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Perversion and pathology: a critique of psychoanalytic criticism in art

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Abstract

For over three decades, Jacques Lacan denounced ego psychology for its emphasis on a strong and well-adapted ego. This article recruits the principle of that critique to examine the use of psychoanalytic theories in contemporary art criticism, with specific focus on the subject of perversion, Freud-Lacanian psychoanalysis, and the work of art critic Donald Kuspit. The discussion examines the main influences and concepts in Kuspit's psychoanalytic criticism, analyses specific differences between this psychoanalytic model and a Lacanian theory of perversion and desire, and considers the effect of these differences in the interpretation of art.



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Squandering one's seed in a futile effort to create new life turns it into unproductive waste matter, into shit. I call the work of Kelley and McCarthy para-art because ... it is anti-life.¹ (Donald Kuspit)

That is the ideal of genital love—a love that is supposed to be itself alone the model of a satisfying object relation: doctor-love, I would say if I wanted to emphasize in a comical way the tone of this ideology; love as hygiene, I would say, to suggest what analytical ambition seems to be limited to here ... [A]nalytical thought seems to shirk its task when faced with the convergent character of our experience. This character is certainly not deniable, but the analyst seems to find in it a limit beyond which it is difficult for him to go.² (Jacques Lacan)

The specific work of art referred to in the above quotation by Donald Kuspit is *The Garden* (1992) by Paul McCarthy, one of many mechanical

sculptural works by the artist depicting sexual behaviours, in this case human sexual behaviour. An installation tableau *The Garden* consists of an obviously fake forest setting with two mechanical figures of men, their pants around their ankles, both masturbating, one against a tree, the other lying face down on the ground. By declaring these actions as the “squandering of one's seed,” we are referred to the Biblical injunction (Genesis 38:9) against non-reproductive, heterosexual coitus, at least in the context of the bible story, for the same injunction has been used for a variety of non-reproductive sexual behaviours and relations, most commonly masturbation, homosexuality, and perversion. However, in addition to the religious discourse of sin and sexual deviancy, Kuspit's critique in this essay and elsewhere embraces the discourse of psychoanalysis and its vocabulary of sexuality, anal-oral-genital stages,

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libido, superego, ego, unconscious, fantasy, and so on. Employing the discourse of psychoanalysis, Kuspit's thesis is that the non-reproductive sexual behaviour exhibited in *The Garden*, as in "masturbating . . . alluding to anal intercourse," corresponds to the demise of art's productivity into unproductive and anti-life shit.³ Although there are many arguments from other disciplines, professions, and even cultures against this equation of excrement with anti-life, it appears as though psychoanalysis takes a less practical and, perhaps, more prudish view of excrement and its uses.

Lacan's critique of a normative human sexuality indicates that not all psychoanalytic theories support the same kind of moral order as that in Kuspit's interpretation of auto-eroticism and anal intercourse as "infantile," "destructive," and "futile."⁴ In Lacan's view, the moral order of mainstream psychoanalysis, with its ideal of genital love, reaches certain limits with sexuality and its excesses, both in terms of the "overevaluation" of the desired other or object (sublimation) and the "passionate excesses" which are "commonly known as perversion."⁵ Lacan's direct precedent for the separation of psychoanalysis from a universal moralism is Freud, "the only scientist of his day who, after many hesitations, ceased to see the infernal trio of the homosexual, the hysterical woman, and the masturbating child as the incarnation of a notion of perversion that was now meaningless."⁶ Taking into account the significant differences, in this mere sample, of Kuspit's psychoanalytically informed conception of sexuality and that in Lacanian theory, my essay will address specific and important problems with certain psychoanalytic theories and the consequences when these are applied to art.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH PERVERSION?

Today's clinical psychodiagnostics must contend with three main problems which, according to the theoretician and psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe, have led to the current misconceptions about perversion.

One, the ubiquitous and in most cases explicit moral judgement attending perversion. Two, the omnipresence of the masculine gaze, meaning in most cases a phallic gaze that hinders studies of perversion. Three, the problem of the differential diagnosis of the

quintessentially human polymorphously perverse sexuality on the one hand, and perversion as a subjective structure alongside psychotic and neurotic structures on the other.⁷

These problems, as Verhaeghe explains, are not unrelated. With the first, contemporary legal and clinical discourses define perversion as the transgression of a norm, thus they maintain the earlier religious ideology where anything other than the missionary position is a crime against nature committed by sinners. In the current judicial discourse, the law of mutual consent places the focus on sexual violence committed mainly by men, thereby restricting the clinical field to the legal-moral norms which define perversion. The legal focus on perversion as a male-dominated crime is reflected in, and supported by, the prevailing diagnostic system of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), where deviance from a male sexual norm delimits a clinical understanding about the place of women and mothers in the perverse structure. These problems only exacerbate the critical questions of diagnosis and of the difference between the perverse structure, as in voyeurism or masochism for example, and those perverse traits in fantasies or behaviours which deviate from a very specific, and therefore limiting, norm of heterosexual coitus.⁸ For the third problem, Verhaeghe refers to Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, where the main obstacle to defining perversion as a distinct psychopathology is considered in terms of "the extraordinarily wide dissemination of the perversions [which] forces us to suppose that the disposition to perversions is itself of no rarity but must form a part of what passes as the normal constitution."⁹ Freud indicates here, and throughout the *Three Essays*, that human sexuality does not conform to a so-called norm of heterosexual, genital sexuality with the aim of reproduction, rather it consists of a wide range of behaviours where the genital drive is no more, or less, the focus of sexual practice than the oral or anal drives. As Verhaeghe points out, Freud's proposal concerning the "wide dissemination" of perverse traits in human sexuality was subsequently proven by Alfred Kinsey's studies which demonstrated the impossibility of applying a heterosexual, genital norm to sexual behaviour. Given the ubiquity of perverse sexual behaviours,

that it “passes as the normal constitution,” the notion of a distinct psychopathology of perversion raises the further question as to whether perversion would exist outside of a socio-moral perspective on sexual normality.¹⁰

Perversion presents difficulties for psychoanalysis, but with benefits, particularly with regard to the ethical and epistemological question it raises, that is, can psychodiagnostics be value-free when it includes the concept of perversion as a deviation from a sexual norm?¹¹ However, as we have seen, the clinical study of perversion in psychoanalysis is limited for a number of reasons, making it necessary for “the psychoanalyst to consider alternative, ‘applied’ methodologies for probing its source and origin within the confines of artistic representation.”¹² Studies by psychoanalysts and theorists have traditionally looked to literature to understand perversion, and, more recently, studies in film and visual art have made valuable contributions to psychoanalytic knowledge of voyeurism, sadism, and the gaze defined as the object of the Lacanian scopic drive.¹³ From a non-Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, the art critic, theorist, and historian Donald Kuspit has produced one of the most well-established studies of perversion in the visual arts. Taking into account that psychoanalytic criticism in the visual arts can challenge and extend each field, does Kuspit’s theory add to or advance our understanding of perversion in both psychoanalysis and the visual arts? Does it avoid the problems in the psychological, medical, and legal discourses which, as with their late 19th century counterparts, define perversion almost solely as “human sexual abnormality”?¹⁴ Or have these misconceptions influenced and found support in psychoanalytic criticism in aesthetics and, if so, what are the effects? In addressing these questions, I want to also consider whether certain models in psychoanalytic criticism are more useful than others and why.

DIAGNOSING PERVERSION IN ART

From the 1980s, Donald Kuspit has applied psychoanalytic ideas to the visual arts. In fact, Kuspit has the distinguished reputation of “the only major Western art critic and art historian who is a licensed psychoanalyst [and] . . . invokes this analytical discipline and clinical practice with an

expertise no other commentator on the visual arts can claim.”¹⁵ His status as a major figure in art is well-established—“one of the half-dozen most significant art critics from the USA in the twentieth century”—and there is little doubt of his impact on the Western art world.¹⁶ In the early 1990s, Kuspit’s influence went so far as to reach New Zealand in the form of a series of studies from the 1992 IKT conference in Rotterdam, a selection of which borne home by local art curators were disseminated a year later in a gallery publication. These studies on the conference theme of monotony and conformism in the exhibition business are, in the publication, led by Kuspit’s magniloquent study “The Spirit of Business, the Business of Spirit: The Postmodern Quandary of the Museum” which, as one of the first texts where Kuspit applies perversion to contemporary art, foreshadows the way perversion will operate in Kuspit’s later analyses of art.

In the 1992 article, art’s significance and social role lies with its “spiritual function” by which the experiences of “communion and contemplation” have, as Kuspit explains, a profound effect: “at its deepest art puts us in contemplative touch with something unexpected and unprecedented, suggests a possibility and perspective on existence we never before imagined . . . spiritual art invites us to change ourselves, to change the spirit in which we live.”¹⁷ In a later article, Kuspit re-defines the notion of “spiritual art” in therapeutic terms (whereby authentic avant-garde art has the “therapeutic will . . . to heal its audience”), which thereafter provides the core criterion in his work for judging art and, as I will suggest, derives from an ego-centred, normalising discourse.¹⁸ In more recent years, Kuspit has proposed that modern art’s inspirational effects are due to its focus on the unconscious, imagination and the soul, the antithesis to the “vice of banality” dominating contemporary, postmodern art.¹⁹ The logic of this argument is clear: good art reaches into “the unconscious depths” (of both artist and viewer) and applies a “controlling” process to it; “postart,” as a “a shadow of art,” is characterised instead by the “mass-produced” and “unself-critical,” it can therefore no longer control the unconscious and cannot achieve the “rebellious program” of modern art.²⁰

Kuspit’s article in 1992 had already warned of art’s demise, attributing the problem to capitalism

and its cultural condition of postmodernism; these conditions, according to Kuspit, confuse the value of art with economic value, and have led to the loss of the crucial difference between avant-garde, high art, and popular art.²¹ According to the psychoanalyst Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, referred to by Kuspit in his critique, the crisis of traditional hierarchies and norms results in an abnormal, perverse social condition, for as he explains when quoting Chasseguet-Smirgel, “the ‘annihilation of the [genital] [Kuspit’s clarification] universe of differences’, putting in its place the ‘anal universe in which all particles are equal and interchangeable’,²² is the essence of the perverse attitude.”²³ While the conceptual parameters are overtly psychoanalytic in this critique of contemporary museums, they also imply certain normative judgements adverse to the aims of psychoanalytic treatment, as I will discuss later. For the moment, however, we can find these normative judgements operating in the question Kuspit presents to the museum, of “whether it will become an anal universe or remain the genital universe it has been in modernity,” in which anal sexuality implies a regressive and abnormal relationship to the other, in contrast with the normal, genital, and, therefore, mature sexuality.²⁴ Kuspit’s psychoanalytic interpretation indicates that perversion entails a lack of traditional social differences and the refusal of a norm in a (sexual) relationship; while in the case of the museum, this argument suggests that art’s dominance by economics will bring about a regression in art which hinders, and even eradicates, its healthy, therapeutic effects.

Surprisingly Kuspit’s critique of postmodern culture makes no reference to Fredric Jameson’s landmark essay on the cultural dominance of postmodernism. Jameson not only applied a psychoanalytic theory to describe a feature of postmodernism’s aesthetic model, although for him, psychosis and not perversion most accurately expresses the “joyful intensities” rather than “the morbid content” of schizophrenia.²⁵ In addition, Jameson had characterised the difference between modernism and postmodernism in very similar terms to Kuspit, defining modern art as that which “warn[s] the subject to change his life,” whereas the waning of affect in postmodern art shows there is “nothing of that sort here, in the gratuitous frivolity of this final decorative

overlay.”²⁶ However, Jameson’s approach is not to privilege either the modernist or the postmodernist aesthetic model, rather for him they are equally appropriate to their different socio-historical conditions.²⁷ Kuspit’s theoretical influences have further connections with Jameson, not least through the Frankfurt School which this discussion does not address, and instead we will turn our attention to the main psychoanalytic theories which provide the coordinates in Kuspit’s conception of perverse art.

PSYCHOANALYTIC PATHOLOGIES

Kuspit’s theory of artistic perversion elaborates a general doctrine which relies not only on the work of Chasseguet-Smirgel, but also of Heinz Kohut, the founder of self psychology, and George Frankl who formulated historical accounts of social pathology. These important influences provide Kuspit with a theoretical framework with which to identify, evaluate and analyse perversion in art by Duchamp, Picasso, Dalí, Warhol, Kurt Schwitters, Mapplethorpe, Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, Tony Ousler, Andres Serrano, Carolee Schneemann, David Mach, and Rachel Whiteread.²⁸ There are also perverse theorists, as distinct from theories of perversion, namely, Lacan, Derrida, and Barthes, who are, however, theoretical influences in Jameson’s 1984 essay.²⁹ It is understandable that the psychoanalytic theories employed by Kuspit will create a different approach to perversion and sexuality than one using a Freud-Lacanian theory. In this case, to re-state my question: does Kuspit’s Lacanian-free model of psychoanalytic criticism challenge the current misconceptions about perversion or does it affirm those misconceptions? If the latter is the case, how does this problematic position affect Kuspit’s principal concern with the contemporary reception and production of art?

Kuspit’s most comprehensive discussion of perversion in *The End of Art* (2004) re-affirms his 1992 study’s position on perversion as a negative effect of the demise of modernism, and, in addition, develops the account of both the end of modernism and how this crisis provides the conditions for pathologically perverse art and artists. *The End of Art* begins with Duchamp whose art Kuspit describes as “supremely perverse” not, as might be expected, for his *Given I*^o

The Waterfall, 2° *The Illuminating Gas*, where the viewer becomes a voyeur of a possible violent crime scene, but for the “ready-made” which confuses art and non-art, or art and life.³⁰ Here, we have a glimpse of the totalising drive in Kuspit’s interpretive model, since I would argue that the ready-made obscures certain differences, not between art and everything art may not be, but more specifically between art and the traditionally concealed yet related domain of industrial production. For Kuspit, conversely, the ready-made’s perversion involves the transgression of laws forming the basis of reality, in this case the law which separates life and art; for without this division, capitalist society too easily undermines the authenticity of the self who can no longer find therapeutic sustenance in art.

In *The End of Art*, Kuspit describes modernist art and traditional art as providing a “sacred place” for the strengthening of the individual ego, a place “not made for the crowd” but instead directing the viewer’s ego inwards, to “internal reality,” an “authentic,” “free,” and “spontaneous” reality of the unconscious.³¹ Earlier in *Psychostrategies of Avant-Garde Art* (2000), Kuspit had described the modern crowd as an anal universe, characterised by mindlessness, violence, disorganisation and the failure to resist the capitalist appropriation of art.³² In the face of the “evil of alienation that permeates modern life,” certain works of art (Kuspit’s examples here are Mondrian and Malevich) will allow for “the transformation of the badness and unhappiness in the subject, induced by maddening, tragic relations with the crowd, into goodness and happiness far removed from it.”³³ These monolithic claims, Kuspit’s signature style, are dependent on a dialectical, oppositional relationship, where, for example, good art unlike postart strengthens the audience and purges its weaknesses.³⁴ While this oppositional relationship undeniably organises Kuspit’s interpretative procedure, what may be less obvious is how this dialectic is structured according to a discourse of norms and is authorised by the particular psychoanalytic theories of influence in Kuspit’s work. We may locate this normalising discourse, and its complicity with certain psychoanalytic theories, in the following passage, where Kuspit explains, with quotations from Kohut, his now more fully developed therapeutic ideal for art.

The ego, according to Freud, is healthy when it has the strength to meet and mediate the demands of id, superego, and external reality and hold its own. But prior to the health of the ego is the health of the self—the establishment of “an at least potentially cohesive self, that is, of a potentially efficient energetic continuum.” Ultimately, this is the “secure consolidation” of self that gives it the “firmness and freedom to carry out its intrinsic program of action.” This ability . . . constitutes the “psychological health and psychic normality” of the “healthy nuclear self.”³⁵

In this passage, Kuspit’s concept of the ego presents Freud’s theory as though it coincides seamlessly with Kohut’s. And, for this conceptualisation of the ego, Kohut himself refers to Freud’s posthumous *Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940) where Freud describes the work of analysis in terms of strengthening of the patient’s ego which has been weakened by negotiating the conflicts between the drives of the id and the demands of the superego.³⁶ Although Kohut’s self psychology has many differences to the earlier branch of ego psychology, not least because Kohut was influenced by Kleinian object relations theory, both ego and self psychology use only this single description of the ego, among the many in Freud’s published texts.³⁷ A very different concept of the ego-as-mediator is found, for example, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) where in only a few pages Freud presents four more qualities of the ego, one particularly of which—a projection of the surface of the body—suggests that the ego is an illusionary and imaginary agency with a tendency for rigidity rather than freedom.³⁸

Both ego psychology and self psychology exemplify the reasons for Lacan’s critique of mainstream psychoanalysis which has recognised only the ego’s active quality, thereby ignoring its static and object-like qualities.³⁹ Where ego psychology privileges the ego’s active side, self psychology promotes a self with the “firmness and freedom to carry out its intrinsic program of action.”⁴⁰ A second criticism of ego psychology concerns its focus on the empowerment of the ego that had, by removing theoretical and clinical attention from the work of the unconscious, led to the revision of the ego as a “‘conflict-free sphere’ in which the ego could develop and extend its ‘mastery of reality’ free from the distracting or nefarious influences of the other psychical

agencies.”⁴¹ Similarly, self psychology conceives of the self as conflict-free in that the self’s integrity is threatened not by conflict but by its own deficiency which, when cured by empathic relations in analysis, can become a coherent and complete self. Through their focus on the empowerment of the ego or self, these branches of psychology are aligned with general psychology in fostering a developmental approach, where the progression through the oral, anal, and genital stages is considered the typical, healthy norm, regardless of the unfeasibility of such a universalising premise.⁴² However, the notion of a normal development is no more a consistent position in Freud’s work than his conception of the ego.⁴³ Kuspit’s reference to Kohut and Freud is, in fact, Kohut’s reading of Freud’s theory as though it were a unified field with a universal standard of normality.

According to psychoanalyst and theoretician Bruce Fink, many psychoanalysts have resorted to a normalising discourse to manage the “otherwise unwieldy process of analysis,” thus relying upon “a specific image of the type of personality they were trying to mold . . . (as opposed to simply following Freud’s recommendation to seek out the repressed).”⁴⁴ Does Kuspit’s theory of art depend on and therefore impose a notion of normality upon art? And, could the elaboration of a normative model afford, as it does in a normalising psychoanalysis, a set of parameters in the “otherwise unwieldy process” of analysing contemporary art?

The End of Art, by virtue of its emphasis on perversion, includes a detailed account of Kuspit’s normative model for art, artists, and viewers. Indeed, the distinction between normal and abnormal is central to the overall argument on the end of art, in the critique of contemporary art, and in the approach taken to psychoanalysis and its fundamental tenets. The cause of art’s demise is presented in unambiguous terms: “It is the end of the cult of the unconscious, and with that the end of modern art and art itself, for without the unconscious art became uninspired—literally, for the unconscious has always been the source of art’s vitality.”⁴⁵ As a psychoanalyst and art critic, it might seem that in this statement, Kuspit has talked his way out of his professions; but, of course, his argument is not that art or the unconscious has ceased to exist, but that the unconscious no longer functions as a “source”

for art. From this position, Kuspit then proposes that the unconscious once served as a source of inspiration in art, by which the “tension between abnormal unconscious conception and normal conscious perception” enabled the postimpressionists to paint external reality while changing “its appearance according to the dictates of their abnormalizing unconscious, in effect distorting it.”⁴⁶ The implication here, confirmed soon after this passage, is that the normal, healthy part of the subject’s ego is in touch with reality, whereas the subject’s unconscious can only distort reality. As Kuspit says of Van Gogh’s painting, “Appearances were altered by unconscious projection, making them more extraordinary . . . than they were in everyday consciousness.”⁴⁷ Here and throughout Kuspit’s texts, normality involves the capacity for true perception and a healthy, direct access to external reality. Kuspit’s belief in a normal, conscious perception conforms to self psychology’s myth of psychic normality and, once again, diverges from Freud who contended that we bring our own preconceptions to each situation; that the external world is only ever “incompletely presented . . . by the communications of our sense organs.”⁴⁸ By uncritically relying on self psychology’s notions of self and reality, Kuspit’s psychoanalytic theory of art would seem to find far less of interest and relevance in the unconscious than it does in the ego’s controlling activities. Indeed, the ego has a vital role in creativity and in modern art, where, according to Kuspit,

regression to childhood and madness is under control of the artist’s working ego. It is a creative regression, in that it strengthens the ego by making it conscious of instinctive forces of nature and the superego forces of society that inhabit the psyche, which allows it [the ego] to use them [the id instincts and the superego] for its sublime ends.⁴⁹

As we can see, the “working ego” of the artist of avant-garde art—and for Kuspit there are still today the “New Old Masters”—has the capacity to creatively control unconscious instincts. The working ego is thus clearly on the side of consciousness and the normal perception of a fixed, singular reality, while it also mediates and forms the unconscious for its creative, “sublime ends.” The term “working ego” might just as well be the holy grail of modernist or “genuine avant-garde art,” for without it, artists succumb to

regressive urges which distort and pervert the true course of art.⁵⁰

What is this working ego so crucial to Kuspit's conception of "genuine avant-garde art"? The term seems to combine two related clinical techniques used in many institutionalised therapies. The working relationship between analyst and patient, also called a therapeutic alliance, is instigated by the analyst in an alliance with the patient's observing ego, the healthy side of the ego, with the intention of making a place from which to observe and comment on the transference relationship. In contrast to the observing ego and the therapeutic alliance, the transference is thought to involve the experiencing ego, as the irrational and obstructive part of the ego which, according to this clinical approach, can be observed and therefore corrected in the therapeutic alliance under the direction of the analyst.⁵¹ Where Freud worked with and focused on the patient's own, singular speech, in contrast, the notion of the therapeutic alliance and its use of a dissociated ego emphasise the analyst's own thoughts and feelings; in other words, the analyst's own ego becomes the authority on the patient and on the meaning of such complex notions as rational and normal.⁵² Clinically, this approach disregards the patient's unconscious in favour of the analyst's normal, in-touch-with-reality, ego which is presented as a model for the patient's conscious, observing ego. The working relationship and observing ego give the analyst and analysand an impression of certainty insofar as the analyst's views and beliefs about the patient guide the direction of the treatment. By comparison, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the analyst does not assume the position of knowledge and understanding which, it is considered, encourages resistance (in both parties) and removes the opportunity for the analysand to speak and hear his or her own unconscious desire.

Normalisation, as Fink contends, gives the analyst a strategy for managing and controlling the unknown, unwieldy process of each analysis. Avoidance operates through the strategy of splitting the ego, putting aside the feared object, enabling instead attention to be given to the more comforting, loved object: the object compatible with the analyst's own "symptomatic avoidance."⁵³ By fostering an observing ego, the analysis strengthens repression in patient and

analyst, at the same time enabling the analyst to systematically avoid something that cannot be resolved on the basis of an oppositional logic in a totalised, theoretical field. The narrative strategy in Kuspit's interpretive procedure takes its shape around an oppositional relationship and in the emphasis on a strong, healthy ego for both the artist's own practice and in the effect generated by art for audiences. In psychoanalysis, an emphasis on a strong ego consigns the patient to an unethical process of indoctrination, and when such psychoanalytic theories are applied to art, we may find evidence of the function of these theories in producing a standard of normality with which to measure art, artists, and audiences.

DIGRESSIONS OF DESIRE

In their responses to Kuspit's psychoanalytic art theory, many authors have written approvingly of its conception of an ego- or self-centred subject, agreeing that it is necessary to a healthy psychosocial experience of "good art."⁵⁴ Amongst these authors of a recent edited book on Kuspit, only Randall Van Schepen's chapter raises questions about Kuspit's theory, including its psychoanalytic principles. In terms of the therapeutic function of art, Van Schepen questions whether therapies "designed to free the subject to make a better life for the self" are, on the basis of that very aim, inherently authoritarian, while he locates a similar totalising impulse in the "trans-historical and trans-cultural" position Kuspit takes toward art and human subjectivity.⁵⁵ These questions not only suggest a close relationship between the focus on the psychic agency of the ego and a prescriptive discourse of norms but also imply that normalisation, in regulating subjectivity through the notion of a stable identity, is potentially problematic if not pathological.⁵⁶ In saying this, I am paraphrasing Lacanian theorist Tim Dean who outlines both the pathology and the fallibility of normalisation, that is, the extent to which unconscious desire cannot be reduced to the subject's ego, and instead in its "perverse resistance to orientation or identity (its unconscious, perpetual mobility) ... desire itself remains potentially antinormative."⁵⁷ By transposing the logic of Dean's thesis on sexuality to Kuspit's art theory, we may be able to locate in the conceptual terrain an asymmetrical, discarded element which subverts its discourse of

norms. The symmetry of Kuspit's social psychoanalysis becomes increasingly apparent and divisive in the concluding chapter of *The End of Art* where the critique of society achieved by avant-garde art is contrasted with postart which, since Duchamp, has provided mere reflections of "society's indifference."⁵⁸ As a further sign of the artist's impoverished ego, postart merely passively imitates society, assuming the attributes of its perverse social other in which the loss of the distinction between high and low constitutes, for Kuspit, "a holocaust of high art" and "is the intellectual case par excellence of perversion."⁵⁹

In drawing these horrifying conclusions about art, where perversion is unequivocally associated with immorality, Kuspit refers to Frankl's social history (1989) and Chasseguet-Smirgel's (1985) study of perversion, both of which have a considerable influence on Kuspit's conception of perversion and art. For Frankl, as quoted by Kuspit, the "dirty and bad" should never be the material in art (rubbish, old or unwashed clothes, excrement, and recycled objects), for this kind of art is merely "a demand for a right to express any impulse previously considered taboo."⁶⁰ In the final sentence in Frankl's paragraph, not included in Kuspit's reference, art consisting of waste materials is the "expression of anal impulses [which] are meant to humiliate and vilify everything that is considered normal and decent."⁶¹ Frankl's norm-based approach has many resonances with Chasseguet-Smirgel's theory of perversion for whom, again as quoted by Kuspit, perversion is characterised by regression and therefore the refusal, by the man "to own a genital procreative penis" and by the woman "to bring a child into the world."⁶² In Chasseguet-Smirgel's account, human sexuality is based on a heterosexual, genital norm and, thus, in an implied reference to the infantile polymorphous perverse disposition, she proposes: "if in the course of development, the anal-sadistic phase represents a sort of 'trial gallop' on the part of the child towards adult genitality, to then try to replace genitality by that stage that normally precedes it is to defy reality. It is an attempt to substitute a world of sham and pretence for reality."⁶³ With regard to art, Chasseguet-Smirgel takes a similar position to Frankl and Kuspit, that is, the pervert's identification with pre-genital impulses is a "major obstacle to a real sublimation process," hence the

pervert "tends more towards aestheticism than creation."⁶⁴ To render more sharply the relationship between perversion, art, and morality, Chasseguet-Smirgel examines the work of Oscar Wilde as a writer "dealing in matters that are vital to the pervert and, we may suppose, to the author himself."⁶⁵ These pseudo-Freudian interpretations of art and society demonstrate how normalisation, as Dean has elucidated, not only produces an exclusive sexual orientation but more importantly focuses the movement of desire on a mature, unified ego.⁶⁶ In the conclusion to *The End of Art*, the same attempt to restrict and control desire according to a normalising process becomes more evident in the characterisation of society as:

the normlessness typical of anomie, that is, lack of "superego" norms by which the individual can guide and judge his behaviour and in which he can find meaning and value as well as measure his own value and give himself meaning . . . In unstable modern and especially unstable postmodern society durable values, sustained meanings, and a hard-won sense of purpose seem impossible . . . All of this is obscured by the celebration of the plurality of values, the multitude of meanings, and the variety of everyday purposes.⁶⁷

In this passage, meaning and identity are on the positive side of normality and are presented as inflexible and established; distinct from the perverse, negative side, where the stability of meaning and identity are absent. However, there is a third effect of signification in this passage, where the multiplicity of meaning is not, as might be expected, a positive function; too much meaning does not for Kuspit stem from the stability of meaning. Rather, the mobility of meaning lends its insubstantial disguise to its own absence of stability, and as such, I suggest, it is this problematic of the "multitude of meanings" that allows for a position on art which is asymmetrical to the opposition of normal and abnormal. Whereas Kuspit condemns any and all fluidity and multiplicity of meaning, of values and therefore desire, Lacan ends his eleventh seminar (1964) by comparing normalising therapies with his psychoanalytic theory which aims to mitigate the rigidity of ego identifications in order for the subject to chart her or his relations to her or his own desire.⁶⁸

Any analysis that one teaches as having to be terminated by identification with the analyst reveals, by the same token, that its true motive force is elided. There is a beyond to this identification, and this beyond is defined by the relation and the distance of the *objet petit a* to the idealizing capital I of identification.⁶⁹

Since the subject's desire cannot be reduced entirely to identity, that is, desire does not conform to the ego's alienating identifications and illusory synthesis, it is certainly unwieldy but also potentially antinormative. Desire does not conform well to norms and instead its essentially enigmatic quality, as Lacan has described it, continually confronts the subject with a "distance between what is desired and what is desirable" and, at the same time, the "question of knowing whether or not this is the same thing."⁷⁰ In this sense, human desire is perverse in that there is never a simple, direct relationship with an object that satisfies desire, for rather than adapting desires to suitable objects, human sexual desire is far more problematic, dispersed, polymorphous, and contradictory with regard to those objects.⁷¹ As Kuspit implies, yet has to explicitly deny on the basis of the psychoanalytic models he uses, the fluidity of meaning is carried along by desires which will always unravel the ego and its fixed, potentially pathological, meanings and identities. In this context, a further implication I draw from Kuspit's conclusion is that a study of perversion and art could make a significant and productive contribution to the discourses of art and psychoanalysis on the basis of, and not exclusive of, desire's excessive and unrestrained disposition for making and displacing meaning.

In his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis (1959–60), Lacan criticises those practices of analysis which, in promoting psychological normalisation, are thereby setting a standard for the correct relationship to reality with a clear moral implication.⁷² Such an ideal of psychological harmony places limits, Lacan contends, on the theoretical and practical purpose of psychoanalysis, specifically the possibility for the analysand to take up new, different ways of thinking and acting in accordance with her or his desire.⁷³ Kuspit's psychoanalytic criticism of art and culture imposes a corresponding form of psychological normativity upon the interpretation and critique

of art and, as a consequence, refuses the invitation from an extensive range of art to confront the polymorphous, contradictory experience of human desire in relation to the aesthetic experience.

Notes

1. Donald Kuspit, 'In the Anal Universe: The Para-Art of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy', *New Art Examiner* 27 (1999): 24–7, 62–3, at 63.
2. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–60*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), 8.
3. Kuspit, 'In the Anal Universe', 27.
4. *Ibid.*, 26–7, 63.
5. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 109.
6. Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Our Dark Side: A History of Perversion*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002), 71.
7. Paul Verhaeghe, *On Being Normal and Other Disorders: A Manual for Clinical Psychodiagnostics*, trans. Sigi Jottkandt (London: Karnac Books, 2004), 397.
8. *Ibid.*, 398–401.
9. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality S. E. 7* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1995), 171. (Originally published 1905).
10. Dany Nobus, 'Locating Perversion, Dislocating Psychoanalysis', in *Perversion: Psychoanalytic Perspectives/Perspectives on Psychoanalysis*, eds. Dany Nobus and Lisa Downing (London: Karnac, 2006), 3–18, at 9–10; Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 271–2.
11. Nobus, 'Locating Perversion, Dislocating Psychoanalysis', 15.
12. *Ibid.*
13. See for example, Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994). *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Darian Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa: What Art Stops us from Seeing* (New York: Counterpoint, 2003); *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: Albany State Univ. Press, 2007); Todd McGowan and Sheila Kunke eds., *Lacan and Contemporary Film* (New York: Other Press, 2004).
14. *Ibid.*, 5, 14.
15. David Craven, 'Introduction: Donald Kuspit's Achievement', in *Dialectical Conversions: Donald Kuspit's Art Criticism*, eds. David Craven and Brian Winklenweder (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2011), 1–40, at p. 25.
16. Craven, 'Introduction', 2.
17. Donald Kuspit, 'The Spirit of Business, the Business of Spirit: The Postmodern Quandary of the Museum', *Midwest* 2 (1993): 11–18, at 13.

18. Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 12.
19. Ibid., 89–90.
20. Donald Kuspit, 'My Intellectual Journey: From New York to Frankfurt and Back', in *Dialectical Conversions: Donald Kuspit's Art Criticism*, eds. David Craven and Brian Winkenweder (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2011), 41–59, at 55.
21. Kuspit, 'The Spirit of Business, the Business of Spirit', 11.
22. Janine Chasseguet—Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* (London: Free Association Books, 1985).
23. Kuspit, 'The Spirit of Business, the Business of Spirit', 12.
24. Ibid.
25. Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* 1 (1984): 53–92, at 74.
26. Ibid., 61.
27. Ibid., 63.
28. Donald Kuspit, *Idiosyncratic Identities* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996). 'In the Anal Universe'. *The End of Art* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004). 'The Triumph of Shit', *artnet.com* September (2008), <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/kuspit9-11-08.asp>.
29. Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, 123, n. 61.
30. Kuspit, *The End of Art*, 22, 139.
31. Ibid., 90, 113–14, 142.
32. Donald Kuspit, *Psychostrategies of Avant-Garde Art* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 110–11.
33. Ibid., 188–9.
34. Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, 12.
35. Ibid., 29; Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self: A systematic approach to the psychoanalytic treatment of narcissistic personality disorders* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971).
36. Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis S. E. 23* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1995), 172–3. (Originally published 1940).
37. Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2004), 41.
38. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id S. E. 19* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986), 26–29. (Originally published 1923).
39. Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 43.
40. Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, 29.
41. Heinz Hartmann quoted in Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 40.
42. Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, 46.
43. Bruce Fink, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique: A Lacanian Approach for Practitioners*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 209.
44. Ibid.
45. Kuspit, *The End of Art*, 90.
46. Ibid., 99–100.
47. Ibid., 100.
48. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams S. E. 4/5* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986), 613. (Originally published 1900).
49. Kuspit, *The End of Art*, 113–14.
50. Ibid., 150, 166.
51. Fink, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique*, 65–6.
52. Ibid., 141–2.
53. Charles Shepherdson, *Vital Signs: Nature, Culture, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
54. Craven and Winkenweder, *Dialectical Conversions: Brian Winkenweder, "Kuspit's Humanness: Subjectivity and Psychoanalysis,"* 151–69; Mark Van Proyen, 'Criticism and the "Metaphysics" of Art: A Close Encounter with Donald Kuspit', 223–30; and Randall K. Van Schepen, 'Dialectical Selfhood in Donald Kuspit's Art Criticism', 236–50.
55. Van Schepen, 'Dialectical Selfhood in Donald Kuspit's Art Criticism', 247.
56. Dean, *Beyond Sexuality*, 237–8.
57. Ibid., 238.
58. Kuspit, *The End of Art*, 165.
59. Ibid., 119.
60. Ibid., 115, 119.
61. George Frankl, *The Social History of the Unconscious*. (London: Open Gate Press, 1989), 341. This book combines two other books by Frankl; Kuspit refers to, *Civilisation, Utopia and Tragedy*, also published as volume two of *The Social History of the Unconscious*.
62. Frankl, *The Social History of the Unconscious*, 341; Kuspit, *The End of Art*, 119.
63. Chasseguet—Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion*, 12.
64. Kuspit, *The End of Art*, 115; Chasseguet—Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion*, 92.
65. Chasseguet—Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion*, 97.
66. Dean, *Beyond Sexuality*, 237.
67. Kuspit, *The End of Art*, 169–70.
68. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 273. (Originally published 1964).
69. Ibid., 271–2.
70. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan VI: Desire and its Interpretation 1958–59*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (From unedited French manuscripts, 2002), at 1 July 1959.
71. Ibid.
72. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 302.
73. Ibid., 302, 311.