ICONOCLASM IN AESTHETICS

Contemporary theorizing about art is dominated by a clash between two approaches: philosophers have characteristically taken the view that art is a vehicle of some universal meaning or truth, while art historians, and others working in the humanities, emphasize the concrete nature and historical particularity of the work of art. Is aesthetics capable of sustaining these two approaches? Or, as Kelly argues, is art rather determined by its historical particularity? If so, then if philosophers continue to pursue mainly the universality of art, they inadvertently end up exhibiting a disinterest in and distrust of art. Kelly calls such disinterest and distrust “iconoclasm,” and in this book he discusses four philosophers – Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida, and Danto – who are ultimately iconoclasts despite their deep philosophical engagement with the arts. He concludes by suggesting ways in which iconoclasm in aesthetics can be avoided in the future.

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ICONOCLASM IN AESTHETICS

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To my daughter Sonia, whose arrival on May 5, 2000 delayed the writing of this book but whose presence every day since has inspired its completion.

I finished the first draft of this book in the early morning hours of September 11, 2001. Because I was up much of the previous night, I got up late that fateful morning and was still at home when the World Trade Center towers collapsed just 350 yards from our apartment. I might wish I had not been there, except that, had I not been, my daughter would have been at the farmer’s market located in between the twin towers, where she had been going every Tuesday morning all summer long. So once again this book and my daughter are intertwined in ways that are full of life. And for this I thank her.
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8 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled 261* (1992), reproduced by permission of Metro Pictures, New York  

Preface

The history of iconoclasm... continues to accompany that of art like a shadow, bearing witness to its substance and weight.

Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*, p. 336

Contemporary aesthetics is infamous for being doubted by some of its practitioners as much as by its detractors. I experienced the depth of the doubt in and about aesthetics quite dramatically for six years as I was editing the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Oxford, 1998). Several dozen people invited to contribute called to ask me why they had been invited. One person even said quite angrily that he had devoted most of his professional life to the overthrow of aesthetics and now I was asking him to write for an encyclopedia on the subject! What struck me as philosophically interesting about these otherwise discouraging experiences is that these people did not just ignore my letters of invitation; rather, they seemed compelled to decline the invitation verbally and resolutely. It was as if the callers were worried that I would simply imagine that my letters had been benignly overlooked if they did not call, thereby leaving aesthetics unquestioned. Their phone calls made it clear, to themselves as much as to me, that theirs was not a passive resistance to aesthetics but rather an active, even public disavowal. But I wondered why they needed to register this disavowal and what exactly they were disavowing.

After the first few calls, I collected myself and responded by asking two questions: “What is it that you don’t do when you don’t do aesthetics?” and “What is it that you do do when you don’t do aesthetics?” In answer to the first question, most people described aesthetics as being traditionally based on ahistorical beliefs in universal truths about art that is regarded as autonomous from other practices and interests (such as politics, religion, ethics, and even history). And in response to the second question, they described a variety of strategies for understanding art in connection with these same other practices and interests. While answering my questions in
these ways, however, the callers also revealed their relative lack of appreciation of the fact that the history of aesthetics contains many critiques of the autonomy and universality of art. At the same time, when these callers clarified what it was they did when they studied the arts, many of them raised questions about the role of historical subjectivity (identity, gender, the body, race, and the like) in any account of the production, experience, or interpretation of art; and they imagined that the overcoming of aesthetics was a necessary preliminary step for addressing these issues. They seemed unaware of the fact, however, that some philosophical attempts to overcome aesthetics originally began as critiques of the very “subjectivization” of aesthetics these critics were now advocating. In the end, the callers’ lack of recognition of the history of aesthetics serendipitously strengthened the rationale for the encyclopedia once again by making it evident that there was a need to clarify this history.

When these potential contributors asked me in turn what I meant by aesthetics, I did not receive much favorable response until one time I answered that aesthetics is critical reflection on art, culture, and nature. I settled on this expression as the most appropriate way to characterize aesthetics across the many disciplines in which it is practiced today – albeit often under other names, such as art history/theory, literary theory, cultural studies, comparative literature, and the like – because it captures the philosophical dimension of aesthetics without reducing it to philosophy. All of a sudden I began hearing sighs of relief and signs of recognition from the callers. They responded to this characterization of aesthetics as if it were natural and obvious, that is, as if it reflected what they were already doing.

In thinking about these skeptical experiences after the encyclopedia was published, I realized that the doubt both about and within aesthetics was more complicated than I fully appreciated at the time. For although there are many alternatives in the history of aesthetics to the kind of aesthetics the callers were disavowing, it is also true that some of the leading figures in contemporary philosophical aesthetics espouse views that promote, though often in indirect ways, the aesthetics being questioned. At the same time, philosophers today often ignore the work in aesthetics being done by individuals in other fields. This only perpetuates the kind of aesthetics that the callers rejected because aestheticians working in isolation are more likely to pursue the philosophical interest in autonomous, ahistorical, universal art than those who interact with aestheticians in other fields that are generally more historical and interdisciplinary. So I decided to explore ways to address these issues, namely, the universalist mode of aesthetics.
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and the relative isolation of philosophers from other theorists engaged in aesthetics.

I discovered that two of the things many contemporary critiques of aesthetics have in common is (1) a rejection of the alleged universality of art, at least where universality implies necessity, and, as a corollary of this first point, (2) a critique of the alleged ahistorical nature of art. (In order to qualify and clarify the sense of universality used by the philosophers I discuss, I will speak – here and throughout the entire book – of the universality of art in the sense that art is considered universal only if it is also necessary; this universality–necessity nexus is always intended, even if only universality is mentioned.) So the natural way to respond to these critiques was to examine the question of art’s historicity in relation to any claims about its universality. To do this, I selected four philosophers of art – Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida, and Arthur C. Danto – who have made claims about art’s universality yet for whom the historicity of art is also a serious philosophical concern. My initial goal was to see whether these philosophers (as representatives of modern and contemporary, analytic and continental aesthetic theory) really hold the universal and ahistorical views of art that critics have asserted all aestheticicians hold, as if it were a professional obligation or perhaps a curse. What I found is that there is indeed a conceptual tension between universality (a philosophical interest) and historicity (a fact about art) immanent in the work of these four philosophers and, moreover, that universality eventually wins out in all of them. I began to worry that the critics of aesthetics were right after all.

This worry led me to analyze the aesthetic theories of Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida, and Danto in more depth with the hope of understanding how the conceptual tension between universality and historicity arises and why it is resolved in favor of universality. What I discovered is that this tension is itself symptomatic of an even deeper problem in their aesthetic theories, namely, iconoclasm, by which I mean a combination of disinterest and distrust in art that stems from a tendency to inscribe a deficiency into the very conception (or ontology) of art. Iconoclasm of this form is not the starting point of each philosopher’s theoretical relationship to the arts, as if he adopted iconoclasm to keep them at bay because of either a simple lack of interest or a basic distrust (in fact, each of these four philosophers has been deeply involved in the arts). Rather, iconoclasm here is the effect of each philosopher’s conception of art because of the deficiency each has inscribed into it, whether the deficiency concerns art’s inability to grasp truth (Heidegger and Adorno) or to “see” its transcendental conditions
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(Derrida) or to define itself (Danto). This inscription is, in turn, coupled with an interest in art’s universality, which is typically pursued through more specific interests such as truth, essence, definition, meaning, and the like. In addition, the very interests that draw philosophers’ attention to art to begin with are also ones which, in order to be realized, seem to require the abstraction of art from its historical particularity. Thus, an inscription of a deficiency into the conception of art underwrites the philosophers’ interests, which then motivate them to abstract art from history. Together, such inscription, interests, and abstraction generate iconoclasm within aesthetics, so they are now the focus of my own critique of contemporary philosophical aesthetics. For in a word, to conceive of art as deficient and then to show disinterest or distrust in art’s historicity in favor of an interest in its universality is to show a disinterest and distrust in art itself.

The iconoclasm in the work of Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida, and Danto is not just a problem for philosophers, since these four thinkers have had considerable influence outside aesthetics in, for example, art history, music theory, literary theory, cultural studies, visual studies, and so on. So their iconoclasm echoes throughout the writings of any contemporary art theorist or practitioner (critic, curator, or the like) influenced, directly or indirectly, by their work. To stop iconoclasm and its widespread repercussions, I think aestheticians need to reconsider their basic conceptions of art, along with their prevailing interest in universality (especially as it is linked to necessity), and, to do all this, they need to establish working relationships with theorists who do not regard art as fundamentally deficient and who find innovative ways of integrating the historicity of art into the philosophical conception of it. For we cannot understand art fully, if at all, if we consider it deficient and then abstract it from the historical conditions determining the process through which, in a Nietzschean spirit, it becomes what it is or, in a more pragmatic vein, it achieves its effects.

My ultimate aim here is constructive as well as critical. For in addition to critiquing the iconoclasm in Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida, and Danto, I hope to contribute to the enrichment of aesthetics by finding ways to link it substantively and methodologically with other fields related to the arts. The exposure of iconoclasm within philosophical aesthetics will make the need for such links apparent and urgent, and the establishment of such links will help to overcome iconoclasm by providing alternatives to the philosophical conceptions of art which generate it. This appeal to theoretical alternatives is crucial to make it clear that I am not appealing here to
some pre- or nonphilosophical understanding of art, that is, to the idea that we might experience art without any mediation by philosophy. Rather, the fundamental issue is what kind of philosophy mediates our relationship to art. Once this issue has been resolved, perhaps we can begin to practice aesthetics without excessive self-doubt. And if we can do that, we can begin to do justice to the “substance and weight” of art that iconoclasm (of all forms) has overshadowed for too long.
Acknowledgments

Since this book was written over several years, there are many people, beginning with the editors and contributors of the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* and several copanelists at annual meetings of the American Society for Aesthetics, who stimulated its formation, even if they were unaware of doing so. So there are simply too many people to thank here. But there are a few people I do want to mention because, by engaging and challenging my idea of iconoclasm, they motivated me to clarify it. To these individuals and friends – Edward Dimendberg, Lydia Goehr, Gregg Horowitz, and Daniel Herwitz – I owe a special thanks, though I may not have succeeded in responding to their comments and criticism in ways they might imagine I should.

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And, finally, I want to thank Annabel Manning, my wife, who witnessed the growth of this manuscript from an idea to a book and who reminded me daily by her own art-making of what I am trying to get at – a philosophical conception of art which gives art is due, a conception which, though mediated by philosophical interests, does not allow those interests to obscure the very art we strive to understand.