

THE
END of ART



Donald Kuspit

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By Donald Kuspit

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Review by Adam Welch,
artist, writer.

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more; or close the wall up with our English dead! In peace there's nothing so becomes a man as modest stillness and humility; but when the blast of war blows in our ears, then imitate the action of the tiger; stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood, disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage."

SHAKESPEARE'S WORDS RANG LOUD IN MY EAR as I entered the battlefield of yet another war waged on art's behalf – the battle of the aesthetic experience. No sooner had Arthur Danto proclaimed that the historically constructed notion of art had ended and announced the onset of the 'posthistorical' era, than Hans Belting presented us with the dilemma of art history after the end of art. While they negotiate how to work with the newest manifestations of art, Donald Kuspit is angry that art has lost its unique ability to transcend ugliness through beauty, that is, the aesthetic. Presumably, Kuspit's concern is for our mental health. In his new book, *The End of Art*, Kuspit raises important concerns about the extinction of art, as we once understood it, aesthetically.

Kuspit's credentials are distinguished and varied, having been awarded numerous prestigious awards by the most important art institutions, from the College Art Association to the Guggenheim Foundation. He is also a contributing editor for *Artforum*, *Sculpture*, *New Art Examiner*, *Tema Celeste* magazines and editor of the journal, *Art Criticism*. Kuspit is a household name in the art world and for good reason. When Kuspit speaks, people listen. Kuspit is a genius (in the Kantian sense of the term), which in modernity makes him king, in postmodernity makes him authoritarian.

Over the past few decades, Kuspit has presented the art world with thousands of essays about art and artists. Arguably, some are more critical than others. This newest collection of Kuspit's thoughts is among his most clear, collected and, dare I say, violent criticism to date. Kuspit is the consummate critic, a walking encyclopedia of art and theory. His usual bag includes collected essays that conveniently come under the guise of an all encompassing anthology, such as *The Critic is Artist: The Intentionality of Art*, *The New Subjectivism: Art in the 1980s*, *Idiosyncratic Identities*, *The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century*, and *Redeeming Art: Critical Reveries*, among others. It is unorthodox for Kuspit to compose a single narrative reflecting the entirety of his thought. Here, he manages to do it in just 192 pages, the first 177 of which are reserved for his "things ain't what they use to be" diatribe pure antagonism – you have been warned.

Kuspit is a passionate man – he knows what he knows and feels strongly about it. He is not the kind of man to walk the middle of the road. He says he is getting too old to worry about that sort of thing. Kuspit loves art, like a father loves his children. A father wants his children to grow up and become all those things that he could not be, do all the things he could not do. If it is true that caring parents get angry only because they love their children, then *The End of Art* is proof that Kuspit loves art. Either that or he wants to kill it himself, which ironically is a good analogy for the critic's role in art.

Kuspit wastes no time, beginning immediately with a noxious attack on contemporary 'postartists', a term invented by Allan Kaprow – one of many postartists who take fire from Kuspit. The theme of Kuspit's book is familiar – the decline of the art experience into dailliness privileging banality over otherworldliness. As of late, with increasing frequency, theorists and artists have addressed the notion of the end of art, usually offering their post-this-or-that theory, and Kuspit is no exception. Postartists are not concerned with mediating that special experience Kuspit calls the aesthetic. Rather, postartists are artists who are in it for rock-star status or because it is fashionable to be an artist. Kuspit would argue that postartists are only concerned about image and style. I am not suggesting that Kuspit is unoriginal. In fact, I propose quite the opposite. Kuspit expresses the most accurate and wonderfully articulate – not to mention profound – depiction of art, beauty and the aesthetic experience through his psychoanalytic background. Covering the spectrum of art practice from this perspective makes this text one of the more brilliant available.

However, one would have to step back from this work a distance to appreciate this perspective. While in the thick of it, the reader is confronted with a barrage of fire and accusations, offering quite a different view, one that is far less attractive for Kuspit. Kuspit systematically accuses the majority of contemporary artists of contempt and banality. No one is safe from his attack. Many artists of import come under scrutiny – Frank Stella, whom Kuspit goes so far as to call soulless; Yves Klein; David Salle; Paul McCarthy; Bruce Nauman; and Marcel Duchamp. He singles out Andy Warhol as the epitome of what Kuspit considers the postartist. Given the chance, Kuspit's theory would find fault with every artist over all time.

In the past few years Kuspit, Danto, Belting, among others, have addressed the attenuation of the concept of art. As of this reading, I still do not know what art is, and I do not think they do either. Nevertheless, Kuspit's belief that "the purpose of art is to dialectically transcend ugliness by revealing its immanence through beauty" sounds complicated, not to mention problematic. Kuspit sets his psychoanalytic and intellectually potent forces on the armies of postartists and, in the process, offers – sometimes subtle, sometimes not – precious insights into the aesthetic experience, Duchamp, Warhol, intellectualism, artist as social critic, and of course the ever elusive beauty. At his best, Kuspit has the ability to craft the most complicated theories into articulate and understandable concepts. Despite his pessimism, Kuspit's greatest achievement – that which supercedes his ruthless and ideological agenda – is his ability to make one believe in art again.