Opposition to same-sex marriage has coalesced around the rhetoric of “redefinition.” Those claiming membership in the movement are obliged to repeat the word at some frequency. The following remark is typical: “[Marriage] should not be redefined by local officials and activist judges.” Sympathetic academics speak of “the redefinition project.” The rhetoric has proved remarkably successful. Some forty states have now cemented a traditional definition of marriage into respective statutes and constitutions.

Whatever its successes, redefinition rhetoric carries a potentially fatal burden of hypocrisy. When defenders of traditional marriage argue that the institution is so fragile as to be imperiled by same-sex participation, potential advocates possessed of any degree of skepticism will want to know how the same institution survived the violence of Elizabeth Taylor. To put it another way, the rhetoric of redefinition often sounds something like Pablo Picasso protesting the artistic experimentations of Jackson Pollock. If redefinition kills the institution, the smoking gun is surely found with the first. As one leading sociologist explains, “What we have witnessed over the past half century is, at its core, the unprecedented decline of marriage as the only acceptable arrangement for having sexual relations and for raising children.” This is a redefinition of marriage, accomplished well before the advent of same-sex marriage.

A more accurate—a more durable—rhetoric in opposition to same-sex marriage, emerges from the following thesis: same-sex marriage threatens the institution, but only insofar as it officially and finally empties marriage of all essential content. Modern marriage is the story of accelerating entropy now approaching utter dissipation. Same-sex marriage is simply the point at which the institution loses any residual hope of coherence, any possibility of lasting purpose. The process is one of ongoing dedefinition, not redefinition.
The Church of England’s 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, a foundation for much of Western civilization’s approach to marriage, provides a point of reference. The *Book* states: “First, [marriage] was ordained for the procreation of children. . . . Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication. . . . Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.” Here marriage is a gateway to parenthood, sanctioned sexuality, devotion, and permanence, all of which were once considered essential elements of the institution. Few, if any, of these definitional pillars have survived into the twenty-first century. In that context, same-sex marriage is simply symptomatic of an increasingly indefinable institution.

An extended analogy between modern marriage and modern art illustrates the point, with a specific comparison between same-sex marriage and pop art. The latter marked the moment at which modern art became an entirely defined institution in the service of a single, indefinable ideal—“new.” Same-sex marriage signals the moment at which modern marriage becomes an entirely defined institution in the service of a single, indefinable ideal—“love.”

*Deconstructing a Cornerstone: Beauty and Permanence*

Prior to the modern era, beauty was the beginning and the end of art. Roger Fry explains: “It was always customary . . . once men had passed beyond the stage of a crudely imitative theory to approach the explanation of art from the point of view of beauty.” In the words of eighteenth-century painter Anton Raphael Mengs: “The art of painting is to choose of all the subjects of nature the most beautiful, gathering and placing together the material of different places, and the beauty of various persons.”

All evidence would indicate that Western civilization once understood and celebrated beauty as a kind of all-purpose, desperately needed inoculation against cultural and moral decay. Mengs, again, maintains that “this Beauty has a power which delights and enchants; and being of a spirit, moves the soul of man, increases, if we may so say, its strength.” Ralph Waldo Emerson agrees, writing, “Love of beauty is Taste. . . . The creation of beauty is Art.”

For Michelangelo, beauty equates to divinity and both are essential to art: “The true work of art is but a shadow of the divine perfection.”

Modern art found much of its purpose in divorcing beauty and art. As Barnett Newman, a practitioner, puts it, “The impulse of modern art was this desire to destroy beauty.” He is echoed by Tristan Tzara, a founder of the Dada movement: “I have a mad and starry desire to assassinate beauty.” Picasso dedicated much of his career to the same end. He acknowledged as much in admitting that his admirers “really had to be masochists.” Marcel Duchamp describes his own art as a product of “visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste . . . in fact a complete anesthesia.”

This scrupulous anesthesia gave birth to an "aesthetic of the least artistic." Modern art increasingly became a catalogue of “awkward drawing, arbitrary color and details, absence of perspective, imitations of the photographs of savages and children, doodling, and visions of amateurs and the deranged.” For many aspiring artists, this was liberation. Jean Dubuffet, for example, cultivated “an excessively rapid way of drawing, brutal even, and without the least care.”

The assault on beauty focused much of its energy on the female figure, beauty’s former
embodiment. Picasso fractured woman into angles and planes. His women were “godesses and doormats.” The latter view prevailed in Duchamp’s work, where the female body is “maligned and humbled into a mechanical object, a kind of grotesque erotic machine.” Dubuffet was no less vicious. One critic asks: “Who could have failed to recognize, at the first sight of a Dubuffet female, that this was art that is repellent by design?”

The institution effectively lowered its sights. “The true aim of art is subversive,” Dubuffet claimed. Perhaps the most influential contemporary practitioner is now Matthew Barney, whom the New York Times identifies as “the most important American artist of his generation.” Here is a representative scene from one of Barney’s films: “The Apprentice is led into a dental operation chamber and forcibly stripped of his clothing to reveal his mutant anatomy underneath. The compressed metal remains of a classic automobile are shoved into this toothless mouth amid pools of blood and speechless moans. His intestines are excreted from his rectum onto the operating table and are studied with strange fascination by his tormentors/healers.”

This dehumanization is inherent in the artistic abdication of beauty. Barney is simply emulating predecessors. The most obvious influence is Francis Bacon, in whose work it is “impossible to say exactly what is going on—the mangled, suggestively unrecognizable figures never quite snap into focus—but we know that, whatever it is, it is extremely unpleasant.” Bacon explains his focus as follows: “I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence . . . as the snail leaves its slime.”

In his insightful, if overly optimistic, essay lauding the dehumanization of art, José Ortega y Gasset explains that the “aesthetic pleasure” of modern art is found in its “triumph over human matter.” This is why the “artist has to drive home the victory by presenting in each case the strangled victim.” Ortega y Gasset saw modern art as a heroic effort to “create from nought.” The movement’s ultimate achievement, however, is to render art a thing of naught, indistinguishable, as we will see, from any number of lesser conventions, including pornography, advertising, and garbage.

The twentieth century exercised this same reductive influence on the institution of marriage, hollowing what was previously hallowed. The process began with the disaggregation of marriage from the guiding ideal of permanency. As legal scholar Carl Schneider explains: “The family law we inherited from the nineteenth century . . . enunciated and sought to enforce an ideal of lifelong marital fidelity and responsibility.” Marriage was, according to James Q. Wilson, “a socially arranged solution for the problem of getting people to stay together and care for children that the mere desire for children, and the sex that makes children possible, does not solve.” To put it another way, marriage was a means of protecting the “mother-infant bond from the relative fragility and volatility of the male-female bond.”

American law, loyal to the ideal of permanency, long made marriage terminable only upon the showing of “fault”—that is, abuse or infidelity. The law enforced lifelong commitments with high exit barriers. Those barriers sank steadily and then suddenly. George Bernard Shaw identified the trend in 1905: “Nothing is more certain than that . . . the progressive modification of the marriage contract will be continued until it is no more onerous nor irrevocable than any ordinary commercial deed of partnership.” In 1910 former Supreme Court justice Billing Brown
spoke for many American judges: “It is not perceived why the partnership created by marriage should so far differ from a commercial partnership that one may be dissolved at pleasure while the other is indissoluble.”

This yearning for easy divorce ran perpendicular to public sentiment. At the time, only 13 percent of Americans found the divorce threshold too high. According to Mary Ann Glendon, “Discontent with fault-based divorce seems to have been felt more acutely by mental health professionals and academics than by the citizenry in general.” This discontent achieved critical mass in 1969, when California instituted “no-fault” divorce. Marriage was now terminable at the will of either partner. The new laws, which quickly swept the country, were an official recognition that “the moral standard of life-long fidelity ought no longer be publicly enforced.”

Western culture had been resisting this impulse since at least 1643, when John Milton first proposed deregulating divorce.

Today only about one-third of all divorced couples report prior abuse, frequent arguments, or serious quarrels. The other two-thirds apparently suffer from something like severe boredom or buyer’s remorse. Scholars put it mildly when they report: “People are leaving marriages at lower thresholds of unhappiness now than in the past.” The abdication of the marital ideal of permanency has pushed the institution close to being a mere “lifestyle choice that binds only because the individual, whenever he is presented with a temptation, chooses again to be bound.” In short, modern marriage has become increasingly indistinguishable from a host of lesser conventions, including cohabitation, shacking up, and casual dating.

The Evacuation of Content and the Dissolution of Borders

In 1917 Marcel Duchamp purchased a urinal and titled it “Fountain.” His work is noteworthy only because it “detonated the attack against boundaries that defined Modernism.” Duchamp had devoted himself to “readymades.” The work was “a form of denying the possibility of defining art.” Eighty years later, in 2004, some five hundred international art experts elected Duchamp’s urinal the most influential artwork of the twentieth century. From Dada to abstract expressionism to minimalism to pop art, the consistent trend has been a drive to shrink “the area in which things can now safely be non-art.” The borders between art and everything else have simply dissolved.

This process began with a determined abandonment of recognizable content in art, an event manifest in the works of abstract expressionists such as Gottlieb, Rothko, Still, Newman, and Pollock, a group celebrated mostly for the rigor of their “aesthetics of exclusion.” Harold Rosenberg, who was their great champion, explains their prevailing sentiment: “[They] conceived painting as a kind of marathon of deletions—one of them got rid of color, another of texture, a third of drawing, and so on.” They took themselves seriously. Pollock once announced: “I am nature.” Barnett explains their work as follows: “It is a religious art which through symbols will catch the basic truth of life.”

Critics were apparently persuaded. Commenting on one of Rothko’s color fields, Peter Selz observes: “These shivering bars of light assume a function similar to that loaded area between God’s and Adam’s fingers on the Sistine ceiling.” Here one gains some insight into the nature of the dedefinition project. It was, among other things, a kind of shortcut. Specifically, the
abstract expressionists sought all the benefits of the religious experience while forgoing all the inherent complications of actually dealing with God and Adam.

The loss of recognizable content in art left traditional barriers between art and nonart unfortified and under assault. Those barriers crumbled quickly. A 1947 New Yorker cartoon captures the general trend. The cartoon pictures an artist standing in front of his abstract painting. He figures, “What the hell. If the National Academy doesn’t want it, there’s always Pepsi-Cola.” By the 1960s the process of blurring boundaries had secured a remarkable achievement wherein it was impossible to “say with assurance what a work of art is—or more importantly, what is not a work of art. Where an art object is still present . . . it does not know whether it is a masterpiece or junk.”

The advancing inability to distinguish masterpiece from junk achieved a dénouement in subsequent decades. The literal climax surely came in 2001, when Damien Hirst, a darling in the British art scene, arranged some trash (recently consumed beer bottles and cigarette butts) at the behest of a preeminent private gallery in London. The London Evening Standard summarizes subsequent events: “A valuable work of art by Damien Hirst was thrown away because a cleaner mistook it for a load of rubbish.”

The course is proving remarkably similar with modern marriage. Having abandoned the ideal of permanency, the institution has devoted itself to the extinction of content and the dissolution of borders. Sociologist Anthony Giddens recognizes the resulting equalization of marriage and nonmarriage: “If orthodox marriage is not yet widely seen as just one lifestyle among others, as in fact it has become, this is partly the result of institutional lag.”

This advancing inability to distinguish marriage from multiplying alternatives is mostly the result of the institution’s loss of content, specifically the loss of a moral and legal monopoly on sexual intimacy and parenthood. With regard to sex, the story is reducible to statistics. Between 1963 and 1975 the proportion of adults who disapproved of sex outside of marriage dropped from 80 percent to 30 percent. This remarkable change is attributable to any number of influences, notably the advent of modern contraception. Introduced in the 1960s, the pill entirely “removed the fear of pregnancy from sexual relationships for the first time in human history.” A decade later the legalization of abortion advanced the same cause.

This separation of sex from marriage and parenthood was both product and enabler of an ongoing privatization of sex. The end result is a prevailing sexual ethic by which “any sexual practice taking place in private between consenting adults is acceptable.” The rate of change is remarkable. It was a little over a century ago, in 1873, that Congress passed the “Comstock Act,” prohibiting any “obscene, lewd, and/or lascivious” materials sent by mail, including contraceptive devices. The law was named for Anthony Comstock, who believed, along with a majority of Congress, that separating sex from marriage endangered the primacy of marriage. While one can call Comstock a prude, one can no longer argue that he was wrong.

All vestiges of the Comstock Act officially died in 1965, when the Supreme Court took up the cause of sexual privatization in Griswold v. Connecticut. The Court invalidated a Connecticut law that prohibited contraceptive counseling of married couples. Drastically rewriting the history of sexual
intimacy in America, the Court held: “We deal with a right of privacy older than the Bill of Rights—older than our political parties, older than our school system.”\(^67\) Truth is, American law had long treated sex as a kind of precious natural resource or public good, the proper regulation of which was essential to civilization’s survival. The view persisted into the twentieth century. A few years before *Griswold*, in 1961, Justice John Marshall Harlan stated:

> The laws regarding marriage which provide both when the sexual powers must be used and the legal and social context in which children are born and brought up as well as laws forbidding adultery, fornication, and homosexual practices which express the negative of the proposition, confining sexuality to lawful marriage, form a pattern so deeply pressed into our social life that any Constitutional doctrine in this area must build on that basis.\(^68\)

A few years after *Griswold*, the Court extended sexual privacy rights to unmarried couples in *Eisenstadt v. Baird*.\(^69\) The case officially established the right of unmarried couples to engage in sexual relations on nearly equal footing with married couples. The Court had legally unchained sex from marriage. The point here is not to analyze the wisdom of sex without sanction, but simply to show how the era of free sex advanced the dedefinition of marriage. For the most part, it advanced quickly. Cherlin describes the events this way: “Sex, living together and marriage, which had been a package deal in the 1950s, were no longer linked.”\(^70\) The era of massive cohabitation had begun. After 1970 the marriage rate fell by some 30 percent; the divorce rate increased by 40 percent; the rate of cohabitation increased sixfold.\(^71\) By 1990 cohabitation was “an entrenched part of the American family system,” with more than half of first marriages beginning with some form of it.\(^72\) Hugh Hefner explains, “In this century, America liberated sex. The world will never be the same.”\(^73\)

If sexual liberation meant separating sex from marriage, the obvious next step was to separate parenthood. The movement began with a determined relaxing of illegitimacy laws. Previously, parents and illegitimate children were “legal strangers.”\(^74\) The laws undergirded a powerful stigma against unwed parenthood that survived well into the twentieth century. That stigma evaporated around the time the Supreme Court ruled illegitimacy laws unconstitutional in the 1970s.\(^75\) By the 1990s, single motherhood had become an institution unto itself, almost as sacred as its predecessor. This was the lesson of Dan Quayle’s heretical criticism of the unwed pregnancy featured on the sitcom *Murphy Brown*.\(^76\) In the firestorm that ensued, the White House quickly backtracked. Quayle defended himself, claiming he had “the greatest respect” for single mothers. Hillary Clinton panned the Bush White House as “an Administration out of touch with America.”\(^77\) The *New York Times* had already praised the multiplying depictions of successful single mothers as a “groundbreaking” message that “women who want children do not need or necessarily want a spouse underfoot.”\(^78\) In 2007 nearly 40 percent of American babies were delivered to unwed mothers.\(^79\)


*Triumph of the Individual over the Institution*

Throughout the twentieth century, artists carried “the dedefinition of art to the point where nothing is left of art but the fiction of the artist.”\(^80\) Art become increasingly synonymous with celebrity.\(^81\) This is
readily apparent in the works of Rothko, whose suicide has become such an essential element of his art that any skeptical viewer must now wonder if there is anything there otherwise.82 One critic observes, “Rothko’s suicide was the final chapter in his pursuit of the tragic-religious drama.”83 Warhol carried the merger of art with celebrity to new extremes.84 During Warhol’s first American retrospective in 1965, the art had to be removed from the walls as crowds stampeded for a view of the artist. Warhol later reported, “We weren’t just at the art exhibit—we were the exhibit.”85 So began a time “when serious artistic endeavor largely, if not quite entirely, gave way before the forces of celebrity and novelty radicalism.”86 Jeff Koons, Warhol’s latest heir, has extended that moment. According to Koons, it is less the art that matters than the artist’s behavior. He explains the nature of his achievement: “I had to go to the depths of my own sexuality, my own morality, to be able to remove fear, guilt and shame from myself. All of this has been removed from the viewer.”87 Rosenberg surely foresaw Koons: “In contrast to the meagerness of art, the artist is blown up to gigantic proportions.”88

The trend was plainly manifest recently at the New York Museum of Modern Art’s retrospective of Marina Abramović, titled “The Artist Is Present.” The centerpiece of the exhibit was Abramović herself, occupying a chair in the middle of the gallery’s central atrium. She sat for nearly a month, attracting some seven hundred thousand visitors. When she finally stood up, the artist, along with the museum’s director and staff, immediately hit the town with fellow celebrities James Franco, Christina Ricci, Liv Tyler, and Courtney Love. Addressing the gathering, Abramović explained her aspiration: “I believe art should be and will be more and more immaterial.” Everyone applauded the artist.89

As with the dedefinition of art, one finds a triumph of the individual at the heart of the dedefinition of marriage. Modern marriage, as one historian observes, is becoming an institution “specialized in the development and maintenance of the individual self.” James Q. Wilson describes the relaxation of illegitimacy laws this way: “All they really did was to decide that it was the individual more than the family that deserved protection.”90 Wilson accurately observes that if the individual once belonged to the family, the family now belongs to the individual.

A qualitative study of women’s-magazine articles finds that throughout the 1960s, articles on marriage increasingly characterized the institution as a unit devoted to the advancement of individuals (as opposed to a group of individuals devoted to the advancement of a unit).91 The essence of the change is a shift in emphasis “from role to self.”92 This emphasis on the individual is surely one reason that men and women “are more likely today than in the past to evaluate their marriage primarily according to how well it satisfies their individual needs.”93

End-Stage Entropy

By the 1960s modern art could claim a single guiding ideal. An art bereft of standards and criteria had caused “one standard to prevail among modern art officials—the practical one of exhibiting as promptly and as conspicuously as possible whatever is most publicized as the new.”94 Through a process of reduction, “the new” achieved exaltation.

The irony is that pop art was not new at all. What “began as an elite indulgence with the appearance of . . . Marcel Duchamp became a national pastime in the 1960s. It was then that the wrong turn became a superhighway.”95 The chief protagonist of
this end-stage was Warhol, who did nothing Duchamp hadn’t already done. Pop art is “found art,” which is “readymade.” Timing is everything, however, and by the 1960s the American public along with the artistic community was better prepared to accept the notion that art can be anything, which is to say that art is nothing in particular.

The banal question Warhol asked is the one that has since obsessed his artistic progeny: “What is the difference between two things, exactly alike, one of which is art and one of which is not?” Pop art, in other words, served as a kind of official audit, revealing the institution’s advanced insolvency. The revelation might have proved salutary except it met with such celebration. The response was infused with what one commentator describes as the fundamental sentiment of modern art: “sinister levity.” With pop art, a funeral was mistaken for a resurrection. As one critic observes, “[Warhol] violated every condition thought necessary to something being an artwork, but in so doing he disclosed the essence of art.”

The dedefinition of art had thus become a kind of institutionalized religion. The high priests were not the artists themselves, but rather the critics, most of whom had long recognized the promise of promotion in the emptying of art. By the time art became synonymous with mere novelty, it was “scarcely an exaggeration to say that paintings are apprehended with the ears.” Throughout the twentieth century, critics ceased to be commentators and became cocreators with the artists themselves. The more blank the canvas, the greater the role left for the critic in elucidating its magnificence. No surprise that Arthur Danto, one of modern art’s more devoted evangelists, finds in Warhol a “philosophical intelligence of an intoxicatingly high order.”

With marriage, as with art, the process of dedefinition has rendered the institution increasingly malleable. Judges, like critics, have gained the sort of immediate influence that is inversely proportional to that of tradition. This perhaps explains the enthusiasm with which judges have celebrated and aided the dedefinition of marriage and its increasing devotion to the indefinable ideal of “love.” This drastically reduced conception of marriage achieved a first, official stamp of approval in the early 1990s, when Hawaii’s Supreme Court extended marital membership to same-sex couples. The ruling ended a lawsuit brought by three gay couples previously denied marriage licenses. Testimony by popular sociologist Pepper Schwartz exercised some influence in the decision: “What people think of when they want marriage is they want companionship, they want love,” Schwartz testified. “That is the definition of marriage as people first and primarily think of it.” Compare Schwartz’s testimony with that of David Eggebeen of Pennsylvania State University: “Well, to me . . . the conclusion is clear that marriage represents a gateway to becoming a parent. When people get married, by an extraordinary margin they intend to become parents.” As one commentator put it, “Eggebeen spoke of the importance of marriage in terms that a nineteenth-century court would have understood.”

Today each victory or defeat for same-sex marriage is greeted with a variation of Schwartz’s drastic dedefinition. “Love Wins: Gay Marriage in Washington DC” is how a writer in the *Christian Science Monitor* put it. “Gay marriage is a question of love,” Keith Olbermann explained after California residents passed Proposition 8. When the California Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage just prior to passage of Proposition 8, the *Los Angeles Times* published an extended editorial entitled: “The
Right to Love.” In the latest example, the New York Times published a celebratory op-ed after the New York State legislature approved same-sex marriage. Written by columnist Frank Bruni, who identifies himself as gay, the piece was entitled: “To Know Us Is to Let Us Love.”

The end result of this reduction of marriage to state-sanctioned love is to render the institution a kind of “seal set upon a (possibly fleeting) sexual relationship, rather than a mutual assumption of the burden of social reproduction.” This deprives the institution of any purpose sufficient to justify the costs of maintenance. Caitlin Flanagan sums up a prevailing sentiment nicely in Time, observing that the “fundamental question we must ask ourselves at the beginning of this century is this: What is the purpose of marriage?” This is not rhetorical. It is a genuine conundrum. As noted above, a host of laws, customs, rituals, and norms once carefully obviated the inquiry. The atrophy and eradication of those forms is the essence of marriage’s dedefinition.

In her essay, Flanagan offers her own despairing description of marriage’s skeletal remains: “an increasingly fragile construct depending less and less on notions of sacrifice and obligation than on the ephemera of romance and happiness as defined by and for its adult principals.” A leading sociologist agrees, writing: “Marriage . . . has become the ultimate merit badge—the marriage badge.” This is not something entirely different than what marriage used to be; it is merely something significantly less.

It will be argued, as it was with pop art, that this reduction of marriage simply serves to reveal the soul of the institution. Warhol, if you recall, “violated every condition thought necessary to something being an artwork, but in so doing he disclosed the essence of art.” Perhaps not. Honest critics like Rosenberg eventually acknowledged the suicidal tendencies of modern art, which “has exalted creations that proclaim their own transience.” In describing the efforts of Warhol and his progeny, Rosenberg describes an artist who “in demonstrating the death of art has continued to present himself as its heir.”

This description is equally apt when applied to many of those championing same-sex marriage. They increasingly evince the institution’s insolvency even as they attempt to collect its dividends. This was evident in a recent New York Times opinion piece detailing new research on 556 same-sex couples in San Francisco, many of whom married during the brief period, prior to passage of Proposition 8, when same-sex marriage was legal in California. The study showed that well over 50 percent of the couples have erotic relationships outside their marriage “with the knowledge and approval of their partners.” According to the author, the experts “say boundary-challenging gay relationships represent an evolution in marriage—one that might point the way for the survival of the institution.” Describing one lesbian couple, the article explained: “Love brought the middle-age couple together—they wed during California’s brief legal window for same-sex marriage. But they knew from the beginning that their bond would be forged on their own terms, including what they call ‘play’ with other women.” One of the spouses explained why this infidelity actually signaled a deeper bond: “I take it as a gift that someone will be that open and honest and sharing with me.”

One recognizes in this brand of “marriage”—which is simply the inevitable end of an institution devoid of normative content and borders—a similar impulse exemplified by the abstract expressionists. That is, the desperate search for a shortcut; in this case,
the desire to obtain all the benefits of lasting, loyal, family-centered relationships while suffering none of the inherent complications of actually committing oneself to another human being for the rest of one’s life. One also senses a hysterical optimism, a close sibling or identical twin to sinister levity. Here, as in pop art, we witness the culmination of almost every constituent element of the dedefinition of an institution—from the exaltation of the individual to the evacuation of content and the dissolution of borders.

In short, one struggles to locate the “marriage” in these modern marriages, just as one struggles to locate the “art” in much of modern art. Indeed, these marriages, which invoke no recognizable duty of fidelity, reproduction, or devotion, raise a question identical to the one at the heart of pop art: What is the difference between two relationships, exactly alike, one of which is marriage and one of which is not? The academically trendy notion that marriage is little more than a scrap of paper has surely never been closer to the truth. To paraphrase what has been said about modern artists and art: the modern spouses who have left marriage behind or—what amounts to the same thing—who regard anything they do as marriage, is an expression of the profound crisis that has overtaken marriage in our epoch.¹¹⁹

In Sum

Responding to a recent retrospective of Jeff Koons, the New Yorker’s Peter Schjeldahl offers what could be a summary of modern art’s general insinuation: “Intelligence is obsolete in a world where things are either blazingly obvious or pitch dark.”¹²⁰ Surely, when art actively negates intelligence, art has actually become anti-art. Reveling in the birth of that transformation, Ortega y Gasset cheered: “The new art ridicules art itself.” Today, in our most celebrated museums, we consistently confront the fact that modern art’s “formulas of negation have promised to defy further reduction. . . . Art might be coming to an end but there has been no end to anti-art.”¹²¹

This, then, is the end result of utter dedefinition. Almost suddenly, it seems, the affected institution becomes its opposite, with no inclination or apparent ability to turn back. This is perhaps the crisis Richard Weaver foresaw when he observed: “The most portentous general event of our time is the steady obliteration of those distinctions which create society.”¹²² The obliteration of distinctions is the essence of dedefinition.

Without some drastic course correction, modern marriage is almost certainly doomed to this same destruction. Deprived of its claim on parenthood, permanency, sanctioned sex, and devotion, the institution is increasingly little more than one brand of adult living. This possibility is made actual by the adamant and requisite message of same-sex marriage: the institution is nothing more or less than a state-sanctioned celebration of “love,” a word now less definable than the word new. In short, modern marriage, like modern art before it, is on the cusp of officially becoming a dedefined institution in the service of a single, indefinable ideal. Given the subsequent history of modern art, there is little hope that modern marriage, having once attained this end-stage entropy, will somehow retain the ability or inclination to recover meaning and purpose.

Yet the dedefinition of marriage is not yet so terminal as that of art. Questions about the institution’s purpose and scope still send us routinely to the streets, indicating that modern marriage, unlike modern art, retains something it might conceivably lose. Resisting the next entropic step is
simply an honest acknowledgment of the approaching point of no return; a noble rejection of the sinister levity and hysterical optimism that are the essential sentiments of the dedefinition project. Evoking those sentiments, the poet Kay Ryan offers cogent commentary on the perils of simply yielding to dedefinition:

However carved up or pared down we get, we keep on making the best of it as though it doesn’t matter that our acre’s down to a square foot. As though our garden could be one bean and we’d rejoice if it flourishes, as though one bean could nourish us.123

5 “To this end [Rothko] and other theologians conceived painting as a kind of marathon of deletions—one of them got rid of color, another of texture, a third of drawing, and so on.” Harold Rosenberg, The Dedefinition of Art (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 100.
7 Christopher Reed, A Roger Fry Reader (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 65.
11 “Denying all aesthetic aims in a work permits the artist to draw freely on the entire aesthetic vocabulary of modern art. . . . This is another way of saying that deaestheticized art, like most art of this epoch, is deeply involved in parody.” Rosenberg, The Dedefinition of Art, 36. See, also, Donald Kuspit’s argument: “The resentment and repudiation of beauty, resulting in a one sided, aesthetically inadequate art—art that can hardly be called fine art—is a central feature of post aesthetic art.” Kuspit, The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 73.
14 “For Durer the perspective point was of the essence. It is the point from which light emanates, the point at infinity; it became an aesthetic. Artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly Cezanne, felt otherwise, and Picasso and Braque obliterated it altogether. For their new art they conceived a new aesthetic: reduction to geometrical forms.” Arthur I. Miller, Einstein, Picasso: Space, Time and the Beauty That Causes Havoc (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 239.
17 Rosenberg, The Dehumanization of Art, 86.
18 Ibid., 80.
20 “Picasso himself would later characterize women as ‘goddesses and doormats.’ And his ambivalence toward women informs virtually every aspect of this painting, from its nominal subject to its conflict between styles.” Jack Flam, Matisse and Picasso: The Story of Their Rivalry and Friendship (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 39.
21 Kuspit, The End of Art, 31.
22 Rosenberg, The Dehumanization of Art, 86.
25 Kimball, Art’s Prospect, 224.
26 Herschel Chipp and Peter Selz, eds., Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics (Berkeley: University of California, 1968), 621.
28 Ibid., 50.
"A humble porcelain urinal—reclining on its side, and marked with a false signature—has been named the world’s most original and furthest-out art of the last hundred years always arrived looking at first as though it had parted company with everything previously known as art." Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 252.


Ibid., 101.

The quotation comes from an exchange between artist and educator Hans Hofmann and Jackson Pollock, described as follows: "On a visit to Pollock’s studio, Hofmann commented: ‘You are very talented, you should join my class.’ He looked at Pollock’s palette. He picked up a brush and a whole can of paint came up with it, whereupon he said, ‘With zis you could kill a man!’ After a few more exchanges, Hofmann said, ‘But you do not work from nature. This is not good. You will repeat yourself. You work by heart, not from nature.’ Pollock replied, ‘I am nature.’" Helmut Friedel et al., Hans Hofmann (Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills, 1998), 82.


Rosenberg, The Dedefinition of Art, ii.


Hirst is a member of the Young British Artists, a term derived from a series of shows at the influential Saatchi Gallery beginning in 1992. In 1995, Hirst won the Turner Prize. That same year, his sculpture Two Fucking, Two Watching, which featured a rotting cow and bull copulating by means of a hydraulic device, was banned by New York health officials out of concern for “vomiting among the visitors.” See, generally, Norman Rosenthal and Brook Adams, Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009).


Cherlin illustrates this point clearly: “Overall, research and writing on the changing meaning of marriage suggest that it is now situated in a very different context than in the past. . . . More forms of marriage and more alternatives to marriage are socially acceptable. Moreover, one may fit marriage into one’s life in many ways: One may first live with a partner, or sequentially with several partners, without an explicit consideration of whether a marriage will occur. One may have children with one’s eventual spouse or with someone else before marrying. One may, in some jurisdictions, marry someone of the same gender and build a shared marital world with few guidelines to rely on.” Andrew Cherlin, “The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage.” Journal of Marriage and Family, 66 (2004): 84.


“Changes in family and social relationships have been particularly dramatic in the second half of the 20th century. . . . The reported incidence of premarital sex, nonmarital cohabitation, and out of wedlock childbearing . . . increased dramatically during this period.” Arland Thornton and Linda Young-DeMarco, “Four Decades of Trends in Attitudes toward Family Issues in the United States: The 1960s through the 1990s.” Journal of Marriage and Family 63 (2001): 1010.
61 Dannisk Orthner, “The Family in Transition,” in Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family, eds. David Blankenhorn et al. (Family Service America, 1990), 102.

62 We forget how radically [the pill] transformed intimate life. As late as the 1950s, sex, love, and marriage were bound together, because any young woman who had sex regularly had a high risk of getting pregnant and any couple in which the woman got pregnant was under heavy pressure to have a so-called shotgun wedding. Granted, condoms had long existed, and men had long practiced withdrawal but these methods were unreliable for couples in long term relationships.” Cherlin, The Marriage-Go-Round, 185.


64 The Comstock Act, 17 Stat. 598 (1873).


67 Ibid., 486.


69 “If the right of privacy means anything, it is the right of the individual, married or single, to be free from unwarranted governmental intrusion into matters so fundamentally affecting a person as the decision whether to bear or beget a child.” Eisenstadt v. Baird, 405 U.S. 438, 453 (1972).


72 Cherlin, The Marriage-Go-Round, 98.


74 “The common law of England, which is also the American common law, is more unfavorable to the illegitimate child than the civil law of Rome . . . in two respects: It does not recognize a legal relationship even between the mother and the child and it does not allow legitimation by subsequent marriage.” Ernst Freund, Illegitimacy Laws of the United States, Analysis and Index (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1919), 9.


77 Ibid.


80 Rosenberg, The Dedefinition of Art, 12.


82 “The bloody suicide was the only way left to get the attention Rothko felt he deserved.” Lee Seldes, The Legacy of Mark Rothko (Chicago, MA: De Capo, 1996), 111.


85 Danto, Andy Warhol, 5.

86 Kramer and Kimball, The Age of the Avant-Garde, xviii.

87 Francesco Bonami, Jeff Room (Chicago: Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008).

88 Rosenberg, The Dedefinition of Art, ii.


90 Wilson, The Marriage Problem, 135.


92 Ibid., 30.

93 Andrew Cherlin, Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1992), 30.


96 Danto, Andy Warhol, 23.

97 “Artists like Damien Hirst and the other professional transgressors who populate the art world today are the heirs of . . . sinster levity. No serious contender for the Turner Prize can be without it. The Whitney Biennial exhibitions are full of it. And virtually all of the big-name star artists of the last few decades have been heavily endowed with that corrosive pathos”. Kimball, Art’s Prospect, 203.


102 As excerpted in Cherlin, The Marriage-Go-Round, 119. Cherlin observes: “Schwartz was suggesting that the most important part of marriage is the emotional reward that couples get from their relationship.” Ibid.

103 Ibid.


WHAT IS THE MEANING OF SEX?

Our society is obsessed with sex—but we hardly understand it.

Bestselling author and acclaimed philosopher J. Budziszewski restores the lost wisdom our culture sorely needs in his wise, gracefully written new book, On the Meaning of Sex.

“An eminently readable and powerful testament to unchanging truth.”
—Anthony Esolen, author of Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child

“I teach a course on ‘Philosophy of Human Sexuality,’ and I must have read fifty to a hundred books on the topic. On the Meaning of Sex is, quite simply, number one.”
—Peter Kreeft, Boston College, coauthor of Handbook of Christian Apologetics

www.isibooks.org