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Deaths of Art: David Carrier's Metahistory of *Artwriting*

Gary Shapiro

*Editor's Note: In 1989 a session of the Western Division of the American Philosophical Association was devoted to several commentaries on David Carrier's book *Artwriting*, a history of recent American art criticism, which had been reviewed by both art critics and philosophers. This article is a critical commentary on *Artwriting* by Gary Shapiro. (A reply by Carrier follows in the next article.)*

In *Artwriting* [1], David Carrier has succeeded in identifying a genre of thought and discourse that is vitally important to the world of art, but that has not been subject to the sort of detailed attention that such a discourse deserves, particularly from philosophers. Carrier's 'artwriting' is the kind of writing on art that lies outside the rather narrow disciplinary boundaries of art history. It is either concerned with explaining the significance of the new and the contemporary or—drawing on older traditions of speculative, philosophical art theory or on relatively informal discourse oriented toward travel and personal observation (like Ruskin's, for example)—it aims at placing art within a context that would not be considered narrowly artistic. Among the artwriters whom Carrier analyzes with unusual care and grace are Clement Greenberg, Ernst Gombrich, Michael Fried, Adrian Stokes, Rosalind Krauss and Joseph Masheck. How, it might well be asked, has philosophical aesthetics come to take seriously writers whose work it has more often ignored as marginal, journalistic or wildly speculative? Let me take a leaf from Carrier's book to construct something of a 'genealogy' [2] for his own procedure—that is, where Carrier is concerned with showing how artwriters construct genealogies to distribute value and significance to artists and then constructs his own genealogy of twentieth-century artwriters from Greenberg to Masheck, I want to suggest a necessarily selective and abbreviated genealogy of aesthetics over the last 100 years that can help to show both why we should take Carrier's project seriously and what questions we should be asking about it.

Following Arthur Danto, Carrier argues that aestheticians have too often confined their attention to presumed properties of the work of art, the artist or the audience. They have supposed, for example, that works are possessed of something called 'significant form' [3], or that genuine artists must be in a special inspired state of mind, or that a work is authentic only if it succeeds in infecting its audience with a special kind of emotion. The generic feature of all such attempts at defining art, Danto argued 25 years ago, is to be found in the view that theory is secondary and adventitious in 'the artworld' [4]. By posing the case of physically indiscernible objects that are significantly different works of art

(an example that Carrier reiterates at the beginning of *Artwriting* with six differently titled red squares and an untitled one) Danto suggested that it is theory, rather than any property of the object, that makes a work what it is and that enables its interpretation. By analogy, states of mind in the audience or the artist are not the criterion of whether something is art; rather the theory that helps to constitute the artworld is. Danto called in effect for a Copernican turn in aesthetics that would allow us to recognize that the objects of the artworld are constituted by theory. Such a turn would free us from the dilemma of *either* having to invent ever-new and more subtle epicycles by which we demonstrate that Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm* or a black canvas by Ad Reinhardt are just subtle variations on Kant's or Tolstoy's or Dewey's definitions of art *or* of following philosophy's old Parmenidean, rationalistic path of simply refusing to recognize the troubling phenomenon as an instance of the concept in question. And it presents an alternative to the Wittgensteinian retreat to family resemblance as the nearest we can come to definition.

I would like to say something more about Danto, because Carrier squarely places his own book within Danto's orbit, although with a few reservations and questions. In 1964 Danto seems to have realized that the classical, pre-Copernican theories of art were all intricately bound up with specific understandings of what the canon of art was. That is, they were tied to certain views of who the great masters of art were, which movements were significant, and what constituted progress or development in art. Such theories typically appear, Danto seems to suggest, at times when a culture feels the need to consolidate, reform, defend, overhaul, question or revolutionize its canon. While providing a way of focusing and justifying such moves, a theory of art does not tell us merely why postimpressionist painting, for example, is legitimate (as in Roger Fry's claim that it shows that paintings can be real things, not merely imitations [5]). Such theories will also open up new ways of

ABSTRACT

This essay is a critical examination of David Carrier's *Artwriting* (1987), which offered a philosophical account of the implicit strategies of narrative and presentation deployed by a wide range of art historians and critics. Here, this author raises some questions concerning Carrier's attempt to describe or define a genre of 'artwriting' distinct from philosophical aesthetics; he also discusses Carrier's views in the context of those writers whom Carrier examines in *Artwriting*.

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looking at the art of the past; whatever it is that we admire about postimpressionist painting—configurations of line, color and form, arguably independent of ‘literary’ significance—now becomes a legitimate criterion for ‘reviewing’ the art of the tradition and so of re-evaluating its contents. Skillful, polished but unimaginative representational works will fade, while we will begin to admire the stark design of some Byzantine paintings and will, for the same reason, transfer some works of tribal art from the ethnographic museum to the museum of art. Danto anticipated much about the line of discussion that now rages heatedly in literary critical circles about the relation between theory and canon. That dispute preceded the one that is now emerging about the relation between art theory and canon, as presented in Carrier’s study, for a number of reasons. Danto’s explanations of shifts in what constitutes the canon are, by the way, the sorts of reasons that Carrier himself invokes at the conclusion of *Artwriting* in order to explain the rhetoric of artwriting. In an age that still prides itself on universal education, the questions of which texts should be read by the young, which should be held up by their elders as models, and which aspects of those texts should be valued, are clearly political questions of the highest order; this is a fact recognized by philosophers from Plato to Rousseau to Jacques Derrida to Allan Bloom. Moreover, there is a certain ease in moving back and forth from literary texts to theoretical ones that allows for at least the possibility of challenging or reconfiguring the apparent distinction between them. However, there may be some analogous considerations that will one day lead us to recognize a similarly heavy import in the disputes of art critics and art historians concerning the variant stories (Carrier’s example again) that Greenberg and Gombrich have to tell about the rise, formation and closure of the visual canon in the West. For surely the politics of the visual image is terrain that is hotly contested—by the right in the form of diatribes against pornographic magazines or violence on television, by the center in the form of projects such as the Getty Foundation’s concept for transforming art education into a discipline-based curriculum with a larger place in the public schools, and by the left in its attack on the commodification of the image in the age of mass

reproduction (for example in John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* [6]).

There was already in Danto’s earliest articles about aesthetics an incipient concern with the politics of art, including the question of who determines the canon and who is authorized to interpret the image. The main lines of Danto’s story were, I believe, those of a liberal pluralism taking a somewhat skeptical, even satirical view of those critics who put forward exclusive claims to truth. It is Danto’s position of 1964 that forms, I think, an indispensable background for understanding Carrier’s views in *Artwriting*. To situate the implicit political and narrative dimensions of Danto’s picture of the artworld, I want to provide a genealogy, which considers him as representative of a fourth generation of artists, critics and philosophers responding to the provocations of modernism.

Tolstoy’s *What is Art?* [7] is as good a place as any to begin, for it raises the question of the canon in highly political fashion, identifying the burgeoning industry of nineteenth-century aesthetics (mainly French and German) as a move by the upper classes to legitimate their own cultural and financial superiority by showing what sort of taste was necessary to be a member of society’s higher circles. But this was to be countered by a universalistic art, an art of and perhaps even *by* the people, that infectiously communicated universal values. This is *romance* of high order. (I follow Northrop Frye and Hayden White in extending these narrative classifications to forms beyond the conventionally fictional [8].) In this romance there is both the evil enemy, the dragon to be slain (the aristocracy and *haute bourgeoisie* with their sensual operas and ballets) and a pure, virtuous hero (the people and their art). There is the anticipation of a final clash and the triumph of the hero. Tolstoy did not hesitate to conclude that this final clash would be marked by the destruction of the art schools and museums of the old order. Skip a generation, roughly, to Clive Bell, defending the sensibility of the Bloomsbury group, championing Cézanne and the post-impressionists under the banner of ‘significant form’ [9]. Bell rigorously rethought the canon, substituting archaic Greek figures for the rounded and mobile sculptures of the Parthenon and Byzantine works for the masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance. But, unlike Tolstoy, Bell had no hope that the

world, even the artworld, would be converted to the cause of significant form. At best the critic’s job is the Sisyphean task of maintaining the purity of a genuinely aesthetic stance against the constant seductions of content, representation and sentiment. In Bell’s view, the critic must defend the cause of artistic beauty (notably that of women) against that quite different earthly beauty with which we are wont to confuse it. Bell’s was essentially a tragic vision, one in which art’s history is seen as a series of repeated struggles with no effective resolution, but one that offers art’s champion the satisfaction of fighting for the right cause. Twenty years later, John Dewey (Danto’s predecessor at Columbia), attempted to mediate the differences between popular expressionists like Tolstoy and elitist aesthetes like Bell, with his suggestion that there is an unbroken continuity between artistic experience and experience as such. Dewey, we might say, spoke for an American culture taking possession of the entire heritage of world art, a movement that Dewey could see on its material side in the acquisitions of his friend Albert Barnes and in the expansion of New York’s galleries and museums. Dewey’s *Art as Experience* [10] is a text for ‘the American century’ in art, promising to show that the highest cultural values are not only consistent with democracy but already ingredient in the experimental and open-ended conception of experience in which such a democracy must ultimately be grounded. As critics have frequently pointed out, *Art as Experience* is the most Hegelian book among Dewey’s later writings. I would add that, like Hegel, the book is committed to a comic reading of experience and history, such that clashes and conflicts can always be *aufgehoben* (transformed and subsumed) in higher unities, and such that these attained syntheses have an organic character, with the pervasive quality of the whole illuminating the specifics of the parts and the particulars of those parts enriching the whole. This comic vision is eminently suited to a civilization that aims at incorporating the best that has been thought, said and painted, while avoiding the cloister-like constriction of the elitist art practices. If there are to be cloisters then let us appropriate them from old Europe, set them up on the banks of the Hudson and open them up so that any honest New Yorker can visit them by hopping on a bus or a subway car.

The artworld that Danto found in 1964 could be said, roughly a generation later, to have realized this Deweyan ideal in an ironic, even parodic fashion. Andy Warhol's cool appropriation of commodities and popular images could be read either as an interrogation of the soul of a commodified culture or as that culture's blatant assertion of the irrelevance of traditional significance, content and form. Hard-edged abstraction confirmed the popular skepticism that greeted abstract expressionism by declaring that any kid (or chimpanzee) could do it (at least so far as technical execution went). At the same time, hard-edged abstraction erected a barrier between the cognoscenti of the artworld and the public, with the former appearing to the latter to be murmuring incantations over these new fetishes that seemed to be meant only to confuse and alienate outsiders.

Enter Danto, who discovered (as Carrier suggests) that there is no artwork in itself, but only an artwork in the context of an interpretation. It is precisely these artworld murmurings that are essential for constituting the works (or fetishes); it is not some property of the fetishes themselves that renders them art. This understanding allows us to see that these are not fetishes at all, in any pejorative sense, but fully continuous with the grand tradition; yet, the continuity recasts our very notion of what it is to have a tradition. Following this generational narrative, one might say that Danto simply gave a new twist to Dewey's contextualism, substituting the environing ambience of language and theory for Dewey's vaguer, more elastic and more democratic conception of experience. And while there is something to be said for such an observation, it is essential, I think, to notice that the narrative emerging from Danto's account is markedly different from that implicit in Dewey's appeal to the epiphany of 'having an experience' [11] or in his hopeful expectations for incorporating emotions and sensibilities that the intellectualist tradition had reserved for art into the rough and tumble of a creative, experimental, American democracy.

Consider Danto's notion of a style matrix, such that every addition of a new artistic dimension results in an array of 2^n possible configurations of artistically relevant predicates [12]. On the one hand this is an elaborately formal way of recognizing the broad spectrum of stylistic possibilities available at present, therefore justifying the plural-

ism and tolerance of the artworld. It is a way of showing how it is that artworks can acquire posthumous dimensions of meaning, insofar as the matrix of interpretation grows. The matrix provides us with a way of schematizing the historical development of the artworld through a Hegelian twist that has been applied on top of the Copernican turn to the constitutive role of art theory. On the other hand, Danto's matrix gives little comfort to those Hegelians who would like to speak of art having finally attained its true essence or form. (Such Hegelianism has a long tradition in art and might even be called Aristotelianism, after Aristotle's tracing of the development of tragic art to its destined conclusion in the *Poetics* [13].) So Danto puts such Hegelians or purists (like Clement Greenberg, for example) in their place, by declaring in the concluding paragraphs of his 1964 essay that:

In this regard, notice that if there are m artistically relevant predicates, there is always a bottom row with m minuses. This row is apt to be occupied by purists. Having scoured their canvases clear of what they regard as inessential, they credit themselves with having distilled out the essence of art. But this is just their fallacy: exactly as many artistically relevant predicates stand true of their square monochromes as stand true of any member of the Artworld, and they can *exist* as artworks only insofar as 'impure' paintings exist. . . . Fashion, as it happens, favors certain rows of the style matrix: museums, connoisseurs, and others are makeweights in the Artworld. . . . But this is a matter of almost purely sociological interest: one row in the matrix is as legitimate as another [14].

Let me suggest that what Danto offered us here was a satiric view of history, one that kept the same cool and ironic distance from the revolutions and discoveries of the artworld that, in Danto's portrayal, Warhol established between himself and the hot images of popular, commodity culture. From this perspective the style matrix may be seen as the anti-Hegelian device par excellence; it appears as a structuralist machine for generating indefinitely many artistic possibilities by means of binary operations compounding one another. Danto thus appears not as the spokesperson for a romantic, tragic or comic construction of the canon of art, or for art's history; he appears, rather, to be offering a *satiric* reflection on the many attempts made by more naive thinkers to establish new ways of looking at art and its history. To the extent that he thus claims a certain self-consciousness

for his position, Danto may still appear as something of a Hegelian. In his vision of the artworld as coming more and more to incorporate such reflections, he would perhaps agree with the Hegel who spoke of art (in the 1820s) being, on its very highest side, a thing of the past, replaced by the scholarly and philosophical knowledge of art.

Danto, who has indeed occasionally (with characteristic wit and irony) identified himself as a Hegelian, may sometimes appear to play both sides of the street, surfacing now as a gently satiric liberal art critic who can explore every row of the style matrix in his criticism (in *The Nation* [15], for example) while seeming to perform a Hegelian *Aufhebung* of art by theory on more strictly philosophical occasions. This ambiguity can perhaps be resolved from the point of view that David Carrier takes in *Artwriting*. One could distinguish Danto as critic and artwriter from Danto as philosopher of art. *Qua* artwriter Danto would be free to marshal all the resources of rhetoric and general culture to tell us what is worth seeing in Fragonard's delicate play with the erotic or in Robert Mapplethorpe's sleeker homoerotic images. *Qua* philosopher Danto would be constrained to give us an account of the ontological status of artworks, telling us, finally, whether and how they have been assimilated into language and theory.

I want to suggest then that Carrier's task in *Artwriting* is to define a position for a fifth generation of critics and thinkers in the wake of modernism. This sort of generational criticism is also consistent, I think, with Carrier's observation that Harold Bloom's "account of the anxiety of influence and belatedness defines the dominant mood of the time" at least as effectively in the artworld as in the literary one [16]. If I am correct then I have justified my long preamble in arriving at Carrier's text. This is the project set by two ways of understanding Danto's conceptions of the artworld and of the critical and philosophical practice appropriate to the artworld. The first antinomy is that between what I have called the Hegelian and the satiric dimensions of the narrative that Danto has to tell about art and its history: are we to read it as a Hegelian metanarrative or as a postmodern deconstruction of all metanarratives in the manner of Jean-François Lyotard [17], and in the style that I have called satiric? Notice, that in thus situating Carrier's work within a certain narrative about art and artwrit-

ing I am attempting to be faithful to some of what I take to be the deepest impulses of his work. The second antinomy to which Carrier seems to be responding is one posed by the looseness of so much artwriting, juxtaposed with the demands of philosophical rigor. But this can no longer be a simple distinction between the woolly-headed and the clear thinkers, because, from the vantage point of Danto's theory, such writing seems to play a crucial role in the formation of the artworld itself. If we dismiss it as merely or purely rhetorical, it is difficult to see how it could play this role. I will address each of these antinomies in turn.

First comes the question of the end or death of art. This is a pervasive theme of *Artwriting*. Throughout the text a certain figure or pattern emerges, that of 'Hegelian' writers such as Greenberg or Gombrich who purport to explain the true or genuine trajectory of art by demonstrating, for example, how it attains a purity in abstract expressionism (Greenberg) or in the realism and naturalism of the nineteenth century (Gombrich). One of the most valuable and perspicuous aspects of Carrier's book is the way in which he displays the structural homology of two such apparently diverse narratives, showing how they highlight certain works and artists to the exclusion of others in order to tell a convincing story that culminates in art's having found its true end. Similarly he portrays the post-structuralists and writers for journals like *October* (Rosalind Krauss [18], for example) as relying in one way or another on the thesis that art has come to an end. Now to all these Hegelian meta-narratives, Carrier plays Nietzsche. He observes that the artworld is able to use these stories for a while in order to make sense of the past and the contemporary. Yet each story outlives its usefulness, coming to have a stultifying effect on the understanding of new art. As in Nietzsche's account of the "advantages and disadvantages of history" [19], it is 'life'—here the life of art and the artworld—that calls out for something new. Part of Carrier's story is that this opposition between history and life becomes increasingly intense; he writes: "The Octobrists insist that if they have demonstrated that art's history has ended, painters ought not to continue to paint" [20].

In this respect the various artwriters in Carrier's narrative appear (to vary my own genealogical strategy) like Hegelian world-historical individuals. Each

comes on the scene sensing something of what the time requires, what sort of narrative or critical intervention will make sense of the art of the day and provide a way of identifying the most significant new work. But, as soon as the world-historical artwriter has achieved her vision, she, as Hegel would say, "falls off like an empty hull from the kernel". While Hegel says of his figures that they "die early, like Alexander; are murdered, like Caesar; or are transported to Saint Helena, like Napoleon" [21], Carrier notes that they retreat to chairs of art history, like Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss, since they have nothing more to contribute to the struggles of the contemporary scene, and so seek the protection of a well-entrenched academic *Fach* with its supposedly less-contested research methods. Carrier is rightly fascinated with the artworld's apparent ability to generate fresh critics when the old ones have done their job. Like Nietzsche he is sensitive to the ways in which the artwriter may serve either a vitalizing or a nihilistic purpose. (If space were available it could perhaps be demonstrated that Carrier has in effect rung a series of changes on Nietzsche's account of the possibilities inherent in the monumental, antiquarian and critical modes of history.) But it is not clear to me that Carrier can dismiss these various versions of the 'death of art' thesis as easily as he does. As I have said, his reasons are somewhat vitalistic: life in the artworld must go on. As Nietzsche puts the point in *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*:

Historical education is really a kind of inborn greyheadedness, and those who bear its mark from childhood on surely must attain the instinctive belief in the old age of mankind: it is now fitting for old age, however, to engage in the activity of old men, that is, to look back, to tally and close our accounts, to seek consolation in the past through memories, in short, historical education. . . . Does not this paralyzing belief in an already withering mankind rather harbor the misunderstanding, inherited from the Middle Ages, of a Christian theological conception, the thought that the end of the world is near, of the fearfully expected judgment? [22]

Certainly Carrier is right to direct our attention to a certain apocalyptic tone that can be heard in many pronouncements of the death of art, from Hegel to Jean Baudrillard. And like Jacques Derrida, who speaks of an apocalyptic tone in recent philosophy, Carrier is right to show us that there is not

a single apocalyptic tone but a wide variety of them, each with its own narrative strategy and its own ethical and political affiliations. But it is not clear to me that Carrier has himself offered a convincing alternative to the various death-of-art scenarios. As he would agree, I think, it is not enough to point to the existence of young artists or to the demands for new art by museums, cultural institutions and the public. One wants to show that something genuinely new and significant is both possible and actual. Yet Carrier's own discussion of the contemporary artworld in his penultimate chapter "Art Fashion" [23] raises in its very title the question of whether these bones can still live. For if art is like fashion then that means it is kept alive by the market, the pressure for sales and the needs of manufacturers and dealers to create constant demands for new products. Perhaps this is unfair to the fashion world. For example, Roland Barthes in *The Fashion System* discovered that it was impossible to write about the semiotics of fashion basing his ideas solely on the visual phenomena of fashion [24]. He realized that it was necessary to consider fashion as it was discussed in fashion magazines, that is (following Carrier) insofar as it was interpreted and constituted by fashionwriting. However, to the extent that the artworld conforms to that image of the fashion world, we might very well want to ask whether art is being given the appearance of life only by the most extraordinary mechanisms of publicity and salesmanship. Recall that in "The Artworld" Danto had said, "Fashion, as it happens, favors certain rows of the style matrix; museums, connoisseurs, and others are makeweights in the artworld. . . . But this is a matter of almost purely sociological interest; one row in the matrix is as legitimate as another" [25]. If fashion usurps the life that was to have been introduced into the artworld by the introduction of new stylistic dimensions, then we might ask whether questions about the nature of art have indeed become sociological questions. And Carrier does provide something of a very bleak picture of a contemporary artworld in which artistic values are reduced to monetary ones. This desolate scene is portrayed by Carrier as a battlefield where artists desperately contend for a place in the pecking order, while power naturally rests in the hands of a small number of dealers. But is this not merely what the death of art would look like in our

economic and cultural situation? For it seems that this artworld is constituted more by financial arrangements than by theory. The function of theory in this artworld, Carrier suggests, is analogous to the discourse of Rameau's nephew [26], whom Diderot depicts as the consummate flatterer and parasite at the table of the rich. I quote Carrier:

Diderot's account aptly applies to our artworld, in which artists, collectors and critics all take up positions. If art-writing is a form of rhetoric, then maybe its success and even its 'truth' can be measured only by its power to convince artworld people. . . . Fashion supplies a model for a world in which appearances are everything, and there is no reality behind these appearances [27].

Of course Carrier might say that there is no reason to think that this triumph of the fashion principle in the artworld will be a permanent one: it may be that other configurations of art, galleries, museums and critics will arise so that we will one day be able to look back at the period Carrier describes in the artworld as we now look back (and Hegel already looked back) on the *ancien régime* whirligig of witty and insubstantial flattery that is dramatized in *Rameau's Nephew* [28]. But we are not at that point yet, if we ever will be, and so there seems to be a certain disparity between Carrier's Nietzschean dismissal of end-of-art discourse in the artwriters he discusses and his own very minimalist and reductive account of our artworld. In a recently published article by Carrier, I find some confirmation for this reading of his assimilation of art to fashion. There he recognizes, as he says, an uncanny coincidence between his own views and Jean Baudrillard's theory, which describes a 'repulsive' world "in which there is no contemplation, and artworks have value only insofar as they are commodities" [29]. This, if nothing else, might lead us to take a closer look at the way in which Carrier consigns talk of the death of art to the purely rhetorical side of artwriting. (These gestures, by the way, raise the question of what is involved in Carrier's strategy of skepticism with regard to the philosophical and theoretical dimensions of writers like Clement Greenberg, Adrian Stokes and Rosalind Krauss.)

In his fourth chapter, "The Art System", Carrier addresses the death-of-art *topos* most directly, by constructing a schematic account of the views of Rosalind Krauss and other writers for

the journal *October* [30]. According to Carrier, these artwriters have sought a theoretical articulation for the suspicion, which began to be widespread around 1975, that painting was dead. One factor contributing to that suspicion, in his retelling, is that photography not only challenges painting as a visual medium, but that in the age of photographic reproduction, the status of the unique object that a painting was supposed to be, has been seriously questioned; a painting may now appear as an object that is waiting to be reproduced, rather than as an original to which reproductions must eventually refer us. The Octobrists, as Carrier reads them, make two claims. The first is that "because photography marks the end of the history of painting, we are examining a closed system of objects" [31]. The second is an expansion of what is meant by 'system'. Krauss is a structuralist who believes that, like linguistics, art history ought to turn from diachronic narrative to a synchronic study that would articulate the formal polarity between, for instance, the classic and the baroque; and she sees some significance in the contemporary appearance of Saussurean linguistics and the 'art history without names' of Heinrich Wölfflin. But for Krauss and her colleagues, this is more than a theoretical discovery. It has for them the consequence that continuing to paint is reinforcing an outmoded fetishism that can support only reactionary values. And to the extent that museums continue with business as usual, they convey a similar misleading ideology. Carrier's restatement of this view makes it sound boldly prescriptive: "The Octobrists insist that if they have demonstrated that art's history has ended, painters ought not to continue to paint" [32]. And museums, one assumes, should deconstruct the tradition rather than celebrating it.

While Krauss's views may not be entirely satisfying, I am not sure that Carrier's reservations concerning them are completely cogent or that his position (and Danto's) are as distinct from Krauss's as he would like to suggest. It is easy enough to point out that painters continue to paint, to admire the museum and to return to expressive styles that the Octobrist thesis seems to consign to a closed system. But should we read that position as literally announcing the death of painting? No more galleries, artists, painters, no more brushes, paints and canvases? Or should we take it as making the more

provocative claim that a certain part of the artworld, the system of painting, is now to be seen as a closed system (in Carrier's words), in which the essential possibilities have been mapped out once and for all? This is a debatable view, but it is not falsified by our identification of painters who continue to paint. We might also notice that the difference between Danto's conception of the style matrix and Krauss's structural system seems to lie only in their views as to whether the matrix or structure is open or closed. In fact there is a very confusing series of charges and countercharges among Danto, Krauss and Carrier on the question of who has said that art is at an end. In a review of Danto's books, Krauss accused him of holding this thesis, while now Carrier, whose views are close to Danto's, accuses Krauss of holding it. It is also not so clear to me from a reading of Krauss that she does hold the end-of-art view Carrier ascribes to her. In one of Krauss's essays that Carrier cites, "Notes on the Index", Krauss does indeed say that the photograph marks an epochal change and "heralds a disruption in the autonomy of the sign" [33]. But the aim of the essay is to describe how the art of the 1970s reveals "the pervasiveness of the photograph". It is not that art is dead but that it has taken on a different character. The photographic mode, she writes "is not only there in the obvious case of photorealism, but in all those forms which depend upon documentation—earthworks, particularly as they have evolved in the last several years, body art, story art—and of course in video" [34]. In her review Krauss explicitly contrasts her position that the impact of photography is 'deeply historical' with Danto's view (as she presents it) that art has entered its 'post-history' [35].

The situation becomes even more puzzling when we consider the critic Joseph Masheck, whom Carrier presents as an alternative to the Octobrists. Carrier commends Masheck for having found a mode of artwriting that avoids the narrativism of writers like Greenberg and Gombrich as well as the invocation of (an ultimately ineffable) presence by Michael Fried and Adrian Stokes. Masheck's strategy consists of seeing contemporary art apart from the tradition of flat, rectangular easel painting that is presupposed as the paradigm by the other artwriters discussed by Carrier. Masheck reminds us of the Byzantine tradition of painting that is not confined to the rectangle, the space

of the painting being understood as an icon, in which the frame is not a window on the world, but the container of “autonomously meaningful materials” or of color panels standing “within the real space that we viewers also occupy” [36]. While Masheck is certainly provocative and illuminating in reminding us of forms such as crucifixes, wall paintings and paintings on curved surfaces (like Baroque church ceilings in Rome) that do not conform to the rectangular, Albertian model, what Carrier finds remarkably valuable in his criticism sounds surprisingly like what he deplores in the Octobrists: “Masheck seeks ‘to draw on the memory bank of culture to claim for contemporary artists the traditions . . . to which they contribute’. [In his] narrative . . . there is no *subject* whose development we can trace. . . . He aims to tell a story without *subject*, dramatic beginning, or definite conclusion; such a text, perplexing for the reader who is accustomed to a strong narrative line, makes sense if we give up the belief that artwriting needs such a structure” [37]. To me this sounds very much like Krauss’s structuralism, which Carrier resists. The difference seems to be one of tone—in Carrier’s writing Masheck emerges as an ‘optimist’ about the present “who gives us a way of seeing that the future is open” [38]. That is, to speak with Nietzsche again, Masheck allows us to think and experience afresh by combining the historical and the ahistorical with exquisite intensity. Yet even Carrier’s remarks on this project are sometimes ambiguous, as when he remarks that Masheck allows the perception that “Perhaps Stella’s shaped works were less an entirely novel development than part of an ongoing tradition” [39]. This suggests that the tradition is what Carrier calls a subject, so that placing Stella’s work within the tradition would indeed be to seek the narrative reassurances that Carrier elsewhere suggests we might just as well do without. But assuming Masheck has dispensed with the subject, has he shown that the structure or system without a subject is open or closed, or has he simply introduced some more subtle variations in our understanding of what the system is?

Perhaps the end-of-art thesis is not so implausible after all. Ever since Baudelaire, critics and aestheticians have worried about what the advent of photography means for painting. These are not questions that arise only recently in the pages of *outré* New York

magazines. It is also worth noting that there is nothing approaching such a volume and quality of apocalyptic criticism and aesthetics that focuses on, say, the putative death of literature or film. Moreover, this apocalyptic discourse seems to be indicative of the contemporary artworld in at least as strong a sense as the arrangements of manufacture and distribution that Carrier details. I do not see what is inherently implausible about the possibility of a certain genre exhausting its possibilities in an essential way. Nor does continued productivity (especially under the conditions of competition for status and investments that Carrier details) constitute an irrefutable falsification of such a view. Yves-Alain Bois, in his essay “Painting: The Task of Mourning”, which accompanied ‘Endgame’, the 1986 exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, takes a view that can be usefully contrasted with Carrier’s [40]. Like Carrier (but drawing on Derrida and Lacan rather than Danto), Bois believes that it is important to discriminate and analyze the different ways in which apocalyptic discourse and thought figure in the artworld. He wants to show precisely how this motif functions in the various narratives that are told about painting today. Bois suggests a psychoanalytical mapping of some of the main responses to the modernist situation in painting. Marcel Duchamp is shown as mourning in the *imaginary* mode: his ‘readymades’—a snow shovel and a urinal, for example—demonstrate the fetishistic character of the traditional art object. Rodchenko’s 1921 exhibition of three monochrome panels (the primary colors) can be seen as an attempt to reduce painting to the status of a *real* object. And Mondrian’s transformation of line, color and plane appear as the *symbolic* project of analyzing and deconstructing the traditional resources of painting. I am not so much interested here in establishing this particular account (although I find it a very powerful one) as in showing that one may sympathetically assess a number of death-of-art narratives without either endorsing just one or skeptically dismissing the theme itself. We may sometimes be in the position of having good reasons for thinking that something like a holistic transformation or narrative conclusion has occurred or is occurring without being able to identify the single most satisfactory story about that event. Unlike the artwriters discussed by Carrier, Bois offers what

might be called a multiple genealogy, with variant ramifications rather than a single line of descent. (This is of course closer to Nietzsche’s use of the word genealogy; Carrier’s sense of the term identifies genealogy with a fundamentally one-dimensional series.)

Let me suggest that Carrier’s skepticism about the role of the death-of-art topos in artwriting is related to a larger aspect of his reading. While he does not want to use the term ‘rhetoric’ pejoratively, it seems to me that this term plays a somewhat exclusionary role in his own narrative. At first glance, Carrier seems to be occupying a moderate position, a critical stance free of either dogmatism or skepticism with regard to artwriting. The typical philosophical response, at least within the American academy, to the texts that appear in journals like *Artforum* is one of revulsion at what appears to be a confused melange of borrowings from European thinkers who are already suspect. Yet at the same time many of these artwriters will seem to invest their own pronouncements with a tone of dogma, if not of mystery and revelation. As a rhetorical analyst, Carrier would like to preserve what is of value in artwriting by disclosing the way that it functions in relation to the real workings of the artworld (demystifying in Danto’s manner) while showing that once we see how Kant, Freud or Derrida play their narrative or rhetorical role for Greenberg, Stokes or Krauss, we need not be concerned with their ideas in themselves. In this way it seems possible to hold the line between philosophy and nonphilosophy. Such a move may have the salutary consequence of provoking philosophers to find some significance in Greenberg, Stokes or Krauss by contextualizing them within the artworld. At the same time it seems to reinforce a certain traditional puritanism about what constitutes genuine philosophy. This is part of an implicit but strong series of distinctions operative throughout Carrier’s analysis but which he does not justify as such. There is a difference, it is said, between artwriting and art history: “[In] art history conflicting interpretations can be debated because there is consensus about how to argue” [41]. And philosophical discourse, it appears, is also structured by a set of presuppositions about what constitutes a reasonable argument. Yet it is not clear to me that the distinctions are all that neat. Do contemporary art historians really display a profound agreement about methods and proce-

dures once they move beyond questions of connoisseurship such as dating and attribution? Or have the questions identified with names like Marx and Freud disrupted what was, until fairly recently, a discipline not known for serious internal theoretical disputes? And cannot the apparent carnivalesque diversity of artwriting styles that Carrier documents be traced in part to the diversity of philosophical sources on which artwriters draw? Allowing for the fact that criticism and journalism will necessarily have a tendency to borrow hastily where they can, and that one's place in a network of money, status and power may lead to a premature and dogmatic entrenchment in a borrowed ideology or philosophy, are not the structure of differences and the strategies of rapprochement to be observed in the artwriting scene something like a dramatic enactment of the same relations in contemporary thought? Unless, that is, we adopt an exclusionary strategy within philosophy too, so that Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud, Heidegger and Derrida are seen as nonphilosophers or as 'philosophywriters' who must themselves be subject to a rhetorical analysis like that which Carrier performs on artwriters. We might also ask (and I do not think Carrier would be unsympathetic to this question) whether many of the classical authors of philosophical aesthetics should be seen as intimately involved in the questions of canonicity that are essential to the artworld. The rhetoric of Hume's essay "Of the Standard of Taste" [42] can be analyzed in terms of his own rather pompous neo-classicism: Kant's aesthetics has much to do with the eighteenth-century taste for gardens and landscapes; and Hegel's project of a unified philosophical history of art can be read as a manifesto for the new culture of the museum and the recently coined notion of *Weltliteratur* introduced by Goethe [43]. It would take a book or two to address whether these commitments and affiliations constitute an effective challenge to the traditional distinction we would like to make between cases and principles. But I will simply assert here that the strongest contemporary readings of these classical texts in aesthetics do just that (for one ex-

ample, let me mention Jacques Derrida's *Truth in Painting* [44]).

I am proposing, then, that a fully general and rigorous extension and application of the kind of readings that Carrier offers in *Artwriting* might very well lead us to question the implicit theory of genres within which it operates. Put in its most traditional form, it is the generic distinction between rhetoric and philosophy. Even if Carrier would rather practice an Aristotelian tolerance than pronounce a rigorous Platonic exclusion, the difference comes to appear as more uncanny than we had suspected. Perhaps, as Carrier suggests, we should all be rereading *Rameau's Nephew* [45], although I would want to focus on the silence of the philosopher as well as on the mimic virtuosity and multiple voices of the parasitic musician.

References and Notes

1. David Carrier, *Artwriting* (Amherst, MA: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1987).
2. By 'genealogy', I simply mean a narrative historical account that aims at making something understandable in terms of its antecedents. Carrier discusses and uses this concept in *Artwriting*, see especially, chapter 2, "Endings in Narrative Art Histories", pp. 42–55.
3. 'Significant form' is Clive Bell's term for the formal essence of art. See Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto, 1914). For a discussion of Bell's ideas, see W. Ray Crozier and Paul Greenhalgh, "Beyond Relativism and Formalism", *Leonardo* 25, No. 1, 83–87 (1992).
4. Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld", *Journal of Philosophy* 61, No. 19, 571–584 (1964).
5. Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto, 1920).
6. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972).
7. Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, Aylmer Maude, trans. (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960).
8. Myschema of romantic, tragic, comic and satiric narratives is indebted to Northrop Frye and Hayden White. See Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957); and Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973).
9. Bell [3].
10. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Putnam, 1958).
11. See Dewey [10] chapter 3, "Having an Experience", pp. 35–57.
12. Danto [4] p. 583.
13. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449a.
14. Danto [4] p. 584.
15. Some of Danto's criticism in *The Nation* has been collected in Arthur C. Danto, *The State of the Art* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1987); and in Arthur C. Danto, *Encounters and Reflections* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1991).
16. Carrier [1] p. 105.
17. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, trans. (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984) especially pp. 18–37.
18. For a representative selection of essays by Rosalind Krauss and other writers for *October*, see Annette Michelson, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp and Joan Copjec, eds., *October: The First Decade, 1976–1986* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).
19. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Peter Preuss, trans. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980) p. 44.
20. Carrier [1] p. 91.
21. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Reason In History*, Robert S. Hartman, trans. (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953) p. 41.
22. Nietzsche [19].
23. Carrier [1] pp. 108–127.
24. Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, Matthew Ward and Richard Howard, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).
25. Danto [4] p. 584.
26. See Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, Jacques Barzun and Ralph H. Bowen, trans. (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964).
27. Carrier [1] p. 126.
28. See Diderot [26].
29. David Carrier, "Baudrillard as Philosopher, or the End of Abstract Painting" in *Arts Magazine* 63, No. 1 (1988) p. 60.
30. See Michelson, Krauss, Crimp and Copjec [18].
31. Carrier [1] p. 88.
32. Carrier [1] p. 91.
33. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986) p. 205.
34. Krauss [33] p. 206.
35. Rosalind Krauss, "Post-History on Parade", in *The New Republic* 196, No. 21 (1987).
36. Carrier [1] pp. 99–100.
37. Carrier [1] p. 102.
38. Carrier [1] p. 105.
39. Carrier [1] p. 103.
40. Yves-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning", in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990) pp. 229–244.
41. Carrier [1] p. 138.
42. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste", in George Dickie, Richard Sclafani and Ronald Roblin, eds., *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989) pp. 242–253.
43. Goethe is usually credited with the invention of the idea of *Weltliteratur* (world literature). See Gary Shapiro, "What Was Literary History?", *Social Epistemology* 2, No. 1, 3–19 (1988).
44. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, trans. (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987).
45. Diderot [26].