
BOOK REVIEW

The Death of Art: On Kuspit's *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*

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The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist, Donald Kuspit, 1993, New York: Cambridge University Press, 175 pages.

As an artist and psychologist, I have certain expectations for the art criticism I read, expectations that are not easily fulfilled. I look for writing about art that enhances my experience of art works and that deepens my understanding of artists, without doing injustice to either. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to do injustice to both. At its worst, art criticism can unwittingly reduce the experience of the sublime and beautiful to mere perception, of creativity to ordinary behavior. It can also carry interpretation too far, committing deterministic reductions and "intentional fallacies" and risking either romanticizing or pathologizing the artist. (Positivism and Freudianism have both taken a toll on our understanding of modern art.) What I need, therefore, is balanced art criticism that is both sensitive to the subtle phenomenology of aesthetic perception and that leaves the psyche of the artist intact.

Good art criticism also meets more general needs. It helps us understand why we like what we like. It gives meaning to our preferences and interests. Moreover, it puts things in context: It creates a historical and cultural backdrop for what we see. It also allows us to see more, or more clearly. It reveals a previously hidden order of perception or a new perspective, orienting us toward experiences in the world-and in ourselves-that we might otherwise miss.

The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist meets many of these needs. It does so because Kuspit has successfully integrated aesthetic and psychological perspectives. The book makes explicit Kuspit's theory of 20th-century art, a theory evolved over several decades during

which his reviews of hundreds of works of visual art have appeared in major art magazines and in *Art Criticism*, the journal he edits.

Kuspit is an art historian, philosopher, and art critic who is trained in psychoanalysis and well-versed in postpsychoanalytic thought. He employs concepts from Freud, Fromm, Winnicott, and Kohut-along with his own contributions to psychobiography and psychodynamic personality theory-to explicate the shift that has taken place from avant-garde to postmodern art. His approach to criticism focuses the same kind of attention on visual art and artists that has long been given to literature and writers. The book brings together a cultural critique of capitalism and of postmodernism with a penetrating psychological analysis of the cult phenomena that pervade the contemporary art world. Kuspit is keenly aware of the narcissistic dangers that abound for artists who attempt to shape an identity while living in a culture that values celebrity over authenticity, and surface over substance.

Kuspit's writing is rich and expressive. His method is more aligned with what Baudelaire called "poetic" as opposed to "mathematical" criticism (1846/1964, p. 38). It is criticism that attends to what the artist evokes-not just what the artist's work signifies. Because he is as comfortable in the art world of Soho as he is in the academic settings of Cornell University and The State University of New York at Stony Brook where he teaches, his style is both hip and scholarly.

Kuspit begins with the assumption that most avant-garde art has a therapeutic intention. He further posits that

neo-avant-garde, or postmodern art at once mocks and denies the possibility of therapeutic change. As such, it accommodates the status quo of capitalist society, in which fame and

fortune count above everything else. Stripping avant-garde art of its missionary, therapeutic intention, neo-avant-garde art converts it into a cliché of creative novelty or ironic value for its fashionable look. Moreover, it destroys the precarious balance of artistic narcissism and social empathy that characterizes modern art, tilting it cynically toward the former. (p. iii)

Kuspit thus attempts to make sense of contemporary art that broadcasts an image of the self as drained and depleted. He also gives voice to the widely felt fear that, as the 20th century ends, visual art is dead.

Through seven densely packed chapters, Kuspit uses philosophic language interchangeably with the terminology of contemporary psychodynamic personality theory. Thus "object" may refer at one time to the perceptual object, at another to the aesthetic object, and at another to a referent in the self-object relationship. This technique is not confounding; instead, it unifies the theoretical strands of his argument, especially in Kuspit's retelling of the myth of the modern artist.

Artists, according to the myth, are special: They seem possessed of genius by virtue of their unique perceptual powers. Kuspit invokes Whitehead's notion of "presentational immediacy" (p. 4) to describe the direct perception attained by the artist and presented to the viewer. Avant-garde artists are also distinguished by a deeper commitment to authentic being and original action. They are "initiated into the mysteries of primordial experience" (p. 5), and because of greater freedom and spontaneity-like that found in Fromm's "integrated personality" or Winnicott's "True Self,"-able to "quintessentialize" (p. 8) reality for us and bring us to fuller experience and a more meaningful life. According to the myth, the artist can overcome the fundamental ambivalence each individual feels about intimacy and connection to achieve what Kuspit calls "the ultimate object relationship-the most intense engagement possible with an object" (p. 12). Although Kuspit doesn't say so, the original ambivalence undoubtedly arises from the anticipation of object loss, to which the artist is exquisitely sensitive. Avant-garde artists are individuals who "regress to the primordial beginning to escape the decadent end" (p. 29). Kuspit equates the "saying yes to life" of the Nietzschean *Obermensch* ("Overman") with Kohut's "healthy nuclear self" in the individual who is able to overcome "disintegration anxiety" (p. 29). Postmodernism pits the artist not only against his or her own mortality, but against the demise and death of art itself. Kuspit's book addresses the

important question of whether any artist these days can survive the disintegrative forces of commodity culture in which art's only value is monetary and the artist's personality is grist for the mill of celebrity and fame.

The times we live in have become decadent, and an intensely self-conscious art reflects this reality. This is an IWC of insincerity, vicarious life and derivative truth. Nietzsche, the first modernist, foresaw this 100 years ago. He told of it in a myth that has subsequently been retold as the myth of the modern individual as culture hero and artist: Art is therapeutic and the artist is a healer who overcomes alienation and depletion to create works that return power and the will to live to individuals living in a decaying, barbaric, and spiritually bereft culture (p. 9).

Kuspit has anticipated the need for an approach to art criticism that acknowledges the profound psychological impact of this myth on artists. Much of the psychohistory of the past has called attention to unconscious and regressive aspects of creativity-viewing art as compensatory in nature, or at best, as the product of the sublimated desires of the artist. It has ignored the artist's explicit, conscious, and culturally conspicuous motives. Since Freud-with his well-known ambivalence toward the artist and antipathy toward visual art-much psychological criticism has overinterpreted the artist's motives, often ignoring the art work itself and cultural factors influencing the way it looks. There is a conspicuous need for an approach that accounts for the complex interactions of mystic style and personality dynamics among current artists, that provides a means of distinguishing healthy from pathological motives behind artistic expressions, and that enhances the discrimination of good from bad art. Kuspit's book shows that such an approach is possible.

Kuspit's method is microcosmic. He defines styles by reference to characteristic works by exemplary artists: Malevich's squares, Duchamp's readymades, Warhol's portraits. He also uses the art historian's method of comparing and contrasting to flash simultaneous slides of important art works or to juxtapose artists' statements. Kuspit consistently allows the artist to speak for him- or herself and, when possible, he allows the work to speak for itself. There is no excess interpretation.

A chapter on Picasso and Duchamp (strange bedfellows!) shows that they share a common interest in "distortion" and "provocation" (p. 31) as a way to evoke an earlier, primordial state of the object. Just as Pi-

casso's cubist deformations of things stir emotions related to the real objects they distort, so do Duchamp's acts of negation ultimately affirm the primordial objects (art historical and personal) they deny.

Mondrian and Malevich are similarly joined stylistically. Kuspit sees both as exemplifying the pursuit of principle in seeking something eternal in geometric form. Both artists attempt to find a way beyond the transience of the object to the realm of the universal. Mondrian's way is a "dialectical geometry" (p. 51) and Malevich's approach is totalistic, but both attempt and fail at a purification of art and an objective relation to (rather than a relationship with) the object. Kandinsky uses geometry, but steers his art toward a spiritual goal—the achievement of "subtler emotions, as yet unnamed" (p. 53). But the artist's desire for innocent vision and spontaneous expression is repeatedly thwarted in an entropic, decaying culture.

For Kuspit, Warhol is the beginning of the end of the belief in the healing power of art. Warhol's aspiration to "be a machine" is a denial of the will to originality, and therefore of the assumption that an original, primordial state exists. A strength of the book is that Kuspit neither reduces the complexity of the art scene to economic behavior, nor romanticizes the artist as a hapless victim of capitalism.

Kuspit's chapter on German artist Joseph Beuys is especially important. Beuys is difficult to understand. His oeuvre consists of highly personal fetishistic objects such as a felt suit and various sculptural forms made of animal fat, as well as drawings and documents concerned with the artist's philosophically and politically charged performances and public gestures. (In the early 1970s, for example, Beuys squared off with a wild coyote in a New York gallery for 3 days.) The enigmatic quality of Beuys's works is compelling even without knowing the complex personal associations of the artist. (A series of honeybee drawings, for instance, relate to Beuys's process theory of sculpture as continuous and transformational—chaos is transformed into order, and liquid to solid to liquid again in the making of the honeycomb.) But the drawings stand alone, as do many of the artist's works. Beuys—who Kuspit regards as a transitional figure between avant-garde and postmodern art—attempted to be more a "shaman" than a "showman," but he was finally the victim of his dependency on an audience, on becoming a guru to the cult that formed around him. He also was the tragic hero, the "physician manque" in a failed effort to heal a society

that perseverates in believing that it is fundamentally sound and denying the need for a cure. Although art, like that of Beuys, has the power to put the audience in touch with previously unfelt emotions, "in general the artist is more likely to solve his own narcissistic problems by making art than to solve any of the audience's emotional problems" (p. 97). Beuys fails because he takes himself too seriously and, therefore, too tragically. He is not enough of a clown to enchant through naïveté and foolishness, the only antidote for the hyper-consciousness and archseriousness that characterize contemporary social life.

The visual art of the 20th century is multiform and diverse. The boundaries between painting, sculpture, gesture, and performance, for example, are quite fluid. There is no "essence" of 20th-century art. It is a proliferation of styles and a profusion of objects, the same object having different meanings in different contexts. Only from the vantage point of the approaching millennium does contemporary art become comprehensible. As Kuspit shows, postmodernism itself is a mocking explication of what was implicit in modernist art.

Kuspit understands postmodernism as a narcissistic style: It speaks "only to and about art, rather than to the self and its needs and experience" (p. 13). In a society that prefers mirroring to confrontation, the artist has become a "stylish symbol," (p. 20) a surface instead of a self. Because who one is has become more important than what one does, the postmodern artist "thinks he is significant simply because he is an artist" (p. 27).

The commercialization and banalization of art points to a breakdown of boundaries between things in the world, and the cult of the artist reveals a loss of depth and creative will in the individual. Kuspit sees postmodernist art as both a defense against decadence (and death) and as a form of decadence itself. Postmodernism promotes what modernism tried to avoid: cynicism, humorlessness, and despair.

Kuspit's interest repeatedly comes back to the primordial as representing an earlier, purer state. What is therapeutic is always a return from a jaded, cynical attitude to a feeling of being alive and having desires. But the way back is blocked at times by art itself. Postmodernist appropriationism (which Kuspit traces from Duchamp to Warhol to the present) is self-stultifying. "Art today," says Kuspit, "has reached a new extreme of decadence, in which it dialectically incorporates all the past signs of artistic rejuvenation—the dregs of old and already won struggles for reintegration,

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reinvigoration-while denying their contemporary possibility" (p. 13). Appropriationist works such as Sherrie Levine's copies of modernist paintings and photographs-and other such works in which the copy is more important than the original-reveal the postmodernist's "disbelief in primordially and its transmutative power" (p. 15). Postmodernism is an aesthetic impasse. It is ultimately the death of art by self-incorporation, the loss of the wish for rejuvenation, and the end of the myth of the artist as healer.

In *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, Kuspit sees beyond the postmodernist insincerity about the self and the mockery of history (and therefore primordially) to an important irony-that, despite its desire to invert art history and to subvert meaning in art, postmodernism affirms by negating and thus ultimately discloses artistic values implicit in modernism: originality, authentic expression, and good faith. By maintaining ironic de-

tachment, Kuspit is able to see beyond appropriation to what is worth appropriating and beyond mockery to what is worth mocking.

When insincerity is the norm it is hard to know how to take things. There is risk of failure inherent in criticism that is either too earnest or too easily deceived. Kuspit has avoided that risk, and without instilling false hope and the wish for a post-postmodernism, he has shown that healthy detachment about 20th-century art is at least possible.

Reference

- Baudelaire, C. (1964). The salon of 1846. In L. Hyslop & F. Hyslop, Jr. (Eds. & Trans.), *Baudelaire as a literary critic* (pp. 35-45). University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press. (Original work published 1846)

