INTRODUCTION

The Twentieth Century: The Era of Nonart

Twentieth-century art began in an atmosphere of euphoria, for here were the founders of Modernism creating the greatest revolution in the history of art. However, the great tumult that accompanied artistic activity for more than half the century died out at the end of the seventies, and at the end of the century it waned to an empty silence and the realization that the revolution, if there had been one, had led nowhere.

The new art, if it is art, is at a complete dead end; and the artists, if they are artists, seem more like puppets in the hands of art dealers and the art establishment. The question that arises is this: Did the artists of the twentieth century really create a revolution in art, as they claim, or is the putative revolution merely illusion and presumption?

Revolution in any domain is a state in which an old order is abolished and a new order established in its place. It is the nature of revolutions that the new order is in most cases so radically different from the old as to be incompatible with it, and any revolutionary change is therefore at times quite traumatic. The following are cases of genuine revolutions: The passage from Aristotelian physics to Galilean physics at the beginning of the seventeenth century marked the most important revolution hitherto in the history of scientific thinking and marked the birth of modern science. In philosophy, the passage from Lockean to Kantian epistemology led to a complete revolution in our understanding of the relation between mind and reality. In the social and political world, the French revolution of 1789 and the Russian revolution of 1917 abolished regimes and replaced them with utterly different regimes that had far-reaching implications, for better and for worse, regarding all areas of life in those countries and far beyond them.

In comparison with these examples, the rise of Impressionism in the nineteenth century was not a revolution in art inasmuch as this artistic movement did not establish a new order in place of the old and did not call for the abrogation of figurative art. Rather the contrary: It proposed a way of saving figurative art from the stalemate

that academicism had forced on it. That is, the Impressionists felt and understood that academicism imposed overly strict limitations on creativity in figurative art, and they proposed vital changes to make it more open-ended. At the same time, academicism continued to exist alongside Impressionism, and thanks to the changes that this movement brought to figurative art, it was given a new lease on life and experienced one of its most glorious periods.

On the other hand, the slackening of the rules that the Impressionists initiated in the second half of the nineteenth century acted upon art as in the "butterfly effect," leading the art of the twentieth century into a state of chaos. This was inevitable, for they and those who followed them only abolished more and more of the constraints of figurative art without creating new ones in their place, thereby thoroughly destroying the figurative order. Thus Modernism became a process of recursive deconstructionism in which each generation continued to fragment what its predecessors had not dismantled, until there was nothing more to dismantle, and finally arrived at nihilism and a dead end.

However, when the existing order is abolished in any domain without the proposal of an alternative order, the inevitable result is anarchy or even the loss of the domain itself. This is true of nations and also of areas of culture, including art. Modernism is merely a pseudo-revolution. It is precisely a case in which the old order has been destroyed without a new order being set up in its place, and for this reason art is in a state of utter diffusion.

Revolutions are nourished chiefly by dissatisfaction with the existing situation, a critical attitude, skepticism, idealism, and revolt against the existing state of affairs, with a readiness to sacrifice much for the sake of a yearned-for vision. Above all, the most important condition for the success of a revolution in any sphere is the existence of a new and exciting vision, the realization of which is likely to create a better situation; it is a vision that can motivate highly committed people to alter the existing situation and to persuade others to accept a new situation. Indeed, the founders of Modernism possessed almost all the requisite qualities for the creation of a revolution in art: Among many artists there was dissatisfaction and weariness with figurative art. There was skepticism regarding the old, and a strong craving for renewal; there was a yearning for an art of a different and higher level. But the essential thing was missing: a sufficiently effective vision that could replace figurative art.

It is true that some artists, particularly Mondrian, had an intuition of genius: a high and true ideal regarding what the new art should be (Elgar 1968); but their understanding of the new ideal was on the intuitive level alone, and that was not enough. True, they did not use the term "paradigm," but that is precisely what they were seeking; they were not searching for another new artistic style in figurative art, but rather for a new *art* or a *paradigm* for a new art. They wished to establish an art of a more abstract type. This art would no longer be concerned with the representation

of the phenomenal world but rather with deep and universal noumenal strata of human thought and experience.

But in practice, they did not have the shadow of a notion how to realize this grand ideal, because in their time the knowledge and understanding of cultural processes did not exist that could have enabled them to build a truly alternative paradigm to figurative art. The history of the art of the twentieth century proves that Modernism succeeded in dismantling figurative art, which had been the sole paradigm of art for some forty thousand years and served as the common basis for the creation of countless artists over place and time. But as in every other sphere of life, it is much easier to destroy than to build, and in fact all that Modernism succeeded in creating in place of figurative art was a chaotic fragmentation of art – a ragbag of styles and whims with no meaningful common denominator among them at all, something that brought art near to extinction. It should, then, be stressed that this book is not intended to dismiss one or the other art movement in the twentieth century. Instead, I intend to show that Modernism did not create any new art but is rather only the debris of the old one.

The fragmentation created by Modernism led art into a formidable dilemma: On the one hand art has reached an absolute dead end and appears to have nowhere to go, whereas on the other hand it cannot ignore everything done in the twentieth century and return to figurative art as though nothing had happened. For this reason it is not surprising that in the world of art there are indications of two central and opposed conclusions. One of these views maintains that the dead end in which art is found today is not a temporary situation but is the end of art, whereas the other maintains that a return must be made to figurative art. These two conclusions have similar drawbacks: One is too pessimistic, and the other is too optimistic. As the result of a temporary blindness, the first one has renounced too quickly the possibility of a true renewal of art in the form of a new paradigm for art. The other conclusion is too naive because it supposes that it is possible to play back cultural processes as if they were a film.

However, this difficult dilemma is not necessarily insoluble, and as with every dilemma the solution is normally to pass between its two horns. Between the death of art and its resurrection there lies a third possibility: a deliberate search for the future paradigm of art. This pursuit is possible if we achieve a much deeper understanding of the cultural processes of the most distant past and up to this day and, by extrapolation of the characteristics of these processes, try to understand the characteristics that must be present in the *next* paradigm of art. But at this point it is still too early to deal with this question, and the immediate problem is to create and consolidate the recognition that art is indeed caught in this dilemma because without such an understanding no one will have the motivation to look for any other solution. We do not take a medicine unless we are convinced that we are sick, nor will we take the medicine if we do not believe that it can improve our condition. Today, art is a

mortally sick patient who does not yet understand that he is mortally sick. As we shall see in what follows, the main reason for this situation is that art is treated mostly by quacks whose existence depends on art being sick, and they therefore have a clear vested interest in its remaining so.

It should be emphasized, then, that this book does not reject Modernism in order to recommend a new current that will replace its predecessors, and it certainly is not intended to preach or justify a return to figurative art. Rather, it points out the need for a recognition of the fact that art is indeed in the first paradigmatic crisis of its history, and there is an urgent need for the initiation of a fundamental and serious search for a new paradigm for art. In the following pages of this introduction I shall outline the general structure and strategy of this book, in the hope that this will make easier for the reader to read and understand the chapters that follow.

The Structure of This Book

This book is constructed in two parts, differing in character and aim. Part One comprises the first four chapters, which together are intended to strengthen or create a skepticism in the reader regarding the assumption that modern art created a new art. This part is written in quite simple language; it requires little previous knowledge of art and philosophy, and common sense alone is sufficient for its understanding.

Part Two comprises the remaining four chapters and is intended to explain *why* Modernism is not art. This matter is immeasurably more complex than merely pointing out the defects of Modernism, and it is therefore in the nature of the subject that this part is more difficult than the first. Nevertheless, here too philosophical and artistic backgrounds are not essential, and if the reader is accustomed to conceptual thinking in some field or other and also has the motivation and curiosity to understand why Modernism is not art, this will suffice for understanding the ideas presented in these chapters.

In the first part, Chapter One attempts to show that the boundless pluralism of Modernism merely camouflages the fact that art is in the throes of the first paradigmatic crisis of its history. But, because it is the first such crisis in art, most historians and theoreticians in this field have not identified the situation as a paradigmatic crisis. Furthermore, those parts of the art market and the art establishment that live on Modernism have done everything to construct for Modernism the image of a normal art. But, as in life, all of the people cannot be fooled all of the time, and today there are enough symptoms of the paradigmatic crisis that it can no longer be concealed. In an age when art has no paradigm, it is only natural that different artists should have reduced art to one aspect or another of it.

Thus art has been reduced to aesthetics or to the world of perceptual things, as though we were to reduce language to the sounds and intonations it uses. The most

destructive and dangerous consequence of this paradigmatic crisis for art is that for the first time in the history of art the demarcation lines between art and nonart have been obliterated. From now on, any thing – including nothing – can be displayed as a work of art. The logical significance of this fact is that there is no longer any meaningful difference between the class of entities that belong to art and those that do not belong to it, and there is therefore no art.

Chapter Two shows how Modernism is based mainly on an intensive use of the most common logical fallacy in nature: among human beings, all levels of animal life, and insects and plants as well. In logic, this fallacy is called the *fallacy of affirming the consequent*, and its meaning in the context of Modernism is that all the innovations proposed in art during the twentieth century were merely *reductions* of figurative art to one of its aspects. True, this reductionism preserved the basic raw materials from which works of art have been produced in all times – namely, color and form. However, as we shall see throughout this book, the supposedly new art lost all the other attributes that made figurative art one of the main branches of culture throughout thousands of years. Moreover, no reduction, nor all reductions together, actually created an alternative art to figurative art.

An example from another domain, also organismic like figurative art, may clarify the problem. A bull is not a head, a tail, a certain number of legs, horns, and so on; nor is it all of these heaped together at the slaughterhouse. That is because a bull is not merely the collection of limbs nor the cells of which it is composed; rather its most important aspect is their *organization*, the chief attribute of which is systemic structure or deep embedding. Organized in a certain way, its components create a splendid animal; organized differently, they are meat in a supermarket; organized differently again, they are a corpse preserved and displayed as a work of art in a museum run by ignoramuses. When the original organization is destroyed, the systemic structure disappears, and then the constituent parts of a fine animal return to ashes: unconnected chemical elements.

Similarly, when Modernism eliminated systemic structure from painting, it remained with only unconnected aesthetic elements, and this is the main characteristic of all the works of Modernism. Chapter Three will attempt to show that abstract art, which is perhaps the main and most important innovation of Modernism, is not abstract in any sense of that term, and real abstraction is present only in figurative art. Because the innumerable supposedly abstract works produced in the twentieth century are not representational and also not genuinely abstract, they are thus no different from any mundane perceptual object, and there is therefore room for doubt as to whether "abstract art" is art at all.

Chapter Four is concerned with the criticism of two views in the aesthetics of the twentieth century, views that are in my opinion of particularly great harm to art. One view, the quintessential representative of which is Morris Weitz, maintains

that it is not possible to define the essential attributes of art, and that in fact it is not possible to define art at all. The second view, which also denies the possibility of a definition of art on the basis of its attributes, is known by the name of the Institutional Theory of the Definition of Art. This view proposes a behavioristic-operational definition for art, and its quintessential representatives are Arthur Danto and George Dickie. Despite the difference between these two views, they have an important common denominator: They both lead in the end to an extreme relativism that can make it possible to exhibit *any thing* as art. These views match the era of nonart very well and serve the interests of art dealers and other parties to the art establishment, who live on Modernism but are destructive of art itself. For this reason, as part of the stocktaking that art must undergo, it should also shake off the theories that not only are of no use to art but also undermine its existence.

At this stage a number of basic aspects of the general strategy of this book should be noted. The main aim of the book is to show that everything produced within the framework of art in the twentieth century – any work that is not some variant of figurative art – is not art. This is to say that *all works belonging to any stream of nonrepresentational art are not works of art or, more simply, are nonart*. Here two points should be emphasized: First, the book does not reject nonrepresentational art on grounds of value because it is bad art; rather, the rejection is on structural grounds. The argument is that it is not art because the attributes are not present in it that make something a work of art.

Second, the rejection of Modernism is not the main aim of this book, but rather it is merely a necessary stage on the path to an immeasurably more important target: the attempt to generate awareness of the fact that the founders of Modernism indeed dismantled figurative art as a paradigm of art but that neither they nor their successors constructed a new paradigm in its place. The result is that art steers its course like a ship of fools, with neither maps nor compass, neither rudder nor motor; and this vessel is deflected aimlessly by whatever wind and currents are encountered.

The uppermost purpose of the book is, then, to generate the awareness essential for the initiation of a serious search for a new paradigm for art without which art will remain at a dead end as it is today; and furthermore there will be no possibility of the flowering of a genuine new art in the future. If all the nonrepresentational works produced in the twentieth century are by that reason nonart, a legitimate question may be raised: Inasmuch as many works produced in the twentieth century border on the figurative, what is the limit at which a work ceases to be figurative? The answer to this is simple: Readability is the limit of the figurative. As long as it is somehow possible to read a picture or a sculpture, it is figurative, but at a certain limit a picture is no longer readable, whereupon it no longer belongs to figurative art but passes into the category of nonart.

It must be stressed that the readability of a picture says nothing about its *quality* as a picture but only the simple fact that it either belongs or does not belong to the category of figurative art. Thus, for example, in the series of pictures of a tree that Mondrian painted at the beginning of the century, it is possible to follow the process at the beginning of which it is easy to read that the picture indicates a tree. However, gradually the pictures of the tree become more schematic and less readable until at a certain stage the picture displays a grid of horizontal and vertical lines. Because of a lack of understanding of abstraction, Mondrian thought that such a grid was a further abstraction of a figurative image for the tree (Elgar 1968). But in fact at this stage the picture is no longer readable as a picture of a tree in any sense, but rather is a reduction of the representation of a tree to a geometrical pattern. The picture thus becomes a geometrical diagram, or a graphic design, but not a work of art. Similarly, most of Picasso's cubist pictures are readable to one degree or another, and as such they mark the limit of readability of figurative art; they therefore belong, albeit at a pinch, to figurative art. But when a cubist composition is no longer readable it is no longer art, and it passes at best into the domain of graphic design or is a meaningless conglomeration of aesthetic elements, and in both cases it is nonart.

At this point the reader may rightly argue that this is an entirely arbitrary and even annoying declaration of the boundaries of art; and one may also ask *why* figurative painting is art and every composition of color and shape that is nonrepresentational is nonart. The reader is perfectly right, and the answer will be given in the second part of the book, beginning in Chapter Five.

The very argument that something is not art requires that there be some other thing that is a work of art, to which we can compare the thing that we say is not art. Let us consider a simpler example: If we say of a red stone of a certain size that it is not an apple, this requires that there should be some other thing that is an apple, to which the red stone can be compared. We prove that the stone is not an apple by comparing the attributes of the two things and by showing that none of the attributes of the apple are present in the stone except that the stone is of a similar color. But the red color is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for something to be an apple, and therefore the stone is not an apple. Following the same logic, we can show that something is not a work of art by comparing it with something about which we can have no doubt that it is a work of art, and by great good fortune we have in fact such a thing. Because figurative art is the class of entities in relation to which the category "works of art" has been constructed for thousands of years, it is thus impossible to cast doubt on the fact that figurative art is art.

The strategy adopted in this book is to show that in nonrepresentational art (this is only with regard to painting and sculpture), there are none of those attributes that appear in figurative art other than the trivial fact that these works too contain colors and shapes. However, color and shape are only a necessary condition, but not

a sufficient condition, for some thing to be a work of art; and it is a fact that colors and shapes are found in every natural or human-made object. The great question is, of course, What are the most essential attributes of figurative art without which it is not art, and without which no other art is possible that is not figurative? The answer to this crucial question is given in Chapter Five, which is the first chapter of Part Two of the book.

Part Two includes Chapters Five to Eight, along with the Appendix, which presents a table that summarizes the many oppositions between figurative art and nonrepresentational art. This part of the book is intended to show why all products of Modernism that are not derivations of figurative art are not art at all. It has already been noted that the central problem of modern art is that there are no longer demarcation lines or criteria for distinguishing between art and nonart and that therefore the very existence of art as a branch of culture is in great danger. On the face of it, one might have expected that the history of aesthetics would have provided such a system of criteria long ago, but actually all the solutions proposed to this question, from Plato to the present day, are partial or reductionist at best, and marginal or irrelevant at worst. The main innovation of this book is perhaps the attempt to delineate a new path to the solution of the problem of demarcation between art and nonart and thereby also to explain why nonrepresentational painting and sculpture are not art at all.

The main idea of the proposed solution is to anchor the nature of art in the nature of mind. I shall thus try to show that the most basic attributes of art are also those imprinted by the mind in all areas of culture, and for this reason I have called these attributes "mindprints." Mindprints are a priori attributes that are common to all branches of culture by virtue of the fact that all of them are products of the same mind or the same intelligence. In other words, mindprints are epistemological and ontological oxymorons: metastructures of the complementarity of mind and reality. The search so far has revealed ten of them: Connectivity–Disconnectivity, Open-Endedness–Closed-Endedness, Recursiveness–Singularity, Transformation–Invariance, Hierarchy–Randomness, Symmetry–Asymmetry, Negation–Affirmation, Complementarity–Mutual Exclusiveness, Comparison–Imparison, and Determinism–Indeterminism.

It is clear that in every domain these attributes are manifested by different means and at different levels of abstraction and generalization. According to this conception, figurative art has for forty thousand years been the means of objectivization of the fundamental attributes of the mind by means of aesthetic elements; all other areas of culture are different objectivizations of these attributes of the mind, working through different symbol systems and other means. If the idea of mindprints stands up to critical examination it can provide, on the one hand, an Archimedean fulcrum that will enable the establishment of new lines of demarcation between art and nonart and that will be the first stage in the rehabilitation of art itself, which today is a wilderness.

On the other hand, if the mindprints are common to all branches of culture, as is proposed here, it may be that this concept can serve as the structural basis for a coherent transdisciplinary approach to culture. Such an approach is also likely to abolish or at least to greatly reduce the alienation, the hostility, and the mutual suspicion that reigns today between the "two cultures" and especially between art and science.

At the same time, for me the chief importance of the idea of mindprints is first and foremost to provide efficient tools for the rejection of Modernism as art, and on the other hand to provide guidelines in the search for a new paradigm for future art. Chapter Five is devoted to the presentation of the idea of mindprints. In this chapter all mindprints are discussed schematically except Connectivity–Disconnectivity, which is reviewed in more detail because it seems to be the most fundamental of all. This mindprint is used to illustrate how mindprints can differentiate between art and nonart by showing very clearly the vast difference between figurative art and abstract art with regard to their levels of connectivity.

Chapters Six and Eight show, respectively, how mindprints such as Hierarchy–Randomness and Symmetry–Asymmetry are at the foundation of figurative art but do not exist in abstract art. Actually, Hierarchy–Randomness (antihierarchy) is sufficient to distinguish between art and nonart because, as we shall see, this mindprint includes to a great extent all the other mindprints, and it was therefore not necessary to devote a special chapter to each of them. If mindprints are indeed the attributes that characterize the domains of culture in general and figurative art in particular, and if these attributes are not present in Modernism, then Modernism not only is nonart but also is antiart, as many of its originators declared, and from this very fact it is also anticultural. Because culture is the main substance of humankind, Modernism is antihuman.

Chapter Seven is devoted to a fundamental refutation of the conventionalist approach of Nelson Goodman (1968), according to which the symbols of figurative art are arbitrary and merely conventions. It was important to refute this theory because it was actually the last alibi of nonart, and its refutation plucks away the last straw that it could have clutched for the justification of its existence.

The book concludes with an Appendix containing a summary table that compares figurative art with abstract art with regard to dozens of attributes, only some of which are discussed in detail in the book. The reader would perhaps do well, after reading this introduction, to peruse this table before beginning to read the other chapters, so as to create a general map of the book prior to an ordered reading of its chapters, some of which are perhaps not easy.

A Word about Art Criticism

Obviously this book has been preceded by not a few essays criticizing Modernism at different levels and from different points of view, throwing doubt on its legitimacy as

art or even rejecting it entirely, such as Appleyard (1984), Belting (1987), Field (1970), Fuller (1982), Gablik (1984), Habermas (1985), Kuspit (1993, 1994), Lang (1984), Morgan (1998), Richter (1965), Ripley (1969), Ross (1998), Wolfe (1975), and others. The great importance of these essays lies mainly in that they create in the public at least a certain measure of awareness of the possibility that something basic is not right with Modernism. They give legitimacy to the natural and justified skepticism of most people that Modernism clashes with their basic values and stands in contradiction to their intuitions, to their common sense, and to their understanding in other domains. On the other hand, this criticism has no influence at all on the conduct of affairs in art itself, for three reasons.

First, none of the critics gives a convincing explanation of *why* Modernism failed or why the criticized products of Modernism are not art. Most of their criticism addresses the shallowness, simplicity, charlatanism, barrenness, falsity, and the enormous pretentiousness of the Modernist artists and their works, their decadence and narcissism, and so on. But all criticism of this kind, however correct and relevant it may be, contains nothing to justify the rejection of Modernism *as art.* Furthermore, the great part of this criticism attempts to refute the false and immeasurably inflated myth of the personality of the avant-garde artist, an aim that is not necessarily relevant to the question of whether or not their works are art. Another part of the criticism touches on negative but nonessential attributes of the works themselves; but the criticism does not touch on attributes that might establish whether these are works of art at all. Before we criticize something – whether it is appetizing or not, nourishing or not – we must be sure that the thing is food at all. Modernism thrived and succeeded in surviving precisely because on the one hand it completely erased all demarcation lines between art and nonart, and on the other hand the theoreticians have not succeeded in redrawing them. Thus a state of doubt and uncertainty was created that was thoroughly exploited by the artists and dealers in order to exhibit everything as a work of art. Criticism is trapped in a situation in which it is concerned with interpretations of these works and with a value or aesthetic judgment of them, positive or negative, without addressing the basic and most important question: Are these works of art at all? What is unique in the criticism put forward in this book is precisely that it will try to show why Modernism is not art at all. If the analysis proves convincingly that Modernism created no art, then all discussion and criticism regarding the quality of its products is manifestly superfluous.

Second, it appears that one of the reasons that the criticism of Modernism has no real effect on the state of affairs in art itself is that all the critics have fallen into the trap of a semantic paradox: On the one hand they reject to one degree or another the products of Modernism; but on the other hand, by that very fact they recognize these products, implicitly or explicitly, as works of art. Indeed the twentieth century invented much more verbosity and terminology than art, and many people