position) or else “manhandled,” remain aesthetically significant and a possible source of ideas. It also involves the recognition that the so-called avant-garde revolution is over – the Modern Masters are also “old” – but remains aesthetically significant and a possible source of ideas. But the New Old Masters realize that the values of the Old and Modern Masters are different, and that the values of the Old Masters may speak more to the needs of art and human beings at this time. Clement Greenberg once said that the Old Masters achieved what they achieved by way of their manipulation of pigments not by way of their “spirituality” (his word), but I think we now recognize that they couldn't do what they artistically did without their spirituality and insight into human nature. I don't think the past is particularly “exalted,” but much of its art seems much more mature than modern art. Nor do I think the future will necessarily be more “original” than the modernist past, but it will be as creative, if in a different way and direction. Picasso once said it took him a lifetime to learn to paint like a child. I think that it's time for a new adult art. Children's art and the art of the insane – so-called “outsider art” in general – has outlived its usefulness as a model. The New Old Masters have turned to more mature, sane art for a model, both emotionally

and aesthetically.

The End of Art contains a wonderful psychobiographical vignette in which Kuspit shows how Duchamp's decision to abandon art in order to pursue a chess career was consistent with his anti-art aesthetic (and, indeed, certain sexual proclivities).

A nihilistic pessimism produced by the prioritizing of the conceptual over the sensual that led Duchamp to a point where it became pointless for him to continue making art: at that point he ran up against the fact that no artwork could perfectly translate his ideas. The tragic non-consummation of the checkmate finds a parallel in Duchamp's violent and frustrated portrayals of women and in his failure to create beautiful art.

One of the key threads in *The End of Art* is the idea that fear and ignorance of the unconscious have created a climate of creative superficiality within which artists are unwilling to breach the surface meniscus of their minds to the uncomfortable waters that lie beneath. What are they scared of? How did the modernist fascination with the unconscious turn into the postmodern horror of it?

They are scared of the inner truth about themselves, more particularly, about acknowledging psychic conflict and trauma as well as the primary creativity evidenced by fantasy (especially dreams). I think the early modernists – Gauguin, Redon, Max Ernst, de Chirico, etc. – were less scared because the world seemed scarier than the unconscious. Militarism and materialism, authoritarianism and capitalism, were more devastating (Meyer Schapiro documents their bad effect on 19th century artists) than anything in the unconscious, even though they had unconscious roots – another reason to explore the unconscious. As for the postmodern rejection of the unconscious, and the treatment of it as another “discourse,” it was inevitable that one had to withdraw from it, on the principle that if one looks into the abyss the abyss will look into you (Nietzsche). One can look only so long into the depths without becoming dizzy and falling in, which is why the postmodernists prefer not to look deeply but stay on the everyday surface of life.

When one experiences the full effect of great art, wonder strikes. In that ecstatic moment doesn't everything about the artist cease to matter? Doesn't the work dominate all our perceptions of it as well as all the mental representations we make of it? What to you, are the ultimate purposes and limits of psychoanalytic criticism and psychobiography?

Yes, I agree with you that at that moment everything about the artist doesn't matter, but nonetheless one knows it and it influences your perception of the work, and perhaps the experience of its “wonder.” I think the point of psychoanalytic criticism and psychobiography is very simple if inherently complex: to infer and articulate the psychodynamic sources and dimension of art.

According to Kuspit, Warhol, is the commercial artist par excellence (although Lichtenstein's Estate is – ironically – worth more). Warhol blurred the line between art and business and is a key figure in the transformation of artist from critical individual to someone who rushes to become institutionalized in the commercial marketplace.

If Andy Warhol had abandoned art to pursue a boardgame, which game would he have chosen?

Warhol would have chosen Monopoly, that is, a game about making money (a game in which everything is for sale at some price or other).

Although best known as an art critic and philosopher, Kuspit is also a poet. Rimbaud's "disordering of the senses" is a key theme of The End of Art, and one in which Rimbaud's program is portrayed as an authentic, self-exploratory act, the antithesis of which is postmodernism's inauthentic mimicry of madness.

How does your poetic aesthetic relate to your visual arts aesthetic? Do they intersect at any point?

I'm a modernist poet who has written poems about works by Dürer and Bronzino, among other artists, and who tries hard to be intelligible with no loss of emotional obscurity

When is your next collection of poetry coming out? What is it about?

My next collection of poems is called "On the Gathering Emptiness." The poems are about love and death, especially my own death. It should appear later this year.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom argues that modern poets have an Oedipal relationship with the great poets of the past. In some ways, isn't postart a valid response to the anxiety that being brought up in the shadow of greatness causes?

Yes, "the anxiety of influence" is also operational in postart, but I would say it is more pre-Oedipal than Oedipal in import, for it involves an attempt to annihilate the art of the past – traditional and modern – through indifference and ignorance. (Many postartists seem to be art school graduates who know next to nothing about the history of art and everything about the youth culture. Postart seems to be a part of it. The muse of Warhol and Hirst seems to be the bitch goddess of popular culture success.) I also happen to think avant-garde art's relationship to traditional art was pre-Oedipal rather than Oedipal, as Bloom thought it was, with the difference that avant-garde art wants to annihilate traditional art by analyzing it out of unconscious envy. (I am referring to Chasseguet-Smirgel's idea of the "anal universe.")

Do you feel any Oedipal anxiety when you're working on a poem?

Hopefully neither Oedipal nor pre-Oedipal anxiety, but gratitude for what has been accomplished.

Finally, when you survey the artistic landscape and consider the future, do you feel despair or hope?

Neither despair nor hope, but only the ironic detachment of a participant observer with certain unpopular values.

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