

Thinking Art

Antoon Van den Braembussche

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An Introduction to Philosophy of Art

 Springer

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Foreword

Antoon Van den Braembussche rightly observes at the beginning of this admirable book, available for the first time in English, that the philosophy of art is a burgeoning field. Not only is its literature expanding rapidly, but so are the perspectives of its practitioners. This is not surprising. The philosophy of art exists because art exists, and for more than a century now art has been unfolding at a dizzying pace. Indeed, its development continues to accelerate, and it is no exaggeration to say that in recent decades the art world has witnessed an unprecedented explosion of new movements and forms. Against this background, someone coming to the philosophy of art for the first time needs an introduction, and an introduction of a particular kind. But what should such an introduction include, and how should it proceed? It is hard to imagine a better place to look for answers to these questions than *Thinking Art*.

One might start by noting that the philosophy of art is a peculiarly challenging field to introduce. For one thing, its subject matter is elusive in comparison with other areas of philosophy. In the theory of knowledge, for example, we do not have to look far beyond ourselves to find the target of reflection: we all perceive and think and claim to know things, however we may interpret these activities philosophically. Philosophers of art, on the other hand, are not only confronted with the established arts – painting, sculpture, music, and so on – but with a variety of objects that are not readily classifiable and even create entirely new categories. If Marcel Duchamp purchases a snow shovel in a hardware store and displays it in a gallery, what is it? A performance? A sculpture? Is it art at all? The subject matter of the philosophy of art assumes such myriad forms because it is a cultural phenomenon issuing from the creative freedom of the artist. It is this complex and unstable reality that aesthetics must master. An effective introduction to the field must therefore go as far as it can toward matching the breadth, depth, and complexity of its subject. Unlike a casual social introduction, which at best offers the bare condition for becoming better acquainted with someone later on, the aim of a philosophical introduction is to leave the neophyte with a genuine knowledge of the field, and, ideally, to provide those already initiated with fresh ways of looking at familiar things.

There are various ways to accomplish these ends. One could take a largely historical approach and discuss in serial fashion what this or that philosopher has said about art, or one could take a more thematic or issue-oriented approach with a

minimum of history. Both paths can yield good results, but the exclusive pursuit of either runs the risk of giving an impoverished picture of a field that embraces a rich array of themes evolving in a fascinating history. The author wisely takes a middle course. He gives the reader an excellent sense of the history of aesthetics, but without making his discussions of particular aestheticians occasions for displays of historical erudition for its own sake. He is doing philosophy, not writing chapters in the history of ideas. His point is to make the account of pivotal figures in the history of aesthetics come to life in terms of the issues and themes that have occupied and still occupy philosophers who think about art; or, from the other direction, to show that the issues on which aestheticians reflect can only be seen clearly through the lens of historical efforts to address them. He is not interested in engaging in flashy (or tedious) conceptual acrobatics carried out in some ethereal region far above the artworks themselves. His thematic and historical investigations are tethered firmly to art itself.

One of the chief virtues of the work's historical dimension is the scope and depth with which it covers the thinkers it discusses. The author may not have intended *Thinking Art* to be a history of aesthetics, but it can serve as one, since it considers – perceptively, sympathetically, but also critically – many of the key figures in the field. A difficulty in introducing the thought of particular aestheticians is that the positions they take on art are usually rooted in their general philosophical outlook, which means that grasping the former hinges on understanding the latter. This puts a double burden on the writer, who must give an accurate account of the philosophical underpinnings of a given thinker's aesthetic position and then of that position itself. The author of *Thinking Art* meets this challenge in exemplary fashion. A case in point is his discussion of Kant. One can write on Kant's theory of knowledge in the *Critique of Pure Reason* without so much as mentioning his aesthetic theory as it is developed in the *Critique of Judgement*, and many have done just that; but one cannot understand Kant's aesthetic theory without having a grasp of Kant's theory of knowledge and even of his moral theory in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The author presents a remarkably concise and intelligible exposition of Kant's general position (it could stand alone as a brief introduction to Kant's thought), and then of the Kantian aesthetics grounded on it. Equally effective is his treatment of Hegel, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, all philosophers whose aesthetic views are inseparable from their ontological and epistemological positions.

In reflecting on the themes aestheticians have promoted and engaged, the author takes a sophisticated and critical path. His discussion of the venerable topic of *mimesis* illustrates this nicely. One could introduce *mimesis* with a simplistic presentation and then subject it to a dismissive criticism, which is common enough in texts on aesthetics. The author's approach is more interesting and nuanced. He addresses *mimesis* in its complexity and depth. He does round up the usual suspect (Plato) and discusses the usual reading of *mimesis* as the imitation of sensuous appearances; but he also develops its broader meaning, which turns out to be expansive indeed. Through a fascinating discussion of Giacometti, he shows convincingly that even the notion of imitation as the copying of perceptual appearances still has a viable life, filtered, in Giacometti's case, through his struggle to capture the

human form. True, the sculptures that we identify as Giacometti's signature works – elongated, roughly modeled figures of women, dogs, and men – are hardly trompe l'oeil works. In the artist's estimation, however, they were imitations of reality, which suggests that the naive trompe l'oeil conception of *mimesis* hardly exhausts the notion. The author goes on to observe that there are three senses of *mimesis* in aesthetic theory: as imitation of sensory appearances; as depiction of emotions and ideas (giving *mimesis* a place even in expressionist theories); and as the representation of a higher, ideal, reality. Since it has so many forms, the author argues, *mimesis* can be found in such varied aesthetic theories as expressionism, formalism, Neo-Marxism, and post-structuralism. Typical of the author's adventurous and revealing approach is his argument that Hegel, while vigorously critical of the trompe l'oeil version of the mimetic theory, still left room for another meaning of *mimesis*. The point is that the philosophy of art excludes *mimesis* from its battery of insights into what art is and does only at its own peril.

The introduction of such a seemingly unlikely figure as Giacometti into the discussion of *mimesis* is the kind of link to the concrete that makes Van den Braembussche's approach effective and illuminating. Something similar occurs in his treatment of the Collingwood/Croce version of expressionism. Expressionism, in its rudimentary form, typically holds that the work of art expresses the artist's emotion. In the Collingwood/Croce version, emotion is less important than the claim that the work of art resides in the artist's mind as a creative idea whose material realization in the world is not essential. Expression of the idea within the mind is all that is needed. This conception is likely to strike a reader as odd, to say the least. The author's criticisms of the view are fair and to the point. He reminds us, for example, that the Collingwood/Croce version of expressionism "grossly underestimates the importance of the medium and of the resistance that it offers." At the same time, his discussion of Joseph Kosuth shows how a significant contemporary artist subscribes to just such a view, at least in modified form. In Kosuth's case, what is expressed is not the artist's emotion but an idea, and it is essentially the idea that is the work of art. The introduction of Kosuth again shows the connection of a classical doctrine, in this case, expressionism, to the contemporary art world, and specifically to conceptual art. Indeed, such connections between art and philosophy, and between philosophical views, run throughout the work, weaving a rich aesthetic tapestry.

The author does not restrict his introduction to classical theories such as expressionism and formalism. He opens it up to views, particularly those of Hegel and Danto, that attempt to come to grips with art's historical dimension and with the ambiguous notion of the "end of art." The latter theme has had considerable resonance among recent artists and critics, many of whom would consider themselves to be members of the postmodernist camp. The author has much of value to say about postmodernism and poststructuralist thought.

Among postmodern thinkers, philosophy of art shifts in the direction of cultural criticism. Traditional aesthetics explores the nature of aesthetic experience and the work of art, what the work is and what it accomplishes, and how it is related *as art* to other things – to the world, to history, and so on. Postmodern thinkers, on the other

hand, tend to focus on art's external relations (to economic life, for example) and on what such relations have done to art (made it into a commodity, and the like); they focus, that is, on art's fate within a certain set of cultural and historical circumstances. Pushed to an extreme, particularly under the lingering influence of the Marxist notion of superstructure, such an approach may have unfortunate consequences for aesthetics. It's as if one had a philosophy of the automobile but never got beyond discussing the advertising and marketing of cars, their role in class relations, and so on: all very interesting, but utterly uninformative about the automobile itself. On the other hand, one can certainly argue that economic and social circumstances are in fact important aspects of the context in which we experience art. Important too, if perhaps wrongheaded, is the claim of some postmodernists that art itself has virtually dissolved into such relations, and that any effort to define art in the sense of capturing the essence that distinguishes it from other things is bound to fail, precisely because art is not, in fact, fundamentally different from other things. Like them, so the argument goes, it derives its meaning from the web of social, cultural, and economic relations in which it is only one strand among many.

If clarifying the nature of art is the principal challenge facing the philosophy of art, clarifying the nature of the discipline itself poses its own difficulties. The author examines the ways in which the philosophy of art differs from scientific approaches to art, from the sociological or the psychological, for example, which reach their conclusions on the basis of empirical investigation. While aesthetics should be firmly rooted in the reality of art, its claims are not inductive generalizations. Nor should its statements be confused with particular aesthetic judgments. Aesthetic judgements are always about some specific work or artistic event. Statements in the philosophy of art, on the other hand, are intended to be universal claims. They represent efforts to get to the essence of art. They should be supported by argument and be alert to the dangers of one-sidedness. This does not mean that there cannot be "cross-fertilization" among the philosopher, the artist, and the critic. Philosophical views may be implicit in the aesthetic judgments of the critic, as the author's discussion of reactions to the work of Luc Tuymans shows, and artists may make what are in fact philosophical claims. This is perfectly innocent, unless the artist or critic naively turns such claims into limiting prescriptions about what art ought to be. Prescriptions are normative and exclusive. In the case of the artist, advancing them usually means nothing more than setting forth a program for artistic action. There is nothing wrong with manifestos and motivating theories, provided that they are not confused with philosophy or used to stifle creativity. In the case of the critic, however, the adoption of a one-sided aesthetic position as a criterion for aesthetic judgment may have the unhappy effect of closing the mind to all art that fails to pass the prescribed theoretical test.

Perhaps the key lesson of this book lies in its stance against exclusion and narrowness in the philosophy of art and in the realm of art generally. The philosopher, in order to do justice to art, should be accommodating and generous. The spectator and the critic should be equally hospitable in their judgments about particular works. This is captured in the author's claim that a "well-balanced" aesthetic judgment should take into account the work's mimetic and expressive aspects, its formal and symbolic

possibilities, and its social and historical dimensions. The art work demands it. Art, then, should have the first word and the last. Philosophy comes in between, and its worth is measured not by the creation of bold new theories but by the degree to which it achieves insight into the nature of artistic phenomena. The author wisely echoes Hegel at the end of his epilogue: "...art is always ahead of philosophy. When thinking about art, the understanding only comes afterwards, when philosophy – like the owl of Minerva – spreads its wings in the silence of night."

Georgetown University
July 9, 2008

John B. Brough

Preface

This is the first edition in English of a textbook that was originally published in Dutch in 1994 and has since become a classic in the Dutch worlds of art and philosophy.

Although this book was written primarily as a textbook to be used in art philosophy education, it is also addressed to all those who wish to deepen their understanding of art.

The primary objective of this book is to set forth a *systematic* and *understandable* introduction into a number of basic concepts and theories from philosophy of art. However fascinating and intriguing it may be, aesthetics has often been accused, and not unjustly so, of being unsystematic and unclear. Its usually haphazard use of concepts tends to confuse rather than enlighten the reader. In this book, on the contrary, conceptual clarification and theoretical transparency have pride of place. But the pursuit of clarity and lucidity should not come at the cost of the richness and complexity of the art theories under discussion. However, one cannot avoid a certain tension between these two goals. I have aimed for a balance between, on the one side, the attempt for clarification and, on the other side, respect for the originality and depth or profundity of the philosophical viewpoints on art.

The second objective of this textbook is to provide a *theoretical framework* that allows the reader to think about art and discuss art from varying points of view. For this reason, the art theories discussed, such as the imitation theory, the expression theory, formalism, symbol theory, idealist, neo-marxist, phenomenological and post-modern theories, are not only exposed in a methodical manner, but they are also systematically compared with one another. This enables the reader to fix his own position within philosophy of art and to account for the advantages and disadvantages of the various approaches. These issues appear as a leitmotiv throughout this book.

The third objective of this book is to shed light on the *relationship between, on the one hand, the philosophy of art, and, on the other hand, concrete examples from art history or the contemporary art world*. Nearly every chapter, then, treats the work of an artist, a specific vision of an artist, or a specific artistic phenomenon as an illustration of the art theory discussed. The purpose is always to show the close connection between philosophy of art and developments in the history of art or the contemporary art world itself. On the one hand, philosophy of art often derives its issues from the evolution of art itself. On the other hand, artists and critics

often justify artistic innovations or aesthetic judgments using arguments found in the philosophy of art. This cross-fertilization shows not only the practical value of art philosophy, but also its inextricable connection to the history of art and recent developments within the art world. I have not restricted myself to one or two art forms here, but I have strived for a more balanced approach, discussing not only painting and architecture, but also poetry, film and video clips. This allows to encompass nearly all art forms, albeit in some cases merely to illustrate a particular philosophical theory.

The fourth objective of this textbook is to present the state of affairs of aesthetics in a way that is as *objective as possible* in addition to being *representative*. Even though my personal preferences have determined the final selections contained in this book as well as the composition of the book itself, I deliberately attempted to put aside my own personal viewpoints as much as possible in discussing the theory and practice of art. Nevertheless, this is not a neutral but rather a critical account of the concepts within the philosophy of art and the art world. The most important objections against the various theories discussed are repeatedly brought to the forefront. Of course, the selection of these objections and the way in which the different viewpoints are compared is also a reflection of personal preference.

In everyday life, we often make comments about what might be considered beautiful and or ugly. Such things as simple tools and natural phenomena are objects of such aesthetic judgments: a chair, a tea set, a sunset or a sunflower. Especially in our contact with art, we are quick to state our preferences. Some people enjoy Bach while others prefer The Beatles. There are those who regard Joseph Beuys as a pioneer of modern art, while others do not even consider his “work” as art. Art critics discuss why a certain work of art, a movie or a novel, a theatrical performance or a piece of music, is regarded a failure or a success. In all these aesthetic judgments we try to convince others of what art really is or should be. In this sense, our daily lives are filled with the questions that are central to the philosophy of art, or aesthetics.

Is art a matter of imitation, in which the ability of artists to represent reality is at stake? Or is art above all about what the artist has tried to express? Or should art be identified with our own emotional response? In other words, is art only art when it moves us and touches us deeply? Is art not rather a matter of originality, of new ideas, through which the artist surprises us and incites us to experience the world differently? Or through which the artist makes us change our minds about art itself? Is art mainly about form and technique in that each sensation or idea becomes irrelevant to the value of a work of art? Or should our main consideration be the way we actually pass judgments on art? And does not the aesthetic judgment itself divulge the secret of why we consider art in certain ways and adhere to certain norms?

All these questions are addressed in the Part I of this book that is entirely devoted to *The Essence of Art*. Here the classic theories on art, which answer the central question “What is art?” from various perspectives, are discussed at length. These classic theories from Plato, Nietzsche, Collingwood and Susanne Langer and others, continue to be influential.

Every art theory at least implicitly answers the question of what art is. But there are other questions as well. Can we discuss art at all without considering its historical development? Should we not acknowledge that a work of art only acquires meaning in relation to previous works of art? Should we still speak about progress or accept that we are living in a time in which art can no longer renew itself? What is meant by “the end of art”? What can be said about the relation between art and society? How can a work of art be traced back to the spirit of the times and the social context? Is art a reflection of the social–historical context? Or is it relatively autonomous, and is the social context only indirectly revealed in art? How should one understand the social function of art? Should art contribute to the emancipation and political awakening of the people? Or should it primarily fulfil a critical function? Should it express harmony, or rather give shape to the inner conflict of modern man?

Part I begins to answer these questions by putting in context the well known debates on the very nature of art. Part II is devoted to *Art in a Historical and Social Perspective* and discusses the influential theories of Hegel, Danto, Adorno, Walter Benjamin and others. Here the debate about the ‘end of art’ will be discussed at length. Other crucial questions such as the way society is reflected in the work of art, the way technological advance has determined, and still is determining the form, the aura and/or the aesthetical experience of the art work, will be addressed.

Over the last several years, an important part of aesthetics has focussed on the analysis and the interpretation of art. Especially postmodern discourse, led by French thinkers such as Lyotard, Derrida and Baudrillard, has challenged numerous classic and modern views on art. Here art is considered a language that should be studied independently of any historical context. More precisely, art is seen as a sign system of which the internal structure demands particular attention. But, next to that, other themes and questions followed. Is the time of the grand meta-narrative, which was so characteristic of modernity, gone for good? What does this imply for our views about art? Does art refer to reality at all? Is not the meaning of a work of art strictly autonomous? Does it only refer to other works of art, excluding all reference to that which lies outside the language of art? Is the end of representation near? Is the division between high art and low art still relevant at all? Have mass media transformed our whole social environment into a big sham to which art is inextricably connected? Because here the work of art is studied as a language or a sign system, Part III is called *The Language of Art*.

The Dutch original of this book has been written in 1993. The Dutch original has been somewhat revised and updated in respectively 2000 and 2007. For the English translation the manuscript and the bibliographical segments have been thoroughly revised, updated and adapted for an English audience.

The English translation was made possible by a publication grant from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). More particularly I am very grateful to Mrs. Foekje Grootoonek of NWO, without whom the translation project would never have taken place. She supported the project right from the beginning and gave it a lot of credit. I also thank Winnifred Geldof who guided the project in a later stage for NWO. I am also very grateful to Mrs. Anita Rachmat from Springer for the efficient and sympathetic way she helped me through the

various stages of the final editing and production of the English manuscript. Translating a philosophical work is an extremely difficult task. I wish to thank Michael Krass, Rutger Cornets de Groot, Thérèse Lorenz and Tina Ortiz, who contributed to the English translation of the book in one way or the other. The most grateful I am, however, to Dick van Spronsen and Shailoh Philips who helped me during the final editing of the manuscript. Thanks to them the book is now almost as readable in English as in Dutch. Finally I wish to thank warmly Professor John Brough for his willingness to write an inspiring foreword to this book.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: What Is Philosophy of Art?

1.1 The Current Interest in Philosophy of Art

Over the past few decades, the philosophy of art has enjoyed a remarkable revival. More and more studies are being devoted to the philosophical or theoretical probing into questions about the meaning of art. This gradual but steady expansion in the field also suggests a broadening group of potential readers. Indeed, the present situation may perhaps be characterized as not simply a revival but as an unprecedented breakthrough. There are three major developments that help explain this.

Firstly, today's increased importance of philosophy of art is due to modern art itself. Revolutionary avant-garde movements, attempting to transcend existing norms in art as early as around 1910, unleashed a process that has challenged any supposedly self-evident notions of art ever since. This process still continues today. Modern art is constantly pushing the boundaries of the "artistic", seeking and providing new answers to the question of what art really is. Not surprisingly, every new movement is accompanied by a theoretical discourse to justify its premises. In the art world, the permanent drive for renewal has urged more and more artists to turn to philosophy to support their concepts of art. Artists have sometimes taken this approach to such extremes as to identify *thinking* about art with art itself, as has happened in conceptual art. In any case, this explains the growing significance of art philosophy to the development of art.

A second reason for this renewed interest in the philosophy of art, or aesthetics, can be found in recent developments within the art world. The rise of so-called postmodernism in the arts in the late 1960s abruptly ended the sense of linear progress that used to characterize modernism. The net result was a fragmentary and utterly dispersed art world, in which the boundaries between art and non-art, between art and popular culture, between art and design, between art and daily life, and so on, were extremely difficult to discern, to maintain or to disentangle. A general sense of disorientation ensued, with art being judged according to arbitrary criteria that seemed based on strategic positions within the art world rather than on sheer conviction. This resulting *malaise* of contemporary art was first signaled in France as "*la crise de l'art*" (the crisis of art) and even as "*la haine de l'art*" (*the hatred for art*) or "*le complot de l'art*" (the conspiracy against art). Anyhow, worldwide the

postmodern condition of art led to a “crisis of legitimacy” which stimulated theoretical reflection on art as never before. Tellingly, most collections of theoretical essays presented at the Documenta in Kassel and several other international fairs in recent years were extremely heavy, both in size and in content, teeming with philosophical quotations and reflections. Needless to say that this has aroused an unusual and wide interest in philosophy or aesthetics.

A third reason may be found in philosophy. Contemporary philosophers show a renewed interest in the philosophy of art and/or aesthetics. This is borne out by a great number of publications of monographs and new introductions, including this book. The reasons for this renewal vary widely with the different philosophical traditions. French post-structuralism, for instance, seems to be the fruit of a kind of congeniality between art and philosophy, mostly inspired by German thinkers such as Nietzsche (Deleuze), Kant (Lyotard) and Heidegger (Derrida). In sharp contrast, analytical philosophy moved away from the system building approaches from German Idealism towards more methodological approaches that submit such concepts as representation, expression, artistic form and aesthetic experience, and such theories as the institutional theory of art to critical scrutiny.

What, though, is meant by the terms “philosophy of art” and “aesthetics”?

1.2 The Terms “Philosophy of Art” and “Aesthetics”

Thinking about art is usually classified under the general heading of “philosophy of art” (“art philosophy” for short) or “aesthetics”. As such, thinking about art and beauty is as old as philosophy itself: already Plato and Aristotle developed philosophical views on art and beauty which are still relevant to-day. Also numerous medieval authors thoroughly discussed the nature of art and beauty. The recognition of aesthetics as an independent philosophical discipline, however, did not take place until the eighteenth century.

It was Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762) who in 1735 coined the term *aesthetics* for this new discipline. In his later work, especially in his *Aesthetica* (published in 1950–1958), he circumscribed aesthetics as the “science of sense knowledge”. With his conception of aesthetics, Baumgarten sought to reassess the entire area of sense experience, which had been deemed inferior to rational knowledge by the metaphysical and logical traditions within Western philosophy since ancient times. This also explains why he used the term “aesthetics”, which stems from the Greek word “aisthesis”, meaning “sense perception” or “sensation”. But aesthetics comprised much more than what we usually understand by sense perception. It included, according to Baumgarten, the whole range of sensibility that was bypassed by modern science, such as taste, judgment, imagination, experience of the fine arts and beauty, and so on. Especially the judgment of taste in its wider meaning as the “sense of beauty” or the ability to judge according to the senses (and thus not according to the intellect), was to be the central object of aesthetics. “According to the senses” here means “based on feelings of pleasure or displeasure”.

In his view, aesthetics should not only be concerned with taste but also contribute to a further cultivation and perfection of taste and sensibility.

More specifically, the science of aesthetics would, still according to Baumgarten, establish the rules or principles of artistic or natural beauty from individual “taste.” Conceived in this way, aesthetics almost immediately fell into discredit, although the term itself was maintained to designate the new field. However, Kant, who came immediately after Baumgarten, still was not very clear as to what aesthetics exactly meant. Indeed, in his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant still used aesthetics in its original and very broad meaning as the science of sense perception. As we will see in Chapter 6, Kant’s so-called “transcendental aesthetics” is in fact not about the judgments of beauty but about judgments based on sense perception. Only in his *Critique of Judgment* did Kant use the adjective “aesthetic” to refer to judgments of beauty, or what are now commonly called “aesthetical judgments”. So, although at first sight Kant seems to accord with Baumgarten, nothing could be further from the truth. The differences between him and Baumgarten are quite fundamental. First of all, Kant systematically distinguishes between sense perception per se and aesthetical judgment. And secondly, Kant based this distinction on a transcendental inquiry into the *a priori* conditions presupposed by empirical and aesthetical judgments, respectively. This explains why he did not believe that Baumgarten’s aesthetics could ever establish objective rules, laws or principles of natural or artistic beauty.

Also Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) considered the term aesthetics hopelessly unsuited and superficial. One important reason for the inadequateness of the term was in Hegel’s view that it referred to both artistic *and* natural beauty, whereas he aimed to restrict aesthetics only to questions pertaining to art and its history. But also Hegel continued to use the term, since it had, as he pointed out, already made its way into common language. And so it remains until the present day: the term “aesthetics” is still widely used, not seldom as a synonym for philosophy of art, although, like Hegel, many contemporary philosophers consider it to be misleading and outdated. And today, even more so than in Hegel’s time, there are other reasons to be wary of the term “aesthetics”.

Since Hegel, the term “aesthetics” has acquired a number of very different meanings. Firstly, aesthetics sometimes refers to an *empirical* investigation into the underlying factors that contribute to aesthetic experience or perception. In this strict definition, aesthetics appears as a branch of experimental psychology, although physiology and physics, especially optics, are also quite important to the study of aesthetic experience or perception. This first use is mostly called *empirical* or *experimental aesthetics*. Secondly, the term “aesthetics” is also used to refer to the systematic study of stylistic and expressive elements, such as composition and design. Thirdly, another use of “aesthetics” is in referring to the various ways that beauty can be studied, including both the experience and the perception of beauty. In these three frequent definitions, the meaning of “aesthetics” is not necessarily philosophical, which undoubtedly explains why some modern philosophers characterize their field as *philosophical aesthetics*. This explicitly philosophical interpretation is in fact a fourth use of the term “aesthetics”!

However, upon closer inspection, even this last definition of “aesthetics” is not the same as “philosophy of art”, because philosophical aesthetics does not only deal with the beauty of art but also with the experience of beauty in general. Philosophers who emphasize aesthetic experience do not generally make a fundamental distinction between the way we experience beauty in nature and the way we experience it in art. For them, both these aesthetic experiences are analogous and equally important, and they tend to retain the term “aesthetics”. Yet not all art philosophers agree that the aesthetic experience of natural beauty falls within the scope of art philosophy. That is why Hegel, for instance, preferred the term “philosophy of art” to “aesthetics”. Seen from this point of view, “philosophy of art” is less broad than “aesthetics”, since it deals exclusively with reflections on art. For pragmatic reasons, however, we shall continue to use the terms “philosophy of art” and “aesthetics” as synonyms, always bearing in mind the implications referred to above.

1.3 Philosophical Versus Scientific Inquiry into Art

More important than the terminological question, however, is the precise definition of the philosophical discipline under discussion. Whichever term is used, we must always be aware of the *fundamental* difference between an *empirical* and a *philosophical* inquiry. This difference is so essential that it deserves further explanation. It is, after all, the difference between an empirical-scientific study of art on the one hand and a philosophical study on the other.

The question of how we are able to form an optical image of a painting implies an empirical study based on the psychology, physiology and physics of sense perception. However, the moment we ask ourselves *how is it possible that we can perceive a painting at all*, we find ourselves entirely within the realm of philosophical reflection. The philosopher will attempt to examine all that is presupposed in our sense and/or aesthetic perception and what it is that makes it possible. He will remind us that space and time are presupposed in every perception, and that without these presuppositions there would be no question of perception at all.

Another example that illustrates this difference is the following. Let us consider a painting of a war scene. If we ask ourselves what technical means were used by the artist to render the scene, the answer can only be arrived at empirically. An art historian will tell us which color combinations were available to the painter, to what extent he made use of perspective, etc. However, as soon as we ask ourselves whether a representation of a “war scene” should be the subject of painting, we find ourselves right in the middle of philosophy of art. The same holds true when we doubt the possibility of the war scene on the canvas being an exact imitation of something that actually occurred. Is an objective representation of reality at all possible? Is not even the most realistic depiction always influenced by the artist’s interpretation? These types of question transcend empirical examination and are typical of philosophy of art.

Finally, let us look at a third example. Suppose we want to know under what conditions Mozart composed his *Requiem*. To answer this question, we are dependent on empirical information, in this case biographical research, for instance. However,

as soon as we ask *if and to what degree such information is relevant or necessary for an aesthetic judgment of Mozart's Requiem*, we are back in the philosophical realm. Such a question *cannot be answered on empirical grounds*. So far, we can conclude that the fundamental difference between an empirical and a philosophical inquiry is not so much determined by the subject of investigation as it is by the type of questions asked. In other words: the difference is determined *not materially* but *formally*. This means that any art subject can be examined both from an empirical-scientific perspective and in philosophical terms.

We can clarify the difference between a scientific and a philosophical inquiry into art in yet another way. An aesthetic judgment such as "This painting by Piero Della Francesca is beautiful" can never be empirically proven or refuted. A simple empirical judgment such as "*The Virgin of Hope* is a painting by Piero Della Francesca" is, on the other hand, open to empirical examination. Aesthetic statements are neither true nor false. They are *normative* statements and as such neither verifiable nor refutable in the common sense of the word. They do not belong to the realm of "what is", but to the realm of "what ought to be"; they are concerned with norms, not with facts. In this sense, aesthetics can be compared with ethics, as moral norms also play a central role in ethics. Aesthetic statements, like moral statements, are *value judgments*, not empirical judgments. It would therefore be absurd to speak of "scientific aesthetics". "Empirical aesthetics" or "scientific aesthetics" is in fact a *contradiction in terms!*

Note that here too the difference between a philosophical and a scientific approach to art is determined formally, not materially. In sociology of art, for example, it is possible to study aesthetic judgments empirically. In this case, however, aesthetic judgments or judgments of taste are regarded as facts. An empirical study conducted by Pierre Bourdieu will illustrate this. He confronted members of different professions and social classes with artworks and recorded their aesthetic judgments to answer the question if and to what extent judgment of taste correlates with social position. One of his conclusions was that members of the working class have much less appreciation for artistic experiments than university graduates or members of the upper classes. Bourdieu's own judgments as a researcher are not value judgments but empirical judgments about the judgments of taste of others! However, as soon as Bourdieu imposes his own views on art, something he is occasionally unable to resist, he departs from the realm of empirical research. At such moments, he too finds himself in the middle of philosophy of art, where the only arguments that count are of a philosophical rather than of an empirical nature.

1.4 Art Criticism Versus Art Philosophy

In the light of our discussion above, it is relatively easy to pinpoint the distinction between empirical and art philosophical judgments, between scientific and philosophical studies of art. The same cannot be said of the basic distinction between art criticism and art philosophy, which would seem somewhat more complicated to determine.

It is true that art critics make frequent use of empirical statements, one of their aims being to provide information about the contemporary art world. However, the final objective of art criticism is a normative one. The art critic is expected to pass a judgment on an exhibition, a musical performance, a film or theater production. Based on his or her own aesthetic experience and/or taste, the art critic is expected to express whether or not he or she found the exhibition, musical performance, film or theater performance beautiful, successful, entertaining, etc. In other words, the art critic pronounces a so-called aesthetic judgment. Thus far any confusion with philosophical statements about art seems unlikely.

However, the distinction between art criticism and philosophy of art becomes somewhat more problematic once we realize that the aesthetic judgments given by the art critic are often implicitly or even explicitly based on more general art philosophical perspectives and/or convictions. Art critics often explicitly support or justify their aesthetic judgments *using* art philosophical arguments *normatively*. Their own philosophical perspectives are sometimes so dominant that they cease to be open or receptive to the aesthetic experience of the work of art or artistic expression they are contemplating! In all of these cases, it seems as though the aesthetic judgment is simply a derivative of the critic's art philosophical views.

A second problem is that the theories of many art philosophers are said to be largely determined by their own tastes, personal preferences and their own aesthetic experiences and judgments of artworks. Philosophy of art, in this case, would seem to be derived from previous aesthetic judgments and would thus only appear as a kind of rationalization or justification of the own personal taste of the philosopher concerned.

Both of these problems are remarkable instances of circular reasoning. While the aesthetic judgment seems to stem from the critic's art philosophy, the philosophical viewpoints of philosophers seem to be derived from their particular aesthetic experiences and judgments as art lovers!

In fact there *is* a crucial and fundamental difference between an aesthetic and an art philosophical judgment, however indistinguishable they may appear in practice, or however much they may seem to presuppose one another. Indeed, an aesthetic judgment is always about *one specific* artistic event, *one specific* work of art, or the artwork of *one specific* artist (or even from *one specific* artistic movement or period). Such a judgment is generally inspired by the critic's aesthetic experience when confronted with a *particular* form of expression. It is therefore *a normative statement or value judgment*, which in principle remains limited to *this* one event, *this* artwork, *this* artist or *that* movement. An art philosophical statement, on the other hand, is not about one specific manifestation of art but a claim or judgment about the *essence* of art: it always concerns an art form or art *in general*. It is, as a rule, not rooted in aesthetical experience, but in essential insight. Consequently, it is not normative, not a value judgment.

The following quotation may serve as an example of aesthetic judgment: 'To me, the paintings of Luc Tuymans are very beautiful. I saw his work at an exhibition, and I find it exquisite' (Bernard Dewulf in *Nieuw Wereldtijdschrift*, 1999, 56). What Dewulf, as an art critic, is expressing here is his aesthetic experience of Tuymans'

work. Here we are, without question, dealing with an aesthetic judgment: the statement is both appreciative and normative, yet remains limited to the work of an artist. Only rarely do art critics express their aesthetic judgments directly or clearly, instead they will use similes or metaphors to evoke the aesthetic experience, which virtually defies description! After visiting another exhibition of Tuymans' work, Bianca Stigter wrote as subtly as meaningfully: 'Tuymans' canvases express a remarkable sort of indifference. The images seem fleeting. If you walk away from a painting and return to it, you almost expect that in the meantime the painting has changed' (NRC Handelsblad, 1 September 1995, CS, 5). This is a beautiful metaphorical representation of a manner of painting which highlights the 'vanishing point of the image' and in which the artist, in his urge towards purification, creates images that become visible the moment they disappear, or disappear the moment they become visible.

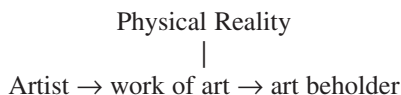
A well-known statement by Luc Tuymans is: 'All art is the art of painting'. This is a full-fledged art philosophical statement, since it is clearly a statement about all art as such. Another well-known statement by Paul Klee is that 'Art does not make the invisible visible, but the visible invisible'. This too is an art philosophical statement, since it refers to the essence of all art. Statements such as 'poetry is what makes the invisible appear' (Nathalie Sarraute) or 'In the art of painting, you must create an impression of authenticity with the help of the inauthentic' (Edgar Degas) are also art philosophical by nature, because they concern the essence of a specific art form.

The difference between an aesthetic judgment and an art philosophical statement can be explained in yet another way. Quite often, an aesthetic judgment is immediately accompanied by an art philosophical justification. A fine example can again be found in Bernard Dewulf's previously quoted reviews: 'Tuymans' work is extraordinarily suggestive, in the good sense of the word – rather than vagueness, it suggests purification' (p. 60). Dewulf's aesthetical judgment is here accompanied and justified by a somewhat implicit philosophical statement about art as such, arguing that art, in order to reach its essential state, should be able to purify its means and leave out the superfluous. Again, the difference between an aesthetic statement and an art philosophical statement is perfectly expressed here: while the aesthetic appreciation concerns Tuymans' work itself, the art philosophical statement applies to all art in general, to the essence of all (good) art.

1.5 The Ideal–Typical Viewpoints in Philosophy of Art

Regardless of the nature of philosophical inquiry, there are various viewpoints or perspectives from which to consider art. These viewpoints are ideal-typical because they are abstracted from the existing literature on the philosophy of art, and are not included in any literature *as such* or *in any absolute pure form*. Even so, most theories center on a specific viewpoint although occasionally other perspectives may be implied.

The viewpoints discussed in the first part of this book, *The Nature of Art: Classical Answers to the Question "What is Art?"*, can be illustrated as follows:



To begin with, one viewpoint is the relationship between the work of art and physical reality, in other words, reality that is sensibly perceptible. This viewpoint is central to the imitation theory. According to this theory, the essence of art is the imitation or exact representation of sensible reality. The imitation theory in its strict sense has been derived the theory of mimesis, a conception of Plato which has a much broader meaning, as we shall see in Chapter 2. The imitation theory as such, which has known his heyday in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, has been increasingly criticized during the twentieth century. In Chapter 2 we will closely consider the most important objections against the imitation theory as such, but also briefly discuss the most important recent theories on pictorial representation in general, such as conventionalism and the neo-naturalist theory

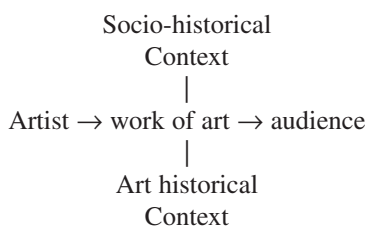
A second point of view is the *relationship between the artist and the work of art*. This viewpoint is fundamental to the so-called *expression theory* of art. According to this theory, the essence of art is the artist's self-expression. Here, the work of art is approached from the point of view of the artist, the original state of mind, the original idea underlying the work of art. It fits well with the popular idea that art is predominantly about the artist's original purpose or intention. Some supporters of the expression theory, however, go so far as to claim that the artwork already exists in the artist's mind and that its material manifestation is entirely unimportant. The expression theory has also stirred up emotions and led to biting criticism. The subject is, however, so fundamental that it demands proper attention. Chapter 3 is entirely devoted to this discussion.

A third perspective is limited to the *contemplation of the artwork itself*. This perspective is characteristic of *formalism*. This theory departs from the assumption that a work of art must be considered for its own sake, in terms of its own merits. The essence of the work of art is the pure form, not the content. Advocates of formalism therefore reject any reference to reality or to the artist's intention. The work of art is completely autonomous and may only be judged in terms of its formal properties. The classical formulation and defense of formalism in music, painting and poetry, respectively, will be critically discussed in Chapter 4.

It goes without saying that, in the quest for the essence of art, no single theory will suffice. Some philosophers of art therefore promote the view that the true essence of art is a *synthesis of form and expression*. Nietzsche's view on the work of art as a synthesis of the Dionysian and the Apollinian will, of course, be of pivotal concern here. But we will also probe into the theory of Susanne Langer, who, in the footsteps of the early Wittgenstein and Ernst Cassirer, the German founder of symbol theory, argued for a similar synthesis. The artist's studio of Chapter 5 will be devoted here to Kandinsky's well-known argumentation in favor of a synthesis of form and self-expression, of pure form and the spiritual mission of the modern artist. These issues will be discussed in Chapter 5.

A fourth viewpoint concentrates on *the relationship between the artwork and the beholder*. This perspective concentrates on the aesthetic experience aroused not only by the work of arts but also by natural objects. It is focused, more specifically, on the analysis of aesthetic judgment, which was first systematically examined by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant’s influence on modern aesthetics can hardly be overestimated. The whole of Chapter 6 is dedicated to Kant’s work. The reason why we do not discuss Kant until that chapter is that he anticipated all preceding classical theories into one synthesis, even though he is usually seen as a founding father of formalism.

Characteristic of the classical theories included in the first part of this book is that they ignore the *historical* and *social* contexts of art. A number of viewpoints which are of the utmost importance to the further development of aesthetics are therefore absent in Part I but will receive full attention in Part II, called “Art in a Historical and Social Perspective”. I therefore suggest updating the classical diagram as follows:



A fifth viewpoint is the *relationship between the work of art and the art historical context*. This view focuses on the art historical perspective, which was first introduced into aesthetics by Hegel. According to Hegel, the history of art belongs to the essence of art itself. Since Hegel identified the evolution of art with the “unfolding self-consciousness of the spirit”, the history of art, he argued, ended shortly after Romanticism. In Chapter 7 we will not only expose the broader philosophical system which inevitably led to the Hegelian thesis on the end of art, but also discuss in some detail the more recent defense of this thesis by the well-known American art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto. Chapter 7 is concluded with a thorough criticism of both Hegel’s and Danto’s argumentations in favor of the “end of art”.

A sixth point of view is the *relationship between the work of art and the socio-historical context*. How does a work of art relate to its social context? Is art a reflection of social reality or is it only indirectly related to it, and if so, in what way? What about the social function of art? These questions will be addressed in depth in Chapter 8, which is entirely devoted to the neo-Marxist perspective. After a systematical account of Georg Lukács’ defense of classical realism, we will delve into the expressionism debate of the 1930s, involving, next to Lukács, Ernst Bloch and Bertold Brecht. After considering his devastating critique of Lukács’ realism we will explore Adorno’s subtle and delicate defense of modernism. In spite of the decline of Marxism in the West, Adorno’s views on art are still relevant and influential. This also, and even more so, applies for Walter Benjamin. The chapter closes with a detailed discussion of Benjamin’s seminal essay on the technical reproducibility of art.

Part III, called “The Language of Art: From Phenomenology to Poststructuralism”, starts with the phenomenological perspective, which links the theories outlined in

Part I and Part II on the one hand, to post-structuralism, which has become of enormous importance to contemporary art philosophy, on the other. Contrary to classical and modern theories that approach art from a pre-determined concept, phenomenology seeks to reveal the original experience of the artwork, i.e. the *immediate* experience that occurs without any intervention whatsoever of preconceptions. This open attitude, explored in Chapter 9, leads to far-reaching insights into the age-old issue of perception, the bodily predetermined experience of space and depth (Merleau-Ponty) and the original experience of the thing as such, the exploration of the materiality of the work of art, the way it brings about the truth (Heidegger). Merleau-Ponty as well as Heidegger were “on the road to language”, heralding the development of semiotics (see Chapter 10). It was not until post-structuralism, however, that the radical consequences of this tendency would be fully felt, leading to a fundamental criticism of Western metaphysics as well as of traditional Western views of art, the latter being inextricably linked to the former. Finally, in Chapter 11, we will exhaustively explore this post-structuralism via the works of Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson.

Further Reading

The last decade some interesting anthologies on aesthetics have been published:

- Stephen David Ross (ed.), *Art and its significance: an anthology of aesthetic theory*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994 (Originally published in 1984).
 David Goldblatt and Lee Brown (eds.), *Aesthetics: a reader in the philosophy of arts*, Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2004 (Originally published in 1997).
 Eric Dayton (ed.), *Art and interpretation: an anthology of readings in aesthetics and the philosophy of art*, Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 1998.
 Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (eds.), *Aesthetics and the philosophy of art: the analytic tradition: an anthology*, Malden, M.A. : Blackwell Publishers, 2004.
 P. Kivy (ed.), *The Blackwell guide to aesthetics*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2004.

In the recent boom of anthologies the following threefold project deserves to be mentioned separately:

- Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, Jason Gaiger (ed.), *Art in theory 1648–1815: an anthology of changing ideas*, London: Blackwell, 2000.
 Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, Jason Gaiger (ed.), *Art in theory 1815–1900: an anthology of changing idea*, London: Blackwell, 2000.
 Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, Jason Gaiger (ed.), *Art in theory 1900–2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, London: Blackwell, 2002.
 (This project embodies a rather complete survey of theoretical insights, which have accompanied the development of Western art since 1648. It contains not only texts from philosophers, but from artists, art critics, writers, psychoanalysts, politicians, and so on. The three volumes offer a gigantic and historically sound reconstruction of important, often forgotten texts. Most of the texts are quite readable.)

Quite old, already classical but still interesting readers are:

- Melvin Rader (ed.), *Modern book of aesthetics: an anthology*, New York: Dryden Press, 1979 (Originally published in 1935).
- Joseph Margolis (ed.), *Philosophy looks at the arts. Contemporary readings in aesthetics*. Temple: Temple University Press, 1987 (Originally published in 1962).
- W.E. Kennick (ed.), *Art and philosophy: reading in aesthetics*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979 (Originally published in 1964).

In the seventies and the eighties two excellent readers saw the light:

- George Dickie and Richard J. Sclafani (eds.), *Aesthetics: a critical anthology*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989 (Originally published 1977).
- Patricia H. Werhane (ed.), *Philosophical issues in art*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1984.

During the last decade a lot of introductions into philosophy of art have been published. Some older, almost classical introductions are:

- Arthur Weiss, *Introduction to the philosophy of art*, Berkeley, CA: Berkeley University Press, 1910.
- Edward Bullough, *Aesthetics: lectures and essays*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977 (Originally published by Stanford University Press, 1957).
- Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics. Problems in the philosophy of criticism*, New York: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1981 (Originally published in 1958).
- George Dickie, *Introduction to aesthetics: an analytical approach*, Oxford, 1997. (Originally published in 1971 under the title: *Aesthetics: an introduction*).
- Anne Sheppard, *Aesthetics; an introduction to the philosophy of art*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Some excellent, more recent introductions are:

- Gordon Graham and Richard Eldridge, *An introduction to the philosophy of art*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Standard works on the history of aesthetics:

- Katherine E. Gilbert and Helmut Kuhn, *History of aesthetics*, Westport, Conn., Greenwood, 1972 (Originally published in 1939).
- Wladislaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of aesthetics*, 3 Vols, Den Haag: Mouton, 1970-74.

On Aesthetics in the Middle-Ages:

- Umberto Eco, *Art and beauty in the Middle-Ages*, (transl. by H. Bredin), New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986.