

# THE NATURE OF ART

An Anthology

THIRD EDITION

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Let's look at some of the dichotomies that Korsmeyer takes feminist art to have undermined. A first, and perhaps most significant from our point of view, is the distinction between art and craft. Although various attempts within the tradition to define art have not explicitly ruled out categorizing products of craft as art, there is no doubt that making such a distinction was of central importance to it. Craft products were denigrated for their utility, whereas works of art were elevated precisely in virtue of their uselessness.

Feminist artists have challenged this dichotomy by exhibiting products of crafts as art objects. Take Judy Chicago's famous work *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979). This mammoth work included products of weaving, embroidery, and ceramics, thereby challenging the notion that such crafts should be excluded from the domain of fine art.

But its radical critique of the traditional notion of art did not stop there. Although the work was conceived by Chicago, over a hundred other artists helped create it. The communal nature of this work's production undercut the idea that art is the product of a lone genius rather than a social group. Finally, the fact that the work depicted a dinner whose guests were feminists of all stripes gave the work a political content that was inseparable from its artistic merit, thereby challenging another dichotomy at the heart of the fine arts tradition: that the value of a work of art could not be related to its political significance.

Korsmeyer asks us to see the work of feminist artists as having profound impact on our concept of art. Although she declines speculation on the new concept of art that might emerge from these practices, she is convinced that feminists have assisted in the dismantling of a sexist (and racist) conception of art that once reigned supreme, thus giving a specific meaning to the core feminist assertion that "the personal is political."

#### STUDY QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. Korsmeyer claims that feminist art undermines some of the most basic assumptions of the fine arts tradition. What theorists whom you have read belong to this tradition, and what assumptions do they make that feminists have challenged?
2. Feminist art is inherently political. Korsmeyer thinks this does not diminish its value as art. What examples does she give to support her contention? Do you agree? Explain.
3. Jana Sterbak's work, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, features prominently in Korsmeyer's discussion. What features of this work mark it as a challenge to received notions about art? Does this make it good art? Explain.
4. What are some of the strategies that the artists discussed by Korsmeyer use to challenge and overturn patriarchal traditions? Do you think these strategies succeed? Are they artistically valuable? Explain.
5. Korsmeyer claims that feminist artists produce works that explicitly register the specific situation from which they arose. What is unusual about this? How does it depart from traditional ideas?

6. Korsmeyer sees performance art as particularly significant. What ontological feature of performance art does she discuss? Why is this feature important? How does it challenge traditional assumptions about art?



### CAROLYN KORSMEYER: GENDER AND AESTHETICS

In 1997 the *New York Times* published a survey of opinions about the nature of art compiled from interviews with seventeen established experts: art historians, museum curators, critics, a philosopher, artists, a newsperson, and a Congressman involved with the National Endowment for the Arts. The questions they were asked included our title subject: what is art? One might expect well formulated definitions to emerge from such a group, but the opinions ranged from noncommittal to skeptical. Most expressed the view that it is pretty difficult to say what art is these days, partly because it is more or less impossible to rule out anything that it is not. "There is no single definition of art that's universally tenable," stated William Rubin, former director of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. "There's no consensus about anything today," concurred Philippe de Montebello, Director of the Metropolitan Museum. "Even the notion of standards are in question." Art historian Thomas McEvelley was somewhat bolder: "It is art if it is called art, written about in an art magazine, exhibited in a museum or bought by a private collection." But artist Barbara Kruger was skeptical even about this open-ended statement: "I have trouble with categories," she stated. "I do know just the idea that because something's in a gallery, instantly it's art, whereas something somewhere else is not art, is silly and narrow. I'm not interested in narrowing definitions."

Theorists and practitioners have never been in complete agreement about the way to answer broad and value-laden questions, so a certain amount of disagreement is to be expected. Art has always been hard to define, since there are so many forms, genres, periods, styles, intents, and purposes that mingle together in its making and its reception. Nonetheless, the hesitation and discomfort this question prompted for many of these professionals, who would seem above all others to be in good positions to pronounce on the issue, signal a moment of theoretical crisis. To many, any kind of definition at all seemed ill-advised. "Now the idea of defining art is so remote I don't think anyone would dare to do it," said art historian and Guggenheim curator Robert Rosenblum. "If the Duchamp urinal is art, then anything is."

Why would these experts refrain from committing themselves more substantively about the nature of art? What sorts of things did they have in mind that

prompted them either to draw back from a definition or to offer an apparently vacuous formulation: art is whatever is called “art”? To understand their caution let us consider several examples of art that challenge traditional artistic concepts. These cases will introduce both feminist art and the reasons for philosophers’ persistent urge—despite the odds—to formulate a definition....

In 1987 Czech-born Canadian artist Jana Sterbak exhibited a piece she entitled *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*. A garment stitched together from sixty pounds of raw flank steak was displayed on a model arranged in a seated pose. In the course of the exhibition, the meat slowly darkened and spoiled. While other art using more orthodox media may represent decay and mortality, this work literally rots before one’s eyes.

Despite its discomfiting features, Sterbak’s works are far from the most confounding that audiences face today. There are many more notorious, including the daring work of a number of other feminists. Among the most disconcerting is a piece that Carolee Schneemann performed and documented in the 1970s titled *Interior Scroll*. During this presentation Schneemann removed her wrap and stood naked before an audience; she smeared her body with mud, reading from a text. And then she slowly extracted a long, rolled strip of paper from her vagina, reading aloud the message written thereon.

These two works—to which we shall return later—are entries in a feminist repertoire of art, and one agenda (among many) of some feminist artists has been to question the terms of classification and evaluation employed in art and to defy those standards in their own work—thereby resisting the gendered ideals that pervade art traditions. But the presentation of works that challenge tradition, categorization, and taste is hardly new. Probably the object most discussed in debates over the definition of art was produced in 1917, when Marcel Duchamp entered a urinal that he titled *Fountain* into the New York Armory show. While the jury for the show rejected his entry, it now stands as an icon of an important moment in 20th-century art. But why?

To one who is not well-acquainted with the artworld over the last century, works such as these are likely to arouse consternation, bewilderment, offense, or discomfort. They appear to be not so much *difficult* art as *not art at all*. What qualifies beef as an art medium? What makes *Flesh Dress* a work of art? What qualifies Schneemann’s performance as a [sic] exhibit of art rather than ordinary exhibitionism? What transforms a plumbing fixture made for entirely utilitarian purposes into a work of art? As Rosenblum noted, “If the Duchamp urinal is art, then anything is.” But why should anyone accept this judgment? While they may be initially posed with outrage or naïvete, these are excellent questions. Critics, art theorists, and philosophers have grappled with them for decades, and not always with perfect confidence or success. It is art such as this that has brought the definitional question, what is art?, back into the center of aesthetic controversy. Feminist art, with its deliberate reversal of virtually all [traditional] aesthetic values, has joined—and sometimes has led—movements within the artworld that perplex, astound, and exasperate, challenging the concept of art at its very core.

The role of feminism in these challenges dramatizes the fact that the historical situation of women artists...has radically altered. The sheer numbers of women who participate in the arts today is [sic] considerably greater than in the past for

most art forms. This is the outcome not only of the reduction of overt sex discrimination, but also of considerable struggle on the part of feminist activists. Women did not just slide into the artworld because long-standing prejudice waned; they battled their way in. The subversive group of artists called the Guerilla [sic] Girls, based in New York, spent years picketing, harassing, and embarrassing the art establishment for the lack of representation of women artists in galleries and museums. Feminist artists in the US and Britain took on the art establishment with alternative exhibits and protests that garnered enough notice that they achieved a foothold in recognized art forums. The energy of the Women’s Movement of the 1970s, itself arising in the tumultuous atmosphere of political activism in the US and Europe, brought public attention to the social situation of women through events that were art and politics in equal measure.

The influence of feminist movements has resulted not only in increased numbers of female artists, but also in many artists (women and men alike) who use art to investigate and explore gender itself. Other aspects of identity, including race, ethnicity, and sexual identification, are equally foregrounded by artists today. Art is a means to uncover aspects of social position that have been just as eclipsed and distorted as ideas about femaleness and maleness in cultural history. Music, literature, theater, dance—all have distinguished practitioners who express and explore race, sexual nonconformity, immigrant and diaspora status, social oppression, cultural identities, and cross-gender experiences. Sometimes in developing their own voices, these artists have been the avatars of new art forms, such as performance. Sometimes they defy traditional aesthetic norms, as does philosopher and artist Adrian Piper, who deliberately forecloses the pleasures afforded by aesthetic distance in her presentations exploring race and gender issues.

In addition to an influx of artists with complex political and theoretical perspectives, other changes have also radically affected concepts of the arts in comparison to the way they had developed from the eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries. The distinction between art and craft that played so prominent a role in the emergence of the idea of fine art is now often deliberately breached. As we shall see in more detail shortly, a number of artists have incorporated craft materials such as fabric and fiber into their gallery works. Indeed, one now occasionally finds traditional craft objects such as quilts hung on gallery walls. (While recognition of an expanded repertoire of artistic contribution is to be applauded, this elevation of traditional crafts is a mixed blessing. Part of the artistry of quilts is their fine stitchery, and their promotion to art status prevents the viewer from getting close enough to see tiny stitches; and of course one must not touch.)

What is more, the barriers between fine art and entertainment, between “high” and “popular” culture, are not as sturdy as they used to be. Jazz, blues, and rock music now receive almost as much theoretical attention as art music (and a good deal more of the market). Narrative arts are by no means limited to literature or theater but include popular and lucrative cinematic media, television, and video. There are entire art forms based on technology that was not available when the concept of fine art was refined: most notably photography (which faced an early struggle to be considered an art form), film, and digital arts. The makers, performers, and audiences for these genres do not as a rule subscribe to the same aesthetic values that reigned when the concept of fine art developed in modern history. Such

departures from older art traditions are noticeable in every art form, though philosophical theory has probably been most affected by the revolutions that have taken place within visual art, which has witnessed such radical changes that the very concept of art has been brought into question.

This is by no means to declare the older tradition dead. As we shall see, it yet wields considerable authority over the art scene today. Nonetheless, there has been a loosening of categories within the arts, such that the confidence that theorists used to have about their ability to characterize the essential qualities of art has dwindled considerably. This loss of confidence and its effects on philosophy of art is one of the subjects of this chapter.

The impact of feminist art, both its continuity with other iconoclastic art movements and its distinctiveness, needs to be placed in relation to debates about art that permeate philosophy, criticism, and art itself. This discussion could take a number of different directions. Because feminism is first of all a political stance, many theorists have utilized Marxist approaches or the ideas of the Frankfurt school of critical theory to analyze the impact of culture in contemporary society. The influential work of British art historian Griselda Pollock is a case in point. Drawing on Marxist cultural theory, Pollock analyzes the patterns of exclusion that have erased women from the history of art and critiques the standards that underwrite the canons of "great art." The works of philosophers and social theorists of these movements offer potent perspectives on the culture of the 20th-century, damaged by two world wars, that have been fruitful in uncovering the political message latent in the high art tradition and providing critiques of cultural norms. Even more directly, European psychoanalytic and deconstructivist theories have been put to use by feminists probing the very construction of gender.... Here, however, I shall situate feminist art in relation to the largely analytic Anglo-American tradition, which has analyzed the concept of art in ways that indirectly illuminate feminist strategies in the artworld....

### FEMINIST WORK AND CHANGING CONCEPTS OF ART

Just as "feminism" does not describe a monolithic politics nor a single point of view about the role of women in society, so "feminist art" does not label one type of art, nor even a class of artworks that share similar themes or perspectives. Art critic Lucy Lippard observes:

It is useless to try to pin down a specific formal contribution made by feminism because feminist and/or women's art is neither a style nor a movement, much as this idea may distress those who would like to see it safely ensconced in the categories and chronology of the past. It consists of many styles and individual expressions and for the most part succeeds in bypassing the star system. At its most provocative and constructive, feminism questions all the precepts of art as we know it.

What feminist artists do share is a sense of the historic social subordination of women and an awareness of how art practices have perpetuated that subordination. That perpetuation has been accomplished by such things as ignoring women's work, objectifying women's bodies in painting and film, romanticizing the sexual exploitation of women in narrative, employing exclusionary criteria for women's

creativity, or carrying on the symbolic systems that regard the feminine as a dark rival to the masculine.

With such issues in mind, not only do feminist and postfeminist artists participate in the complex self-reference that characterizes virtually all postmodern work, but they challenge and overturn patriarchal traditions, often with highly theoretical agendas aiding their creative production. Nancy Spero, for example, paints registers of delicately limned figures taken from ancient mythic traditions (Greek and Celtic) and installs them racing across gallery walls. Sometimes the images are juxtaposed to classic texts, presented as partially erased fragments; sometimes the texts allude to contemporary writings about women. This sort of play with tradition calls attention to the norms of the genre that are being queried or subverted, and hence a "knowledge of the history of art" is a special necessity. Sally Potter's film *Thriller* (1979) is a reprise and revision of the story of the popular Puccini opera *La Bohème*. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's movie *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976) recounts the Oedipus myth from the point of view of the Sphinx whose riddle launched Sophocles' drama, thus invoking not only Greek myth but also the psychoanalytic theory that Mulvey used to such influential effect in articulating her theory of the gaze.

In addition to questions and challenges raised within the genres of familiar art forms, there are two trends much employed by feminists that refuse the expectations of traditional arts: the use of nonstandard materials and the presentation of the body as a component of art.

### THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE: FIBER AND FOOD

Since the fine-art tradition was fairly strict about excluding utilitarian craft objects, including things made for domestic use, many feminist artists have deliberately incorporated craft materials into their work. Moreover, since some craft traditions in which women participated were joint efforts and did not single out an individual creator, some feminist projects have been similarly collaborative, even though many of them are attributed to the artist who "directed" the whole show, as it were. Judy Chicago's large project *The Dinner Party* (1974-9), for example, is an enormous triangular table with place settings commemorating thirty-nine female figures from history and myth. It uses weaving, embroidery, and ceramics, and Chicago enlisted the skills of over a hundred other artists to put it together. Another collaborative installation on the part of twenty-four artists, *Womanhouse* (1972), set up an entire house with different rooms designed with feminist themes. Chicago's room in this project is called *Menstruation Bathroom*, a blood-splotted lavatory. We can regard it as a wry counterpoint of *Fountain*, for Duchamp's attention-getting urinal is, of course, a singularly male appliance.

Cloth and other fiber materials figure heavily in the work of Miriam Schapiro and Faith Ringgold. Ringgold employs quilts, a traditional women's craft form, in the fine art context of galleries, as vehicles for messages about politics and social issues, especially those involving race in America. This work uses the idiom of sewn fabric implicitly to criticize the exclusion of women's craft items from the

art tradition by pointing back to objects commonly made for domestic use on the frontier, under slavery, in ordinary domestic necessity. Feminist uses of fiber, ceramics, and other craft materials may be seen as a challenge to the fine-art-craft divide. The very materials employed *subvert* the fine-art tradition; but at the same time cloth and woven items refer to and revive women's artifacts *within* the fine-art tradition.

The use of craft materials associated with home and comfort to make painful and difficult social statements produces some interesting dissonance in the product. One thinks of quilts as benign items for warmth and decoration. But their designs are often more than decorative; they have long been used as family records or to depict historical events, many of them tragic or painful. The largest quilt on record is the AIDS quilt, a joint project that connected squares quilted by people all over the globe commemorating loved ones who died of AIDS. The incorporation of craft in fine art defies the distinction between the two and questions the denigration of domestic creativity. And as Ringgold's work makes evident, it also can be employed to confront another standard modernist aesthetic divide: the [sic] separation of aesthetic value from political significance.

The artistic employment of food is even more radically subversive of familiar concepts of art, for while craft materials represent artifacts that have been squeezed out of the fine-art tradition, foods represent substances that have been considered to have little or no artistic import at all....[T]he low philosophical standing of taste, smell, and eating is powerfully embedded in cultural symbols, and it is these associations that contemporary "food artists" usually exploit. The use of foodstuffs as art media simultaneously explores aesthetic traditions and sabotages them. It probes at the concept of art and the values associated with high culture traditions, at the same time that it presents provocative reflections on gender, sexuality, and death.

Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, to return to our initial example, is an interesting bridge between traditions of painting and the contemporary interrogation of those traditions. Its references are directed to the history of art itself, and it can be read as a manifesto against that history and its aesthetic values. Moreover, it reaches into political realms and embodies commentary on the worth attributed to the female body.

We can begin by placing *Flesh Dress* in a continuum of artistic production. Sterbak gives us some help with the title: *Vanitas*. This term alludes to a genre of European still-life painting popular in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. *Vanitas* motifs feature objects such as decaying foodstuffs, skulls, broken musical instruments, spilled coins, torn pages—any item that once was accorded value and is destroyed with the passage of time and therefore symbolizes the ultimate waste of worldly endeavors. (The label is taken from the first line of the book of Ecclesiastes: "*Vanitas vanitatis, et omnia vanitas* [Vanity of vanities, all is vanity].") *Vanitas* pictures are highly moralistic reminders of the fruitlessness of human effort and the error of placing value on things of this world that inevitably will be destroyed. The title places *Flesh Dress* in the same tradition as still-life painting, declaring its kinship with a long-recognized genre of art.

At the same time, its insistent literalness, for the dress is actually made of flesh, rejects the traditions of that medium, for Sterbak has chosen to work not with paint

on canvas but with butchered meat. Her work will not survive to hang alongside its forebears in art museums; it decays rapidly and declares its decay in the very course of an exhibit. (It is preserved only through reports and photographic documentation.) In so doing, it mimics the aging of human flesh—in this case female flesh: a "flesh dress for an albino anorectic." Allusions multiply as we realize that the flesh is hanging outside the emaciated body of a very pale woman, her thinness indicating an extreme fashion that rejects too much female fleshiness. The meat is heavily salted, but all meat has an odor. Even looking at a picture of this piece arouses uncomfortable synaesthetic feelings: *What would it feel like against one's skin? Do age and rot smell the same? In the final analysis, is human flesh really just so much butchered meat?* Sterbak's work is not itself anti-art, but it partakes of the spirit of anti-art in its choice of medium.

The employment of meat and other foodstuffs is different from the incorporation of craft materials into venues of high culture, though it similarly questions fine-art traditions. But food and eating...are associated with femininity in a most extreme and disturbing way. The female body in many symbol systems is linked with both life and death. All bodies die, but the maternal body is also a source of life, and the decay of women's flesh is a kind of betrayal—beauty and sexual attraction are lost, the ability to produce life has withered, and the comfort and sustenance of a mother are no longer available. The flesh of *Flesh Dress* isn't even naked (we are used to that in art); it is *skinned*—disgusting, vulnerable, and impermanent. One difference between food in a traditional *vanitas* motif and in Sterbak's work is that the first is a theme explored *within art* and the second is a statement about the nature of *art itself*. What began as the object of an associative reference employed for moral and aesthetic purposes to convey messages about the transience of life, has been transmogrified into an actual art medium.

## ARTISTS' BODIES

...[F]eminist theory participates in the critique of Enlightenment ideas, including skepticism about the universality of aesthetic values. This critical approach rejects the idea that the artist should create with an abstract, universal vision that eclipses his or her personal perspective, and replaces it with the insistence that all creativity has "position" inflected by history, gender, sexuality, social position or class, race, nationality, and so forth.

One means by which artists draw attention to specificity and positionality is by using their own bodies in their works. Ana Mendieta imprinted her body into the land art she created in the 1970s and 1980s as a means of expressing her views about the affinity between women's bodies and the earth. Virtually all of Cindy Sherman's works of the 1970s, 1980s, and into the 1990s include her own image, sometimes standing in for figures in compositions reminiscent of famous old master paintings, as with her series of *History Portraits*. Her *Untitled #224* (1990) is unsettling partly because of an implied gender cross-over, for her face appears in the motif of the classical Bacchus or wine-god figure. Renée Cox's work *Yo Mamma* is a photograph of herself holding a child, an image that resonates with paintings and sculptures of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child, most especially Michelangelo's

*Pieta*. In the act of substituting her own image for a familiar icon of a biblical narrative, Cox calls attention to the fact that she creates from a particular subject position identified in history by gender, race, culture, and sexuality.

It is evident even from just these three examples that this specificity of position means that the use of "the body" on the part of artists does not always signify the same thing. This fact is particularly dramatic when one considers the political impact of body images made by women artists from different nonwestern cultural traditions. Alongside the male-female dichotomy these works allude to additional oppositions between occident-orient, past-present, tradition-revolution. Just which cultural context is employed further diversifies the meanings of female flesh. The covered-over bodies hidden by the chador in Sherin Neshat's photographs of Iranian women holding guns, whose visible flesh is inscribed with Persian poetry, reference both Muslim tradition and revolution. The artificial, mechanized figures of Lee Bui evoke the highly technocratic society of contemporary urban Asia. Additional examples would further multiply the different types of eroticism, gender meanings, and social challenge that the presentation of bodies can signify. Needless to say, these meanings are not limited to the use of female bodies. Male artists have also used their own flesh—depicted or presented—to heighten awareness of sex, gender, eroticism, and identity.

The literal use of flesh and the body of the artist has also become a major feature of performance art, a relatively new form in which feminist artists have been especially daring. Performance art affords an immediate means to engage with audiences and to explore and enact ideas about identity and the cultural construction of femininity. Since so much of the Euro-American visual-art tradition depicts female bodies (usually young and voluptuous), much performance art upsets that tradition by means of exaggeration, parody, violence, and reversal. Artists have used their own bodies as means to explore the pornography industry (risking confusion with pornography itself), violence against women, the sexual marketplace, race identification, aging, and mortality. Performance art employs the living flesh of the artist, and some have shed their own blood in their works, sometimes with irreversible effects. The French artist Orlan, for example, has undergone numerous plastic surgeries, broadcast on video links, that have permanently made her own body into an exemplar of a series of references to artistic renditions of idealized feminine appearance. Orlan's works refer to specific paintings and sculptures. But more generally, when women employ their bodies in performance, they can hardly avoid evoking echoes of the entire art tradition at the same time. Speaking of performance artist-musician Laurie Anderson, Susan McClary says:

The fact that hers is a *female* body changes the dynamics of several of the oppositions she invokes in performance. For women's bodies in Western culture have almost always been viewed as objects of display. Women have rarely been permitted agency in art, but instead have been restricted to enacting—upon and through their bodies—the theatrical, musical, cinematic, and dance scenarios constructed by male artists. Centuries of this traditional sexual division of cultural labor bear down on Anderson (or any woman performer) when she performs.

Performance art has met with a high degree of controversy partly because of the directness of its presentations and the exposure of the bodies of the artists in ways

that are unprecedented in the fine arts (though not in pornography). The work of Karen Finley, who calls attention to the sexual exploitation of women by smearing her body with foodstuffs resembling blood and excrement, gained special notoriety because of her participation in a lawsuit filed *against* the National Endowment for the Arts, some of whose members found her work too offensive to merit public expenditures. The performance of Carolee Schneemann mentioned earlier, *Interior Scroll*, shockingly made use of taboo interior space of the artist's body, from which she extracted a wound strip of paper—like both tampon and sacred scroll. The idea that there are secrets hidden within women's sex is an ancient conceit of myth, and the enactment of myth in and by a living woman both explodes and employs venerable symbols, collapsing the distinction between mythic body and real flesh, and also between representation and reality.

For some theorists, performance signifies the social and psychological production of gender itself. They adopt a strong version of social constructionism, which maintains that gender identity is not given by nature as a developmental feature of sexual dimorphism, but is imposed by social norms with which children are inculcated through education, manners, upbringing, and cultural discourse. The connections between gender identity and performance have entered feminist thinking from several philosophical entry points. Marilyn Frye, writing in the analytic tradition, has formulated an analysis of female and lesbian identity that employs the idea of performatives developed in speech-act theory. Judith Butler, more influenced by European philosophy, has developed an explicit theory of gender and sexuality as performance. In fact, related ideas can be traced back several generations, for (as Butler notes) in 1929 Joan Rivière, a Freudian psychoanalyst, wrote a suggestive essay on "Womanliness as Masquerade." Thus from multiple theoretical starting-points one can explore the idea that female identities are less given by nature than formed through patterns of culture.

The feminist uses of the real body in art are among the challenges directed to traditional distinction between art and reality. At first glance, it does indeed seem difficult to distinguish art from reality if the art object is not a representation but a real thing. Strictly speaking, however, the ontological distinction between artwork and real object, however one articulates it, still obtains with even the most radical of body arts. It is the artwork that is described by means of aesthetic predicates: daring, graceful, packed with meaning, etc. Schneemann's performing body may be co-extensive with her actual body, which is to say that physically they are one and the same (which is part of the impact of her performances). But it is the body-in-performance that is the referent for aesthetic judgments, not Schneemann herself. In this respect performance art, however radical in other respects, is comparable to dance, where the dancer's body creates the dance but is not identical to it. The ontological distinction between art and reality, strictly speaking, cannot be erased. One must grant, however, that it has been rendered nearly imperceptible; moreover, the idea that gender itself can be viewed as performance further blurs the borders between art, artifice, and "reality." Uses of the body in feminist performance art have the dramatic effect of obliterating the familiar distance between art and life, and in terms of the challenges posed to the concept of art, this apparent ontological shrinkage has had stunning impact.

## SUMMARY

The last century has witnessed radical alterations to the [nature] of art and aesthetic opportunities.... To what extent do the philosophical, aesthetic, and artistic traditions that peaked in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries still affect artists in the 21st-century? This is a complicated question, and answering it is made more difficult by the fact that we are actually living in the time under assessment. We don't have the benefit of hindsight to judge the effects of the present art scene on developments yet to happen. Analyzing the artworld of today is necessarily tentative, for no one can foresee what the present will resemble from the perspective of the future.

We do not find with contemporary philosophical concepts of art and of the artist the same kind of exclusionary categories that prevailed as the fine-art tradition developed. (This is not to say that standards of evaluation and selection in the artworld today have erased all of the skewed value structures that excluded women's accomplishments of the past. That is a matter for a study of the critical reception of art, which I have not done here.) Women—of diverse ethnic and racial and national backgrounds—have been major presences in postmodern and feminist art and are among the pathbreaking innovators on the contemporary art scene. Their presence adds impact to the fact that the concept of art itself continues to be under scrutiny, and women artists embody in their very persons a challenge to the fine-art tradition. This we can see vividly in performance art as well as in the expansion of art to encompass nontraditional media.

Amid all these changes, have the concepts of artist and art also utterly changed, such that their implicit masculine gender has all but faded away? With due observance of the caveats expressed above, I suspect that this is not the case. The most noticeable reason for this judgment is that tradition remains the overarching point of reference for feminist and postmodern artists, who refer continually to the past, whether ironically, parodically, or confrontationally. Tradition unavoidably frames the work of even the most iconoclastic artists, for only God creates *ex nihilo*. The breakaway movements in art remain to that extent bound to rejected legacies, which therefore retain much of their power in these acts of confrontation. What will emerge from the collision of innovation and tradition that propels cultural history we have yet to see.

## ART AS CULTURAL PRODUCTION: PIERRE BOURDIEU

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Ever since Kant proclaimed the *disinterestedness* of aesthetic judgments (see Chapter 4), there has been an ongoing controversy among philosophers and art theorists about the relationship between works of art and the societies that spawned them. Although there have been spirited defenses of art's autonomy from its social context—such as that of Bell (Chapter 10)—there have been equally passionate attempts to show art's relationship to broader social tendencies—as in Benjamin's discussion of the changes wrought in art by advances in technology (Chapter 14). At the same time, contemporary discussions of art's nature have had to take account of artistic gestures that seem aimed at undermining the concept of art itself. By now, Duchamp's *Fountain* has made a number of appearances in this volume for its thumbing its nose at the pretensions of the art establishment as well as for its potentially revolutionary undermining of the idea of art itself. In his contribution to this volume, Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), the French sociologist and Marxist social critic, develops an account of art that not only treats art as a social phenomenon but also takes account of recent, apparently transgressive works of art. Bourdieu argues that these works amount to acts of “sacrilege” in that they aim to expose art to be more like normal industrial production than its adherents like to admit.

There is a well-known problem that art presents for Marxist theory. Marx had argued that the economic value of any object was equal to the value of the labor that went into producing it. But art objects, by this standard, are grossly overvalued, for no matter how long and hard an artist like Picasso may have worked on a painting, the value of his labor is radically overvalued when his work sells for millions of dollars. Bourdieu seeks to preserve Marx's theory by showing that the value of an artwork is, indeed, the value of the labor that went into producing it, only there is a vast social network whose value must also be calculated in estimating the value of a work of art. If we included the labor that goes into the production of *that*, he asserts, the value of a work of art would fit Marx's theory.