Introduction

there has been, until now, only a philosopher of art. And this philoso-
pher of art, . . . face to face with art, never abandons his positions
[interests]1

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Iconoclasm conjures up a fiery image of the destruction or censorship of
art because, according to certain religious, political, or cultural beliefs, art
is thought to be idolatrous, destabilizing, or offensive. The classic examples
are from the Byzantine era, the Reformation, and the French Revolution.
More recent examples are provided by the widely televised treatment of
Soviet art in the former Iron Curtain countries after November 1989, or by
the polarizing controversies in the 1990s about public funding for the arts by
the National Endowment for the Arts. Whichever case is cited, iconoclasm
represents a graphic example of the triumph of negative beliefs about art
aimed not only at art, but at the beliefs it embodies so that religion, politics,
or culture might thrive without their own beliefs being challenged by art.

The standard defense of art against iconoclasm since the beginning of
modernity is to invoke the principle of autonomy and thereby to abstract or
distance art, in theory, from the practices whose beliefs are used to criticize
it.2 For example, art is abstracted from religion, as much of it has been since
the Reformation, in order not to be subjected to its doctrines; or abstracted
from politics, as it largely has been ever since the French Revolution, so it is
less vulnerable to censorship by political ideologues; or else abstracted and

p. 77.
2 The discipline of aesthetics has, in turn, benefitted from the conception of autonomous art because
aesthetics asserts its own autonomy — again from religion, politics, and culture — as it asserts the same
for art. The benefit is so clear, in fact, that the autonomy of art might even be regarded as a precondi-
tion of aesthetics since it emerged in the eighteenth century only after the autonomy of art (from
religion and politics) had already been established — as a normative ideal if not ever fully as a reality.
thus exempt from society’s moral codes, as has been argued in defense of the art (by, for example, Robert Mapplethorpe, Karen Finley, et al.) that provoked the NEA controversies. Part of the justification for such acts of abstraction is the claim that once art is autonomous, it provides us with a critical perspective on religion, politics, and culture which we would otherwise not have and which is vital to a society’s self-understanding. In effect, art is conceived as an autonomous practice not accountable to any of the other practices in society yet, at the same time, as being capable of criticizing them. Art’s autonomy thereby underwrites its capacity for critique, which in turn serves as another defense of art against the forces of iconoclasm.3

The link between iconoclasm and autonomy does not always work in art’s favor, however. For while aestheticians repeatedly appeal to the autonomy of art as a defense of art against iconoclasm, this tends only to motivate iconoclasts all the more. They want nothing less than to subject art to the critical eye of the very practices from which it has been abstracted, which would of course amount to an annulment of art’s autonomy. In turn, the call to critique with the hope of better defending art’s autonomy actually puts it in jeopardy, because critique requires that art engage with the very practices from which it strives to maintain its autonomy. Iconoclasm is thus a battle of beliefs with regard to art and its alleged autonomy, which is at the same time a battle among the various practices that constitute themselves around their competing beliefs. In Hans Belting’s words (speaking about Byzantine iconoclasm), “images were often merely the surface issue for deeper conflicts between church and state, center and provinces, central and marginal groups in eastern society.”4 That art has historically been the site of such battles should be enough in itself to cast doubt on its autonomy, at least in any absolute sense.

One would think that the role of belief in generating iconoclasm, or that of autonomy in defending art, or that of critique in justifying autonomy, or, more generally, the conceptual as well as historical links between iconoclasm and autonomy would, individually or collectively, be enough to attract the attention of philosophers to the problem of iconoclasm in art. This has

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3 At the same time, art’s autonomy is historically, and ironically, indebted to the secularization of art that began with the iconoclasm prevalent during the Reformation; for it was as much iconoclasts as artists or aestheticians who insisted that art be separated from religion because it often conflicted with religious doctrine. Further confirmation of the complicated conceptual link between autonomy and iconoclasm is the fact that, even today, those who challenge the autonomy of art are often regarded as iconoclasts, as if autonomy were the primal ground of respect for art.

not been the case, however, as iconoclasm has largely escaped philosophical scrutiny. Even art historians have traditionally not given it its due, because, according to David Freedberg, iconoclasm “sears away any lingering notion that we may still have of the possibility of an idealistic or internally formalist basis for the history of art.”5 In other words, art historians, like aestheticians, are often also committed to the belief that art is autonomous and thereby immunized against the external challenges that iconoclasm represents. So once again iconoclasm and autonomy are intertwined, this time with autonomy serving as a barrier to the proper study of iconoclasm.6

Another, related reason why iconoclasm has not been discussed adequately by philosophers is that it is a topic that demands an interdisciplinary approach, since the causes and contexts of iconoclasm implicate religion, politics, culture, and many other practices that have shaped art over the years and, in turn, have been shaped by it.7 As Belting expresses the problem: “The mantle of competence displayed by each academic discipline is . . . insufficient to cover” iconoclasm because images “belong to all of them, and to none exclusively.”8 While art historians would seem to be reasonably well prepared for such study, given that the social history of art is a strong tradition within the discipline and that it involves reference to many of these same practices,9 aestheticians, by contrast, are not so well trained to study iconoclasm because traditionally they are reluctant to engage in interdisciplinary studies of art.10 The philosophical root of this reluctance

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6 Freedberg goes so far as to say that art historians are so “strikingly apprehensive and diffident about assessing the implications for their study of the great iconoclastic movements,” specifically with respect to the psychology underlying our responses to art of all types, that their disinterest in iconoclasm is tantamount to repression – and is perhaps, I would add, even a form of iconoclasm itself. See David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1989), p. 11; cf. pp. xxi and p. 421, where he specifically says that *disinterest* is the same as repression.
7 For a discussion of some of the reasons why iconoclasm has not been studied adequately, see Gamboni, *Deconstruction of Art*.
8 Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. 3.
9 Of course, in more recent times, Freedberg, Gamboni, Belting, and other art historians (including Alain Besançon, André Grabar, and Martin Warnke) have studied it more seriously.
10 The analytic tradition of aesthetics does not look favorably at interdisciplinary, though here Danto is perhaps an exception. And the continental tradition is generally thought to be more receptive to interdisciplinary, despite the fact that Kant and other influential figures (such as Heidegger) have not been. Adorno connects aesthetics with social theory, but even he is an exception, as is evident from his involvement with the Frankfurt school tradition of critical theory – “critical” as distinct from “traditional” theory within the continental tradition. So, either despite or because of these exceptions, the record in the respective aesthetic traditions is not good on the matter of interdisciplinary.
Iconoclasm in Aesthetics

is none other than the familiar principle of autonomy; for if art is truly autonomous, there is no need for philosophers to study it in connection with the other practices from which it is said to be autonomous. At the same time, perhaps philosophers value their own autonomy from history as much as that of art and recognize that the proper treatment of iconoclasm would require engagement with history on an empirical as well as a theoretical level; that is, philosophy's failure to confront a clear symptom of art's historicity and lack of autonomy — iconoclasm — may just be a failure to confront its own historicity and similar lack of autonomy.\(^1\) In any case, there has been almost no systematic study of iconoclasm in the history of aesthetics.

This is an extremely unfortunate fact because the absence of any philosophical scrutiny of iconoclasm only enables it to thrive with less, or certainly with less effective, resistance. Moreover, this absence is also unacceptable, since philosophical theories about art have routinely been recruited by people on both sides of the iconoclasm debates, which means that philosophers have contributed significantly, if unwittingly to the development of iconoclasm. Their role has not been just as a neutral party, however, as if iconoclasts or their critics appropriated philosophical theories without the philosophers' consent or knowledge, drawing them either unwillingly or unknowingly into the debates. On the contrary, philosophers historically have been very articulate and passionate about some of the issues that have fueled iconoclasm: the deleterious effects of art on human emotions or political stability; the inability of art to be a reliable partner in the search for truth; and the central topic of them all, namely, the autonomy of art. Less innocently still, philosophers have been iconoclasts themselves; for they have sometimes adopted adversarial roles toward art, just as their counterparts in religion, politics, and culture have done, and largely for the same reason: to establish and preserve their own autonomy. The locus classicus of such a critique of art is of course Book X of Plato’s Republic, where the critique of art is part of his larger argument to have philosopher kings replace artists as the guardians of the just state he envisions.

When philosophers are iconoclasts, however, they tend not to take on the power of art directly; that task is left to those religious, political, or cultural leaders who have the requisite power to destroy or censor art. Rather, the philosophers’ strategy has been like that of the theologians involved in the classic debates about iconoclasm, namely, to conceive art in such a way that it no longer appears to have the power that makes it a threat. Luther argues,

\(^1\) To return to Freedberg's charge of repression among art historians, this reluctance might be the form that repression of iconoclasm takes among philosophers.
for example, that it is more effective to convince people that images have no power to heal, to perform miracles, and so on than to destroy them, since any individual images destroyed can always be replaced. Philosophers likewise respond to their fear that art may have cognitive and political efficacy in the world in a way that competes with philosophy’s own power by conceiving of art as having no cognitive or political efficacy in the world whatsoever. Even though such arguments seem less pernicious than the destruction or censorship of art, they are no less effective in threatening (the power of) art and may even, inadvertently, be no less iconoclastic than, say, the decrees against images in the early sixteenth century or, more recently, the Congressional imposition of a “decency clause” as a condition on all NEA grants. In short, philosophy’s ability to conceive of art is extremely powerful and has real effects in the world, and not only in the artworld, since art is so central in our culture. So a philosophical study of iconoclasm should begin at home, namely, with a critique of the iconoclasm within philosophy. Hence my topic: iconoclasm within philosophical aesthetics which stems from its conception of art. And my aim: to demonstrate how iconoclasm is generated, why it is a serious issue for philosophers and for all those who reflect theoretically about art, and how it might be avoided.

Iconoclasm has clearly been an issue throughout the history of philosophy, but I want to focus on the particular form that it takes within contemporary philosophical aesthetics: a combination of disinterest and distrust in art, where disinterest is an uncanny mixture of “disinterestedness” and “lack of interest” (and thus a combination of a technical philosophical term and an everyday expression). Examples of this form of iconoclasm can be found, I believe, in the writings of Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida, and Arthur C. Danto, despite all their substantive and cultural differences. Even though none of them (with the possible exception of

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12 Danto refers to this strategy as philosophy’s “insubstantiation of art,” which he adds would be, were it successful, “one of the greatest victories of political metaphysics.” The Philosophical Disenfranchise-ment of Art (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 5.

13 The first three philosophers are typically described as “continental,” making Danto the lone “analytic” philosopher, albeit one whose philosophy of art is indebted to Hegel, who, along with Kant, is very much in the background of Heidegger’s, Adorno’s, and even Derrida’s aesthetics. So, despite their different placements on the current philosophical map, all four philosophers have the German Idealist tradition of aesthetics in common. The inclusion of Danto also makes it clear here that iconoclasm is not just a “continental” problem, and that the problem persists from the beginning of the twentieth century up to the present.
Derrida) is explicitly iconoclastic, there is enough iconoclasm embedded in their respective conceptions of art to make them provocative subjects. If they seem to be unlikely suspects because they are so engaged with the arts (see below), just imagine how entrenched iconoclasm is in the work of other contemporary aestheticians, if these four are indeed iconoclasts, since the others are mostly not so engaged. Of course, these four philosophers have also much to contribute to aesthetics, especially in connection with our understanding of contemporary art, which is how I came to focus on their work (particularly that of Adorno and Danto). I think their contributions would be all that much stronger, however, if what I have identified as their iconoclasm were first exorcized from their work. But let me start by explaining what I mean by iconoclasm in philosophical aesthetics and how it is generated.

The iconoclasm the above four philosophers share is generated by their common tendency to conflate the philosophical interest in the universality of art\(^{15}\) – which is always expressed in terms of more particular interests such as truth, essence, definition, or meaning – with what constitutes art. That is, the universality that is said to make art philosophically significant is inscribed into the very conception of art; thereafter, art is understood principally in terms of this inscription and thus in terms of philosophy’s interest in universality. The problem this inscription causes is that art is conceived in terms of how it conforms to philosophical interests, and such conformity is, in turn, taken as evidence in support of the conception of art determined by these same interests – thereby confirming the conflation of philosophical interests with what constitutes art. The conception of art based on such a conflation may be formulated as an ontology of art (Heidegger), as a definition of art (Danto), or, more generally, as a theory of art (Adorno and Derrida, even if, as in Derrida’s case, art is regarded as a phenomenon that lacks a determinate ontology or definition).

Although this inscription of the philosophical interest in universality into the conception of art may seem innocent enough, since philosophy is after all a theoretical practice with interests distinct from those of art, it is not innocent if what begins as simply an artifact of philosophy – namely, a

\(^{14}\) Two of these four philosophers, Heidegger and Danto, insist that they do philosophy of art rather than aesthetics, while a third, Adorno, does aesthetic theory and a fourth, Derrida, does neither. Despite these qualifications, I will speak mainly about aesthetics throughout because all four philosophers developed their conceptions of art in relation, if also in outright opposition, to the tradition of philosophical aesthetics, so they remain very much part of this field.

\(^{15}\) As I have indicated already in the preface, I will speak – here and throughout the entire book – of the universality of art in a way that a universality–necessity nexus is intended, even if I mention only universality; that is, art is universal only as it is also necessary.
specific interest – is elevated to a constitutional condition of art. This elevation is problematic because it creates an unusual situation where a philosophical interest is combined with disinterest or, rather, where the effect of a philosophical interest in art is disinterest in art. For once the philosophers are satisfied that their interest has been reflected in (the conception of) art, their attention is then directed away from art toward that interest, making it clear that art was never the real issue. For example, after Heidegger argues that the essence of art is to disclose truth, he does not then ask “What is art such that it discloses truth?” but rather “What is truth such that it is disclosed in art?” And once he asks this second question, he is disinterested in art except to clarify its role in the disclosure of truth. Some might respond that even this disinterest is not problematic, on the assumption that it is reasonable for philosophy to focus its efforts on the universality of art since, after all, philosophy’s medium is typically thought to be the universal concept. But even if this focus is understandable, there is still a problem with philosophy’s disinterest in art, because it entails an abstraction of art from history (both art’s history and general history) in an effort to isolate the philosophical interest in universality and to ensure its realization. For example, Danto defends an account of the universal essence of art and, in doing so, he argues that this essence is not contradicted by the vicissitudes of the history in which even he recognizes art must realize its essence. This does not mean that he ignores history; on the contrary, he takes it very seriously, but principally in order to render it philosophically irrelevant and harmless relative to the realization of the reigning philosophical interest in art’s essence. But insofar as it turns out, as I argue, that art is and remains inseparable from history, then disinterest in the historical particularity of art is tantamount to disinterest in art itself – hence iconoclasm.

The term disinterest evokes the philosophical notion of disinterestedness, the locus classicus for which is Kant’s Critique of Judgment, where disinterestedness is achieved when we abstract or distance ourselves from any interest in the existence of an artwork in order to make a judgment of it that can command universal assent.16 As such, disinterestedness is a condition for

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16 Disinterestedness is traditionally synonymous with impartiality, especially in connection with judgments in legal, moral, and aesthetic contexts. At the same time, disinterestedness is also linked to universality in the sense that it is typically claimed that the impartiality of a judgment is a condition of its universality. In law, for example, disinterestedness means to be detached or abstracted from one’s subjective interests in order to reach an impartial and universal verdict in a judicial proceeding. In ethics, we are asked to abstract from any considerations (personal, consequential, and the like) that are not directly tied to the principles being used to judge the moral worth of an action so we might achieve an impartial and universal judgment about such worth. Finally, disinterestedness in aesthetics means to be impartial in either the experience or judgment of art; and, again, it is the
the universality (and necessity) of a pure aesthetic judgment of taste (since disinterestedness is the first of four “moments” of such judgments, with universality being the second and, moreover, since Kant claims that the second can be inferred from the first; necessity is the fourth moment). For Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida, and Danto, disinterestedness – or what I simply call disinterest – is achieved when they abstract art from the historical conditions that would prevent the universality/necessity they claim is embodied in it – everything from Being to truth to meaning – from being realized. Abstraction in these cases is as much the effect of the interest in universality as it is its condition, because it is the realization of that interest that requires the abstraction. There is therefore a conceptual web (at least in connection with art) linking universality, abstraction, and disinterest, such that once a philosopher takes up an interest in universality, he thereby becomes enmeshed in abstraction and disinterest. The disinterest involved in this web, whether a condition or an effect, is a disinterest in art (rather than just a lack of interest in everything other than universality) insofar as art is determined by the historical conditions from which it has been abstracted. That is, so long as art remains tied to the conditions of its historical particularity (or existence, in Kant’s narrow terms), to abstract from them is to abstract from art, and therefore to be disinterested in them is to be disinterested in art.¹⁷

The meaning of disinterest is always tied to that of interest, but the relationship between these terms here is not to be understood as one between two mutually exclusive contraries. If they are seen only in that contrary detachment or abstraction from interests derived from practices other than autonomous art which is said to make one impartial and one’s judgment universal. What all three modes of disinterest have in common, therefore, is an act of abstraction from certain interests in favor of others in an effort to achieve impartiality, which itself a means to achieve universality. My focus here is on the interest in universality and abstraction that underlie disinterestedness rather than on the impartiality that might be achieved once disinterestedness has been attained. In a word, I am concerned about the costs of such universality relative to the historical conditions determining art from which Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida, and Danto abstract art in order to realize their universal interest in art.

¹⁷ To be sure, Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida, and Danto all claim that the universality in which they are interested is embodied in historically particular artworks, suggesting that their interest in universality (and even in the abstraction of art from history that it requires) is compatible with art’s historical particularity after all. But, as we shall see, their notions of embodiment are theoretically in conflict with their interest in universality, in part because they all believe (indirectly following Kant) that universality implies necessity in the sense that whatever is universal is necessarily so and, therefore, that such universality is independent of history, the realm of the contingent. This conflict explains why they abstract art from its historical conditions of embodiment and thus end up with a disembodied universal, despite their efforts to avoid just such a result. Of course, there is also a sense in which history and necessity are compatible, namely, if history is considered to be the realm of necessity in contrast to morality as the realm of freedom. But this is not typically the contrast operative in aesthetics.
way, then we would have to acknowledge that, if somebody has an interest in art, he could not at the same time have a disinterest in it. But these terms can also be related in a more dialectical manner, where interest and disinterest are mutually determining rather than mutually exclusive. In Heidegger’s words: “The misinterpretation of ‘interest’ leads to the erroneous opinion that with the exclusion of interest every essential relation to the object is suppressed. The opposite is the case. Precisely by means of the ‘devoid of interest’ the essential relation to the object itself comes into play.”18 This is what happens in the iconoclasm of Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida, and Danto. Each has an active interest in art, which is evident in his respective philosophy of art and particularly in his art, literary, or music criticism. But, at the same time, he has a disinterest in art, or, to make the same point stronger as well as in the right order, it is because of the philosophical interest each has in art that he also has a disinterest in it; that is, the effect of such interest is disinterest in art.19 These philosophers display a disinterest in art in the sense that when they are actually interested in art, their primary interest is directed to the philosophical problem of universality, albeit as it is reflected in art, and away from the historical conditions constitutive of what art has become or what it does. This is not to say that interest and disinterest do not conflict; on the contrary, my aim is precisely to identify and analyze their conflict in order to make it clear that they are mutually determining rather than excluding each other.


19 The mutual determination of interest and disinterest helps to clarify why the term disinterest is more appropriate here than lack of interest (and disinterested more than uninterested) since disinterest preserves the relation to interest while lack of interest simply points to the absence or privation of interest. In addition, disinterest is tied to acts of abstraction (of art from history), so it is active rather than passive in the way a mere lack of interest is. Finally, whereas disinterest is traditionally thought to have considerable philosophical significance, since it is often regarded as the principal condition for the universal experience, judgment, or even definition of art, a lack of interest has no philosophical relevance. Nevertheless, I discuss disinterest in connection with lack of interest or, rather, I discuss the relationship between them and specifically how the first actually generates the second. For it turns out that the philosopher who is disinterested in art (particularly its historicity) is also lacking interest in it, not because of the absence of all interest but because of the priority given to philosophical interests over the historical conditions from which he has abstracted art.

Since the philosophical interests I have in mind are explicitly stated by the four philosophers involved, there is no need for me to engage in any uncovering of their masked interests. That is, my critique of the disinterest in art displayed by these philosophers is not of the type developed by Pierre Bourdieu – Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) – who argues that philosophers who claim to be disinterested when they discuss art are masking their distinctive social class or gender (historically, male) interests. So I am not saying (nor need I deny) that these four philosophers are really interested (in Bourdieu’s sense) when they are disinterested (in my sense). What I provide instead is an analysis of the implications of each philosopher’s explicit (unmasked) interests for the conception of art.
Iconoclasm in Aesthetics

Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida, and Danto are disinterested in art, though that is not how they start out when they develop their respective philosophies of art. Rather, they begin by analyzing art, often in some detail, but then they abstract art from history in the pursuit of the philosophical interest in universality. As a result, they end up being disinterested in art. So my claim is not that any of these philosophers pursues or values disinterestedness in itself, especially since each of them is critical of Kant, but they do engage in abstraction from history because of what they believe such abstraction affords them philosophically, namely, the possibility of the realization of their interest in universality. To start with the example of Heidegger, all conditions linked to human subjectivity – especially those involving the ontic history of the production of art and the concepts developed by aesthetics to understand the objects of such production – are said to obscure the universal essence or origin of art, namely, truth. Abstraction from such conditions and thus from ontic history, which is symbolized by Heidegger’s insistence that the ownership of the shoes depicted in the van Gogh painting is philosophically irrelevant and which is achieved through poetic-philosophical reflection, is required before the origin of art can reveal itself. In Adorno’s case, the content of art is separated (or abstracted) from art’s semblance character (namely, its status as a sensuous illusion) in order to open up the possibility that universal truth might be manifested in (even as) the content of art. In order for such truth content to be universal, however, it has to be abstracted from art’s historical particularity, that is, from what Adorno himself identifies as art’s very own “character.” In a word, art’s universality is again in conflict with its particularity. For his part, Derrida is principally interested in arguing that the philosophical conceptions of art that Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and others have espoused only obscure the truth that there is no determinate truth in art. But although Derrida challenges the interest in universality prevalent in the history of aesthetics, he continues to espouse the iconoclastic conception of art based on the interest in universality he appears to reject; this espousal is all too evident in his emphatic claim that art is constitutionally “powerless.” So he, too, is an iconoclast after all. Finally, Danto abstracts art from its historicity in order to isolate its essence. While he has an admirably subtle account of this process, arguing