<center>CHAPTER 10</center>

# Alley Art

## *Can We ... See ... at Last, the End of Ontology?*

### JUDITH R. BLAU

Last year our village's Downtown Council commissioned an artist, Michael Brown, to paint a mural on the full wall of one of the buildings adjoining a narrow alleyway just off the main street. The wall is roughly the length of an ordinary Manhattan apartment building that faces either north or south, which makes the mural nearly half the length of an uptown–downtown Manhattan block. Cream and black on a gray wall, the mural that Brown designed and painted, along with his apprentice and local school children, depicts the *joie de vivre* of a procession, whose participants are towers and gowners, from the past and the present. Its catalogue name for the purpose of town records is Mural #12, but villagers call it "Parade."

Most of the academicians are puffed up with cheerful pomposity, just as some shop-keepers give the air of great importance. But, really, the whole town is there: political activists, clergy, football players, cheerleaders, cops, firefighters, city officials, kids (some with spiked hair; others with baseball mitts; one with a violin), dads with strollers, homeless regulars, and students—blacks, whites, Latinos, Asians. It is an affirmative monument to the villagers, but I also detect some irony: that our unity is more apparent than real and our pluralism stands up only at public ceremonies.

Do we know that it is art, that is, in the sense that art is an institution? In the lower corner of "Parade," at the end furthest from the main street is a drawing of a sink, an old double sink, dating from about the 1920s. As the casual passer-by might say, "This mural has everything *and* the kitchen sink!" On the sink is painted, "R. Mutt," the signature that Duchamp sprawled on his 1917 urinal (*Fountain*). Although I was pleased with myself that I recognized this reference—a credit to my art history professors—I missed others, including one to Judy Chicago, prominent feminist artist and craftsperson. (She is in drag, so to speak.) The giveaway, Brown told me, is that she wears a baseball shirt with a Cubs logo, suggesting perhaps that public roles and public display trump conviction; or if the allusion is to Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe it might suggest that feminists are more authentic than commercialized sex goddesses. (Whatever. The joke provokes.)

JUDITH R. BLAU • Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599.
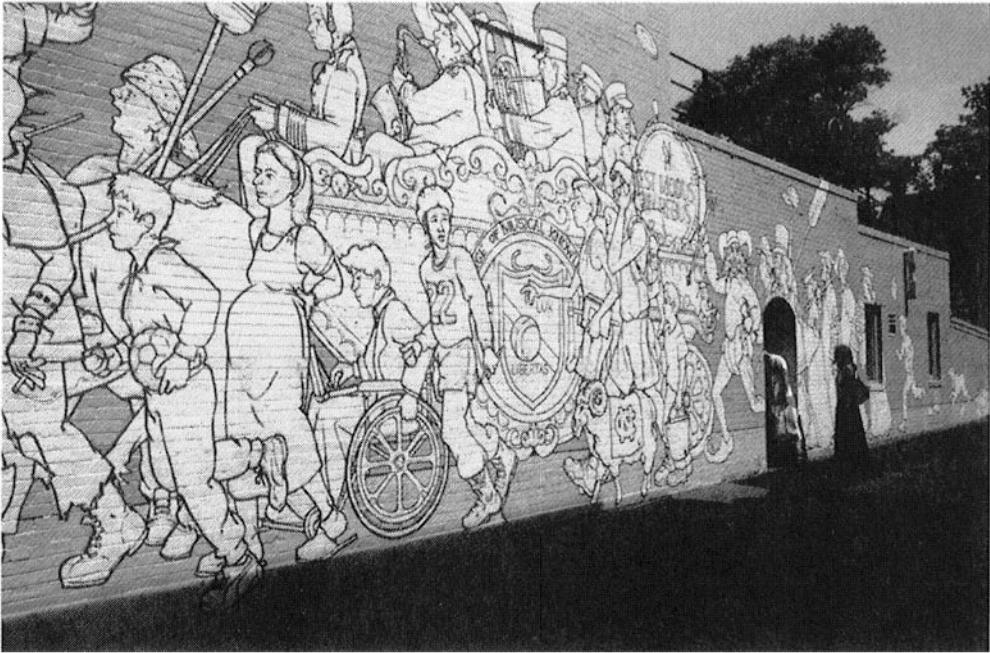
**FIGURE 10.1.**  Wall mural, *Parade*, by Michael Brown (Chapel Hill, North Carolina) (photograph by Lisa M. Collard).
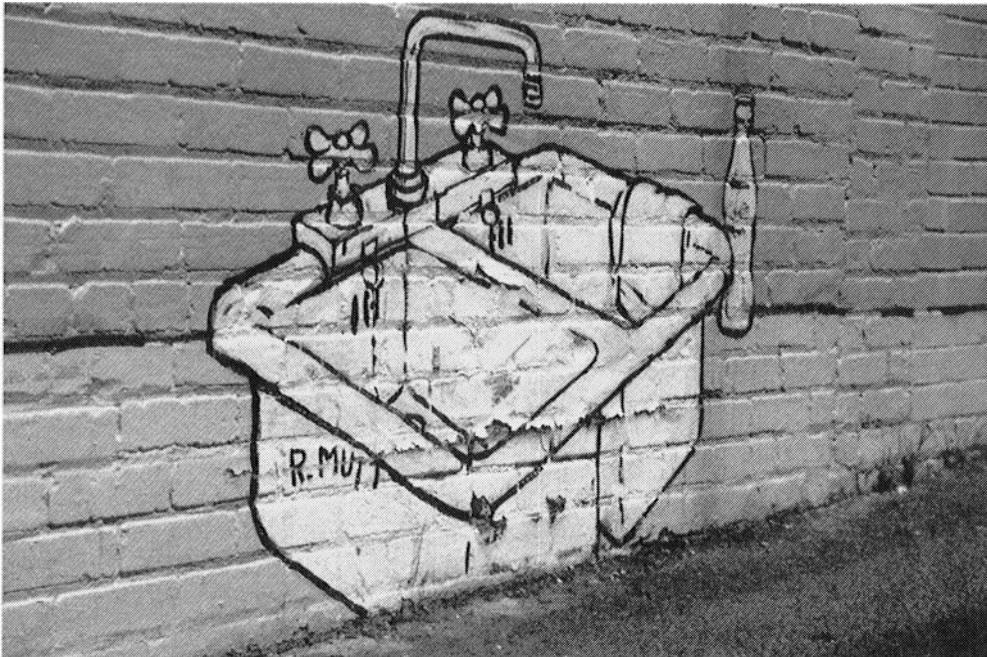


**FIGURE 10.2.**  Detail of wall mural, *Parade*, by Michael Brown (Chapel Hill, North Carolina) (photograph by Lisa M. Collard).

For all of the mural's populist themes—provincialism, theatricality, and satire—it *is* art. It cites some of Western art's memorable notations and uses art's institutionalized vocabularies, such as composition and framing. It also plays with themes that preoccupy contemporary artists, notably publicness, the deconstruction of durable structures, and historical memory. Yet it is not art in the Kantian sense of the term. The Kantian tradition of *art pour l'art* rests on the assumption that an artwork exists in its own autonomous realm. In the late 19th century, this came to mean autonomy from capitalism, industrialism, and bourgeois values, and then, in the United States, as autonomy from all values other than art's own. According to this tradition, art is sovereign only onto itself.

Like many contemporary public art works, "Parade" both invades and appropriates its context. It has no presumptions of its own autonomy. It celebrates its contemporary and historical subjects and enjoins them to commingle among themselves and engage those who pass them by. By the same token it makes no moral claim that it relates to universal aesthetic values, as the Kantian tradition would insist. Brown does not demand assent, but instead invites our reactions and comments, while he rebukes us. Nor does Brown assume much about the nature of the subjectivity that viewers ought bring to the experiencing of the work— something of importance in Western aesthetics—as signaled by, for example, the imperative of stylistic unity as a criterion for evaluation and appreciation (Adorno, 1984). In my view, "Parade," like other contemporary public art works, is part of a quiet revolution in aesthetics that has great significance for the social sciences.

Postontological art rejects the distinction between the "I" and the "You," and the "Us" and the "Them," and the correlative distinction between "the subjective" and the "objective." As I will argue, contemporary artworks are about "betweenness"; between, for example, groups, races, genders, nations, generations, and historical periods (Blau, 2000). The starting point for "betweenness" involves "introductions all round," which are required for artworks whose details about particular places, people, and history may be obscure to outsiders. Museums and galleries now often provide detailed narratives printed on cards off to the side of an artwork to help make these introductions. Contemporary artworks often exist in interstitial social spaces (and sometimes, interstitial geographical spaces; see Harris, 1999) and do not recognize or grant privilege to any.

## THE CENTRAL PROBLEM

The reason why I use the hulky terms, "ontology" and "postontology," is that I want to refer to an historical divide of consciousness, between considering that the self is uniquely and autonomously constituted and the view of a plural self that exists in terms of many codependencies. In Kantian aesthetics, a corollary of ontology is the imperative of a universal standard of beauty, namely, that a person judges an artwork in a "disintererested" way, which leads to sound judgment. The Kantian "I" who sought cognitive understanding in science was not so different from the "I" who sought subjective pleasure from art, and it is roughly in these terms that we can see the origins of utilitarianism, capitalism, consumerism, taste, rationality, and reason. This conception of the "I" is very different from the current conception of the Self that is uncentered, underdetermined, pluralistic, and who struggles with multiple identities, or is preoccupied with a master identity. The brilliance of Kant's aesthetic philosophy is attested to by its long-standing usefulness; it lasted from the end of the 18th century through nearly the whole of the 20th century and helped to sustain European avant-gardes as well as America's

Abstract Expressionism, even though ostensibly, as I will suggest, they were rooted in quite different art traditions.

It is useful to expand a bit on Kantian aesthetics to show that both reason and aesthetic judgments were situated with individuals and that both involved principles to which individuals refer. He contrasts reason (from his *Critique of Pure Reason*) with aesthetic evaluations in *Critique of Judgment* (1790):

> These concepts (the categories) call for a Deduction, and such was supplied in the Critique of Pure Reason.... This problem had, accordingly, to do with the *a priori* principles of pure understanding and its theoretical judgments. [But in contrast] ... there arises a judgment which is aesthetic and not cognitive.... How are judgments of taste possible? This problem, therefore, is concerned with *a priori* principles of pure judgment in *aesthetic* judgments, i.e., not those in which (as in theoretical judgments) it has merely to subsume under objective concepts of understanding, and in which it comes under a law, but rather those in which it is itself, subjectively, object as well as law.... All that it [aesthetic judgment] holds out for is that we are justified in presupposing that the same conditions of judgment which we find in ourselves are universally present in every man. (Kant 1790/1952, pp. 143–145)

Taste, thus, is enlightened judgment and derives its imperativeness from being universal. Moreover, it is the artist, as creative genius, who gives the "rule to art," namely, dictates the standards that becomes universally accepted (Kant, 1790/1952, p. 168). This view survived more or less intact through Hume, Wittgenstein, Hegel, Nietzsche, Trotsky, and Derrida. However, it just barely survived Derrida, and did not at all survive Foucault.

We have come to understand that contemporary conditions—a multiplicity of social worlds, of worldviews—pose different challenges for aesthetic theory, art making, and evaluating art. The conception of the decentered, underdetermined, or the pluralistic self has particular significance in understanding contemporary art. To begin with we might provisionally consider an artwork to be something like a link involving the artist, viewers, groups, and meanings. This argument snips at the heels of the Kantian assumptions about genius, individual subjectivity, and universal standards of judgment. One answer, which I consider too easy as a way out, is to consider contemporary art as merely another expression of cultural and social pluralism. Such a relativist perspective denies art its institutional character, and by posing that art simply mirrors social life, undermines its moral power.

## THE DISTINCTIVE CLAIMS OF AESTHETICS

I approach the topic of aesthetics as being worthy in its own right, rather than to reiterate the view that art is a component of culture (for example, Williams, 1961; Halle, 1993) or the view that art traditions survive because they shore up class boundaries (Bourdieu, 1984; Gans, 1999; DiMaggio, 1982) and help to legitimize political elites (Mukerji, 1997). These approaches have been extremely useful, and not, in my view, at all wrong. Most importantly, they have challenged the high–low distinction and demonstrated the extent to which the rich have relied on High Art to define class lines. However, a consequence has been that social scientists have marginalized the power of aesthetic theory and quite inadvertently trivialized what artists do and what they say they do.

Art, whether it is rooted in the aesthetics of a craft convention, a religious or cultural tradition, or a self-conscious canon, is bracketed in its own terms, as an expression of sensuousness and imaginative performance. Art forms establish a world for which meaningfulness is a given, but the given is the occasion of considerable critical and interpretive analysis (Wood, 1999). When I use the term "aesthetics," I mean it in the sense of any self-

conscious critical and interpretive tradition, for which there are exemplary cases: the way the horns on the mask must be carved, a particular Corot landscape, Duchamp's urinal, or the manner of depicting the rain god Tlaloc.

There are four reasons why aesthetics may be of interest to social theorists. First, aesthetics, to the extent that it is a specialty of moral philosophy, deals with questions of human values and meaning, something with which contemporary social scientists grapple, as there is growing concern about social justice and human rights. Second, as aesthetics veers from philosophy to criticism and advocacy, it requires a practical concern with ethics, a field underdeveloped in the social sciences, but which may accompany our newfound interest in social justice and human rights. Third, critical traditions in the arts are not vexed by the splits with which sociologists contend involving positivism, interpretation, and historical study. Finally, aesthetics takes representation as a central problem, and because representation is in constant flux, aesthetics is routinely in a crisis mode, as it might be said of social theory in contemporary times.

Given the problems of comparability among the performing, visual, and musical arts, art theory has traditionally been about the visual arts, and this too will be my focus. However, I will suggest at the close of my chapter that this tight specialization is bound to change as artists create works that are not easily contained within museum walls. Owing to digitalization and other technologies (see Virilio, 1994), artists are able to transgress traditional boundaries in the arts. In the meantime, it is possible to draw on aesthetics as it is currently configured around art practices and suppose that there will always be aesthetic principles just as there will always be institutional frameworks for the application and development of these principles.

## WHAT IS ART?

A reference point for any aesthetics is a conception of art practice, and the most generous of conceptions gives wide berth to others while containing the kernel of one's own version of what the morrow might bring. Here I draw broadly from contemporary art theory, the striking tone of which highlights pluralism and the dialogical qualities of art. It is useful to start with some major dimensions of art that I believe are not all that controversial within contemporary aesthetics.

First, art *defines a real world of its own*. Art—folk, commercial, abstract, figurative, tribal—is mimetic (inauthentic), although people reference artworks in terms of what they take to be real at the time and in their context. What museum-going Americans in around 1970 may have taken as an exemplary statement involving emancipation and freedom, say, a Rothko painting exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art is now in some permanent collection and viewed by the public as an icon of an earlier time. The African mask loses its magic, although not its beauty, on the wall in a collector's home. Yet then, what is more "real," the thing itself or the representation of the thing? Is it possible to greatly marvel at a water lily in a pond after seeing one of Monet's paintings of water lilies? Can your lover hold a candle to any Greek sculpture? Yet in another sense, the artwork takes power and agency from what it represents and gives it to the viewer. The lion is tamed by the photographer and images of gods give redemption to pilgrims. Brown's mural is congenial, but it rebukes its subjects, as its subjects; we, the viewers, are aware. Thereby, second, art is *subversive and critical*.

Third, in apparent contradiction to its mimetic and its fleeting character and its subversive and critical capacity, art is *affirmative* as it represents a feeling or conception (Langer, 1957). Thus, artworks, at least many of those that are very interesting, shape a dialectic between

subversiveness and affirmation. Cezanne subverted space to affirm the compositional princi-
ples on which space depends. Goya's mannerisms mocked his royal subjects. Picasso's
"Guernica" depicts evil but affirms painterly expression. Maya Ying Lin's Veterans Memorial
subverts ostentatious monumentality, long considered as only appropriate for public com-
memorative statutes.

Fourth, art is a *reference point* for trans-local meaning and communication, and thereby
expands both knowledge and understanding across great boundaries involving language,
culture, and other differences. Artworks mediate and thereby weakly tie together different
reference points and identities, potentially bringing about a sense of mutual awareness. The
diffusion of an art style and the absorption of many others mark the genius of Islam between
about 750 to the 12th century, Christianity later, and likewise the Romans even earlier, but the
contemporary challenge is to achieve intermingling without mangling what already exists.
Crossovers between African, Caribbean, and Latin music retain qualities from each original
source. Official attempts to lace Peking opera productions with Western components have
been lamentable failures. It seems to work the more casual it is.

Fifth, artworks are part of a *historically dynamic institution*, which in turn relates in
complex ways to other institutions, such as the political economy, religion, and the nation-
state (for example, Corse, 1997). The avant-garde, even with its pretense of autonomy, was no
exception to this. Sixth, the artwork–public (viewer) nexus is made in the terms of an
enigmatic link that involves meaning, which may or may not be informed by theory. We can
call this enigmatic link *interpretation*. This can be formalized as criticism (Shrum, 1996), but
interpretation rightfully belongs to those who view the artwork, just as the right to experience
and evaluate live music is that of the listener's. Something of this enigmatic link between the
viewer and artwork may be hardwired in human beings, but still we can describe it in
experiential terms, as the capacity to "feel" or "know" beauty, delight, tranquility, or terror.

My approach is to ignore the conventional distinctions in aesthetics, those that relate to
experiencing art (Dewey, 1934/1958; Gadamer, 1975), evaluating art (Dickie, 1988; Hume,
1757/1998), and the character of aesthetic objects (Gombrich, 1971), but I attempt to select
puzzles in art theory that suggest parallels to social theory, namely, art's criticality and social
affirmative functions, as spanning local meaning, as an institution, and as mediation.

Another convergence between aesthetics and social theory might be considered in the
following terms. As Alexander (1995, p. 11) points out, modernism in sociology was articu-
lated in the following ideal typical terms: coherently organized systems; progressive evolution
from traditional to modern (individualistic, democratic, capitalistic, universalistic, and secu-
lar); and functional interdependence. Modern art, or at least American Abstract Expressio-
nism, was nicely compatible with this modernist conception. It relied, as Bernstein (1992)
argues, on a sharp differentiation between morality and beauty and on the mythic conception
of the individual (the creative artist). Modernism in art, at least in the United States, as
Abstract Expressionism, also disavowed any political agenda. It was antiparticularistic (that
is, anti-Kitsch), elitist, and defended as nonideological and universalistic. Its very principled
nonfigurativeness and abstractness were presumably testimony to its transcendence over
political and cultural differences.

Contemporary art is different now than it was in the 1950s and 1960s, as our understand-
ing of social worlds is also different. Now social theorists consider that social life is weakly
organized through networks, local practices, and social cooperation instead of by ordered
systems (Misztal, 2000). Aesthetic theorists suggest that we consider how meaning and value
are also weakly organized by thematic interpretations that have significance for linking
traditions, affirming local practices, and for helping to achieve awareness of codependencies.

Art has a particular advantage in this, and there are "things" that mediate transactions, namely, performances, dances, murals, videos, exhibits, sculptures, paintings, and events.

## AN ACCOUNT OF THE MODERN

To illustrate that art is self-consciously distinct from culture and that at least for the past century in Europe many artists participated in movements that were explicitly ideological, I provide a listing in Table 10.1 of major 20th-century art movements. They are identified as either avowing a political ideology or not, and for those that were ideological, I label them as either having a Left or Right agenda. The primary source used is Harrison and Wood (1992) and I explain later why I end the series about 1975. Dates of formation are not always clear, but I use dates of manifestos or major first exhibits given by Harrison and Wood. Political orientations are usually clear enough. The futurists are listed twice—1912 and 1922—because they began as a left-oriented radical movement, but many of the artists later sided with Mussolini. The formation of the Artists' Union in the Soviet Union on April 23, 1932, was the effective end of artistic diversity and dissent in the Soviet Union until toward the end of the Cold War. Other movements are described as having a right agenda, including US Regionalism (c. 1935), owing to an appeal to nationalism, absolutism, and social purification. The main point is to show how very early art movements self-consciously evolved in terms of "art for art's sake," and subsequent movements became increasingly involved in geopolitical alignments, until Abstract Expressionism in the United States (ostensibly) abandoned the partisanship of such alignments.

By 1900, the revolution against the academy and traditional constraints was considered to have been successful. The Impressionists, and then the Postimpressionists, had completely overturned conventions about style, technique, and training. Court and official patronage had come to an end. The early 20th-century movements—Divisionism, Symbolists, Synthetism, Metaphysics, Jugendstil, Fauves, Orphism, Suprematism, Cubism, Purism, and the German Expressionist movements (Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter)—centered on controversies dealing with painterly values—line, color, shapes, and form. During this early period art styles were defended by their respective publicists in terms of their psychological appeal and often justified in terms of Freudian theory. For example, Benedetto Croce (1913/1965) described Symbolism as epitomizing "intuition"; the Postimpressionists, such as Gauguin, were considered by Roger Fry (1909/1924) to be drawing from "deep, instinctual primitivism"; Hermann Bahr (1916/1925) stressed the "life-giving" qualities of German Expressionism; and, it was "purity" that Guillaume Apollinaire (1913/1949) found in Cubist works. Early modernism in art, in short, was something of an escape from the ordeals of the brutalizing conditions in cities and factories, but at the same time signaled a rather precocious appeal to universal values and an international order. Artworks related to personal, subjective identities and emotional needs, something Abstract Expressionism would later draw upon.

Paradoxically, these early movements that dominated the first two and a half decades of the century became a negative frame of reference for most subsequent European avant-gardists, although they were appropriated by American avant-gardists. A somewhat simplified, but largely correct interpretation, is that American Abstract Expressionism was rooted in a denial of heterodoxy and of vexing global problems, and instead was preoccupied with the relationship between individual expression and what was considered to be a baseline universal aesthetic (Crane, 1987). Ignoring philosophical movements in Europe, such as Existentialism as well as the Marxist debates that fueled European art movements, US critics appropriated

TABLE 10.1. Art Movements 1900–1975, Classified as: Exclusive Claim as Art for Art's Sake, or Not, and If Not, as Politically Progressive Agenda (Left) or a Politically Right Preservationist Agenda (Right), with Approximate Founding Dates, and Representative Artists[a]

|  | Art for art's sake | Left agenda | Right agenda |
|---|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Divisionism, c. 1900 (Paul Signac) | A |  |  |
| Symbolism, c. 1900 (Paul Gaugin) | A |  |  |
| Jugendstil, c. 1900 (August Endell) | A |  |  |
| Brücke, c. 1905 (Ludwig Kirchner) | A |  |  |
| Synthetism, c. 1910 (Paul Cezanne) | A |  |  |
| Fauve, c. 1910 (Henri Matisse) | A |  |  |
| Metaphyiscal School, c. 1910 (Giorgio di Chirico) |  |  | R |
| Futurism, c. 1912 (Filippo Tommaso Marinetti) |  | L |  |
| Orphism, 1912 (Robert Delauney) | A |  |  |
| Theosophy, c. 1914 (Wassily Kandinsky) | A |  |  |
| Vortex, c. 1914 (Percy Wyndham Lewis) |  |  | R |
| Suprematism, 1915 (Kasimir Malevich) |  | L |  |
| Neo-Primitivism, c. 1915 (Alexander Shevchenko) |  | L |  |
| Der Blaue Reiter, c. 1915 (August Macke) | A |  |  |
| Neo-Plasticism, c. 1915 (Piet Mondrian) | A |  |  |
| Cubism, c. 1915 (Pablo Picasso) | A |  |  |
| De Stijl, c. 1917 (Theo van Doesburg) | A |  |  |
| Novembergruppe, 1918 (Max Peckstein) |  | L |  |
| Bauhaus, c. 1919 (Walter Gropius) |  | L |  |
| KOMFUT, c. 1919 (Vladimir Tatlin) |  | L |  |
| Arbeitstrat für Kunst, c. 1919 (Bruno Tat) |  | L |  |

TABLE 10.1. (*Continued*)

| | Art for art's sake | Left agenda | Right agenda |
|---|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Purism, 1920 (Charles Edouard Jenneret) | A | | |
| Dada, c. 1920 (Man Ray) | | L | |
| Constructivists, 1920 (Alexander Rodchenko) | | L | |
| L'Esprit Nouveau, 1921 (Juan Gris) | | | R |
| Opposition to Novembergruppe, c. 1921 (Otto Dix) | | L | |
| Futurism (Novecento), c. 1922 (Mario Sironi) | | | R |
| Unism, c. 1922 (Wladyslaw Strzeminski) | | L | |
| Syndicate of Technical Workers Painter and Scultors, c. 1922 (David A. Siqueros) | | | R |
| UNOVIS, c. 1923 (El Lissitsky) | | L | |
| Left Front for the Arts (LEF), c. 1923 (Leon Trotsky) | | L | |
| Surrealism, c. 1924 (Andre Breton) | | L | |
| AkhRR, c. 1924 (early Socialist Realism) | | | R |
| Red Group, c. 1924 (Georg Grosz) | | L | |
| ARBKD (Asso), c. 1928 (Otto Nagel) | | L | |
| October, 1928 (Alexander Rodchenko) | | L | |
| Combat League for German Culture, 1929 (Alfred Rosenberg) | | | R |
| Ash Can School, c. 1930 (Reginald Marsh) | | L | |
| Harlem Renaissance, c. 1930 (Sargent Johnson) | | L | |
| Artists' Union, c. 1932 (official Stalinist art) | | | R |
| [b]Early American modernism, 1932 (Hans Hoffman) | A | | |
| Association Abstraction-Création, c. 1932 (Hans Arp) | A | | |
| Artists' Union, US, c. 1935 (Stuart Davis) | | L | |

TABLE 10.1. (*Continued*)

|  | Art for art's sake | Left agenda | Right agenda |
|---|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Regionalism, c. 1935<br>(Grant Wood) |  |  | R |
| Artists' International Association, c. 1935<br>(Henry Moore) |  | L |  |
| New Realism, c. 1936<br>(Fernand Léger) |  | L |  |
| American Abstract Artists Association, c. 1936<br>(Ibram Lassaw) | A |  |  |
| Constructivism, c. 1937<br>(Naum Gabo) | A |  |  |
| Independent Federation, c. 1938<br>(Diego Rivera) |  | L |  |
| ᶜNew York School, 1945<br>(Adolph Gottlieb) | A |  |  |
| Art Brut, 1948<br>(Jean Dubuffet) |  | L |  |
| Cobra, 1948<br>(Karl Appel) |  | L |  |
| Spatialism, c. 1946<br>(Lucio Fontana) | A |  |  |
| Independent Group, c. 1952<br>(Brit., Pop Art; Richard Hamilton) |  | L |  |
| Situationists, c. 1957<br>(Guy Debord) |  | L |  |
| Nouveaux Réalistes, c. 1959<br>(Yves Klein) | A |  |  |
| The New Realists, c. 1960<br>(Paris—Jean Tinguely) |  | L |  |
| Happening, 1960<br>(Allan Kaprow) |  | L |  |
| Pop Art, c. 1962<br>(US, Claes Oldenbrg) |  | L |  |
| Post-Painterly Abstraction, 1962<br>(Barnett Newman) | A |  |  |
| Socialism ou Barbarie, c. 1965<br>(Jean-François Lyotard) |  | L |  |
| Conceptual art, c. 1967<br>(Sol LeWitt) | A |  |  |
| Arte Povera, 1967<br>(Giovanni Anselmo) | A |  |  |
| Art & Language, 1968)<br>(Brit., Terry Atkinson) | A |  |  |
| Society for Theoretical Art and Analysis, c. 1969<br>(Brit., Ian Burn) | A |  |  |

TABLE 10.1. (*Continued*)

|  | Art for art's sake | Left agenda | Right agenda |
|---|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Minimalists, 1970<br>(US, Donald Judd) | A |  |  |
| Earth projects, c. 1970<br>(Robert Smithson) |  | L |  |
| Flexus, c. 1970<br>(Joseph Beuys) |  | L |  |
| Art Workers Coalition, c. 1970<br>(US, Carl Andre) |  | L |  |
| Art Meeting for Cultural Exchange, c. 1975<br>(United States and United Kingdom, Mel Ramsden) |  | L |  |

[a]Political labels apply only within their context; for example, Leninist and Trotskyite art movements are classified as Left and Stalinist art movements are classified as Right. Compared with other German art movements, Bauhaus might not be considered to be Left-wing, but it self-identified as a social visionary movement. This summary should not be used as a primary source because it is not based on sufficient examination of original documents. National identity is not indicated except to distinguish some of the differences between the United States and Britain.
[b]Not an art movement, but indicated to clarify early source of Abstract Expressionism.
[c]See text.

the language of early modernism from the initial decades of the 20th century. It is somewhat ironic that if a 1960s Ad Reinhardt work were to be placed next to Malevich's 1915 "Black Square," it would be difficult to tell the difference. Oddly enough, early innovative Russian works—for example, by Malevich, Gabo, Pevsner, and Kandinsky—were canonized by US critics and museums during the Cold War, while contemporary Soviet works (Socialist Realism) were banned from public exhibit in the United States (though not in Canada, which is where interested Americans traveled to see them).

Throughout the Cold War period there existed a three-way split: Socialist Realism, European avant-garde movements, and Abstract Expressionism. The first was virtually isolated after the 1936 Moscow show trials under Stalin, and European artists launched alternative art movements that resonated with Marxism. A widely circulated paper by André Breton, Diego Rivera, and Leon Trotsky (1938) signaled the irrevocable break between Latin American and European art and Soviet art. European avant-garde movements nevertheless engaged socialist themes and were for the most part anticapitalist. Throughout this period in Europe, it was not only art theorists and critics who wrote about art, but also people who we nowadays consider as social theorists or social philosophers. These included George Lukács, Francis Klingender, Walter Benjamin, Georges Battille, Jean Paul Sartre, Guy Dubord, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Louis Althusser, Walter Kracauer, and Jürgen Habermas. In contrast, American intellectuals were not involved in the arts, except in the never-ending debate about the problem of the massification of tastes. When the House Committee on Un-American Activities denounced "realists," such as Ben Shahn and Willem De Kooning (along with authors Langston Hughes and Arthur Miller), most American academicians remained silent. The conventional account of this period is that the Left was intimidated, while "innocents" were bought off. The CIA put up front money to support artists through the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, an anticommunist effort supported by the Museum of Modern Art and many prominent artists (see Guilbaut, 1983; Saunders, 1999). Leaders in the official art world, such as Alfred H. Barr, Jr., who spoke out against painters such as Shahn,

defended *art pour l'art* and denounced realistic tendencies as communist (see Harrison & Wood, 1992, pp. 654–668). Another interpretation of the failure of academicians to respond is that there were too few intellectuals in the United States, compared with Europe, who had ties with artists or who cared enough about art to understand what the issues were.

The time series in Table 10.1 stops at 1975. The events around 1968 politicized the avant-garde in the United States and elsewhere, and there was a growing hiatus between theory and practice. Generally, new questions began to challenge the conventional understanding about the relationships involving what was represented, the significance of what was represented, and how what was represented was received. More specifically, semiotic structuralists, such as Barthes and Eco, suggested there were oppositions involving what is expressed (written or painted), what is believed (myth and ideology), and what is experienced/seen. This perspective, codified in somewhat overly scientific terms, as sign, signifier, and signified, was taken up in architectural theory by Charles Jencks (1973), and greatly helped liberate US architects from the formal pretensions that had dominated Modernism in American architecture (see Blau, 1980). In museum art, as Pop Art, semiotics achieved a genuine coup against Abstract Expressionism, followed by a rapid succession of movements that centered on similar theoretical concerns: Conceptual Art, Minimalist Art, Photorealism, and "text art."

As Danto (1981) proposed (although not explicitly in the language of semiotics, namely, sign, signifier, and signified), an artwork is what is merely titled—labeled—an artwork. In other words, it is the institution of art that gives credentials to an artwork and there is nothing inherent in any work that makes it special (see Becker, 1982). But it was Foucault who drove the last nail in the Kantian, Modernist coffin, not only by arguing somewhat along the same lines, but concluding that originality was an ideological construction (see Foucault, 1973/1982; Krauss, 1986). The artist, the poet, the author, the creator were all "dead." There was a growing consensus in the mid-1980s in both Europe and the United States that all avant-gardes had come to an end (for a summary in sociology, see Blau, 1995). At the conclusion of this chapter, I will speculate about the emerging issues in contemporary art. However, I think it is useful to look more closely at Abstract Expressionism; for one thing, it dominates major US museums' current permanent collections; and for another, it is likely to remain an important reference for any art movement because of its prominence during the middle decades of the 20th century.

## AMERICAN MODERN

Although its defenders traced the origins of Abstract Expressionism back to Kandinsky's abstractions done in the first decades of the century and claimed dominance over all other styles, Abstract Expressionism itself was a short-lived affair, from the early 1940s to the early 1970s, and mostly confined to the United States. We could say that American modernism appeared around 1943 with the opening of Pollock's first exhibit in New York and an exhibition in New York of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, which included Gottlieb, Rothko, and Newman. By the 1950s, it was claimed by American art critics that Modernism—Abstract Expressionism and American architecture—comprised the "International Style."

Its appeal lay with its abolition of content by color and its denial of history, ideology, particularity, identity, oppression, and struggle. Is most ardent defender, Clement Greenberg, argued

It has been the search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at "abstract" or "nonobjec-
tive" art ... [the] artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own
terms.... Something *given*, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. (Greenberg,
1939, p. 36; italics in original)

Such a defense was echoed about two decades later by the artist Ad Reinhardt, toward the end
of Abstract Expressionism: "The one standard in art is oneness and fineness, rightness and
purity, abstractness and evanescence. The One thing to say about art is its breathlessness,
lifelessness, deathlessness, contentlessness, formlessness, spacelessness, and timelessness"
(Reinhardt, 1962/1992, p. 809). One American dissenter, Harold Rosenberg, described Ameri-
can modernism in these terms: "In this parody of vanguardism, which revives the academic
idea of art as a separate 'realm,' art can make revolutionary strikes without causing a ripple
in the streets or in the mind of the collector" (Rosenberg, 1967, p. 91).

    Later, Jameson (1981) noted that its philosophical premises—the dominance of style over
substance and its centered subject—could not withstand the fragmented, decentered, post-
modern consciousness (see also Larson, 1993, on this point). As disillusionment set in
regarding America's claims as the innocent defender of democracy around the globe, the idea
of Abstract Expressionism receded. It had been defended in the terms of individualism *and*
universalism, choice *and* evolutionary determinism—the very stuff of claims about free
markets and capitalist democracy but the antithesis of substantive politics and authentic
identities. As noted, the CIA and the Defense Department considered Abstract Expressionism
to be a perfect weapon in the Cold War precisely because artworks exemplified nonspecific,
abstract freedoms (Guilbaut, 1983; Saunders, 1999). The conclusion would be that art is never
agnostic, as we may have thought it was.

## MEANINGS IN ART

    Lest this account be interpreted to imply that artists work entirely along lines dictated by
theory and closely tied to their historical context, I discuss two works to illustrate the point
that styles and labels tell us little about individual works of art, although any artwork
nevertheless exists within an institutionalized domain (Bürger & Bürger, 1992).

### "Power"

    Figures 10.3 and 10.4 are different views of *Power*, an anodized, bright-dipped aluminum
sculpture. Its 192 strips, alternating bronze and silver, were cut from 354 feet of metal. Its
weight—259 pounds—is carried by a 4 × 18 × 18 inches piece of solid transparent Plexiglas,
atop a brick base that is about 3 feet tall. A contemporary observer might think about its
similarity with modernist works, such as Mondrian, say, owing to its formality, proportional-
ity, and also its affinities with early industrial design and the technological precision of early
Russian Constructivism. "Power" was designed and constructed by Dan Murphy for a
specific location, namely, in our courtyard, just adjacent to a large Imperial azalea, which for
about 2 weeks a year backdrops the stark metal with the softest of white blossoms. "Power" is
shaded during the summer by a drooping wax myrtle and tall oak trees. The environment and
the sculpture interact, so as the sun and clouds move through the sky and the light filters
through the oak branches, the surface of the sculpture reflects patterns of motion.
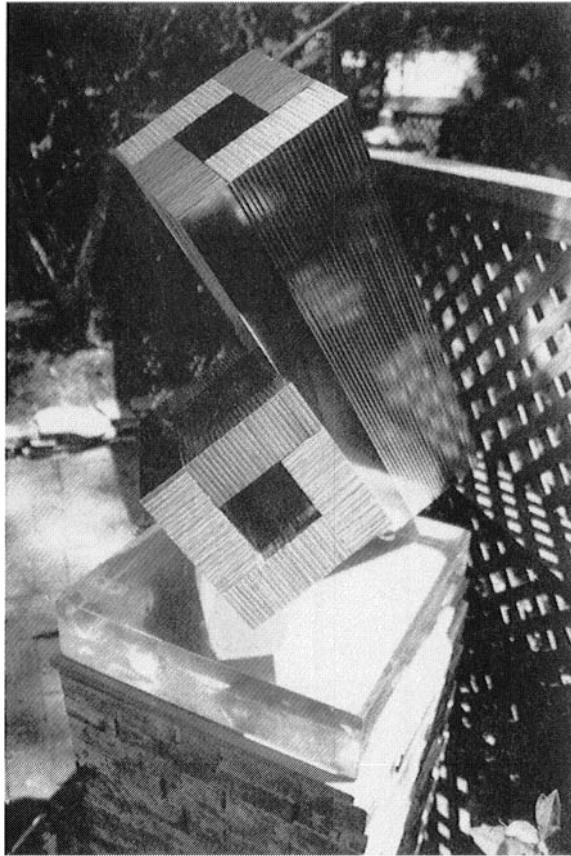
**FIGURE 10.3.** Top view of *Power*, sculpture by Dan Murphy (photograph by Lisa M. Collard).

In 1920, Mondrian wrote about formal structure as plasticity:

> Logic demands that art be the *plastic expression of our whole being*: therefore, it must be equally
> the plastic appearance of the *nonindividual*, the absolute and annihilating opposition of subjective
> sensations. That is, it must also be the *direct expression of the universal in us*—which is the *exact
> appearance of the universal outside us*. (Mondrian, 1920/1992, p. 287, italics in original)

Yet the sculpture's continual interaction with its environment reminds us that this is not, as
Mondrian conceived art, as an object that is self-contained for a self-referential experience.
Much later, environmental artist Smithson wrote, "I am for an art that takes into account the
direct effect of the elements as they exist from day to day apart from representation"
(Smithson, 1979, p. 133). A point I make is that the beauty of Murphy's "Power" is self-
contained in the way that a Mondrian painting is, but "Power" is also a work of the late 20th
century and derives some of its meaning from contemporary environmentalism. In this sense
individual works affirm continuities within institutional traditions of art, while they also
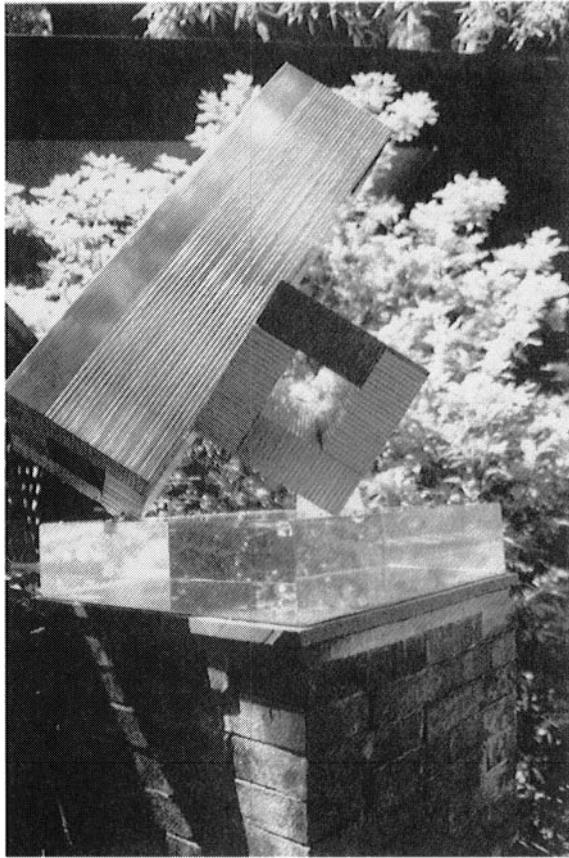exhibit the conditions of their own origins.

**FIGURE 10.4.** Side view of *Power*, anodized aluminum sculpture by Dan Murphy (photograph by Lisa M. Collard).

## "Thirsty Traveler"

Betty Bell's "Thirsty Traveler" (Fig. 10.5) is a painting of a homeless man. He is resting on a stone wall, being accommodated by the wall, or perhaps better put, he shapes it with his body and weight. The cats and birds around him seem both curious and consoling. Someone has brought him a glass of water and it is placed just near him, on the street. The colors, textures, and shapes give the piece an expressive quality, but the affinities between animate and inanimate objects, between nature and man, are also reminiscent of symbolist works, by Gauguin, perhaps. That is, there is something here that suggests a transcendent unity, perhaps a divine one, but probably a more animistic idea than a Christian one, which is that conscious-ness is possessed in their being and becoming by all living things. Aside from these speculative possibilities, the most obvious point about this painting is its strikingly humanistic quality. Though homeless, we are assured that the man is comfortable, sheltered by the trees and protected by the animals. He has a glass of water, which Bell explains, "Was all that he wanted when he was asked." Although Bell's painting is contemporary and resonates with a general

FIGURE 10.5. *The Thirsty Traveler*, painting (oil on canvas) by Betty Bell (photograph by Lisa M. Collard).

return of humanism in the arts in about 1995, it also recalls the writings of Sartre and works by Giacometti, one of his favorite artists (see Sartre, 1948).

In other words, like Brown's mural, "Parade," "Thirsty Traveler" draws its meaning from a vast storehouse of tradition, technique, and material possibilities and in so doing disallows singular interpretations. At the risk of belaboring the metaphor, I, as a viewer and member of the community in which this homeless man may still be living, can pull from my own memory bank the closest matches I know—Giacometti—as I consider the puzzles it raises. Why a wall? If walls are boundaries, why does this one accommodate a man without a home? Are walls for transgression? This is precisely how an artwork's own premises elude theory.

## ART INSTITUTIONS VIS-À-VIS OTHER INSTITUTIONS

Although the crisis in modernism within the social sciences was not evident until later, it began in the arts in the late 1960s as events cascaded and dissent erupted in America and Europe. These events centered on Civil Rights, the Vietnamese war, the Cultural Revolution in China, the Cuban missile crisis, Czech Spring. The most evident manifestations of this crisis appeared most clearly in architecture, which was profoundly influenced by Italian and French

semiotic theory and then by postmodernist conceptions of narrative, language, and discourse. In my view art became more inaccessible to the public than ever before. Buildings that looked like ducks or paintings of flags were incomprehensible outside of an institutional matrix, and that matrix was distinctly High Art in the United States in the 1970s. Yet, High Art is not the only institution that can dominate art. Religion did in the United States throughout much of the 19th century and a conception of language attempted to at the 20th century. I would like to briefly explain.

## Art and Religion

There are strong indications that the reason American art sharply diverged from European art beginning in about 1830 was due to the domination in the United States of evangelical religion over art after the Second Great Awakening. Besides portraiture, only representational artworks of nature were allowed the American artist, as landscapes alone was considered to do justice to God's designs. Artists who insisted on painting or drawing mythical, allegorical, or historical works, in the tradition of their English and European contemporaries, were shunned by critics and collectors. Already early in the century, English and French artists had started to experiment with nonfigurative approaches and depict scenes from ordinary life. American artists could only depict themes that were congruent with religious values, whereas many English and French artists had already adopted a critical and realistic approach to topics relating to class relations and ownership (see Antal, 1966, p. 183). Virtually all those whom we now consider the finest 19th-century American artists fled the United States to work abroad. They included John Copley, John Trumbull, Samuel Morse, Thomas Cole, Thomas Eakins, Mary Cassatt, James Whistler, and John Singer Sargent.

It was not so much that the clergy kept a tight rein on artists (although some did), but rather than institutionalized religion was inimical to artworks except for landscapes that reflected the manifestation of the Divine. As I have documented in much greater detail elsewhere (Blau, 1996), the suppression of artistic creativity lasted well into the 1870s, until Boston's and New York's elites were swayed by arguments, especially by those presented by Matthew Arnold, that art had more to do with refined taste and distinctions of learning and social class than with spiritual values. Once there was a fissure opened between Sectarianism and the arts, revolutionary transformation in the arts was rapid; in 1896, Santayana (1896/1955) provided the secular language for the autonomy of the arts. The Armory Show in New York in 1913 was the self-defining moment when avant-gardists in America could join Europeans in exhibiting works by Cubists, early Surrealists, and Expressionists. In short, American Protestants were intolerant of all art that did not encode religious values. By 1880, Americans were well on their way to becoming artistic snobs.

## Art and Language

One way of considering what has been termed the "Post-Aesthetic" is precisely in the terms of the positioning of art along with another institution, namely language. Mike Sutton's drawing, "*Ceci n'est pas un chien*," in Fig. 10.6, is in the spirit of one by Rene Magritte, which later became an occasion for an essay by Foucault (1973/1982). Magritte's work is a careful replica of a pipe, under which he wrote in cursive script, "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" ("This is not a pipe"). Surrealist Magritte may have had a political intention, but Foucault used it to

FIGURE 10.6. Illustration by Mike Sutton (India ink on paper), after Rene Magritte.

make a point about representation and language, no doubt more subversive than Magritte originally intended.

Foucault notes that its strangeness is not the contradiction between the image ("a pipe") and the text ("this is not a pipe"), because, he argues, contradiction can exist only between two statements or within one statement, not, in other words, between the sign and what is signified. In short, he denies the premise of the traditional European avant-garde that pitted ideology against a material reality. "What misleads," Foucault states, is "the impossibility of defining a perspective that would let us say that the assertion is true, false or contradictory" (Foucault, 1973/1982, p. 19). Clearly among the many things problematized by Foucault is the European avant-garde's taken-for-granted contradiction between objective conditions and conscious-ness. In the context of my discussion about art, Foucaultian assumptions about language undermine the ontological independence of artist, viewer, work, and critic. They also under-mine the premise of the European avant-garde, say starting from Novembergruppe in 1918 to Socialism ou Barbarie in about 1965. Foucault had a somewhat different impact on American scholars (Kurzweil, 1980), and I suspect on American artists and theorists as well. Without a vital political avant-garde tradition, Foucault's influence in US art circles was to challenge the

notion of the creative artist, an important component of Abstract Expressionism. Yet, in an important way, Foucault was the intellectual heir of structuralism. The problems about art, history, and language had been addressed earlier by Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes who challenged the taken-for-granted relations among sign, signifier, and signified, and by Derrida who questioned the idea about stable historical interpretations (see Bernstein, 1992).

## AESTHETICS LOST AND REGAINED

Aesthetics is always at the center of any philosophical crisis. The choir members sang at the funeral: "The Museum Is Dead" (Crimp, 1983), "Metaphysics Is Dead" (Dziemidok, 1985), "Epistimology Is Dead" (Vattimo, 1985), "The Audience Is Dead" (Gopnik, 1992), "Art Is Disenfranchised from Philosophy" (Danto, 1985), and "No more narrative ... subject ... object.... No more representation" (Owens, 1983, p. 66). The death sentence created an interesting predicament, but the situation was not viewed as such dire straits by everyone, and as it turns out it was a premature warrant.

Lyotard's (1988/1992) argument was that art and representation are not the problem, as Foucault had insisted, but rather the public is. He contended the central problem for artists was *Öffentlichkeit*, "finding a public." He writes: "Artists and writers must be made to return to the fold of the community; or at least, if the community is deemed to be ailing, they must be given the responsibility of healing it" (Lyotard, 1992, p. 4). Additionally he focused attention on practice; artists must be their own philosophers, creating the works that make the rules for *"what will have been made"* (Lyotard, 1992, p. 15; italics in the original). The inference I draw from his argument is that collectively artists will appeal to pluralities of publics and that addressing publics will lead to particularized and localized "solutions" *and* to practices that prevail over universalistic and supremacy claims. Art in the 1990s increasingly became configured less in terms of art movements, but more idiosyncratic and localized.

Major issues in contemporary art are not that dissimilar to those in contemporary social sciences: the representation of particularized locales and contexts and mediation. If there is a philosophical counterpart (for art) to Foucault these days it might be Emmanuel Levinas (1998; also see Cambell & Shapiro, 1999). Levinis is especially helpful in this context; he is an ethicist or moral philosopher, and art always advances an ethical or moral claim with which aesthetic theorists must grapple. It is in these terms that I have already contrasted the European avant-gardes that denounced, on ethical grounds, class domination and capitalism and the American avant-garde that made moral claims for individualism.

Levinas states the challenge as being responsible for the Other; it must be the totalizing concern with the Other that annihilates the self-interest of the I. That is, in contrast to Kant's ontology involving the "I" and its own subjectivity, the loci of consciousness and practice are interstitial spaces within pluralities. In social theory terms, these are clarified by concepts such as symmetry of power, networks of mediation, places of participation, and distributions of rights and resources, hybridization, and commons. In art we can think of this as "between-ness," as Lyotard suggested in his discussion about the artist "finding" the public. The "Thirsty Traveler" serves as my example. It evokes the responsibility and sense of caring— the You—the stranger—who brought the homeless man the glass of water, the metaphorical wall or barrier that softens to accommodate his shape, the trees that provide shade, and the cats and birds that are the sentries, as he might be theirs. (One recalls the contrasting premise in Manet's Olympia, in which a black cat stands guard to protect Olympia and her black companion against You, the prurient viewer.) Such considerations as these suggest the differ-

ence between ontology and postontology. They also suggest that "betweenness" is a useful conceptual companion to contemporary social theory's "decentered self."

## CAN THE ARTS SURVIVE CULTURE?

Let us assume that pluralism is on the ascent in art practices and that the boundaries between performance, the visual arts, and music are diminishing. Let us also assume, along with aestheticians, such as Krauss (1986), that the notion of creative genius was a myth that sustained the avant-garde and it bifurcated canonical judgments of art from the experiencing of art. We also might imagine that there will be a growing interest in public art, for it uniquely addresses concerns about inclusion, public life, and shared use of the commons. Public arts are currently defined extremely broadly: parks, sculpture, fountains, sand castles, parades, the Chicago cows, street theater, outdoor video displays, decorated cars, murals, monuments, decorated benches, and pyrotechnic displays (see Senie & Webster, 1992). Public art is craft. But is it art?

Lyotard (1992, pp. 4–5) argued that the modernists fostered allusions for the presentable, whereas postmodern art is based on what is conceivable but not presentable. It is then consistent with Levinas to consider that art, public art especially, now focuses on how the conceivable invokes the Other—"betweenness"—as an ethical project. Sociologists should be wary about calling artworks "cultural productions" lest they strike down their philosophical premises. This is to argue that art remains practice with an ethical bite, which is an invitation to sociologists to consider that as artists struggle with a utopian project—engaging publics to consider what is imaginatively conceivable—that we struggle to understand what is socially conceivable.

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