Cover image: Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box*, 1964

To butcher Charles Dickens, it is the best of times and the worst of times for contemporary art. On the one hand, there has never been so much contemporary art, and in so many styles. The "post-medium condition" —the idea that contemporary art imposes no specific limits on what it can tolerate—is taken as a glorious given. We live in a golden age of artistic pluralism.

On the other hand, we also live in a golden age of artistic angst. Everywhere, you hear people talking about how the serious and soulful side of art is being taken over by new money, shallow celebrity, and rapacious marketers. The globalized fair-and-biennial circuit appears as a monoculture of prepackaged art-brands. The same small tribe of curators, critics, and creators circle the earth endlessly.

My thesis is that these two seemingly disconnected themes are actually halves of a whole. To understand how this might be the case, it's worth digging into a term that is casually invoked in both discussions but that goes undefined: the "art world." The idea I want to explore is this: the actual "medium" of contemporary art is the "art world" itself, and that this fact accounts for both contemporary art's diversity and its homogeneity.

There has not always been an "art world"—in the United States, its existence as a given dates from the late 1950s and early 1960s, when "artist" became an identity integrated into mainstream life via the media presence of the Abstract Expressionists, the growth of an art market, government recognition of the arts, and mainstream press coverage. That doesn't mean that there weren't working artists before this period, but they didn't have something like an established "world" to relate to. An "art world" can be distinguished from an "art scene." Writing of the pre-war period of American art, Dore Ashton explained its relative isolation:

> Even in the twenties, the little towns throughout America usually had at least one piano teacher and often a circle of literary ladies subscribing to newly organized book clubs, but art was taught very rarely in the local high school, and if there were art classes, they were horribly debased. Mechanical drawing, even in the universities, was the nearest approach to art, and it was taught for obvious utilitarian reasons. These extreme

conditions sent the determinedly artistic youth fleeing to the few large cities in America where there were usually a few art schools and some pretension to visual culture.

Within artistic bohemia, painters and sculptors constituted a subset of the bohemian literary set of the literary and musical bohemia of Greenwich Village—and a fairly inconsequential one, at that. Painters were still, more or less, viewed by society at large as tradespeople. Those who committed themselves to painting generally saw it as a calling, motivated by a strong sense of their craft's deep spiritual meaning.

It is against the background of a transition away from this isolation that you have to read Arthur Danto's seminal 1964 essay "The Artworld," which gets credit for giving the idea of an "art world" its modern use. The Abstract Expressionists' achievement was to elevate painting, in the US context, above its traditional givens as a craft: splashes of paint on canvas weren't depictions of the world, but they weren't just splashes of paint either—they were the expression of a worldview. In the process, these artists established a place in society for the artist as someone who created intellectual and spiritual value as well as painted images—and Danto sees Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* as taking this new status of the artist to its ironic conclusion.

Danto would tease out the implications of this observation for the rest of his very long career. The argument in "The Artworld" is the early form of his most famous assertion, that we had reached the "end of art," by which he meant exactly that we had entered an age of "pluralism": "It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means. When one direction is as good as another direction, there is no concept of direction any longer to apply." The spiritually subjective character of Abstract Expressionism logically led, Danto thought, to total artistic pluralism, where it was impossible to agree on a single definition of capital-A Art. What makes this earlier essay worth revisiting, however, is that it reminds us of the fact that the same text that introduces the theme of the "end of art" also creates the idea of an "artworld;" the two ideas presuppose one another:

What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that

takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is (in a sense of IS other than that of artistic identification). Of course, without the theory, one is unlikely to see it as art, and in order to see it as part of the artworld, one must have mastered a good deal of artistic theory as well as a considerable amount of the history of recent New York painting. It could not have been art fifty years ago. But then there could not have been, everything being equal, flight insurance in the Middle Ages, or Etruscan typewriter erasers. The world has to be ready for certain things, the artworld no less than the real one.

Or, here's the essay's most famous line:

To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry —an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.

The explicit corollary of the fact that "anything can be art" is that it must enter into dialogue with a now self-consciously defined body of ideas within a newly self-conscious art scene. The new pluralism and the new professionalism overlap.

Contemporary art's narrative about itself as a particularly liberated aesthetic space sometimes obscures this. As Anna Brzyski writes in a recent essay on "Painter of Light" Thomas Kinkade's non-relation with the traditional discourse of the "art world," the lion's share of writing about art today tends to assume parameters of quality that it doesn't actually admit or define. Critics actually focus obsessively on a very narrow slice of visual culture, excluding the vast majority of what is shown in the United States:

The closer one gets to the here and now, the narrower the definition of art becomes and the tighter the controls over the content of the category. For the last fifty years or so, a period belonging to living artists, the field of art has contracted to such an extent that the typical relationship between the normative and the exceptional is in effect reversed. When contemporary art becomes the subject of discussion and study in art history, a very narrow and elite register of current practice becomes the norm that defines the entire field. It functions in that context as a designation and a value judgment.

What, then, determines the specific limits of the "art world" as a space? To put flesh on the theoretical environs of Danto's "artworld," it is worth bringing in a second, classic essay on the subject: critic and curator Lawrence Alloway's 1972 essay "Network: The Art World Described as a System," written for the tenth anniversary of *Artforum*. Here's Alloway:

What is the outpost of the art world viewed as a system? It is not art because that exists prior to distribution and without the technology of information. The output is the distribution of art, both literal and in mediated form as text and reproduction. The individual reasons for distribution vary: with dealers it can be assumed to be the profit motive at one remove. Art galleries, museums, universities, publishers are all part of the knowledge industry, producing signifiers whose signified are works of art, artists, styles, periods.

The possibility of self-defining what art is, as Danto describes it, corresponds to this new importance of distribution over the art object that Alloway traces. Concretely, he writes about how the new period produced a new kind of writing: the "artist statement" and the interview as characteristic products of the moment. Therefore, the media circulation of the artist's persona becomes part of the art experience in a new and more aggressive way.

How close or far away are we from these observations today? If Alloway writes ruefully that, "The failure to interpret has left us with a backlog of unevaluated interviews," imagine how we stand in the present, with our greatly increased volume of circulating discourse! Writing recently, Pamela M. Lee questions whether Danto and Alloway's definitions of the "art world" still hold under contemporary conditions:

Alloway's theorization of the art world continues to authorize the language and secret handshakes that grant membership into a closed society. But what happens when the world itself is progressively aestheticized as global spectacle, a culture of design and the image, not to mention the capital investments that everywhere seek a new audience for that image's distribution? What happens if ours is now an open system, and Danto's "atmosphere compounded of artistic theories" has expanded beyond measure in a virtual Babel of new languages, histories, and ideas beyond

the borders of the conventional art world? Is it still possible, ultimately, to separate Alloway's "negotiated environment" from the environment which would seem to encompass it, where the theories and protocols that were once the exclusive purview of the art world take on the status of a new cultural and mental labor?

Lee's observations here are a variation on the sense of crisis that I began with, that art's distinctness is being overrun by the new realities of commerce, PR, and global spectacle. It is indeed possible that art's special status is eroding under the impact of a frenetic visual culture. But I also think she is flattening some of what is most interesting—and useful—about Alloway's essay, and Danto's before it. What is remarkable about "Network" is that, in Alloway's assessment, the "art world" comes into being only at the moment that the "secret handshake" culture of art breaks down, and the channels of media distribution are already taking on an importance over and above the art itself.

Thus, Alloway describes, on the one hand, the increased presence and influence of a specialist universe of art magazine discourse. At exactly the same moment that Alloway was writing his essay for *Artforum*, *Newsweek* was singling out *Artforum* in an article on "the growing, seminal importance of the art magazine … No longer the passive judge and recorder of art, it [the magazine] is now part of the action." But at the same time, Alloway finds just as important the drastic increase in images of artists within mainstream, non-specialist publications: depictions of art in lifestyle magazines, for instance, or artists like Rauschenberg and Lichtenstein being drafted into designing covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Alloway also identified the rise of a consciousness of the "art world" as a defined subject with the new merchandising of art, dedicating a long and brilliant passage to analyzing the significance a Jackson Pollock jigsaw puzzle sold by the Albright-Knox art gallery.

These are still relatively primitive versions of the phenomena of art merging with the logics of commerce and design that Lee describes. A Jackson Pollock puzzle seems rather quaint next to Lady Gaga collaborating with Jeff Koons, or Barbara Kruger designing a *W* magazine cover with Kim Kardashian, or Rob Pruitt designing shoes for Jimmy Choo. However, such phenomena are part of a continuum with it:

all this interpenetration of art with design and celebrity and commerce is already baked in once you start using the term "art world," since it already implies, as Alloway says, "a professional group in a situation sufficiently stable not to demand continual conscious participation." It implies naturally a shallower, more mediated experience of art — Alloway says this explicitly —, one interpenetrated with a consciousness of itself as subject matter for wider layers of media and visual culture.

We can trace a line through Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, as Danto analyzed them as the product of a star artist's pronouncement that "this is art," to his media-savvy heirs of the 1980s. Warhol collaborator Jean-Michel Basquiat's first painting on stretched canvas was done for a film, *Downtown '81*, in which he played the part of a down-on-his-luck artist. The media image of Basquiat as a "New York artist" literally preceded its realization as an actual thing, making it possible.

All this, finally, accounts for the weird sense of assumed depth and actual superficiality that simultaneously accompanies the term "art world," as it circulates unscrutinized. The term implies "depth," in that talking about the "art world" signifies the existence of a community of shared professional interest. But it also suggests "superficiality," in that this world does not, as Alloway says, "demand continual conscious participation," and that it can be consumed as an image. In fact, the sense of being part of a community that requires no commitment to any specific ideal is one of the things that the contemporary art industry sells.

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