

**THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE TWENTIETH
WORLD CONGRESS OF PHILOSOPHY**

VOLUME 4

***Philosophies of Religion, Art,
and Creativity***

EDITOR

Kevin L. Stoehr, Boston University

Philosophy Documentation Center

Bowling Green State University

1999

**GLARING
OMISSIONS IN
TRADITIONAL
THEORIES OF ART**

Peg Zeglin Brand

I investigate the role of feminist theorizing in relation to traditionally-based aesthetics. Feminist artworks have arisen within the context of a patriarchal Artworld dominated for thousands of years by male artists, critics, theorists, and philosophers. I look at the history of that context as it impacts philosophical theorizing by pinpointing the narrow range of the paradigms used in defining "art." I test the plausibility of Danto's *After the End of Art* vision of a post-historical, pluralistic future in which "anything goes," a future that unfortunately rests upon the same outdated foundation as the concept "art."

Within current philosophical aesthetics, various theories of 'art' continue to be proposed in spite of mid-century misgivings and against the backdrop of early Greek origins rooted in the term *teche* (meaning "craft" and not "art"). When Wittgenstein questioned the very enterprise of defining as the purview and purpose of philosophy, he broke the historical chain—dating back to Plato and Aristotle—that sought to identify the essence of that uniquely human activity now collectively labeled 'art'. The common perception that philosophical aesthetics began at some undetermined point in time and progressed triumphantly and predictably toward some goal until its recent demise (Arthur Danto's end of art; Victor Burgin's end of art theory) is a myth. It invariably portrayed Wittgenstein's influence on the field—evidenced in the writings of Morris Weitz and others—as an irreparable and cataclysmic break in the chain. The resistance of Weitz to "any attempt to state the defining properties of art" constituted a severing of stasis in the ongoing theorizing about art; a break in the narrative of 'art': a collapse of the longstanding Institution. In no uncertain terms, Weitz

argued that “theory—in the requisite classical sense—is never forthcoming in art.” If this pronouncement had been accepted as true, there would have been no post-Wittgensteinian proliferation of theories about art. But there has been, and analytic aesthetics has been quick to revise its picture of past philosophizing about art and Wittgenstein’s role in it. The break in the chain was reinterpreted as a temporary aberration quickly repaired.

Now, at the end of the twentieth century, we find ourselves not only theorizing about art but also classifying those theories into categories. We live in an age of functional, procedural, historical, and intentional theories of art whereby the former define ‘art’ in terms of the unique function it fulfills while the latter cast the creation of art in terms of its accordance with certain rules and procedures. Many theories are also labeled ‘contextual’ since, unlike old-fashioned functional accounts, they utilize an analysis of the art historical context of the work.

Why are there so many theories? And why particularly—in contrast to fields such as literary theory, feminist art theory, and other subdisciplines of philosophy that have generated influential feminist theories in ethics, epistemology, and philosophy of science—has no feminist theory of art gained prominence in philosophical aesthetics? Why, in light of twenty-five years of feminist theorizing on art, do gender and race still fail to play any significant role even in recent contextual theories, poised as they are to lead us into the next millennium?

This essay will investigate the role of feminist theorizing in relation to traditionally-based aesthetics. Noting that feminist artworks have arisen within the context of a patriarchal Artworld dominated for thousands of years by male artists, critics, theorists, and philosophers, I will look at the history of that context as it impacts philosophical theory by pinpointing the narrow range of the paradigms used in defining ‘art’. I will test the plausibility of Danto’s *After the End of Art* vision of a post-historical, pluralistic future in which ‘anything goes’: a future that unfortunately rests upon the same foundation as the past concept of ‘art’.

PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIES AND DEFINITIONS OF ART

Several issues bear emphasizing when we look back on the history of writing about art in terms of its dynamic, complex interactions as well as interconnections with philosophical aesthetics. At times, one seems to predate and predetermine the other, while at other times they work in tandem. Artistic and historical criteria for evaluating art did not arise in a vacuum: completely separate and outside philosophical interests. Likewise, the philosophy of art was not immune from overwhelming

influences of certain types of art held in high regard. This was especially true during the time in which art history was being “written” in the nineteenth century, with the rise of museums and the demarcation of high art from low. It is perhaps no coincidence that Hegel’s historical theory of art was a product of this time.

At no time in these theoretical developments—of museums, art history, philosophical aesthetics—were women artists or theorists allowed to play a real role. One would hope that such insularity was short-lived. But this is hardly the case even in the twentieth century—especially with regard to the dominant philosophical theories of art.

The entire history of art has been based on paradigms. It is the history of the ‘great masters’, their ‘genius’, their ‘masterpieces’.¹ Their history is clearly traceable, back to the Greeks, highlighted with the names of such sculptors as Polykleitos and Praxiteles. In spite of the Renaissance writer Vasari’s citing several women in his renowned *Lives of the Artists*, male artists have dominated the established historicizing of art as a scholarly field and academic discipline. Pressure from feminist art historians has forced the canon to become more inclusive, bringing recognition to other invisible artists as well: more examples by artists of color, new explanations of American Indian artifacts and culture, and entire reconceptualizations of the way art history had been previously cast.² The classification of certain peoples as “Primitive” has been rethought; the roots of African art have been traced back to the zenith of Egyptian civilization; the art of Asian and Pacific cultures has gained in stature; the collective label of ‘other’ is no longer attached to any culture different from the predominant Western; and a general dissection of the history-by-paradigm approach has become standard practice in light of charges of elitism, sexism, racism, and homophobia.³ The history of art has come under scrutiny as has its foundation of aesthetic criteria—criteria established by white males of an upper-class eighteenth-century European society who ushered in the birth of modern aesthetics.⁴

Philosophers, who rarely argue for the artistic status of a work of art that has not already been deemed a paradigm by art critics or art historians, continue to rely upon an old version of art history. Thus, philosophical theorizing is nearly two decades behind in updating its paradigms. Given this fact, it is no surprise to read volumes of writings in aesthetics and find no references to women artists. If one rereads Plato on imitation, beauty is the ideal, but one can only surmise as to whether women—who were allowed a role in the waging of war and governance—would also be allowed participation in the arts.⁵ In reviewing Aristotle on tragedy, we are reminded that it was inappropriate for a female character to be manly or clever due to her inferiority.⁶ Eighteenth-century

empiricists introduced gender into the description of the experience by which one exercised his faculty of taste, and nature and art were considered beautiful or sublime.⁷ Unsurprisingly, the masculine sublime was ranked above the feminine beautiful. Women were designated passive exemplars of beauty: good for being looked at. In fact, some theories of art were promulgated by several of the most notorious misogynists in the history of philosophy, viz., Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Hegel, in keeping with the tradition set by Aristotle, claimed that 'womankind' is constituted through suppression. This does not mean that their theories of art were necessarily misogynistic but it certainly insures that their base of artistic examples excluded women as artists on a par with men.

It is no surprise, given these philosophical convictions, that women were denied active roles in the establishing of the philosophical foundations of aesthetics and recognition as artists in the production of art, and excluded from establishing the criteria for canonizing art historical styles and personae. Aesthetics was gendered masculine from the beginning. These are strong charges in light of philosophy's claims to pursue criteria for definition and evaluation that are universal and objective. What feminist scholars have tried to show (and as I will continue to argue below) is that any theory purporting to be universal but based on biased criteria with a limited range of applicability is inherently flawed.

Aesthetic theorists placed significant emphasis on the notion of disinterestedness, setting the stage for the advent of aesthetic attitude theories and isolationist theories that precluded contextual data from being relevant to the aesthetic experiencing of art. Information about the artist, her/his origins and intentions, was considered irrelevant and the theories of Stolnitz and Beardsley, among others, sought to isolate art from its socio-historical context at all costs.⁸ Consistent with their predecessors, twentieth-century aestheticians located their paradigms safely within the same art history as did previous philosophers. Only with the challenge of explaining Duchamp's *Fountain*, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, and other conceptual art—in conjunction with Wittgenstein's anti-essentialism—did theories arise that took the sociological (the institution of art) and the art historical contexts into consideration. Two main leaders in this move were Arthur Danto and George Dickie. Their theories contained the germ of theories subsequently proposed by Lucian Krukowski, Jerrold Levinson, Noël Carroll, and Marcia Eaton.

According to Stephen Davies, theories of art divide into three categories: functional, procedural, and historical/intentional.⁹ Even within contemporary theorizing about art, however, the range of paradigms cited is grossly skewed to white male artists. The problem with these theories is

not just that women have been left out of the written and conceptual histories of art, nor that they still fail to function within art history, art criticism, and aesthetics as paradigms of 'art' or 'good art'. Rather it's that theorizing about art—as guided by this narrow range of paradigms—is incomplete and conceptually inadequate. It cannot encompass all art because the stipulated precedents from history and criticism preclude the broader spectrum of what counts as human expression and creativity. This is why challenges are continually mounted to existing theories: what about the case of driftwood? Salvador Dali's pile of rocks? Aboriginal art? Naive art? Graffiti art? Digital art?

Let us look at some of the language used to stipulate the narrow range of paradigms and the way such paradigms are established. In Dickie's two versions (and related writings) of the Institutional Theory, no woman artist is cited although the definitions appear relatively gender-neutral. In the first definition, a work of art is an artifact that has had bestowed upon it the status of art by someone qualified within the ongoing institution of art.¹⁰ For Dickie, this means the continuum of practices—conventions—that constitute the ongoing practice, or institution, of art. Davies designates Dickie's theory as inadequate and "ahistorical" since it stipulates roles that members of the artworld hold without providing any particulars of those roles, i.e., Dickie fails "to characterize the roles that generate the structure of that institution—their boundaries, their limitations, the circumstances under which they change, the conditions for their occupancy, and so on."¹¹

Thus Dickie has failed to certify the history of art as the basis of his theory, thereby leaving open to speculation the specifics of who has occupied those roles in the past, who occupies the roles now, and who will occupy the roles in the future. That is, in spite of Dickie's oversimplified claim that anyone "could" be an artist within the artworld, some reflection on the socio-historical restrictions on women would prompt reconsideration.¹²

The revised version of the Institutional Theory, although clearer, still falls short for Davies, who seeks more information about the authority persons come to hold in the artworld (by which they may confer status of arthood).¹³ Feminists have asked the same type of question for years, though not in Institutional Theory terminology. They, too, have challenged the authority of the philosophers of taste of the eighteenth century, the historians of art of the nineteenth century, the art critics and theorists of the twentieth century. It appears that philosophers have come rather late to the fundamental questions that challenge the variety of procedures by which definitions of 'art' have come to be codified. Given this state of things, the procedural approach may be suspect in all its manifestations.

Let's take another example. In Arthur Danto's *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, he discusses the "experts" who accorded the status of art to Warhol's *Brillo Box* and Duchamp's *Fountain*:

The experts really were experts in the same way in which astronomers are experts on whether something is a star. They saw that these works had meanings which their indiscernible counterparts lacked, and they saw as well the way these works embodied those meanings.¹⁴

Who were these experts? The art critics, we presume: empowered by the Artworld on Danto's theory and authorized by the institutions of Dickie's theory. Who deemed them expert? It is unclear, although the analogy to astronomy implies that these are persons educated and experienced in knowing about art, reminiscent, perhaps, of David Hume's qualified person of taste.

The fact that artworks by women fail to be cited as paradigms and women critics fail to be considered "expert" explains why the paradigms remain less than fully representative. This is particularly interesting, given Danto's adjustment of his "admittedly somewhat reckless claim" concerning the death of art.¹⁵ In prior writings, Danto was famous for sounding the death knell for art as we know it. Art, in its linear progression (*à la* Hegel), had reached its end—or had at least reached the point at which it "had nearly turned into philosophy." He has reconsidered this opinion and now defines the present moment in art as "open" and at "the conjunction of essentialism and historicism":

As we seek to grasp the essence of art—or to speak less portentously, of an adequate philosophical definition of art—our task is immensely facilitated by the recognition that the extension of the term 'work of art' is now altogether open, so that in effect we live in a time when everything is possible for artists¹⁶

Still borrowing from Hegel, he claims that freedom defines our post-historical period of art; it stipulates our "modalities of history":

The sense in which everything is possible is that in which there are no *a priori* constraints on what a work of visual art can look like, so that anything visible can be a visual work. This is part of what it really means to live at the end of art history.¹⁷

This should come as good news for women artists who worked outside the 'pale of history' (i.e., raced white/'pale') for so long and for feminist theorists who developed alternative theories of art that deviated from the canonical norm. If we are living at the end of art history,

several possibilities lie before us. One is to consider ourselves at a moment in time when we can say good riddance to the old exclusive art history and welcome to the new. But it's not clear what Danto foresees as the new history nor how it will come to be generated. He cites Wolfflin "with his keen sense of historical modalities—of possibility and impossibility"—as his guide, but his examples reflect the narrowness of staunch conservative art historians like Kenneth Clark and Robert Hughes.¹⁸ In Danto's vision of the future, the range of possibilities of art still extend no further than Grünewald, Durer, Terborch, Bernini, Botticelli, Lorenzo di Credi, Caravaggio, Pinturicchio, Courbet, Giotto, Cervantes, Guercino, Feuerbach, Manet, Poussin, the Bolognese 'masters', Praxiteles, Van Meegeren, Vermeer, Rubens, Rembrandt, the "post-modern masterpiece" of the American painter Russell Connor, and the "masterpiece" of the "true heroes of the post-historical period," the "post-historical masters" Komar and Melamid.¹⁹ It appears that art paradigms in a post-historical period are no different than ones from a previous history. Danto may simply answer this charge by claiming that women artists implicitly form part of the canon of art, but his negligence in citing them as *paradigms* might lead us to view his response as *ad hoc* and inadequate. If women artists, critics, and theorists are part of the post-historical age of Pluralism, why are they not visible?

More pointedly, given that Connor's work consists of jointly parodying Rubens' *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus* and Picasso's *Desmoiselles d'Avignon*—in which the women being carried off by the two horsemen are imitations of Picasso's women (already an appropriation of African art)—how do we interpret Danto's judgment of this as a 'masterpiece' much less as comic? Defining what is funny can be delicately gender- and race-specific.²⁰ It is questionable to some feminists whether any rape scene can count as an artistic 'masterpiece', much less whether a parodied rape scene can ever be considered 'comic'—even if it is done for the sake of artistic expression (appropriation being a fashionable style in the 1990s) and the enjoyment of the Artworld.

Consider several other historical definitions as well. Lucian Krukowski makes the link of contemporary art with its past and future absolutely explicit. Similar to Danto's theory, his account stipulates that art status is dependent upon something sharing aesthetic properties with "established artworks." In other words, what counts as art are those things that share properties with past and future art. If, however, as I have pointed out above, what is considered past 'art' is suspect, then any theory that necessarily links art to the past is similarly suspect. Of course, it could be the case that Krukowski's notion of past art would include quilts by American women, pottery by African natives, and aboriginal

bark paintings, but he has not made this explicit, and his reliance upon “established artworks” limits him to the traditional canon of art history.

Noël Carroll’s theory is necessarily tied to a narrowly-defined past as well. His stipulation that art is a cluster of cultural practices directs attention away from past artworks to past practices and the persons responsible for those practices. Like Dickie’s institutional theory, he relies upon a model of historical evolution, again with its emphasis on “well-established” practices. It embeds current theorizing of the notion of ‘art’ in practices structured within the artworld as we know it. This means that inherited biases and narrowness determine the same range of paradigms. Jerrold Levinson’s historicist definition of art also relies upon artists’ intentions that tie their creation by linking art now to past art. The artist’s intention must be regarded in one of the ways in which past art has been regarded correctly. But the notion of being “regarded correctly” packs a considerable amount of precedent and bias, as with the other theories.

Even Marcia Eaton’s theory, which invokes a connection between the intrinsic properties of an artifact as they are deemed worthy of attention in “aesthetic traditions (history, criticism, theory),” is suspect.²¹ Her theory, which relies upon “talk about art” as both a necessary and sufficient condition in defining ‘art’, stipulates that artifacts not talked about are only “potential” works of art; they do not count as art until they are talked or written about. Women’s quilts are mentioned as an example of objects “that are finally being recognized as worthy of serious attention,” but her theory would inevitably exclude many other works by women that have been so far ignored by those who routinely talk about art.²² The silence surrounding women’s art leaves innumerable examples of ‘potential art’ dependent on a male-dominated Artworld. Thus her choice of authoritarian figures from the history of art criticism leaves her open to the same charge of narrowness.

Even this brief investigation of recent contextual theories of art reveals the narrow range of paradigms used in defining art. I recommend an authentic, post-Danto pluralism that truly integrates unrecognized paradigms into philosophical theorizing about art.²³

*Peg Zeglin Brand, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405-2601;
pbrand@indiana.edu*

NOTES

1. See Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
2. See the essays collected in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, Broude (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), as well as Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995).
3. For further discussion, see Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the 19th Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990).
4. See *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), and *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, ed. Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer (University Park, Pa.: Penn State Press, 1995).
5. E.g., Nancy Tuana, *The Less Noble Sex: Scientific, Religious, and Philosophical Conceptions of Woman's Nature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
6. See Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
7. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by J. T. Boulton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958).
8. Peggy Zeglin Brand, "Feminism in Context: A Role for Feminist Theory in Aesthetic Evaluation," in *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. John W. Bender and H. Gene Blocker (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993), 106.
9. Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).
10. George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).
11. Davies, *op. cit.*, 94.
12. See Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), and Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).
13. George Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (New York: Haven, 1984).
14. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 195.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, 197.

17. Ibid., 198.
18. Ibid., 199.
19. Ibid., 199f.
20. See my forthcoming *Parodies as Politics: Feminist Strategies in the Visual Arts* which discusses feminist theories of humor in comparison to traditional theories written by Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Hutcheson, Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Freud, and others.
21. Marcia Muelder Eaton, *Basic Issues in Aesthetics* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1988), 94.
22. Ibid., 95.
23. A longer version of this essay appears in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noël Carroll (University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Burgin, Victor. *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*. London: Macmillan, 1986.
- Carroll, Noel. "Art, Practice, and Narrative." *The Monist* 71 (1988): 140–56.
- Danto, Arthur C. *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- Krukowski, Lucien. "A Basis for Attributions of 'Art'," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39 (1980): 67–76.
- Levinson, Jerrold. "Defining Art Historically." *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979): 232–50.
- Weitz, Morris. "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15 (1956): 27–35.