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Art is *the exploitation of the medium.*

OGDEN, RICHARDS, AND WOOD, *The Foundations of Aesthetics*

Art is a notoriously difficult concept to define. The unruly condition of contemporary artistic activity challenges many received notions about *art* as a class of objects or set of practices. Fine artists no longer confine themselves to the use of traditional media and materials, so the identity of fine art can no longer be assured simply by an account of its making. Icons, themes, and technologies of mass media show up with increasing frequency in fine art imagery, so no clear divide between popular media and those of fine art can be established on thematic grounds either. At the same time, ideas of what an artist is or what the role of fine art might be are constantly changing. Classical notions of beauty, harmony, and proportion have largely vanished, along with displays of formal skill; or, at the very least, they are no longer required to make an artwork. Equally absent are expressions of tender feelings, religious and spiritual themes, and such once-familiar genres as portraiture, landscape, and still life. In short, the characteristics that long distinguished fine art from ordinary objects or mass media—the use of special materials, particular kinds of imagery, and aspirations toward higher values—are no longer definitive.

The foundational moment for modern art comes with the Industrial Revolution. But in Western culture, notions of art have a longer history, and a brief overview provides some insight into the dual legacy that seems to have confounded the idea of "art" in our time. Traditional production in the decorative arts has been involved in a sustained—if sometimes fractious—exchange with mass media and the fine arts. In this history, *media* means two things: the materials of production and the broader context of media culture.

In the modern to contemporary period, the prevailing belief is that

the distinctive identity of art derives from the unique ability of individual artists to give formal expression to imaginative thought. This tenet seems unlikely to disappear, though it has been modified considerably; art is now as often constituted as a practice or activity as it is by the production of rarified objects. In tracing the concept of art as a viable category, several threads need to be followed: attitudes toward the media of production and imagery, the role and function of art, and the concept of the artist.

In traditional cultures, the techniques and activities of fine art are not distinguished from other kinds of form-giving. Pottery, clothing, and religious and ceremonial objects are often carefully made and elaborately decorated but without being separated from their function within secular or sacred cultural activities. Individuals with artistic talent were certainly appreciated in the ancient world—by classical times, sculptors and painters gained fame and reputation through their works—but art was a concept associated with *techne*, or applied skill. Individual talent was not linked to the expression of personal experience or feeling. The modes and motifs of classical aesthetics followed dictates of form. A few individual artists are known through historical accounts and associations (e.g., Praxiteles, a sculptor who worked in the fourth century BCE), but the moden idea of originality is of more recent origin.

In medieval monasteries and workshops, art was still not distinguished from the application of skills to specialized tasks. Illumination, calligraphy, elements of painting, drawing, and bookbinding, as well as stained-glass work, stone carving, and other applied arts contributed to church decoration of a high artistic order. Yet imagination was a concept outside the realm of such activity. Practical manuals stressed technical perfection, offering recipes for inks and paints or models to be copied. Finely made textiles, furnishings, and decorative objects served wealthy and powerful patrons, but not until towns and cities sprang up within expanded economies and emerging political and social systems was there a developed market for works that were not commissioned or controlled. The notion of art offered for sale as an autonomous commodity was almost unknown, even if artistic skills were prized and works commissioned from talented craftsmen.

The idea of the artist as a gifted individual gained prominence in Renaissance culture, as a symbol and symptom of humanistic thought. Leon Battista Alberti's brief treatise *On Painting* (1436) stressed training in perspective, anatomy, and geometry, along with the art of composition. His sources were the ancients, with Aristotle's poetics and classical rhetoric in literary texts presented as the wellspring from which painters who practiced the "highest art" should draw their inspiration. Media in

the literal sense were relegated to craft production even as the notion of invention, with its emphasis on originality, began to ascend. A century later, in the high Renaissance, Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1550) consolidated a paradigm of the artist as genius and original thinker. With Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti as examples, this ideal took hold in a way that has never lost its grip on the Western imagination. Art as the expression of individual genius affirms the very concept of originality and virtuoso capability. A direct line connects the Renaissance figure of the artist as a personality ruled by the planet Saturn, and thus tinged with madness or melancholy, with the later Romantic artist at odds with culture and society. Even in the present day, an aura of alienation is considered characteristic of artistic temperament.

The invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century challenged the identity of works of art as unique, individually crafted objects. Woodblock printing, though not capable of anything like the volume of production that would come with industrialization three centuries later, was quickly put into the service of every conceivable kind of expression, from scandal sheets and news broadsides to scientific texts dependent on visual illustrations as a primary mode of knowledge production. The role of the artist continued to be blurred with that of the engraver or other tradesman skilled in printing or graphic arts, and, in an era where distinctions between popular and fine arts served little purpose, the identity of art was expanded.

Printing remained a slow and laborious process throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Several hands were involved—an artist's original drawing was usually engraved (and thus interpreted) by one skilled artisan and printed by another. Prints made by indifferent, anonymous craftspersons were produced through the same media as those of renowned artists such as Pieter Breughel, Rembrandt van Rijn, and William Hogarth. Each of these artists made his reputation through prints distributed within a widespread commercial market. These once-popular mass-media images now are considered fine art, raising questions about the changes in status brought by historical perspective; later generations may discern sufficient artistry in various commercially driven productions of our times to overturn the categorical distinctions that now prevail. The distinction between fine art and popular graphics sometimes depends on whether a work was initiated by an artist or brought to market through the agency of a commercial publishing partner. But such differences are not necessarily perceptible in either the imagery or object.

Our contemporary concept of fine art is closely bound to nineteenth-century ideas, particularly Romanticism, with its emphasis on artistic

imagination and emotion. Images of nature, nightmares, and other excesses prevailed in this period as signs of cataclysmic power, beyond the rule of rational thought. The visionary artist William Blake championed the ability of art to open the doors of perception. Art became an instrument through which to refute the claims of Enlightenment thought and its emphasis on rationality. The Romantic artist often took the stance of being at odds with mainstream culture and its conventions. The image of the artist driven by feelings, often working in isolation, scorned or misunderstood, found ample support in the works and deeds of Eugene Delacroix and Lord Byron, exemplary among others, who seemed to embody the wildest dream of artistic life. Imagination became the catchword of the era, and Percy Bysshe Shelley's essay "Defence of Poetry" (1822) made a passionate argument for the essential contribution of poetic imagination to the generation of new knowledge and creative production. Edgar Allan Poe, by contrast, exposed the myth of this cliché in his own essay on the deliberate craft of literary labor, "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846).

Aesthetics, as an area of philosophical inquiry, focused on questions of taste and value in the late eighteenth century, though the specific properties of individual media remained largely a concern of artists. Gotthold Lessing's influential essay *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766) reflects the sensibility of the writer-playwright as much as a philosophical disposition. Immanuel Kant's formulation of autonomy (as distinct from moral obligation or selfish desire), though adopted by later philosophers and social critics as a way to describe art practice as a discrete domain of cultural activity, was concerned with media mainly as an abstraction. When G. W. F. Hegel formulated his aesthetics with a hierarchy of progress toward a spiritual condition, media were linked to material but without the engagement with specificity inherent in Lessing's earlier tract. The posthumous publication of Hegel's *Philosophy of Fine Art*, in 1835, had little traction on the critical investment in media and materiality central to modernism's formal bent. Central tenets of German Idealism (e.g., beauty as equivalent to truth) persist. But attention to specific properties of media find a materialist expression among the writings and works of late Romantics (Pre-Raphaelites), Symbolists, and early Futurists in ways that were not explicit in an Idealist philosophical formulation.

Romanticism comes into being as the Industrial Revolution is transforming European culture in radical ways, automating labor and production on an unprecedented scale. Thus the distinction between rational thought and imaginative expression aligned with a contrast between mechanistic labor and artistic innovation—and with a contrast be-

tween mass-reproduced works and unique, hand-executed originals. The less obvious problem of the role of art in an era of administered culture (where applied logic and bureaucracy were perceived as oppressive) would come to the fore only later, though signs of this struggle are ubiquitous in early Romantic expression. Art takes on the force of a secular religion, auratic and charged with a salvific mission in the face of the perilous condition into which humankind is being led by the coming of machines and the end of traditional forms of labor and life.

The historical dialogue of art media and mass production reached a crucial point in the early nineteenth century. Industrialization exponentially extended the capabilities of mechanical print production, and these transformations were accompanied by changes in the concept of art. Visual culture was changing radically and rapidly. A mediated world of high-volume, mass-produced print artifacts sprang into being. An unprecedented number of social transactions became linked to printed objects, as train tickets, theater posters, menus, bills, trade cards, and other graphic ephemera began to be part of people's daily routines. Mass-circulation printed matter—newspapers, journals, cheaply made books, and novels—created new social spheres and communities of readers. By the 1830s the "penny press" was reproducing engravings of fine works of art from antiquity, motivated in part by a belief in the moral benefit of exposure to classical masterpieces. But if an engraving of a statue like the classical *Laocoön* could be had for a penny, then how was the value of a work of art to be established? Enormous pressure arose to define art as something other—not mass-produced or commercial but finer in form, rarer in production values, and particular in its uses of media. In dallying with media other than those abrogated to art for its specialized use, the argument went, art risked being overwhelmed, sold out, or lost in the rising tide of visual noise that clamored for attention in the streets, on the kiosks, and in the shopwindows of stationers, booksellers, and framers.

One celebrated case exposed the way crucial questions regarding the definition of art were posed by uses of the new media of reproduction and publicity. When the renowned British painter John Everett Millais, a member of the Royal Academy, allowed his painting *Bubbles* to be used to advertise Pear's soap, an enormous debate ensued. The image of a velvet-suited boy with angelic features enraptured with floating soap bubbles, painted in 1886, became the basis of the first advertising campaign to enlist a work of established fine art. Some artists and critics accused Millais of abasing the sanctity of art and sullying his own reputation in allowing his painting to be linked with commerce. Once used as a soap advertisement, *Bubbles* was no longer a work of art, purists de-

cleared. Others saw the popularization of images of fine art as a social benefit. Late-nineteenth-century British and American culture was permeated with the ideals expressed in the works of Matthew Arnold, who considered fine art to be the best expression of the highest values of civilization. Exposure to works of poetry, music, art and architecture were believed to be ennobling and uplifting, and the mass reproduction of Millais's image brought it before a wide public. In any event, works of art could not be separated from systems of distribution, consumption, and use, and the relations of art and commerce, inextricably linked to media and reproduction, continued to engender debates.

The early-nineteenth-century belief in art as a means of liberation had grown jaded by midcentury. A radical social vision of reform—and faith in the power of art as an instrument of cultural change—gave a realist painter like Gustave Courbet a very different conviction about the role of his work. In a spirit shared by the great novelists of the period—Honoré de Balzac, George Eliot, and Emile Zola—practitioners of realism believed in the social efficacy of artistic work. Social reform of child labor, living conditions among the urban poor, and other injustices became the impetus for works of art that took advantage of the power of print and imagery to expose cultural ills. Though works of art had been pressed into the cause of moral reform for centuries, the idea of art as a force for social transformation, not just spiritual improvement, was an idea that gained unprecedented momentum as the cultural effects of industrialization prompted utopian socialist movements.

The links between art and utopian idealism took many forms. The Arts and Crafts movement in Britain, largely inspired by William Morris, launched a nostalgic return to guild production methods of the preindustrial era. Art in this context was to be reintegrated with craft traditions in which individual expression was second to trade skills. But in an era still charged with romantic ideas about individual talent and the rarified character of artworks in relation to industrial products, the Arts and Crafts agenda was filled with contradictions. Though Arts and Crafts workshops rarely sustained themselves economically for more than a few decades, the ideas about art as a holistic, integrated, alternative to the alienated condition of work in industrial circumstances took hold of popular imagination. But by the century's end, even the initiators of the Art and Crafts movement had become reconciled with a role for art in industry, rather than as an alternative to it. The notion of the designer or industrial artist with a commercial and professional identity came into being by the 1890s and early 1900s. Fine art, however, retained its rarified status, even as the terms on which that identity was maintained were constantly questioned by critics and by changing practices. If anything,

the growth of new professional identities in design, architecture, and graphic art reinforced the distinction of applied and fine art.

At the end of the nineteenth century a new surge of support for art as a democratic medium accompanied the vogue for chromolithographic posters. Theirs was an art for the people, claimed the producers of the larger-than-life dancers at the Folies Bergère drawn by Jules Cheret and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Advertisements for oatmeal, cigarettes, beer, and bicycles appeared in public spaces, pasted up by bill-stickers competing for space in the crowded urban landscape. The champions of such public art met with cold welcome from citizens inclined toward decorum, many of whom felt that vivid commercial advertising cheapened public space. Battles over control of bill-posting also involved governments intent on controlling the politically inflammatory effects of poster art and reformist groups worried about the corrupting influences of dance hall programs and other images of entertainment. The artistic value of such posters was determined by aesthetic criteria, but more conservative judges felt that any commercial association negated a work's artistic status.

In the 1890s an art-for-art's-sake sensibility dominated the circles and salons from which sprang publications and images that characterized the fin de siècle across Europe and England. While applied arts and new professions in design for industry flourished, the rhetoric of fine art shifted to a self-justification on the basis of aesthetics. Art was to have no purpose but itself, serve no masters but beauty and imagination, and be in the service of individual expression or taste. Though only pale echoes of the decadent sensibility found their way across the Atlantic, a form of bohemianism flourished in American capitals as well as those of Russia, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe. The flamboyantly witty Oscar Wilde proclaimed, "All art is quite useless," a statement that clearly demarcated aesthetic activity from that of industrial labor or production.

At the same time (and not surprisingly, given the formalism implicit in a focus on aesthetic properties), the idea that artworks were composed primarily of their media and materials came increasingly to the fore. The work of Impressionist artists focused attention on the literal surface of the canvas as early as the 1860s, when Eduoard Manet eschewed the conceits of illusion associated with academic technique. By the 1870s, when Claude Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*, lent its title to the new movement, the group's painters were being accused of exhibiting their dirty paint rags and palettes. But for calling attention to paint and pigment, rather than placing it wholly at the service of an image, they elicited critical support as well as attacks. A theoretical foundation for modern art as medium-based came into focus. In 1890 the French painter Maurice

Denis made a comment that resonated for decades: "Remember that a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude, an anecdote or what not, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order." Abstract formalism and attention to materiality became *the* basis of critical approaches to fine art in the Postimpressionist work of Georges Seurat and the Symbolist Gustave Moreau. The influence of mass-media techniques in poster design, combined with the fashion for Japanese prints, likewise called attention to the graphic organization of surface elements in visual work of the final decades of the nineteenth century. And Roger Fry and Clive Bell, early-twentieth-century British writers on aesthetics, made attention to the formal properties of art production paramount. In *Art* (1914), Bell stressed that the one shared characteristic of all fine art was what he termed "significant form"—the capacity to carry meaning through well-composed, skillful expression. This text was written in support of the work of Paul Cezanne, among others, but was attempting to make universal claims for modern work and media.

Bell and Fry were not alone in proclaiming the importance of materiality. In two landmark essays from 1913, "The Word as Such" and "The Letter as Such," Russian Futurist artists Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenyk stressed the material foundations of art, emphasizing facture, or making, as the primary means through which artistic value (form and meaning) was produced. Russian theorists struggled to define the particular properties that made literature "literary"—and by extension, made art a category apart. Viktor Shklovsky coined the phrase "making strange" to describe the effect of art on the habits of thought that pervaded modern life and consciousness. This may be seen as a version of Blake's earlier "opening of the doors of perception," but defamiliarization, in this case, relied on shock effects rather than the romantic visionary imagination. Nonetheless, the twentieth-century avant-garde extends the romantic sensibility. Avant-garde artists were commited to creating works that flew in the face of convention and tradition. An equally strong impulse toward universal abstraction and an art of ideas also found justification by asserting the autonomy of media. Visual artists as distinct as the Russian Suprematist Kasimir Malevich and the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian pushed formal innovation to new limits in their hard-edged geometric approach. While Malevich aimed to destroy illusion, Mondrian sought the delicate harmonies and balances of a supremely distilled formal rhythm. For both, flat properties of the canvas and the literal surface of the painting were primary factors. For modern art, media were no longer serving as a vehicle or instrument of communication or representation of meaning, but as the very *site* of meaning and experience.

The idea that art might be defined by formal distinctions between traditional studio practice and mass media began to erode with the invention of collage practices. Pablo Picasso's 1913 *Still Life with Chair Caning* contains actual rope, thus challenging distinctions between presentation and representation. Other works he produced in the 1910s included torn newspaper, wallpaper, and other mass-produced printed materials. Not only were mass media and entertainments now subjects for fine art, but mass-media artifacts were materially incorporated into artworks. At the same time, principles of composition, harmony, proportion, and beauty were attacked or eroded. While Picasso's careful arrangements respected traditions of composition, German and Swiss Dada artists soon began making random collages using chance operations. Elements were drawn from a hat, thrown to the floor, or allowed to drift onto a canvas from a great height. With this shift, any possibility of using significant form as a criteria for defining art fell away.

Theoretical recognition of the growing power of visual culture seriously altered critical conceptions of fine art. In the 1930s critical theorist Walter Benjamin composed an essay titled "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility," in which he celebrated the arrival of mass media as an antidote to the "aura" that had surrounded original works of art. The essay aligned mass production with an idea of the democratic multiple, which he contrasted with the legacy of religious and sacred art. Benjamin, along with a number of other important members of an intellectual circle referred to as the Frankfurt school, were concerned with the ideological values or belief systems that created myths on which culture operated. While Benjamin celebrated the democratic implications of films and other mass-produced works' being made available to a broader audience, others, notably Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, decried the mind-numbing effects of what they called "the culture industries" of Hollywood, Broadway, and Madison Avenue. Yet these critics all maintained some faith in the ability of art to preserve values that were otherwise lost in the broader culture. An earlier Romantic era had embraced imagination and emotion, but these authors stressed the importance of resistance and defamiliarization, concepts inherited from the avant-garde.

Much twentieth-century art seems to play a game of eluding and outstripping definitions supplied by critics and theorists. Artists cannot resist challenging the premises of such definitions. The artist most responsible for pioneering these radical gestures of conceptual gamesmanship was Marcel Duchamp, who famously submitted an upturned porcelain urinal for inclusion in a 1917 art exhibition. He signed the work with a pseudonym, "R. Mutt," and forever changed the way art was defined.

By choosing, titling, and signing a mass-produced object, Duchamp was suggesting that the identity of art is based on cultural frameworks—that is, that the foundation of art consists in a set of conventions and ideas, not in formal properties or principles of composition or media. This was a radical departure from previously held ideas.

In the mid-twentieth century, the work of critic Clement Greenberg became practically synonymous with modern art, especially in the United States. His essays on abstract art, particularly the work of the group known as Abstract Expressionists, made materials and media central to the definition of what constitutes painting or sculpture. With a rigor that took earlier twentieth-century formalism to its limit, Greenberg wrote in 1940 in the *Partisan Review*, "The arts, then, have been hunted back to their mediums and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined. It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself." Flatness, Greenberg determined, was the essential characteristic of painting, and any canvas that betrayed the least hint of spatial illusion was violating that basic premise. In an earlier essay, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," Greenberg had revealed the influence of other critical theorists by arguing passionately for the importance of fine art as a way to resist mass culture. Art, it seemed, had the task of preserving whatever was left of civilization, a charge that was resonant and potent in the face of the rise of fascism in Europe and various forms of totalitarianism elsewhere. A generation of artists took Greenberg's tenets as prescriptive; Morris Louis's poured veils of paint on raw canvas (*Alpha Pi,* 1960), for instance, directly fulfilled the call for work that was entirely about the medium of paint. Greenberg's purity was later perceived as exclusionary and repressive, premised on an ideal of autonomy, or the separateness of art from ideology, that could not be sustained. But he had in fact championed experimental fine art for its combination of aesthetic and cultural values. Greenberg's insistence on visuality extended the earlier modern prohibition against literary references and narrative qualities as much as it expressed hostility to representation or illusion.

The European artists who, in the aftermath of World War II, created the group CoBrA (for Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam) sought to create art that would build world community by drawing on universal principles. One central figure, Asger Jorn, drew on his training as an anthropologist to incorporate the study of signs and archetypal figures as primal elements of visual media. Though these interests seem far from the realms of mass media, a number of these artists became part of the influential Situationist International movement, participating in its investigations of simulation and illusion in contemporary culture. Driven as much by political impulses as aesthetic interests, SI combined serious

Marxist criticism with strategies for transforming cultural life. These included a practice called *détournement*, an early form of what is now called "culture jamming," that consisted of transforming the meaning of mass-produced images and objects through direct intervention in the images or forms of the works. Among its precedents were Dada collage and photomontage and Duchamp's use of mass-produced reproductions. Distinctions between "high" and "low" art—the former aligned with elite taste, the latter with popular audiences—were challenged by the use of old master reproductions or thrift-store paintings, all treated with irreverence in creating works of critical commentary. Fluxus, a more loosely affiliated international network of artists that became established in the early 1960s, became interested in the aesthetics of everyday life. Art became increasingly a matter of participatory performances and ephemeral activities. Fluxus artists honked automobile horns and turned their windshield wipers on and off, rubbed soap suds on cars and themselves, poured streams of water from a great height, and so on. Art, it seemed could get along very well without the production of objects.

The emphasis on ideas rather than forms created a distinction between media culture and fine art in which art took the conceptual high ground. Some Conceptual artists flirted with eliminating visual work altogether. In 1958 Yves Klein, a metaphysically oriented and deeply spiritual artist, made an exhibition titled "Void," comprising an empty gallery. In a 1967 essay, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," Sol LeWitt stated that "an idea is a machine that makes art." Conceptual art invoked the idea of "dematerialization," as expressed in the writings of critic Lucy Lippard. Media that would have been unheard of in studio work a century earlier were used to push artistic boundaries. In the early 1960s conceptual artist Piero Manzoni made a limited edition of cans of his own excrement, neatly labeled and signed. Book artist Dieter Rot made pages of cheese and bodily fluids sealed into plastic packaging. Blood, semen, human hair, and other detritus found their place in sculptural installations and visual works throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as barriers to incorporating any and all materials and media into the realm of art fell away completely. Art freed from media constraints assured its identity through other means. Duchamp's basic inventory of defining gestures—the cultural conventions of authorship, institutional sites, or games of value predicated on contracts and beliefs—seemed to work very well to ensure the continuity of art as a specialized realm of production even as the objects or events produced outstripped conventional categories.

Conceptual art and Pop art came to prominence in the same decades. Andy Warhol, a major figure in Pop art, had been trained in commercial art and advertising. He began by making hand-painted images of mass-

produced objects but in 1962 took a step that broke down another set of boundaries that had distinguished types of production. Using photographic silk screens of the kind used to make industrial billboards and signs, he created works of fine art in a studio called the Factory. Airbrushes and halftone screens soon made their appearance in studios as well as workshops, and this new intertwining of mass-media culture and fine art threw critics into confusion. Copied from the workings of an emerging celebrity culture, the image of the Pop artist has reinforced a model for dramatic actors and actresses, authors and artists, film stars and rock musicians to the current day. When Warhol, who had become a media figure as well as skillful manipulator of media images, predicted that in the future every person would have their fifteen minutes of fame, he may or may not have foreseen the extent to which that fame would be based on the bold outlines of the artist as a distinctive personality silhouetted against the masses. Art, it seemed, was a celebrity accessory, a high-end fashion statement, a commodity among commodities, to be fetishized along with the artist-personality that produced it.

In an extreme contrast, at least formally, a third major strain of artistic practice emerged in the 1960s that also had implications for the definition of art and for the range of media and materials used in its practice. Minimalism pushed the boundaries of art toward another limit. Minimalist artists made use of mass-produced chunks of steel, glass, felt, or other materials altered only enough to have them register as art. Donald Judd's starkly stated principles of minimalist work, "Specific Objects" (1963), declared all conventions of composition, hierarchy, figure-ground relations, proportions, and surface detail irrelevant to the more significant problems of artistic identity. Robert Morris's cut and draped pieces of felt or Barry Le Va's floor pieces of scattered, broken glass exemplified the movement's reductive aesthetic. The distinction between works of art and those of mass culture depended on removing the industrial materials from use. Austere, difficult, and elegant, Minimalism emphasized properties of art that were inherent in materials and media, but dependent on a conceptual framework. Minimalist art reduced forms to material, banishing expression and emotion, compositional techniques, and any trace of representation or reference.

All three major mid-twentieth-century movements—Pop, Conceptualism, and Minimalism—contributed to the range of possibilities on which contemporary artists draw. Our ideas of the ways "art" distinguishes itself from mass culture are in part dependent on critical positions forged in the debates generated by these movements. In the 1970s identity politics from feminist communities and traditionally marginalized groups brought representational imagery back into the mainstream.

A new, eclectic internationalism was supported by biennials and art fairs, and in a cycle of boom and bust economies, fine art became an investment as well as a status symbol.

In the 1980s postmodern artists engaged in acts of appropriation. They posed strong arguments with the myth of originality that had fueled artistic practice since the dawn of the industrial era. Postmodern critics asserted that all art used images and ideas that had "always already" existed. So appropriating preexisting works from any and all sources—commercial, industrial, historical, or artistic—was the only way to create new works. Richard Prince made prints of the Marlboro man from cigarette advertisements and Sherri Levine rephotographed works by canonical photographers like Edward Weston. They exhibited these as their own works, eschewing the concept of authorship and originality. High postmodernism quickly exhausted its conceits and devices for art making, but in its wake, the rule-bound and highly codified terms of formalism were banished, along with any trace of autonomy as a viable critical concept. In their place came theories of allegory, hybridity, and pastiche that granted wide permission for the most eclectic practices. Contingency, or the situatedness of work within cultural and historical frames, displaced lingering traces of formalist autonomy. Performance art, installation work, new media, photography, projection, ephemeral activist work that left little or no remnant, and works that consisted largely of actions or transactions took their place among the traditions of painting, sculpting, printmaking, and other studio-based art, all of which experienced a late-twentieth-century revival.

Ultimately, however, works of art have to be distinguished from the products of other culture industries that permeate daily life. Often this is as much a matter of framing, site, and presentation as of material, media, or imagery. The spectacularly kitschy sculptures made by Jeff Koons in the 1980s and the elaborately staged performance sculptures of Vanessa Beecroft, using fashion models posed nude, register as art in part through context. Works of art are certainly valued above and beyond the costs of labor or materials used in their production, though *In the Name of God*, a diamond-studded platinum skull made by British artist Damien Hirst (and the most expensive piece of sculpture by a living artist), played with the capacity of fine art to command capital as part of its production. In a striking countermove, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno acquired and liberated a Japanese anime figure—returning a mass-media brand to a free condition outside of ownership or markets. Clearly these artists understand the mediated condition of their own practices as part of the production of objects and events. Thus the intrinsic value of the media involved shrinks by contrast to the works' value as rarified

expressions of human thought, skill, or emotion. The question of which media are specific or proper to the production of art has been answered differently in successive generations. In traditional practice, materials such as fresco, oil paint, watercolor, marble, and bronze were the media through which works of fine art are produced, but in the modern and postmodern periods, media have become the subject and substance of works of art, not merely the means of production.

In the era of digital and electronic arts, new challenges to the boundaries and definitions of art are posed by changes in contexts and circumstances of production and reception. The basic characteristics of digital work are that it is programmable, iterative (open to being issued in new and changing versions), generative (giving rise to new expressions), and frequently networked. While earlier networks of social and economic exchange were intrinsic to the value of works of fine art, the networked condition of digital media allows for works of virtual art that have little or no existence outside of electronic environments. The production of artworks for sale and consumption in the online world Second Life, exemplified by the artists' books editioned within its realms by Richard Minsky, show the critical and economic viability of aesthetic projects conceived entirely within the domain of virtual space. While the existence of these productions first and foremost as files of digital code foregrounds their simulacral, or immaterial, aspect, the elaborate technological infrastructure that supports these activities makes clear the highly material nature of electronic media.

In a work that calls attention to the circuit of human involvement essential to the operation of aesthetic effects, Janet Zweig created a piece titled *The Medium* (2002) for the lobby of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota. It consists of a cozy alcove, scaled for conversation but with a large video screen separating any two individuals who take their places in it. The occupants can speak to each other but only through a camera feed, in which their images are modified by a program that shifts the colors and tones in real time. The result is a hypnotically beautiful series of images, with visual qualities that seem psychedelic, solarized, or impressionistic by turns. The myth of face-to-face communication as unmediated is exposed, as the process emphasizes the subjective quality of perception in any and all circumstances. Our experiences are mediated through the perceptual apparatus, as well as the cultural conditions of our individual subjectivity. Zweig's piece makes a clear case for the emphasis on media as an aesthetic device and art as a specialized form of experience within the larger realms of mediated perception. It thus exemplifies the dictum of the renowned media theorist Marshall McLuhan that the "medium is a *mas-*

Janet Zweig, *The Medium*, 2002. University of Minnesota School of Journalism and Mass Communication, commissioned by the Art on Campus Program. Photo courtesy of the artist.

sage." But it is the art coefficient that provokes wonder and seduces us into consideration of the way it inflects and shapes meaning.

Works of art can no longer be identified by their media, and the image of the artist has become a founding myth of celebrity and commodity culture. The definition of art in an era of mass media depends on our ability to distinguish works of art from other objects or images in the spheres of media and mass visual production. Art serves no single purpose, cannot be circumscribed by agendas or beliefs. But it provides a

continuing space for renewing human imagination and giving expression, in any form, ephemeral or material, to that imaginative capability. Finally, the practice of art becomes independent of objects or things, even of ideas or practices. Art becomes a way of paying attention.

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