

# **Language in Art: Gombrich's History of Representation and the Breakdown of Visual Communication Paper presented at XXVII International Congress for Aesthetics, Ankara, July 2, 2007.**

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In *After the End of Art*, Arthur Danto argues that Ernst Gombrich fails to explain the shift of post-historical art away from optical fidelity. Consequently, Gombrich is unable to take seriously, among others, Marcel Duchamp, one of the twentieth-century's most significant artists. This failure, in Danto's view, invalidates Gombrich's theory of pictorial representation. Thus, he dismisses Gombrich's theory outright, without recognizing the advantages of the theory that Gombrich himself appeared unable to leverage. Gombrich's taste for art, as well as his own historical expectations, may have led him to assess what Danto calls post-historical art in a less than stellar manner, much as Greenberg was unable to see *Brillo Box* as art. Danto argues that in 'our time' artistic interpretation requires the assistance of a body of theory, providing a conceptual understanding of artworks that exhibit few cues for visual interpretation. This necessitates the philosopher-critic's role in interpreting the art of "post-history." Despite its shortcoming, Gombrich's theory provides an explanation for the divergent forms of contemporary art. Gombrich emphasizes the development of an artistic language, suggesting an interpretation of the artworld today that does not require art ceding its communicative capacity to philosophy. But, rather than signaling a transition into a new era defined by a radically different approach to artistic production, the interpretive aid called for in understanding the art of today indicates artists' rejection of inadequate modern icons coupled with their ongoing process of reevaluating and extending available visual metaphors.

I support Gombrich's argument that art manifests a progressive communicative structure through the following steps. 1) I apply Habermas' critique of Hegel, which uses his theory of communicative action to counter the notion that modernity has ended, to Danto's end-of-art theory. Danto's explanation for art's change in narrative succumbs to the paradox of modernity—the task of forming a uniquely modern guiding principle without recourse to past traditions—in the same manner as Hegel's end-of-art theory. 2) I examine how Gombrich's theory, which predicted the breakdown of artistic communication, provides an alternative account of art's historic "ground-zero,"[1] suggesting that the language of art is in the process of "re-formation." If applied with a more flexible notion of the visual schemata, this theory would not be vulnerable to Habermas' critique. 3) I reexamine the relationship of philosophy and art, arguing that philosophy could be viewed not as a universal or unifying force, rather, as Habermas suggests, as "stand-in" for a general theory with empirical application. In this capacity, philosophy could be viewed as a mediator, helping the specialized language of the arts establish meaningful connections with its audience. Applying a hypothetical thesis to Gombrich's multidisciplinary empirical studies would provide a method to show that the creation of contemporary non-mimetic art remains within the framework of a developmental learning process, and as the contemporary artistic language reaches a higher level of articulation, the interpretation of the philosopher is no longer required.

### **1. The role of philosophy in the theories of Hegel and Danto**

Despite Danto's clear rejection of Hegel's metaphysics, his narrative account of the historical shift away from modernism is vulnerable to criticisms that apply to Hegel's account of the end of art, insofar as Danto's theory also resolves the particularity of modern art into the unifying pluralism of the post-historical through philosophy. Danto holds that the internal drive of art created during the era of art is typified by two distinct but contiguous periods. The era of art begins around 1400 with the progressive attempt to achieve optical fidelity. During the twentieth-century, art attempts to define

itself philosophically through its manifestos and the quest for purity. According to Danto, the era of art's progression is completed when it is released from the universal constraints of self-definition. When art understands what it is, it no longer seeks to define itself, and philosophy is invited to explain why artworks are art and interpret their significance. In Danto's eyes, the way twentieth-century art is produced differs so radically from what came before it that it belongs to a new epoch. Danto's claim finds support among those arguing from the post-modern perspective. They hold that because the language of art has changed, what art is doing has changed; therefore, as far as artistic expression is concerned, we live in a new narrative epoch. Indeed, Danto's observation that the philosopher-critic is a necessary player in the interpretation of the art of post-history is well founded, for the boundaries of the contemporary artworld are drawn such that art can be whatever it wants to be. Danto articulates the conditions differentiating art from non-art in an essentialist definition of art: the artwork must materially embody the intention of the artist. But art's newfound freedom demands the interpretive capabilities of philosophy. The shift manifest in the post-historical era is, in Danto's own terms, linked to the Hegelian end-of-art thesis.

While Hegel's end-of-art thesis takes the form of a critique of modernism, Danto's is less critical of the modern age. Nonetheless, like Hegel, Danto's definition of art is linked to a notion of historical completion. Danto builds on Hegel's aesthetic theory without being tied to it, putting a narrative twist on the prognosis that art will end with an analysis of twentieth-century art history. Like Danto, Hegel assumes the necessary dissolution of examples and norms of the past, but Hegel also presupposes society's unification, through philosophy, in the dialectical resolution of the Absolute.[2] For Danto the need of the philosopher-critic in interpreting the meaning of artworks created in the fragmented artworld of the post-historical era places the philosopher in an independent role. The philosopher, acting as the unifier of the "Babel of unconverging artistic conversations,"[3] resolves art's subjective particularity into philosophy's universality. In this way, for Danto, the role of the philosopher-critic is analogous to that of philosophy in Hegel's absolute. Nonetheless, Hegel's solution to the problem of art's drive for self-understanding leaves the positive cultural forms that philosophy serves without guidance because the critical power with which history once endowed the artwork is no longer capable of giving imperatives.[4] Unable to provide substantive guidelines to modern culture, the critical import that philosophy offers is "blunted." The place Danto allocates to the philosopher-critic in the post-historical artworld would, like Hegel, deny art its critical developmental power. In the Hegelian account of the end of art, the unifying philosophy of the Absolute negates the positive forms of modernity represented in romantic art. Spirit withdraws from the decadence of finitude at its highest level of development, leaving no role for philosophy in society at the close of modernity. But in postulating the ongoing necessity for art's philosophical interpretation, Danto belies his claim that art's release from philosophical tutelage resolves this dialectical opposition.

When art's narrative is complete, when art no longer needs the direction of philosophy, art is free to 'do what it wants.' The task of interpreting art's meaning falls to philosophy. In its final phase, art embraces all styles, and, according to Danto, ceases to develop in any particular direction. The "style of using styles" serves to unify the artworld,[5] and Danto's philosophical definition of art as embodied meaning establishes the boundaries for this newly realized artistic era. Despite placing his theory within a narrative rather than a metaphysical framework, Danto's account of the contemporary state of the arts, remains close to Hegel's. But the need for philosophy to act as the independent interpreter points to a problem, indicating the need for an alternative account of art's historical development and the relationship of art to philosophy.

## **2. Habermas**

Jürgen Habermas' challenge to the radical discontinuity of 'contemporary' and 'modern' society

applies to the end-of-art theses put forth by Hegel and Danto. Habermas argues that some of the radical claims of those speaking from the post-modern perspective are merely “anti-Enlightenment” revolts disguised as “post-Enlightenment.”[6] His critique offers an alternative position by providing an argument that challenges Danto’s claim that art has ceased to progress in a unitary direction, and second, by suggesting an alternative relationship of philosophy to the aesthetic sphere. Habermas’ critique of modernity aims to overcome the philosophy of the subject that Hegel argued was manifest in modernity’s relationship to the self. Hegel realized that a unifying concept is needed when society becomes aware of “the dissolution of the exemplary past, and the necessity of creating all that is normative out of itself, as a historical problem.”[7] Though the principle of subjectivity may provide a foundation, or normative orientation, for the spheres of science, morality and art, it may not be capable of “stabilizing a historical formation that has been set loose from all historical obligations.”[8] The power of subjective reason is instrumental; it possesses the capacity to foster notions of subjective freedom and reflection coupled with the critical ability to undermine religion, a previously unifying force. Nonetheless, the principle that empowered modernity’s escape from the enchantment of religion is not able, under the power of subjective reason alone, to replace religion’s unifying potential.

Hegel’s presupposition of the concept of absolute knowledge provides a way to go beyond the subjective principle while still drawing on principles internal to modernity. But, Habermas points out, Hegel falls into a trap insofar as modernity achieves its self-understanding at the cost of losing the critical capacity of subjectivity.[9] Since the critical impetus of spirit, positively manifest in art, is resolved into the higher forms of religion and philosophy, Hegel’s dilemma necessitates art’s dissolution. But the sublation places the critical guidance previously extant in the sensual form of art outside of artistic practice.

Habermas’ critique of Hegel’s dissolution of art can be applied to Danto’s end-of-art thesis in two ways, which correspond to the two roles Habermas sees available for philosophy in a post-metaphysical world. First, if art has been sublated into its final form, freed from the constraints of history and the internal drive for self-definition, it would not be dependent upon philosophy. This implies that the form of art is not complete, that the ‘project of modernity’ is yet to be completed. Second, analogous to Hegel, the way Danto views the dissolution of art’s history indicates more than a break with the icons and constraints of the past. Danto argues that with the narrative shift, the way art is made has changed. Couched in this assertion is the assumption that art, in its freedom, is no longer compelled to communicate directly with the audience. The need for critical interpretation points to a deficit in an artwork’s capacity to independently convey its meaning. Relegating the task of communicating art’s embodied meaning or critical significance to the philosopher-critic points to a contradiction because art is not free if it requires philosophy to communicate its embodied meaning. The experience of art is completed, according to Danto, through artists’ attempts to communicate the meanings they manifest in their works. With the disengagement of art from philosophy, Danto allots the task of explicating art’s meaning to philosophy. Though it is still the artist who divines the meaning of history, the communicative task of art now falls within the purview of philosophy. This implicates Danto in the critique Habermas levels at Hegel.

### **3. Communicative action**

For Habermas, the ‘unfinished project of modernity’ is linked to the emancipatory properties redeemable through the philosophy of language. Communicative action is found in the originary form of language. Strategic action is manifest in language used to effect some goal in the actions of the hearer; the rationality embedded within such speech is instrumental.[10] The apparent loss of the normative underpinnings of what some view as post-modernity is actually the colonization of the

lifeworld, the non-specialized sphere of everyday social interactions, by strategic interests. To complete the project of modernity, Habermas advocates reestablishing communicative rationality within the lifeworld, and securing for philosophy the role of mediator between the specialized rationalities of modernity and cultural forms of the lifeworld.

Habermas' solution to the problem of modernity makes room for an alternative account of the sea change in art's morphology while resituating the role of the philosopher as the expositor of art's meaning. Habermas moves away from Hegel's resolution of finite into infinite, in which subjective consciousness resolves itself through unification in the universality of the Absolute. Instead, Habermas argues that reason is neither subjective nor universal in terms of Hegel's philosophy of consciousness. Rather, reason is manifest in the intersubjective communicative norms of validity extant among individuals genuinely committed to rational agreement. This notion of reason would, in agreement with Hegel, act as a unifying force. Yet Habermas' notion of communicative action would not necessitate the resolution of reason's critical drive into reason's unifying force. The critical force of reason does not entail the necessary progression of a process detached from its historical context. It involves argument and counterargument, fostering a reciprocal progressive learning process. Within this format, historical example is not disengaged, but challenged and reinterpreted when placed under the scope of criticism.

In Habermas' view, the paradox of modernity is to understand itself without recourse to its prehistory, which, nonetheless, provides the driving moment of its critical independence.[11] With the question of why art is art left to philosophy, the guidance Danto gives to critics is tolerance because the plurality of artforms extant in today's artworld will surely extend beyond the critic's taste. Remaining within the bounds of subjective taste leaves one stranded outside of an artworld that accepts all styles. Despite the wisdom of this guidance, Danto does not envision art moving beyond this stage. He accepts the style of styles as the final state of the artworld, as Hegel accepts the Absolute's unification of the finite into the infinite. There is no more struggle; all styles are equal. But this, as Habermas claims of Hegel's solution, "blunts" the critical import of art. If tolerance is the aim, then art's capacity to engage in a progressive learning process, and to communicate to its audience matters of critical significance, is set aside.

#### **4. Gombrich**

While Habermas lays the groundwork for an alternative role for philosophy in relationship to empirical social sciences and the lifeworld, Gombrich provides an empirical study demonstrating that artists employ a visual language with a developmental structure. In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich charts how art of the Vasarian age progressed through a trial and error process by examining the historical evolution of the artists' language or "schemata." The schemata make up the toolset artists use in communicating the nuance and form evoked by the image. The accumulated knowledge of their use is passed on from generation to generation. For Gombrich, however, the schemata provide more than a means for artists to ply their illusionist craft. It is through our knowledge of images that we gain the means of recognizing and interpreting the world. The styles of artistic presentation, rather than merely depicting an independent world, embed within them the interests of the culture that produced them.[12] Thus, the creation of images is a learning process that involves the tricks of illusion—how the eye reacts to visual sense—but also how the beholder understands and accepts the image presented.[13] The interactive process that occurs among artists and beholders is a trial and error process. Gombrich observed that the artists of the modern period despaired of the tools with which they had to communicate, and they added more. But if the schemata and the categories of art become too flexible they will not serve their purpose.[14] Gombrich argues, "The artist, no less than the writer, needs vocabulary before he can embark on a 'copy' of reality." [15] Finding the tools of their

era lacking, the artists of the modern era began to create a new vocabulary. But when a new word is added to a language, it is understood within the context of an already developed language. Thus, a language made up of only new words and new syntax is unintelligible.[16] The downside of the vast array of choices available to artists today is the near incomprehensibility of the language of art. Limits, according to Gombrich, serve a purpose in achieving communicability because “where everything is possible and nothing unexpected, communication must break down.”[17]

Gombrich’s preference for the efficiency of tradition is not reflected in the progress of history. In the late modern period, before the era of art had passed, Piet Mondrian insisted that artists break with the traditions of the past in order to bring out the universal in “a completely new art.”[18] Though not all artists shared his purist goals, during the twentieth-century, artists like Mondrian abandoned art’s traditional and outdated schematic language. But the project of creating a new language for a new age was never completed. Consequently, artists lost the medium through which they communicated with their broader audience. As a result, the nascent language of the arts was only accessible to the few who possessed its interpretive key.[19]

Prima facie, Gombrich’s recognition that modern artists rejected their schematic tradition points to the end of a historical narrative. Here, Danto and Gombrich concur. As stated earlier, Danto counts Gombrich’s inability to recognize Duchamp’s readymades as a falsification of his theory defining art as a trial and error process of mimetic depiction. Indeed, Gombrich seems to falter in applying his theory to contemporary art. But Gombrich’s theory can be employed to explain art of ‘our time’ if we are willing to use Gombrich to look beyond Gombrich. Many, apparently Danto included, view Gombrich’s work as pertaining only to pictorial representation. Though most of Gombrich’s major works deal with mimetic art, nowhere in his work does he commit to the notion that all art is representative.[20] Though Gombrich’s own taste may have prevented him from applying his theory of “schema and correction” to non-mimetic art, a rereading of Gombrich with a level of theoretical guidance capable of deriving hypotheses from his theory which do not entail mimetic restrictions would provide a fruitful alternative to the aesthetic theories of Hegel and Danto. Such a theory could offer a provisional general definition of art that is subject to empirical testing.

Habermas’ critique of Hegel is relevant to Gombrich in two ways. Habermas states, “Rationality has less to do with possession of knowledge than with how speaking and acting subjects acquire and use knowledge.”[21] Rationality should not be viewed as separate from the lived world; it is more practically located in the intersubjective norms manifest in genuine attempts to communicate. Second, the role of philosophy should not be above the discipline it focuses on, acting as an “usher.” Rather, philosophy should mutually interact with the discipline, working to supply “ideas without raising foundationalist or absolutist claims á la Kant or Hegel.” [22] Based on this, two points can be made regarding the philosophical and empirical theories of Danto and Gombrich. First, Danto’s assigning to philosophy the role of defining art should be reconsidered in light of Habermas’ critique of the philosophical attempt to unify subjective particularity into independent rational structures that dislocate the originary communicative competency of individuals. Gombrich’s theory shows how artists “acquire and use” visual knowledge, revealing the internal rationale of a progressive learning process. Though it varies according to the epoch and the culture, Gombrich’s pragmatic approach reveals art’s method of transmission. The critical power of art lies in its ability to adjust and critique cultural preunderstandings through a communicative learning process.[23] If this process has ended with a narrative shift, as Danto’s depiction of post-historical art suggests, then art has ceased to aid in the development of cultural consciousness.

If the rationale of art lies primarily in its 'opaque' method of communication, it is unacceptable for the interpretation of art to be permanently turned over to the philosopher-critic. Gombrich's theory suggests art is struggling to establish a metaphoric language that has resonance with contemporary culture in a manner, though non-mimetic, unique to art. The greater need of explanation today is a sign that the equilibrium among artists, critics and audience is shifting because art is in the process of reinterpreting itself. Indeed, the art produced today often requires the curator's notes or the critic for clarification, but not because art has ceded its communicative function to philosophy. Rather, the need for interpretation is due to the inundation of 'artistic' vocabulary with objects of the everyday coupled with a change in the syntactical usage of art's traditional representative metaphors. Thus, the aid of the philosopher-critic is enlisted in communicating the artistic message because a need in the cultural form of art exists that will in time resolve itself through its internal process of schematic development.

Gombrich's inability to make this case for himself in light of the changing styles he confronted after Warhol, suggests not a deficiency in his theory, but the lack of a systematic way to apply his empirical theories.[24] Thus, Habermas' second point comes into play. Rather than standing above the empirical disciplines, philosophy should integrate and interact with them. Philosophy's relationship to art should be shifted from one that defines art's nature and purview, to one of a "stand-in and interpreter." In this capacity, philosophy, rather than making essentialist claims, could suggest "reconstructive hypotheses for use in empirical settings." [25] The role of philosophy as the interpreter of art would still exist, but not, as Danto argues, on an exclusive and ongoing basis required by art in its final emancipatory phase. Rather, philosophy would mediate between the specialized rationale of the creators, critics and curators and everyday experiences of the lifeworld audience. By reestablishing art's communicative rationale within the lifeworld, the originary communicative function of language is strengthened.

To conclude, if, following Gombrich, we view the rationality of artistic creation as a reciprocal learning process rather than the transition from one narrative state to another, we can make sense of the changes in how art was made without yielding its communicative capacity to philosophy. Though the significance of late modern attempts within the artworld to create a new language were forgotten before the quest was completed, the process of reference and critical reexamination that artists employ to engage the audience persists.[26] Artists sought novel ways to interact with their beholders in part due to the deficiency of traditional methods. These novel attempts are intended to establish a dialogue with the spectators utilizing metaphors that resonate with the changing times. When a work references one or more previous works, it relies less on conceptual explanation and more on recognition of the images extant in contemporary art.[27] This creates a series of referential pointers within a work, allowing it to draw on the meanings manifest in prior works while adding new meaning via the artist's addition to the dialogue. Gombrich's theory demonstrated how art was used and how knowledge of art is acquired. Though his theory was not developed at a systematic level, he isolated the rationality of art. Reconstructing a general theory based on Gombrich's multi-disciplinary study of visual representation would provide hypotheses which could be tested, and, I contend, would show that as the referential dialogue of art builds upon itself, its expanded vocabulary will form a critical dialogue capable of communicating matters of critical significance. This would result, over time, in art's decreased reliance on the mediation of the philosopher-critic.

#### Notes:

1 Skeptical critic Robert Morgan refers to the "re-formation" of the artistic language as "ground zero." "The absence of experiential signification in art reduces the aesthetic to ground zero....Ground zero was the re-formation of language in art, a new semiotics, and a new contextualization as to how to

read art as an active agent within culture.” *The End of the Art World* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), 38.

2 Danto's account of the resolution of art's struggle for self-definition into the infinite pluralism of the post-historical artworld mirrors Hegel's sublation of the “bad infinite.”

3 Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 148.

4 According to Habermas, “Hegel sees philosophy absolved of the task of confronting with its concept the decadent existence of social and political life. This blunting of critique corresponds to a devaluation of actuality, from which the servants of philosophy turn away.” Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 43.

5 *After the End of Art*, 10.

6 Habermas, *Discourse of Modernity*, 5.

7 *Ibid.*, 20.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*, 22.

10 Habermas bases the distinction between communicative and strategic action on Austin's distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. I: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. T. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 286-95.

11 In Habermas' words, “[Hegel] sees philosophy confronted with the task of grasping its own time – and for him that means the modern age – in thought. Hegel is convinced that he cannot possibly obtain philosophy's concept of itself independently of the philosophical concepts of modernity.” *Discourse of Modernity*, 16.

12 In his article on Gombrich, Gregg Horowitz lists the five main points he argues. See ‘Gombrich, Ernst Hans Josef’ in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 317.

13 This concept is expressed in Gombrich's account of sprezzatura. Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 181-202.

14 *Ibid.*, 88.

15 *Ibid.*, 87.

16 *Ibid.*, 324.

17 *Ibid.*, 376.

18 Piet Mondrian, *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. Harry Holtzmann and Martin S. James (Boston: C. K. Hall, 1986), 169. See Roger Lipsey, "Piet Mondrian: The Universal Towers Above Us" in *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1988), 66-89.

19 Morgan describes this phenomenon in terms of the complexity of the artistic language. "If there are too few who understand the language of art, particularly the language of the avant-garde, then the game of conversation is bound toward monotony, an endgame cloistered by too many constraints." *The End of the Art World*, 14-15.

20 Horowitz, 318.

21 Habermas, *Communicative Action*, 8.

22 "Fallibilistic in orientation, they reject the dubious faith in philosophy's ability to do things single-handedly, hoping instead that the success that has for so long eluded it might come from an auspicious matching of different theoretical fragments." Jürgen Habermas, "Philosophy as Stand-In Interpreter" in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* eds. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 310-11.

23 Habermas, unlike Hegel, does not envision art's sublation into the infinite; rather, he argues that aesthetic discourse plays a vital role in maintaining the unifying force of communicative reason by providing alternative validity claims to those of science and morality within the backdrop of the lifeworld. Habermas does not argue that art is a communicative medium. His claim that the original structure of language is emancipatory does not extend to art. However, he argues that by using art, historical preunderstandings can be critically reexamined and reintroduced into a social discourse, providing a cogent alternative to the claim that the art of today must effect a radical break with the past. Within the specialized discourses of the separate spheres of knowledge, Habermas distinguishes discourses concerning the problem-solving questions of truth and justice oriented around "intramundane learning processes" from discourses of "world-disclosure," focusing on questions of art and matters of taste. Habermas argues that "a knowledge specialized in only one validity claim, which, without sticking to its specific context, bounces across the whole spectrum of validity, unsettles the equilibrium of the lifeworld's communicative infrastructure." In order to prevent a state of disequilibrium from arising, symmetry must be maintained within the lifeworld's communicative infrastructure between discourses of world-disclosure and the process of intramundane learning. World-disclosing discourse, according to Habermas, serves to examine the presuppositions of the lifeworld. This reevaluation comes about by subjecting the underlying preunderstandings of the lifeworld to a critical discourse, enabling the presuppositions of a culture to be scrutinized and altered without the necessity of a diremption from past tradition. *Discourse of Modernity*, 149, 319, 339-40.

24 See Horowitz, 315-18.

25 Habermas, *Stand-In*, 310.

26 Artists representative of this movement can be found among the early twentieth-century abstract painters. Artists such as Mondrian, Kandinsky, Klee, Bancusi and Matisse, though coming from

disparate backgrounds, all attempted to depict a world beyond the visible in their art. See Lipsey, 21-2.

27 Examples can be found in the works of appropriationist artists. They do not duplicate images found in the everyday or in the works of other artists merely as quotations or mimetic reproduction. They add to the image, progressively manifesting it with a meaning not present before. Examining the works of appropriationist artists, such as Sherri Levine or Elaine Sturtevant, as well as the works of artists like Robert Rauschenberg, reveals a referential dialogue unfolding within the artworld.