
Iconoclasm in Aesthetics. By Michael Kelly. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp xiv + 222 pp. \$65 Cloth.

The ancient claim that art loses its power when placed under the tutelage of philosophy is raised again in Michael Kelly's *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics*. Kelly argues that iconoclasm is the unavoidable result of philosophical investigation seeking to isolate the universal nature of the artwork. Philosophy's "inscription" of its universal "interests" onto the object of analysis distracts from the artwork as it exists independently of conceptualization, forming a "web" of abstraction and disinterest. In Kelly's words, "the disinterest involved in this web, whether a condition or an effect, is a disinterest in art (rather than just a lack of interest in everything other than universality) insofar as art is determined by the historical conditions from which it has been abstracted" (8). The process of abstraction employed by the philosopher in the analysis of art tears it out of its historical context, showing the philosopher's disinterest for the work of art itself. The disinterest that follows from aesthetic theory's application also leads to philosophy's distrust of art. To substantiate his thesis, Kelly examines the philosophical theories of four of the twentieth century's most committed aesthetic thinkers: Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida and Danto. Kelly wants to demonstrate the presence of iconoclasm in aesthetics by showing that these four thinkers denude art of its essence by subjugating it to philosophy's abstracting tendencies despite the active interest they exhibit in art.

Kelly's claim poses a challenge to those who take the philosophical analysis of art seriously. If Kelly can establish his thesis using philosophers who intend to show the virtues of art, he avoids the objection that he is singling out philosophers against whom his case is easily made. Rightly, he points out that there are many philosophers besides the four he examines who would not try as hard to bring art's virtues to light. Critical of philosophy's general scheme for assessing art, Kelly argues that philosophy's approach to art should be able to incorporate its historicity. This would involve, in Kelly's estimation, the inquiry of philosophy following more closely the path of art history. Laudably, Kelly takes his own advice. In the four critical chapters, he integrates the thinker's philosophical writings with the writings of an art historian as they focus on the work of a single artist. In this way he contrasts the philosophical and the art historical methods. Kelly makes several valid criticisms of how philosophy proceeds with artistic inquiry, and his interdisciplinary method takes steps toward resolving the issues surrounding the ancient quarrel between philosophy and art. Nonetheless, in some respects his critique goes too far, and in the process of demonstrating to the reader that the four great aesthetic philosophers of the twentieth century are themselves guilty of iconoclasm, he creates a caricature of each thinker, painting them all with the same brush, so to speak. Though complex and insightful, his exegesis is at times inaccurate, putting his demonstration of iconoclasm in doubt.

Examining Kelly's critique of Danto uncovers a weakness in his demonstration. Kelly's portrayal of Danto is sharp and well developed, so it does not suffer from being a shallow critique. However, in order for his argument to succeed, Kelly must show that

Danto's interest in the essence of art focuses on its universality, a matter of philosophical, not artistic, concern. This removes art from its historical context and inscribes the interests of philosophy onto the artwork, "abstracting" a universal by flushing out all historical particularity. Danto holds that the historical transformation of art over time must be accounted for in any valid definition of art, and Kelly acknowledges this. Thus, Danto does not attempt to define art based on any set of historical circumstances. Yet, according to Kelly, without its historical context, an artwork cannot exist as art. To avoid the shifting nature of art's historical embeddedness, Danto's essentialist definition of art makes only two stipulations: 1) that art must be embodied and 2) that it must be about something. To make his case, however, Kelly adds a third "unstated condition of universality" to Danto's definition (143). Admittedly, there is room for confusion in Danto's stance regarding universality in art, complicated by (what Kelly has called Danto's "rearguard" maneuvering) attempts to explain or evade criticisms aimed at his earlier claim that art has ended.ⁱ Though Danto's clarifications of some earlier claims may leave some critics unsatisfied, his theory should be examined in its entirety. Judging Danto's theory of art on the whole, Kelly cannot support his claim that Danto requires the unstated condition of the universal in art. Danto makes it clear that art's universality, insofar as content is concerned, is not the universal that is valid for all times and places.ⁱⁱ Rather, Danto advocates "a kind of universality...different from this."ⁱⁱⁱ According to the passage cited from "Philosophy as / and / of Literature," the artwork (in this case a literary work) entails a universally valid content insofar as the artwork suggests a metaphor such that all who encounter that metaphor can enter into it and experience it as their own. This metaphor is not the universal of the philosopher, as Aristotle puts it, but the universal of everyone.^{iv}

When Kelly makes his case that Danto "abstracts" the universal from the artwork, he uses one of Danto's pieces of art criticism. Though Danto's art criticism may *suggest* a universalizing tendency, Kelly's use of Danto's art criticism as evidence of this must be questioned. Danto makes it clear that his art criticism is decoupled from philosophy. Though his criticism is philosophically informed, attempting to draw what is philosophical out of the artwork, it remains separate from philosophy. Thus, Kelly lacks the demonstration needed to add the third unstated condition to Danto's essentialist definition of art.

Despite bringing art history and art criticism into the discussion, Kelly uses it as a critical foil to demonstrate the iconoclastic tendencies of the philosophers discussed. While criticizing the need of historical recognition in the works of others, Kelly's own critique is lacking an art historical layer. In his introduction Kelly states that he does not seek to scrutinize the methods of art history, but those of philosophy. Thus, the art historical element of the triad is not given the same scrutiny as the philosophical. But despite removing historical particularity from his essentialist definition, in the application of his theory, Danto incorporates a rich account of the history of art. His recognition of the changing morphology of art compels him to account for the process of historic change. Oddly, throughout his critique, Kelly speaks as if Danto himself had changed the path of art production in the twentieth century. While acknowledging Danto's historical

view of art, Kelly often seems to forget that Danto's account of the history of art is descriptive. Though certainly he wants to tell the story one way, he is not *defining* the course that art history has taken. Similarly, Kelly argues that Danto's rejection of the aesthetics of beauty is another sign of his iconoclastic tendencies. But Danto's description is merely echoing the mood of the artworld. Philosophy has influenced art over the centuries, but it cannot be said that art has been coerced by philosophy into shifting art production from the realm of the visual to the realm of conceptual. It is as if Kelly believes Plato banned the poets from a real city instead of an ideal city, and that Danto is the gatekeeper of art for the post-modern age. Would it that the philosopher's influence stretched so far.

Kelly poses a more serious problem for Danto by pointing out that after the end of art, history will no longer endow the artworks of post-history with its meaning. This would remove a pillar from Danto's essentialist definition: that art must embody meaning in some form. Certainly, in various texts Danto has backed away from this claim, stating that the meaning of history is not absent; it has merely changed.^v In the post-historical era it is still the artist's task to divine the meaning of his or her own time and manifest it in art, while the task of the critic is to interpret the meaning that the artist intuits.^{vi} Despite Danto's disclaimer, I agree with Kelly that the need of the philosopher or critic to interpret art is a problem for Danto's theory. Not, as Kelly claims, because in Danto's account philosophy takes from art what is solely art's, but because art, according to Danto, needs the philosopher critic's interpretation. In post-history the relationship of philosophy and art points to a deficiency in art's capacity to convey its message without the philosopher. Kelly argues that such a deficiency in art's ability to communicate is inscribed by philosophy. However, despite the influence philosophy may have had on art, I contend that this is a deficiency in the communicative capacity of the arts today. It is not a permanent state, but one that exists in what Danto calls post-history. Rather than pointing to the end of art, as Danto asserts, or iconoclasm in Kelly's case, it points to a dialectical opposition that has yet to be resolved.

In the final chapter, Kelly presents a philosophical approach that would avoid the trap of iconoclasm in aesthetics. Kelly proposes that the aesthetic theory incorporate the following changes: first, philosophy must concede that the domain of art falls outside of the realm of conceptual analysis, and that art's "resistance" to conceptualization not be viewed as a deficiency (196). Therefore, the inability of philosophy to grasp art must be seen as philosophy's deficiency, not art's. Certainly, the philosophical inability to grapple with issues outside of its conceptual realm should not be turned against philosophy. But philosophy is guilty of iconoclasm when its precepts are given priority over those of another realm, especially a realm in which its concept cannot be directly applied. Second, if philosophy can recognize its limitation, and not confuse its realization of a limit with the overcoming of a limit, it can, according to Kelly, proceed with a non-iconoclastic study of art, provided that primacy is given to the "object of aesthetic reflection—namely art" (197). This implies that aesthetic theories must recognize the value of the non-conceptual, even if it falls outside of the cognitive schema

of the philosopher. This does not mean that concepts cannot be applied to art. Rather, according to Kelly, it implies that the concepts applied to art “are to be shaped by the object, not the object by the concepts.” Objects of art are historical and contingent. Therefore, Kelly concludes that philosophy’s interest in necessity or universality cannot apply to the artwork’s historicity because in the strict sense they are incompatible. But Kelly does not claim that art and philosophy are incompatible; the incongruity arises only when philosophy takes the leading role in defining art. Kelly argues that if philosophy does not subsume art under its concept, art’s resistance to philosophy’s encroachment may subside, potentially leading to art’s reciprocal acknowledgement of the presence of philosophy in art (199). Third, any aesthetic theory, as with the philosophy of science, must be based on a solid depiction of the discipline it critiques. Unlike the philosophy of science, aesthetics often portrays art objects and art appreciation in a manner not corresponding to actual artistic practice. To be effective, aesthetic theory must be in line with artistic practice. Finally, aesthetic theory, insofar as it applies concepts to art, should follow the lead of art historians who view art first as a historical phenomenon and do not present it as separate from its particularity (200-202). If these conditions are met, then philosophy can proceed in its aesthetic investigations without committing the transgression of iconoclasm.

Kelly’s fundamental claim is that philosophy’s iconoclastic urge is manifest in the way that it frames its inquiry into the nature of art. Heidegger, who held that to disclose truth was in the essence of art, makes art a central component in the uncovering of truth. Yet his inquiry is not oriented by the question “What is art such that it discloses truth?” Rather, Heidegger asks, “What is truth such that it is disclosed in art?” (7). On this point, Kelly levels a charge to which philosophy must answer. The primacy that philosophy allots itself has, since the time of Plato, tainted philosophy’s inquiry into art. But agreeing with his first point, Kelly may go too far with his second point, that art be given primacy in aesthetic reflection. Though philosophy’s ceding the primacy of its interests would allow for art’s reciprocation in an inquest into its nature, surely art’s primacy would also undermine the critical import of any such investigation. An investigation into any phenomenon would be better balanced with an internal and an external perspective.

The primacy of art in aesthetic reflection is coupled with Kelly’s final and most adamant charge that art is inextricably linked to its historicity; thus, any philosophical analysis that takes art out of its concreteness embarks upon the path of iconoclasm. Kelly maintains that art’s critical autonomy is one of the attributes most attractive to philosophy; thus, philosophy focuses on this element without looking at art’s context. Though certainly philosophers may focus on how the artwork gains its autonomy, to assert that all abstraction neglects art’s historical embeddedness goes too far. One cannot even recognize objects at the most basic level without some sort of abstraction. I must abstract enough from concrete reality to recognize the difference between a glass and a vase if I wish to avoid embarrassment when invited into the home of another, and I question how this might threaten the integrity of these objects. While recognizing the strength of Kelly’s first claim, I feel that one cannot ask, “What is art such that it discloses truth?” if the barest abstractions from an art object’s historical context are

disallowed. Here I suggest that Kelly places too much emphasis on art's historicity, though it is essential to what makes art what it is. Kelly argues that philosophy extracts the universal from art, thus violating its particular nature, and when this is done in extreme cases, I agree. However, the implication is that art is pure particularity, and on this matter I could not more strongly disagree. What is art, that it is more than the mere everyday? What makes a poem more than the mere historical sequence of events? Why does art fail if the viewer cannot even tell that art is art, if it is buried in its particularity? In *Poetics*, Aristotle held that it was the addition of something more that made the artwork distinct from its mere historical context. Though Kelly is correct that the 'essence' of art is not pure universality, if we agree with Kelly's thesis that art must remain first and foremost particular, the pendulum swings too far the other way, and art merges with the quotidian. Kelly concedes that even art historians generalize and apply theory to art, but they do it in a manner different from the philosopher, recognizing art's historicity practically, rather than theoretically. While I agree with Kelly at one level, it is a cautious agreement: to define a movement is to make a generalization or to apply a theory. If the meaning of the artwork is not apparent to the eye, the curator's notes are already revealing the theory in the work. Aesthetics may have much to gain by recognizing art's historicity, but many art historians and philosophers already occupy the penumbral area between the two extremes of universality and particularity. Though the theory embedded in art may not be the theory valid in all places and times, art is nonetheless wrought with theory.

Iconoclasm in Aesthetics takes aim at a host of problems within the aesthetic tradition and proposes a way out of the deadlock philosophy encounters in its attempt to account for art. The book is engaging and it forces the reader to take a closer look at philosophy's traditional attitude toward art. Though I find the direction in which Kelly wants to take the reader very compelling, his method, which relies on a demonstration of iconoclasm in the aesthetic philosophies of Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida and Danto, actually detracts from his goal. Nonetheless, a great deal of insight can be gained from reading *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics*. Despite some exegetical disagreement, this book is important to anyone concerned with philosophy's relationship to art. I would warn the reader unfamiliar with the figures presented that Kelly inscribes them with the "interest" of his argument. However, his broader argument is very well stated and his approach to aesthetics, which incorporates the perspectives of art historians and artists, is an example for philosophers who will have their theories of art bear some resemblance to the discipline it studies. I make a strong, though qualified, recommendation of this book.

ⁱ Admittedly, in his article "The End of Art," Danto appears to support Kelly's criticism. See Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 111. Nonetheless, in numerous publications Danto clearly states that art has not stopped and the history of art has not stopped. See Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), viii and *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 25, 198. History still has meaning, but the linear historical narrative of the 'era of art' is over.

ⁱⁱ *Disenfranchisement*, 11-12.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Disenfranchisement*, 154.

^{iv} Aristotle states, while discussing why humans take pleasure in evaluating mimetic objects, “Here too the explanation lies in the fact the great pleasure is derived from exercising the understanding, not just for philosophers but in the same way for all men.” *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 34.

^v “One does not escape the constraints of history by entering the post-historical period.” *After the End of Art*, 198.

^{vi} Arthur Danto, *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994), xiii.

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