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ART VERSUS NONART

In *Art Versus Nonart: Art Out of Mind*, Tsion Avital poses the question, “Is modern art art at all?” He argues that all of the nonrepresentational art produced in the twentieth century was not art, but rather the debris of the visual tradition it replaced. Modern art has thrived on the total confusion between art and pseudo-art and the inability of many to distinguish between them. As Avital demonstrates, modern art has served as a critical intermediate stage between art of the past and the future. This book proposes a new way to define art, anchoring the nature of art in the nature of the mind, solving a major problem of art and aesthetics for which no solution has yet been provided. The new definition of art proposed in this book paves the way for a new and promising paradigm for future art.

Tsion Avital is associate professor of philosophy of art and culture at the Holon Academic Institute of Technology, in Holon, Israel.

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Art Versus **Nonart**

ART OUT OF MIND

Tsion Avital

Holon Academic Institute of Technology,
School of Design

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To the memory of my parents,

*Abraham Rafael Amlal Abitbol Avital and
Preciada Dorit Poney Abitbol Avital,*

*from whom I inherited the values
that made my lifework possible*

וַיְהִי כָּל הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים: (ב) וַיְהִי בְּנִסְעֵם מִקֶּדֶם וַיִּמְצְאוּ בְּקֵדָה בְּאֶרֶץ
 שִׁנְעָר וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם: (ג) וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ הֲבֵה נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשִׂרְפָה וְהָיִי
 לָהֶם הַלְבֵנָה לְאֶבֶן וְהַחֲמֹר הִיָּה לָהֶם לְחֵמֶר: (ד) וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲבֵה נִבְנֶה לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ
 בְּשָׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן נִפְּוֹץ עַל פְּנֵי כָּל הָאָרֶץ: (ה) וַיַּרְדַּ ה' לִרְאֹת אֶת הָעִיר וְאֶת
 הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם: (ו) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' הֵן עַם אֶחָד וְשָׂפָה אַחַת לְכָלָם וְזֶה תְּחִלָּם
 לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא יִבְצֹר מֵהֶם כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְכּוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת: (ז) הֲבֵה נִרְדֶּה וְנִבְלָה שָׁם שְׂפָתָם
 אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שִׁפְתַּי רֵעֵהוּ: (ח) וַיִּפֹּץ ה' אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל פְּנֵי כָּל הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחְדְּלוּ
 לִבְנֹת הָעִיר: (ט) עַל כֵּן קָרָא שְׂמֹהּ בָּבֶל כִּי שָׁם בָּלַל ה' שְׂפַת כָּל הָאָרֶץ וּמִשָּׁם הִפְרִצָם ה'
 עַל פְּנֵי כָּל הָאָרֶץ:
 בְּרֵאשִׁית: יא: 1-9

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shin'ar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

Gen. II:1–9

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Preface

The chief aim of this book is to formulate in as explicit and penetrating a manner as possible the broodings and doubts held by many people regarding the art of the twentieth century. Many within and outside the world of art feel that something fundamental is not right in that art, but in most cases they either do not have the knowledge that might enable them to pinpoint the quandary that they sense, or they do not have the courage to express their doubts openly.

The following episode is for me greatly symbolic of this situation: Some thirty years ago, at the time when I was a student and still believed that perhaps something interesting would emerge in art, I would from time to time visit exhibitions of modern art. On one of these visits, there were only two people in the gallery besides me: a man whose hair had turned white and who seemed old to me then, and his son, who was in his late twenties. The two were standing in front of an abstract painting, carrying on a loud and stormy argument that I could not avoid hearing. The father maintained that all these paintings were daubs and that any fool could paint such things. The son rejoined that the elder man was conservative, old-fashioned, and unable to understand this art. Their argument became more and more heated until at a certain point the father was so annoyed and frustrated that, not content with shouting his unconvincing arguments, he emphasized his words by banging his fist on the canvas.

Restraining myself no longer, I approached them, apologized for interrupting their argument, and told the overwrought father that although I agreed with all he said, it would be best to stop hitting the hapless painting so that others would be able to form their impression of it, for better or worse. Father and son left the gallery at once, but I was much moved by the embarrassment and helplessness of the former. In my heart I said to him, one day perhaps I will give you, and all those who feel the same way you do, the tools to explain your case without any frustration whatsoever. In a certain sense, this book is the fulfillment of the

unexpressed promise I made to that man, about whom I know nothing and who is probably no longer among the living, but who became for me the symbol for all those who have a valid feeling about twentieth-century art but lack effective tools for its expression.

The beginning of a new century is a fitting time for reassessment and intermediate summaries concerning many things, among them the state of art. Indeed the central task of this book is to reexamine the imagined and real achievements of twentieth-century art. In this spirit the basic question that the book attempts to answer is this: Did the artists of the twentieth century succeed in creating a new art as an alternative to figurative art? The categorical answer of this book is that in the twentieth century the old art was indeed reduced to fragments, but no new art at all was created in its place; but the fragments and shreds of the dismantled old art are displayed in museums and in books as though they were in fact a new art.

This pretense, which is in part clever deceit, is the source of one of the most basic dilemmas of twentieth-century art: We shall see that to the extent that real art was produced in the twentieth century, it can be shown that it is one variant or another of the old art; and to the extent that something new was produced in that century that was not a variant of figurative art, it can be shown that it is not art at all. This book tries to solve this dilemma on several planes: On the one hand it widens and deepens the criticism of nonrepresentational art and justifies its delegitimization as art; and on the other hand it perhaps provides a new way of discriminating between art and nonart. It thereby indirectly provides, at least in general outlines, a new map in the search for a new paradigm for art in the future. If the analysis presented in the course of the book reflects the truth with regard to Modernism, then far-reaching implications arise from it regarding every possible aspect of art and in particular on the cultural, educational, and economic planes.

This book is aimed at those for whom art is an important component of their lives but who have doubts and uncertainties on one level or another regarding the validity and value of Modernism. They will find in the book an analysis that may sufficiently dispel their doubts and replace them with a clear view of the emptiness of Modernism. The beautiful is difficult, said Plato, and the analysis offered here is another attempt to understand the beautiful; it is not always easy to understand, but this book is intended first and foremost for those who love art sufficiently to make some effort to understand it. I hope especially that it will help young people who are deeply committed to art and truly gifted, to free themselves from vain beliefs and misconceptions, the dubious legacy of the art of the twentieth century. From among these, perhaps the artists of the future will emerge, who, when the time comes and a new paradigm emerges, will be mentally ready to harness themselves to the reconstruction of art from its ruins.

Acknowledgments

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Acknowledgments

This book sees the light of day at the onset of the twenty-first century, but its beginning was in the sixties and seventies of the past century. Unlike the case today, when there are not a few skeptics of Modernism, in those days the euphoria of Modernism was at its height, and the expression of opinions such as those put forward in this book was considered something between madness and suicide. In those dark days I was fortunate in having a number of unusually wise, knowledgeable, and open-minded teachers, who encouraged me to develop my ideas even though they were utterly opposed to what was accepted in the world of art. I wish especially to mention the late Prof. Nathan Rotenstreich, then the head of the philosophy department, and Prof. Moshe D. Caspi, both of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem; the late Prof. Daniel Berlyne, and Prof. Anatol Rapoport of Toronto University.

Those days of study were relatively days of grace, and the tolerance that the academia can show toward a student, it cannot allow itself toward any of its members when they pose any threat to its interests. It is said that “you can’t beat the system,” and that is of course true, but you can at least survive it, if you have real friends. In my own case it is clear that this work would not have been possible without the support of friends and colleagues who helped me in different ways, and I mention them in alphabetical order: Moshe and Ziva Caspi, Reuven and Janet Cassel, Dalia Cohen, Tommy Dreyfus, the late Shalhevet Freier, Ozer Igra, Vladimir Koshkin, Elise Latner-Assaraf, Denes Nagy, Larry Scully, Aron Shai, Ilan Shalev, and David Shinar. I am especially indebted to Gerald C. Cupchik, who for some thirty years has been a wonderful friend and the main colleague with whom I tested most of my ideas: sometimes we discussed them with great seriousness, sometimes we laughed at them, and sometimes we quarreled over them, but always against the background of true friendship.

It can easily be imagined how difficult it is to publish ideas such as are presented in this book, and I therefore wish to thank the editors of the journals and books who published or recommended my ideas. This is a group of people of outstanding intellectual openness, with some of whom the connection has developed into friendship. Gerald C. Cupchik published my first paper and recommended others for publication. Denes Nagy and Gyorgy Darvas, the editors of *Symmetry: Culture and Science*, published three of my papers, two of which are the most important I wrote in my life. My gratitude also goes to Leonid Dorfman, Slavik V. Jablan, Estelle A. Maré, Colin Martindale, Reinhold Viehoff, and Ellen Winner.

Throughout all the years of the development of the ideas presented in this book and in other essays, I did not in fact have a single colleague in Israel, the country in which I live. The many students I have had over the years, first at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and later at the School of Design at the Holon Academic Institute of

Technology, were my real colleagues. The intensive intellectual interaction with them was the chief means of sifting my ideas, and the grindstone against which those ideas received their form. I have no way of thanking them sufficiently for all that. Some of them, such as Yossi Bar-Erez, Sandra Folk Kanner, Yaron Naor, and Ziv Rotem-Bar, became my friends and sometimes my saviors whenever I got stuck with a computer graphics problem. My fellow members of the staff of the School of Design, and especially the artists Boaz Tal and Gabriel Benzano, deserve particular thanks for the openness and tolerance that they have shown toward my ideas, even when these were in complete opposition to their views and beliefs concerning art. My thanks go to Prof. David M. Maron, President of the Holon Academic Institute of Technology, for his consistent support in the preparation of this book.

Special thanks are deserved by my friend John G. Harries, who translated this book and other essays of mine from Hebrew into English. A language is not a mere collection of words, but rather it embodies and dictates a particular mode of thought. For this reason a good translation is much more than the finding of equivalent words in two languages: It is an interpretation and transformation of ideas from one mode of thought into another mode of thought. The difficulty is especially great when the language of the source and the language of the translation are as different as Hebrew and English. I owe him my heartfelt thanks for the great diligence with which he strove to transform the text from Hebrew into English with the greatest possible fidelity. Special thanks also go to Betsy Hardinger, my copyeditor, whose thoroughness and excellent editing improved the clarity of the text by suggesting, whenever possible, simpler but equivalent formulations of the ideas presented in this book. I wish to thank Prof. Donald Kuspit, the editor of the Contemporary Artists and Their Critics series for Cambridge University Press, who invited me to submit a book for this series. My gratitude goes also to Beatrice Rehl, senior editor at Cambridge University Press, for her patience and great penetration regarding what should be changed and, even more so, regarding what should *not* be changed.

Finally I wish to thank my sons, Oded, Youval, and Daniel, who have shared with me moments of discovery and years of hardships.