

ART IN ITS TIME

Theories and practices of
modern aesthetics

Paul Mattick

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ART IN ITS TIME

Art writing normally contrasts art with “everyday life.” This book explores art as integral to the everyday life of modern society, providing materials to represent class and class conflict, to explore sex and sexuality, and to think about modern industry and economic relationships. Art, as we know it, is not common to all forms of society but is peculiar to our own; what art *is* changes with people’s conceptions of the tasks of art, conceptions that are themselves a part of social history. The history of society does not shape art from the outside, but includes the attempts of artists to find new ways of making art and thinking about it.

The essays in *Art in Its Time* offer a critical examination of the central categories of art theory and history. They propose a mode of understanding grounded in concrete case studies of ideas and objects, exploring such topics as the gender content of eighteenth-century theories of the sublime and beautiful, the role of photography in the production of aesthetic “aura,” the limits of political art, and the paradox by which art, pursued for its own sake with no thought of commercial gain, can produce the highest-priced of all objects.

Employing an unusually wide range of historical sources and theoretical perspectives to understand the place of art in capitalist society, *Art in Its Time* shows a way out of many of the cul-de-sacs of recent art history and theory.

Paul Mattick is Professor of Philosophy at Adelphi University. He is the author of *Social Knowledge* and editor of *Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics and the Reconstruction of Art*. He is also editor of the *International Journal of Political Economy* and has written criticism for *Arts*, *Art in America*, and *Artforum*, among other publications.

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For Ilse Mattick
with love and admiration
and for three friends who should be remembered
Serge Bricianer
Louis Evrard
Gherasim Luca

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PREFACE

In writing this book I have depended greatly on the work of many people, inadequately represented in my footnotes, with whom I have discussed over the years the issues treated here. I thank in particular Jeffrey Barnouw, Annie Becq, Timothy J. Clark, Susan Denker, Judith Goldstein, Valerie Jaudon, Richard Kalina, Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Sally Markowitz, Joseph Masheck, Maureen Ryan, Richard Shiff, and Barry Schwabsky. Two art historians have been of special importance: Meyer Schapiro gave me, along with an example combining immense learning with a flexible and sensitive language for the description of works of art, the single most important piece of advice I received when I began my study of art: to draw everything I wanted to look at seriously. And Alan Wallach, who first gave me the idea that I could try to understand my reaction to a picture, in terms both of its physical form and of my historical relation to it, was for years a companion in my attempts to understand a domain of experience in which he is also deeply involved.

I have been privileged to encounter art not only as a set of finished objects but as process; I owe much to the artists who have discussed their work and ideas about art, history, and society with me. In particular, Rochelle Feinstein first led me into the world of contemporary art, and I am honored to acknowledge the pleasure and stimulation of years of friendship with the late Sidney Tillim, whose brilliance as an artist combined depth and subtlety of thinking with formal inventiveness steeped in history and so critically alive to the present moment. Long ago, Frans Brüggen helped me see and hear the relation of art, as a mode of action, to the social worlds in which it is produced and consumed.

Katy Siegel read the entire manuscript, offering criticisms and suggestions both material and formal that considerably improved the book. She has also considerably improved my life as a whole.

I acknowledge two sources of funds that made it possible for me to take time off from teaching for research and writing: the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Dedalus Foundation. Regina Di Pietro helped with production of the manuscript. Muna Khogali was an encouraging and otherwise exemplary editor. Claire L'Enfant is at the source of this project.

Finally, I am grateful to schools and editors who invited me to prepare earlier

PREFACE

versions of the essays collected here. Chapter 2 was originally given as a lecture to the Department of Art, College of William and Mary. Chapter 3 appeared in Paul Mattick (ed.), *Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics and the Reconstruction of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Portions of Chapter 4 formed an essay included in Peggy Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer (eds), *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). A German version of Chapter 5, "Kunst im Zeitalter der Rationalisierung," was included in Brigitte Aulenbacher and Tilla Siegel (eds), *Diese Welt wird völlig anders sein. Denkmuster der Rationalisierung* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus, 1995). An early version of Chapter 6 appeared in the September 1990 issue of *Arts* magazine, now sadly no more. Chapter 7 came into existence as a talk commissioned by Grantmakers in the Arts for their 1993 annual conference; an edited version appeared in Andrew Patner (ed.), *Alternative Futures: Challenging Designs for Arts Philanthropy* (Washington: Grantmakers in the Arts, 1994). An ancestor of Chapter 8, "Aesthetics and anti-aesthetics in the visual arts," was included in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51:2 (1993). Chapter 9 appeared in *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998). Chapter 10 was first given as a lecture in the Fordham University Fine Arts Lecture Series, 1998, and Chapter 11 began as a paper read at the 1999 annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics.

INTRODUCTION

The ten chapters that follow this introduction were first written, over about as many years, as lectures and essays for a variety of audiences and occasions. Assembled to form a book they present at once the problem of disjointedness and a tendency to repetition. I have left the latter alone, for the most part, in the hope of diminishing the effect of the former. Reading them through to revise them for the present publication, I was pleased to discover to what extent they are bound together by the recurrence of a small number of artists and writers on art: Eugène Delacroix, Marcel Duchamp, Piet Mondrian, Barnett Newman, Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Joshua Reynolds, and Andy Warhol; along with Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu, Clement Greenberg, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Friedrich Schiller, among others. The fabric created by the warp and woof of the works of these figures displays, if not an overall design, a coherent set of basic themes: the eighteenth-century origin of the modern practice of art; the nature of modernity as a period of social history and the place of art in it; the salience of gender categories in the theory as well as the practice of art; the conceptual opposition of art and commerce; the dynamic character of the social category of art, changing theoretically and practically along with the society in which it has its life.

By emphasizing the intimate relation between art and other historically specific features of modern society, I am violating a fundamental aspect of the idea of art, the contrast with what art writers generally call “everyday” or “ordinary” life (a common variant is exhibited in the title of Arthur Danto’s first book-length contribution to aesthetics, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*¹). While its underlying conception is seldom made explicit, it is clear that the contrast is meant to signify a radical separation of art from the social (and individual) circumstances in which it is produced and enjoyed, which then can only appear as its historical “context.”²

1 Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.

2 See P. Mattick, “Context,” in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (eds), *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Art, in the first place, is supposed to transcend its historical moment: the category unites products from all epochs and areas, a unity represented physically by museum collections and intellectually by art history as a study of products from every human society. The museum physically separates art from the hustle and bustle of modern life, creating an apparently independent universe in which—in the words with which Gurnemanz in *Parsifal* describes the ritual of the Grail that Wagner no doubt identified with the mystic power of art—time has become space. Similarly, art history presents an autonomous narrative structured by such categories as tradition, influence, style, medium, and technique, a domain of relations between artworks.

In the second place, art represents a mode of value—aesthetic value—independent of practical interest. From the eighteenth century, when Kant characterized the aesthetic attitude to an object (in contrast with the moral or instrumental point of view) as marked by disinterest in its existence, to the twentieth, when the US Supreme Court defined “obscenity” in terms of the absence of artistic value, art’s significance has been distinguished from other modes of social importance.

With no apparent use-value, the work of art seems to acquire its exchange-value simply by the expression in money of the art-lover’s desire. The miracle is that these objects can achieve prices higher than those of any other human products. This well-known paradox suggests a problem with the distinction of the aesthetic realm from that of the everyday. And a moment’s thought suggests that art as actual thing exists nowhere but within the “everyday life” from which its cultural construction separates it. The artist must pay rent on the studio, buy paint, seek dealers and buyers; his or her product, if it succeeds in entering the stream of art, will find a place in a home, a museum, a reproduction in a book or postcard. The work of art, to have a chance of entering that stream, must show its kinship to other things called art and so to the social world in which artists and art have their places.

That moment’s thought, however, has not as a rule disrupted the flow of aesthetics, art theory, and criticism from the eighteenth century until quite recently. This fact itself is evidently a key to the nature of art, and must be central to an engagement with the literature of art that wishes to provide a path to understanding this social reality constituted, like others in most societies, by activities both represented and misrepresented by the concepts and theories evolved to describe them. To put the same point in other words, these essays are meant as elements of a critical analysis of the ideology of art.

To call a discourse ideological is to read it differently than did its originators: in particular, to identify at its basis a set of assumptions not explicitly recognized by them. While the inhabitants of a mode of social life typically experience their cultural conventions as not only normal but natural, an outsider may seek to understand those conventions as the product of particular historical circumstances. This might be described as the anthropological point of view; to understand one’s own culture with some independence from its

ideology, as I am attempting to do in this book, one must view it from something like an outsider's perspective. Comparing it to other cultures is helpful; a variant required in any case is to view it historically, in the double sense of having not only an origin but also an imaginable endpoint in a future fundamental social transformation.³

Characteristic of modern ideology is the idea that culture has a history of its own, with a logic of thoughts operating independently of the other factors acting on the thinkers of those thoughts. It may even seem—as it did to the thinkers of the Enlightenment, to Hegel, and still to many contemporary thinkers—that social history as a whole is regulated by the progress of thought. This appearance acquires strength, as Marx and Engels pointed out in their influential treatment of ideology, from the existence of professional thinkers within the social division of labor.⁴ As the activity in which a particular group of people specialize, consciousness ceases to look like the necessary aspect of all social activity it is and appears as an autonomous domain, with its own history.

Only in relatively modern times has the set of practices grouped since the eighteenth century as the fine arts become an important element of ideology in this sense, demanding to be considered historically autonomous, part of the domain of “mind” alongside law, morality, religion, and philosophy, as opposed to that of productive labor or quotidian life generally. This peculiarity of the modern idea of art cannot be explained within the terms set by that idea. Art developed along with the commercialized mode of production that became capitalism, and it is only by understanding art as an aspect of this mode of production that the supposed antagonism between them (central to aesthetics)—and so the idea of art's autonomy—can be understood.

How difficult it can be to attain the outsider's anthropological perspective can be gauged by considering Terry Eagleton's popular (at least among academics) effort to confront aesthetic theory as ideology, a book that itself employs the vocabulary of that ideology in speaking, for example, of the “debasement” of art as a branch of commodity production.⁵ Eagleton's argument is that aesthetics, the intellectual product of a social system that both places its highest value on human subjectivity and requires the subject's submission to class oppression, at once expresses basic ideological themes of modern society and provides a powerful challenge to those themes. In its freedom from social and economic utility—threatened by commodification—art provides “a utopian glimpse of an alternative to this sorry condition,”⁶ in principle shareable by everyone. Such an argument, despite its author's wishes, restates fundamental elements of the

3 For a detailed exploration of this issue, see P. Mattick, *Social Knowledge* (London: Hutchinson, 1986).

4 K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), pp. 36, 45.

5 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 2.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

aesthetic ideology against which it is directed; in particular, the idea of a polarity between creative freedom and the compulsions of the market.

Renaissance artists laid the groundwork for the modern ideology of art when they struggled for social status by insisting that they practiced not a craft but a liberal art, the object-making hand merely fulfilling the dictates of the imaginative mind. The nineteenth-century modernization of art that replaced working to the order of religious, state, and private patrons with producing on speculation for the market redefined it as the expression of individual genius. In fact, artworks are produced by independent entrepreneurs (or, latterly, professionals, employed by nonprofit cultural or educational institutions) rather than by wage-workers. Art can therefore incarnate free individuality, validating the social dominance of those who collect and enjoy it, and signifying a cultural end to which the making of money becomes only a means. The freedom of the artist, including his or her freedom to starve, provides a model for that of the ruling elite (who have the education and leisure necessary for the appreciation of art) purchased by the unfreedom of the many. It is precisely its distance from market considerations, its “non-economic” character, that gives art its social meaning—and its market value.

Aesthetics, along with the artistic ideologies at work in critical and pedagogical theory and in the history and psychology of art, consists of theoretical constructions open like other discursive products to critical analysis. But if, in accordance with such analysis, art is seen to derive its meaning not from some autonomous realm of spiritual significance but from the social world in which it exists, art objects themselves must be able to embody ideology. It is not in principle difficult, though it may take ingenious and scholarly work, to identify ideological elements in the aspects of artworks that have or can be given linguistic representation, such as Zola’s biologism or the vision of a fruitful natural order crowned by aristocratic ownership presented by some English landscape painting around 1800. But since the nineteenth century the question of artistic meaning has increasingly been addressed in terms of a contrast between the “content”—stateable in words—of artworks and their nondiscursive “form.” Especially after the development of abstract art, the purely aesthetic element in art has been identified with those attributes—color, line, and handling, in the case of painting, for instance—peculiar to particular artistic media. Can ideology be interpretively identified in artistic form?

This question provides a meeting point for two important problems: the relation between experience and what is said about it in words; and the means and nature of the production of meaning in non-discursive modes of signification, such as gesture, sound, and imagery. The first of these arises as soon as ideology is understood as a systematic rendering of social practices—such as behavior at home, school, and work, voting or not voting, reading newspapers, watching television—that people ordinarily engage in without thinking too much about what they are doing. What is decisive in social life, as Raymond Williams says, “is not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs, but the whole lived social

process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values.”⁷ Williams wrote of “structures of feeling,” meaning “not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind.”⁸ This may be compared to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus,” dispositional schemata of action and perception, learned in the family and reshaped as individuals move through social institutions like school and workplace. Habitus includes, for instance, the unconscious details of carriage, tone of voice, vocabulary, and differentiated response—reactions of enjoyment, displeasure, or indifference—to objects and activities, that allow people to sort each other out by social class. It involves for some a sense of being at home with works of art, and a felt assumption of a high place for art in the scale of social values. We can think of ideology as a systematizing (and simplifying, since abstracting) presentation of such structures of feeling and action as natural forms of experience. Thus the doctrine of “aesthetic experience” defines art, a cultural practice, as the natural producer of a particular psychological response (if only on the part of certain, properly sensitive individuals).

But why should language be seen as the only medium for such systematization? Even within the linguistic domain, the plot summary of a novel leaves out much that readers might look for in the work, and that a writer might have labored to put into it; no description of a painting is a substitute for the visual experience of the picture itself; and the question of the “meaning” of music antedated the development of abstract composition, in eighteenth-century debates about the relation between music and text in opera. Yet it is hard to see how a piano sonata or an abstract painting can be understood as exhibiting features of an ideology. Can the meanings inherent in such works, or identifiable in the formal aspects of narrative or descriptive art, be capable of ideology, presenting people’s experience of their social existence in ways that occlude the historical specificity of that experience?

Theodor Adorno argued that it was the very irreducibility of an artwork to its description—a version of Kant’s idea of the autonomy of art, its independence as a mode of meaning and value from other modes of experience—that constituted its social significance. Music, the most abstract art, provided the clearest case. Adorno saw the music of Viennese classicism as ideological by virtue of its submission to formal laws of composition, by which “it closes itself off against the manifest portrayal of society in which it has its enclaves,” hiding class conflict with harmonically structured wholeness.⁹ He believed that the new music of the second Viennese school, in contrast, was “no longer an ideology,” because in its hermeticism and refusal to please an audience it “surrendered the deception

7 R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 109.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

9 T. W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, tr. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 129.

of harmony” and made the alienation of the oppressive class system in which music has its being audible in the rigors of serial technique.¹⁰

Despite the brilliance of Adorno’s writing the relation he discovers between Arnold Schoenberg’s liberation of dissonance and the avowal of social disharmony is only a suggestive analogy. Elsewhere he compares serial composition to bureaucratic rationalization and the relation between theme and variation in sonata form to the dialectic of individual and society. Such analogies or allegorical readings can be stimulating and even revealing, but they can also be arbitrary or mechanical. At best they point to further, deeper questions about the origin of the seeming similarity between such disparate orders of social reality as economic organization and compositional technique.

The relation between the two tends to be mediated in cultural theory by some conception of “world view” or “class outlook.”¹¹ Such conceptions demand further exploration of the relation between artistic activity and the social groups to whose outlook it supposedly gives formal definition. One path art historians have taken into this territory is the study of patronage, ranging from examination of the constraints set on earlier artistic activity by the religious or courtly commissioners of work to more recent examples such as the effect on Abstract Expressionist painting of its utilization by the American ruling class as a propaganda weapon in the Cold War. Serge Guilbaut, for instance, concluded with regard to the latter case that American “[a]vant-garde art succeeded because the work and the ideology that supported it, articulated in the painters’ writings as well as conveyed in images, coincided fairly closely with the ideology that came to dominate American political life after the 1948 presidential elections.”¹² (I consider a related argument of T. J. Clark’s, formulated partly in response to Guilbaut’s, in Chapter 10.) Whether such claims are true or not must in the end be decided by the plausibility of interpretations of the actual images; study of the uses made of art provide only a temporary escape from the question of how form in art can constitute ideology.

This can only be because—to repeat—art does not exist in a world of its own, sealed off from the conceptualizing performed in language. In Meyer Schapiro’s words, “there is no ‘pure art,’ unconditioned by experience; all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, are shaped by experience and by nonaesthetic concerns.”¹³ The mute experience of an art object is no different from any other lived event. Just as all language is an

10 Ibid., p. 131.

11 On the difficulty of such explanations, see Meyer Schapiro, “Philosophy and worldview in painting,” in *Worldview in Painting—Art and Society. Selected Papers* (New York: Braziller, 1999), pp. 11–71.

12 S. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 3.

13 M. Schapiro, “Nature of Abstract Art,” in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: Braziller, 1978), p. 196.

articulation of nonverbal as well as verbal practices, so nondiscursive form—visual, aural, and other—shares its world of meaning with that constructed in speech. Not only can a mode of depiction or mark-making be, for instance, described as literally “free,” meaning ungoverned by convention or a definite idea of an image’s final configuration. Images and sounds can also metaphorically exemplify (to use Nelson Goodman’s terminology¹⁴) the same descriptions as other things (giving us gloomy colors, happy tunes, or mechanical shapes), in this way establishing links to them.

Schapiro gives an example, drawn from the appeal of machinery to modernist painters after the First World War:

The older categories of art were translated into the language of modern technology; the essential was identified with the efficient, the unit with the standardized element, texture with new materials, representation with photography, drawing with the ruled or mechanically traced line, color with the flat coat of paint, and design with the model or the instructing plan. The painters thus tied their useless archaic activity to the most advanced and imposing forms of modern production; and precisely because technology was conceived abstractly as an independent force with its own inner conditions, and the designing engineer as the real maker of the modern world, the step from their earlier Expressionist, Cubist, or Suprematist abstraction to the more technological style was not a great one.¹⁵

Ideology can be identified in such artistic work in the location of “modernity” in engineering (and indeed in what might be analyzed as ideological forms in the presentation of machine-made things), ignoring the historical specificity of the ways in which the mechanization of production was being accomplished. The advance of capitalist production—including, in the USSR, its state-directed analogue—was equated visually with the progress of universal norms of rationality and efficiency (a matter discussed in some detail in Chapter 5).

We can say, then, that ideology can be identified in artistic form where the latter can be conceptually linked, by maker or receiver, to other areas of social practice. Ideological content, in form and subject-matter alike, is for this reason not univocal, as Schapiro pointed out in a discussion of Diego Rivera’s Mexican murals: “in so far as the revolutionary work of art projects slogans, phrases, and their counterpart images, in so far as it forms a spectacle rather than determines an action, its effect in stirring the imagination may be manipulated in contrary ways”.¹⁶ It is open, that is, to contrary interpretations. As an artifact, thrown by

14 See N. Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), Part II.

15 M. Schapiro, “Nature,” p. 210.

16 M. Schapiro, “The patrons of revolutionary art,” *Marxist Quarterly* 1:3 (1937), p. 465.