

The New Art Zoo
by Ron Zito

“The painters have paid too much attention to the ism and not enough to the painting.”
-- William Carlos Williams (Williams 71)

Imagine one morning you get an urge to go to the zoo. You’ve heard all about the brand new animal-friendly enclosures that have been built, and the new exotic species that have taken up residence at the zoo. With great anticipation you pay your money and walk in through the new entrance. Directly in front of you is the House of Cats, where all the lions, tigers, and jaguars should be lolling about in the morning sun. But for some reason there are no big cats in sight. Instead they’ve been replaced with metal and cardboard cutouts that barely resemble the real thing, or don’t resemble them at all. A sign in front of the enclosure tells you: “The Zoo has embarked on an exciting new program to educate the viewing public. The Zoo will now feature real animals instead of the fake ones we’ve been showing you for years. Replicas can still be seen in some older sections of the zoo.”

Everywhere you look the animals that you have grown accustomed to seeing are nowhere to be found. As you walk around the zoo you notice that other people are just as perplexed as you are. Families with children are especially hard-put. Mothers try to comfort their bawling toddlers as they push their strollers around Primate Pastiche, where the entertaining, rambunctious, smelly denizens have been replaced with clean, shiny metal boxes. You spot another sign that states: “The gorillas, orangutans, macaques, and golden tamarinds that you were used to seeing were only illusions. We are confident that opened-minded visitors will develop a taste for the real animals that the Zoo has recently acquired to replace the outdated representations.”

You also notice that an increasing number of people are converging around the old animal cages where the replicas are now kept. The zoo administration has decided to have a special exhibit of animal fakes to satisfy the increasing demands from their financial officers.

When your day at the zoo comes to an end, you return home questioning the whole experience. You miss the old familiar fakes, but you have to admit, some of the real animals are interesting and well-crafted. You decide to have an open mind about the whole thing and try to understand and enjoy the new animals. So you watch all the new nature programs on PBS, you attend lectures at the zoo, you even try to read the latest zoo literature, confident that your new knowledge will overcome your confusion and misgivings about the new zoo. But enlightenment does not come easily. You encounter statements such as this: “Zoos of the future will have no need

for actual animals. Visitors will be able to visualize the animals in their enclosures.” And this: “The idea that a zoo should be an exclusive province of animals is an elitist throwback to Western thought. Other forms of life such as viruses, bacteria, and rocks should also be included in zoo collections.” And this: “Even the idea of a zoo is outmoded. We need to do away with traditional enclosures. The era of zoos is over.” And then you wake up from your dream.

If this fanciful day at the zoo seems far-fetched, it is, for now. But let’s leave zoo-keeping behind and venture forth into another area of our culture that is also considered to be a societal benefit: the world of art. The average museum-goer would not find the above scenario that preposterous, since he has already encountered such a situation, and, alas, has not woken up from the dream. How many art lovers have found themselves scratching their heads in front of a totally black canvas, or a giant ashtray filled with cigarette butts, or a set of vacuum cleaners posing inside Plexiglas boxes, or, the mother of them all: a urinal tipped on its side and titled *Fountain*.

Marcel Duchamp, creator of *Fountain* (1917) and originator of the “ready-made,” questioned the visual basis of art. In 1946 he said, “I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. I was interested in ideas -- not merely in visual products. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind” (Tomkins 8-9). Duchamp thought that despite the original contributions of Picasso and Matisse, art was still primarily “retinal,” meaning that the artist and the viewer were only using their eyes to decide what was art. As far as *Fountain* was concerned, Duchamp (who had signed the urinal, R. Mutt,) said, “Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He *chose* it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under a new title and point of view -- [he] created a new thought for that object” (39). In line with these remarks he also said, “the ideas . . . are more important than the actual visual realization” (152).

So suppose you walk into the plumbing section of Home Depot. There you see an entire aisle of toilet fixtures and exclaim, “What are these works of art doing in here? Has Home Depot gone into the art business?” Just imagine the looks you’d get, and if you proceeded to sign all the white porcelain bowls with a black magic marker, the unreasonable store management would have you arrested for destruction of property. If only they knew something about Duchamp they might understand your point, that now it is up to each individual to decide what is art. And if you were lucky enough to plead your case in front of an enlightened judge and jury, you might

even say to the plaintiffs, “Why stick to toilets? Practically everything in the store could be art if you choose to call it that.”

What prompted the crossing of such a divide in the history of art? In the past, artists had been in the service of the aristocracy and the church. The two were entwined in a Europe where church and state were sometimes one and the same. Casting off the chains of the feudal system, with its privileged aristocracy, also meant casting off the theology of the church. What it meant for the arts was a loss of patronage from both. Torn loose from the service of these twin employers, artists and composers were soon to find themselves in problematic circumstances. They had more freedom to create, but it became more difficult to find commissions. A wealthy merchant class took its place for awhile, but with the industrial revolution and the enormous growth of the middle class, artists were now able to sell their work through art dealers and salon shows.

But the changing political scene of the late 1800’s was also to effect the rising middle class, which thrived under capitalism. The bourgeoisie still clung to pictures of people, scenes from nature, and historical events. By and large these were images of beauty. With the growth of revolutionary materialist political systems, not only capitalism, but the culture it had created was under attack. Artists reflected this condemnation and tried to find novel ways to distance themselves from the bourgeoisie, while at the same time relying on its money.

It is perhaps no coincidence that so many art movements began to act and sound like political parties. Most of them, like Dada, the Surrealists, and the Futurists, had totalitarian tendencies, mostly of the socialist variety. The issuing of manifestos, demands of group loyalty, the advocacy of anarchy, and the mockery of the bourgeoisie were common traits. It is especially illuminating to read what was said about the middle class. Jean Arp sneered, “The normally constituted bourgeois possesses rather less imagination than a worm and has, in place of a heart, a larger-than-life-sized corn which troubles him when there is a change in the weather - the stock market weather” (Tomkins 69). In 1919 Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus School said, “The intellectual bourgeois . . . has proved himself unfit to be the bearer of a German culture. New, intellectually undeveloped levels of our people are rising from the depths. They are our chief hope” (Wolfe, “Bauhaus to Our House” 16). Duchamp himself, the unofficial founder of Dada, also had contempt for all things bourgeois. Francis Picabia was a fellow artist and one of his closest companions. Picabia’s wife wrote in her memoirs that the two “emulated one another in their extraordinary adherence to paradoxical, destructive principles, in their blasphemies and inhumanities which were directed not only against the old myths of art, but against all the foundations of life in

general. . . . Better than by any rational method, they thus pursued the disintegration of the concept of art, substituting a personal dynamism . . . for the codified values of formal Beauty.” She perceptively called them, “forays of demoralization” (Tomkins 31-2).

Duchamp’s iconoclasm almost seems refreshing after we examine what was to be unleashed on the art world of the twentieth century. For it was to become an age of manifestos. In Arthur Danto’s book, After the End of Art, he cites historian Phyllis Freeman’s research on art manifestos in which “she had unearthed roughly five hundred examples, some of which -- the surrealist manifesto, the futurist manifesto -- are nearly as well known as the works they sought to validate” (28). Philosophy had become the muse of art. “To accept the art as art meant accepting the philosophy that enfranchised it,” says Danto (30).

This reliance on philosophy may have had its birth in the remarks of Georg Friedrich Hegel. Danto quotes from Hegel’s work Aesthetics, Lectures on Fine Art: “Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place” (30-1). Hegel also says, “Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is” (13-4). It is as if Hegel in 1828 peered into a crystal ball and saw the defining character of Modern art: its self-conscious preoccupation with ideology.

With ideologies came the manifestos. Each new movement would plant its flag in the unexplored territory of its own making and declare itself the only true art. One -ism followed another in a never-ending reaction to the preceding one: cubism, futurism, orphism, vorticism, rayonism, dada, de stijl, purism, surrealism, ad infinitum. Whereas it has usually been future generations that give names to the past, e.g., Renaissance, Baroque, in the twentieth century the art theories were named as they were being invented. No wonder G. K. Chesterton would say, “. . . the baby has to submit to a system that is younger than himself. The flopping infant of four actually has more experience, and has weathered the world longer, than the dogma to which he is made to submit” (Chesterton 155).

An early example of this dogma was the one set forth by the Futurists. Their manifesto of April 11, 1910 (an exact date, no less!) included these declarations:

1. That all forms of imitation must be despised, all forms of originality glorified.
2. That it is essential to rebel against the tyranny of the terms “harmony” and “good taste . . .”

3. That the art critics are either useless or harmful.

4. That all subjects previously used must be swept aside in order to express our whirling life of steel, of pride, of fever and of speed (Hunter 152).

Perhaps the paradigmatic example came from the Surrealist movement. In 1924 André Breton put forth his First Surrealist Manifesto. He defined Surrealism as “pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing, or by other means, the true function of thought -- thought dictated in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all esthetic or moral preoccupations” (Tomkins 98). Surrealism became known for its reliance on Freudian theories of the subconscious mind. In the works of Dali and De Chirico we see how these evocative dream-states were worked out on canvas. But to Breton, more important than the visual imagery was the philosophical discovery of what art essentially is, and anyone who strayed from the definition was a traitor to the cause. For example, in 1926 the two Surrealist painters Max Ernst and Joan Miró accepted a commission from Serge Diaghilev to design stage sets for the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*. This infuriated Breton so much that he published a pamphlet condemning the two artists for un-Surrealist activities. On opening night the Surrealists staged a loud disruptive protest inside the theater. Years later Ernst, Miró, and Jean Arp were “expelled” from the Surrealist movement for accepting awards at the Venice Biennale.

Abstract Expressionism produced some of the most well-known artists of the twentieth century, men like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko. But it also produced one of the most famous critics in the history of art, or rather, Clement Greenberg may have single-handedly created the Abstract Expressionist movement. Greenberg believed that a modernist painting, as exemplified by Abstract Expressionism, should not create a three-dimensional illusion, that the flatness of the picture plane should not be misused. He was such a staunch defender of this form of modernism that to him all other forms of painting were impure and regressive. “Realistic, naturalistic art has dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art,” Greenberg would say after Pop Art had supplanted his beloved Abstract Expressionism (Danto 73). In 1944 he would have this to say about an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York: “The extreme eclecticism now prevailing is unhealthy, and it should be counteracted, even at the risk of dogmatism and intolerance” (70). At the height of World War II it is astounding to hear Greenberg make statements that sound like they come from Nazi Party literature condemning “degenerate” art.

Contrast the doctrinaire Greenberg with the nihilistic nonchalance of Duchamp, who once gave this irreverent summation of the art world:

Art is a habit-forming drug. That's all it is for the artist, for the collector, for anybody connected with it. Art has absolutely no existence as veracity, as truth. People speak of it with great, religious reverence, but I don't see why it is to be so much revered. I'm afraid I'm an agnostic when it comes to art. I don't believe in it with all the mystical trimmings. As a drug it's probably very useful for many people, very sedative, but as a religion it's not even as good as God (Tomkins 10).

Tell that to the Museum of Modern Art in New York where in 2002 they temporarily moved to a space in Queens. MOMA commemorated the move with a “ceremonial procession.” In MOMA’s own account of the parade it resembled a pagan celebration of its favorite gods.

Departing from 11 West 53 Street, moving over the Queensboro Bridge, marching up Queens Boulevard, and ending at MoMA QNS, the performance was evocative of both a saint’s day procession and a secular celebration. Reproductions of some of the Museum’s most well-known works, including Pablo Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, Albert Giacometti’s *Standing Woman*, and Marcel Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* were carried on palanquins or litters, as was artist Kiki Smith. Uniformed participants spread rose petals along the route throughout the three-hour procession, and were accompanied by a Peruvian band (Kuspit 109).

As far as God is concerned, Art may have become the new god. Arthur Danto believes that the history of art (but not the production of art) ended in 1964 with the unveiling of Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box*. He believes that if Warhol’s creation could be called art, then anything could be art. Because there was no way to tell apart *Brillo Box* from a real box of Brillo, Danto wondered what made one art and the other just an ordinary household product. In one of the more revealing sections of his book, After the End of Art, Danto speaks of the “transfiguration” that such a work accomplished. “Transfiguration is a religious concept. It means the adoration of the ordinary, as, in its original appearance, in the Gospel of Saint Matthew . . .” (128-9). Danto is right to say that Warhol somehow got the art world to look at an ordinary box of Brillo with something close to adoration. (After all, someone paid a lot of money for it.) Where we can disagree with Danto is in his depiction of the passage in Matthew 17 as ordinary. Whether or not we believe in this incident from the Gospels, there is nothing ordinary about the description of what happened: the face of Jesus shone like the sun and his garments became as white as light; Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus; and when a voice spoke from out of the cloud, the disciples fell on their faces in fear. This was certainly an *extra*-ordinary experience, far removed from the banality of a box of scouring pads. The keepers of this faith in the ordinary may have raised up the *Brillo Box* to the pantheon of Art, but most people are still reluctant to get down on bended knee. It is difficult enough for people to believe in God,

let alone a golden calf in the shape of a Brillo box. But isn't that exactly what it takes when we find ourselves face to face with such an icon in any of our contemporary museums of art? It takes a leap of faith, or, at least, a suspension of disbelief. To Danto, seeing is not believing, but instead, believing is seeing.

But this is not to say that there is never a "transfiguration." Surely great masterpieces like the Sistine Chapel, Rembrandt's self portraits, Monet's water lilies, Bernini's unsurpassed sculpture, or Vermeer's light-filled interiors of Dutch domestic life do seem to accomplish a transformation from the ordinary to the extraordinary. Most of us do not need to be convinced, or have anything explained to us when we stand before these works of art. It takes no leap of faith to "adore" these creations.

But doesn't the *Brillo Box* remain ordinary no matter how hard we try? According to Danto it does not, but we need to turn to art theory instead of religion to understand the transformation. In his examination of Robert Ryman's monochrome paintings he says that in order to uncover their meanings "we would have to look closely at Ryman's own thoughts and motivations. That the paintings are white and square will not tell us much: monochrome paintings underdetermine their interpretations." This is why Danto believes criticism will always have a role to play in the art of painting (157). Taking it further, Danto says, "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry -- an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an art world. . . . No one unfamiliar with history or with artistic theory could see these as art, and hence it was the history and the theory of the object, more than anything palpably visible, that had to be appealed to in order to see them as art" (165). It's no wonder that Clement Greenberg could say with a straight face that "all original art looks ugly at first" (Wolfe, "The Painted Word" 91). Leo Steinberg, the art critic who supplanted Greenberg (art movements aren't the only things left behind), said that Modern art "is always born in anxiety" and that its very function is to "transmit this anxiety to the spectator" (91). Surely, if art has become that difficult to enjoy then shouldn't our museums be reading us a *caveat emptor* before they take our money?

In his book, What Good Are the Arts? John Carey takes issue with Danto's idea that we must know the motivation of the artist in order to understand their work. "With the vast majority of the artworks that fill our museums and galleries we have no access whatever to the creator's intentions. In much early art even the creators' identities are unknown. Whether they intended to produce 'art' in our sense at all seems, as we have said, highly unlikely. Judging works by their intentions is a purely circular exercise" (21-2).

The art of the past was full of mythological and religious symbols that most of us are not familiar with today, and later *vanitas* paintings also had their own symbolic code. But at least we have access to this knowledge, and it does not take much effort to understand the logic behind the representation of a particular flower, fruit or animal. Looking at today's art there does not seem to be a common logic to the intentions of the artist. If symbols are being employed, then they seem to be locked inside the mind of each autonomous artist. How unfortunate that we can sometimes understand the art of a thousand years ago better than the art of our own contemporaries. But maybe this is the point of most contemporary art. Maybe we are not supposed to understand it -- *maybe the disconnect is the point*. As a mirror of our own times perhaps it is a good one, showing us the relativity and autonomy in the air we breathe, and the non-transmission of one culture to the next. Danto's idea that one must be properly informed to understand contemporary art is born out of a kind of art gnosticism. Only the enlightened inner circle who shares the secret knowledge, or as Tom Wolfe would say, the art village of New York, can understand the art of our own age, and they happen to prefer it that way. Oddly enough, Wolfe concurs with Danto when he says, "frankly, these days, without a theory to go with it, I can't *see* a painting" (Wolfe, "The Painted Word" 6). If this is the case, then a blind man should be able to understand a work of art just as well, or maybe even better than a sighted person, as long as he understands art history and theory. We should be happy for the blind man, but then where is the importance of creating visual art anymore? Being able to see might actually be a hindrance to understanding art.

What does the contemporary artist want to say today? Is he like Duchamp, who according to Donald Kuspit in The End of Art, wanted to mock and defeat the spectator and ridicule posterity? The ready-made "defeats every attempt to bring it into contact with the external world, remaining the medium and symbol of the artist's inner world" (23). In 2001 an installation by Damien Hirst in the window of a London gallery was taken apart and discarded by a cleaning man. The work consisted of half-full coffee cups, ashtrays with cigarette butts, empty beer bottles, and other detritus. This Hirst original was reported to have a sales value in the six figure range, but the unwitting cleaning man said, "It didn't look much like art to me. So I cleared it all in bin bags, and I dumped it." Hirst thought the entire incident was "hysterically funny," and a gallery manager said . . . "since his art is all about the relationship between art and the everyday, he laughed harder than anyone else" (xiii-xiv).

I doubt that anyone would've been laughing had they found the Mona Lisa in the garbage, nor would the cleaning man have mistaken it for trash, but when art is just the leavings from everyday life it is not easy to tell

the difference. Kuspit says that according to Hirst, “life is more interesting than art, and art is only interesting when it is mistaken for everyday life, even if that means it loses its identity as art,” which it only has when it is exhibited in an art gallery. It is Kuspit’s contention that “the more completely modern an art seems, the more indifferent it seems to human concerns -- which suggests just how humanly indifferent we feel the modern world to be -- and thus the more unconsciously disillusioning, however consciously we celebrate the advance of art as such. However unintentionally, the doctrine of art for art’s sake -- the belief in the absolute autonomy of art -- is a defense of art’s right to be indifferent to human concerns” (165).

In a conversation with Tom Wolfe, Milton Glaser, author of Art is Work, says, “The sadness is that there is this contempt for narration and for storytelling. Why do we eliminate this fundamental idea of reference to the observable world? Who benefits from it? . . . Why storytelling becomes unclear is very strange. Suddenly the idea of depicting any kind of reference to a narrative objective has become undesirable” (Wolfe, Glaser 9).

In the 1940’s when Edward Hopper remained committed to his own brand of realism, despite the opprobrium of the art world, he thought that the craze for abstraction was cutting off the painter from real life: “We are all bound to the earth with our experience of life and the reactions of the mind, heart, and eye, and our sensations, by no means, consist entirely of form, color, and design. We would be leaving out a great deal that I consider worthwhile expressing in painting. . . “ (Matheny 172).

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was not one to think that art could be “indifferent to human concerns.” In his 1972 Nobel Prize Lecture, he gave this assessment of the artist’s duty: “The task of the artist is to sense more keenly than others the harmony of the world, the beauty and the outrage of what man has done to it, and poignantly to let people know.” It would be easy to conclude that the art world is unaware that it is committing suicide, but Solzhenitsyn goes on to say that art is not dead. “All who predict that art is disintegrating, that it has outgrown its forms, and that it is dying are wrong and will be wrong. We will die, but art will remain. Will we, before we go under, ever understand all its facets and all its ends” (5)? He was convinced that a work of art “contains its verification in itself: artificial, strained concepts do not withstand the test of being turned into images; they fall to pieces, turn out to be sickly and pale, convince no one. Works which draw on truth and present it to us in live and concentrated form grip us, compellingly involve us, and no one ever, not even ages hence, will come forth to refute them” (7).

We can only surmise what Solzhenitsyn thought of art like Hirst's gallery installation, but he probably would have agreed with these remarks from Kuspit, "The moment of revelation occurs not when art and life are blurred, but when one becomes clear-eyed -- like Hirst's cleaning man -- and realizes that what presents itself as art is just a leftover piece of life. One has awakened from a bad dream" (Kuspit 75).

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