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Can Art Really End?

In “The End of Art,”¹ Arthur Danto prophetically announces the end of art history as we know it with the arrival of Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box*. But, when you think about it, his suggestion seems very strange. True, art exhibits a rampant, unguided pluralism. However, the mere existence of pluralism seems no more to support the end of art history than it does to suggest that we have simply entered into yet another phase of art history. The pronouncement of art history’s end with *Brillo Box* is even more puzzling when we recall that *Brillo Box* also makes possible Danto’s definition of art. *Prima facie*, there is a tension between the fact that the arrival of *Brillo Box* makes possible Danto’s definition of art and the fact that the arrival of *Brillo Box* also marks the end of art. After all, of what use is a definition of art, if it is possible only after art has ended?

My project has two parts: (1) Noël Carroll has argued, against Danto, that the latter uses his end-of-art thesis in an illicitly circular way.² The reason is that Danto uses the thesis to indemnify his own essentialist theory of art against the possibility of future counterexamples. I shall argue that Danto’s end-of-art thesis does not presuppose any essentialist theory of art. (2) In the second part, I shall go on to argue that, on Danto’s own terms, art history cannot come to an end anyway—contrary to his claim.³

I. CARROLL CONTRA DANTO

Carroll argues that Danto’s only motivation for advocating his philosophy of art history stems from its convenient ability to vindicate his philosophy of art. *Prima facie*, Carroll’s charge appears plausible, since Danto himself agrees in print with both his diagnosis of Danto’s hidden

agenda and his formulation of his definition of art.⁴ Indeed, he says that he “admires” Carroll’s critique so interpreted, and he nowhere provides any straightforward reply to it.⁵ I might describe my goal in the first part of this paper as defending Danto against himself. On his own terms, he should not have accepted the interpretation upon which Carroll’s critique is based.

First, let us review how Danto thinks about defining art. According to him, the defining features of an artwork are its nonmanifest properties. Specifically, “To be a work of art is to be (i) *about* something and (ii) to *embody its meaning*.”⁶ This definition is unique insofar as it fails to make reference to any manifest properties as the defining properties of an artwork. Prior to Danto, the main essentialist definitions of art relied on identifying the defining features of artworks by reference to their manifest properties. This fact led to the downfall and failure of those essentialist definitions. For, as the history of art reveals, any artwork created in the future may serve as a counterexample to an essentialist definition of art relying on the manifest properties of artworks. Moreover, the introduction of Warhol’s *Brillo Box* onto the art scene made it apparent that an artwork can have *any* manifest properties and still be an artwork. More seriously, the *Brillo Box* also made it clear that if any essentialist definition of art was possible at all, it must be an essentialist definition that does not rely on the manifest properties of an artwork.⁷

At this point, Carroll suspects that something funny is going on. According to him, there is a hidden agenda underlying Danto’s philosophy of art history, viz., that it renders his philosophy of art immune to counterexamples. In effect, Carroll believes Danto is arguing as follows:

1. Art history has come to an end (according to his philosophy of art history).
2. If art history has come to an end, then there can be no more future possible counterexamples to an essentialist definition of art.
3. Therefore, an essentialist definition of art is possible, and is not subject to future possible counterexamples.

Call this the hidden agenda.

Surprisingly, Danto does not seem to notice an important ambiguity in this formulation of his hidden agenda. When Carroll claims that once art history ends, there will be no more counterexamples to Danto's definition of art, it is unclear to which type of definition Carroll refers: whether there are no counterexamples to (a) an essentialist definition of art that relies on the kinds of properties that Danto himself claims to be definitive of artworks, or (b) an essentialist definition relying on *nonmanifest* properties of artworks, or, possibly, (c) an essentialist definition of art relying on *manifest* properties of artworks. It is crucial to understanding Carroll's accusation that we are clear about which of these three options Carroll intends to advance. In what follows, I shall examine these three interpretations of claim (2) in Carroll's formulation of Danto's hidden agenda.

a. Of course, it would be extremely uncharitable for Carroll to advance the first alternative, viz., if he interpreted Danto to be claiming that if art history ends, then Danto's *own* definition of art will be immune to counterexamples; for this reason, I shall discount this interpretation.

b. Suppose next that Carroll is referring to manifest properties. His diagnosis of Danto's hidden agenda, then, is as follows: (1) art history has ended; (2) if art history has ended, then there can be no more counterexamples to an essentialist definition of art that defines art by reference to its *manifest properties*; (3) therefore, an essentialist definition of art that defines art by reference to its manifest properties is possible.

Clearly, this interpretation of Danto's hidden agenda is absurd. For one, Danto himself claims that the importance of Warhol's *Brillo Box* is that it reveals that if any essentialist definition is

possible, then it *cannot* be one that makes use of the *manifest* properties of artworks. Danto takes Warhol to show the impossibility of an essentialist definition relying on manifest properties of artworks. Danto's own definition is one that invokes the *nonmanifest* properties of artworks; so, an interpretation of Danto in which Danto claims that an essentialist definition of art relying on the *manifest* properties of artworks is possible makes Danto look as if he has forgotten his own definition of art, when presenting his account of art history! Hence, when Carroll claims that Danto's hidden agenda is to show that his philosophy of art history renders his philosophy of art immune to counterexamples, he cannot mean counterexamples relying on the manifest properties of artworks.

c. Suppose finally that Carroll is referring to nonmanifest properties. His diagnosis of Danto's hidden agenda can be reformulated as follows: (1) art history has ended; (2) if art history has ended, then there can be no more counterexamples to an essentialist definition of art that defines art by reference to its *nonmanifest* properties; (3) therefore, an essentialist definition of art that defines art by reference to its nonmanifest properties is possible. Prima facie, this interpretation appears plausible, insofar as it is a charitable interpretation of Danto's hidden agenda. Before critically examining this argument, it will be helpful to examine why Carroll might adopt this interpretation.

Carroll suggests that:

The Warhol examples, along with the logic of resemblance, showed that all of the evidence was in *vis-à-vis* manifest properties since everything is like everything else. Anything, that is, could look like something that was art. What remained for theorists to ascertain was whether there was some nonmanifest property or properties to supply the differentia between art and non-art. *Artists could not pursue this investigation any farther. For they work in the medium of manifest properties* wherein, once it is admitted that anything can look like art, we can expect to learn nothing further of any theoretical import.⁸

As reluctant as I am to put words in Carroll's mouth, the foregoing strongly suggests that not only do artists like Warhol work in the medium of the manifest, but also that they are *restricted*

to manipulations of the manifest. Let us grant this for the sake of argument and consider the plausibility of this interpretation.

Carroll believes that there can be no counterexamples to essentialist definitions of art relying on nonmanifest properties, because of the nature of artworks: artists work in the medium of *manifest* properties; consequently, they cannot produce objects that could constitute counterexamples to a definition that relies on *nonmanifest* properties.

Notice that if Carroll claims that artists work only in the realm of the manifest, then it is extremely unclear what to make of Warhol's *Brillo Box*. Both Danto and Carroll take Warhol's work to raise the question "What is the nature of art?" in its proper philosophical form. As a philosophical question regarding the problem of indiscernibility, Warhol's work is taken to show that no matter how we identify the nature of art, the defining characteristics of artworks are *not* those very manifest properties. But, if artists work *only* in the realm of the manifest, then Warhol cannot be interpreted as having made such a claim. In fact, if Warhol only works in the realm of the manifest, it is not clear that we can interpret him to have made any claims at all.

In addition, even if we could grant that artists do only work in the realm of the manifest, and make sense of Warhol's project, it is not a view that could plausibly be attributed to Danto. Danto takes his definition of art to highlight the fact that what distinguishes art from non-art are the *nonmanifest* properties of artworks. It is inconsistent to suggest both that Danto's definition highlights the importance of the *nonmanifest* properties of artworks and that artists *cannot* work in the realm of the *nonmanifest*. To attribute to Danto the view that artists *cannot* work in the realm of the nonmanifest would defeat his definition of art. So, interpretation (c) of (2) should be rejected.

All three interpretations lead to consequences that Danto would surely reject; hence, Danto's hidden agenda cannot be correct on any interpretation of (2).

But, now there is no way that Carroll could advance the hidden agenda *on Danto's behalf*. (Again, it is unclear why Danto himself accepts Carroll's diagnosis.⁹) As we shall see, Carroll's

charge of circularity depends crucially on this diagnosis of Danto's hidden agenda. It is to this charge that we must turn next.

If Carroll's diagnosis of Danto's hidden agenda were correct, then it would seem that Danto is arguing in a circular fashion. On the one hand, Danto's philosophy of art history presupposes the truth of an essentialist definition of art; on the other hand, the possibility of an essentialist definition of art presupposes the end of art history. Danto cannot, without circularity, appeal to his philosophy of art history as a defense of his philosophy of art, because his philosophy of art history loads the dice in favor of essentialism. But, at this point, it is not clear why this mutual reinforcement between Danto's philosophies should be stamped *viciously* circular.

Carroll seems to mobilize two distinct arguments to substantiate his charge. His first argument rests on the claim that indiscernibility is just a way of indirectly assuming an essentialist position; this argument relies on conceptual considerations concerning the relationship between essentialism and indiscernibility. Let us call this the Conceptual Tie Argument (CT). Carroll's second argument relies on the relation between the evidence for the claim that the end of art arrives with the advent of Warhol's *Brillo Box* and the evidence to show that there can be no new counterexamples to his definition of art. Call this the Evidential Tie Argument (ET). In both cases, Carroll endeavors to show that Danto's philosophy of art history cannot serve as an *independent* argument supporting his philosophy of art, since the former presupposes the latter—either conceptually, or evidentially.

i. CT focuses on the conceptual ties between essentialism and indiscernibility. CT argues that the method of indiscernibility reveals the crucial and defining features of artworks, and it can do so because the issue of indiscernibility is really just another way of endorsing an essentialist definition of art. In other words, talk of indiscernibility and talk of essentialism amount to the same thing. So, Danto's claim that art history ends with the advent of Warhol's *Brillo Box* presupposes essentialism, since his definition of art stems from the centrality of the indiscernibility issue. Here is Carroll's argument:

The method of indiscernibles is nothing but an exqui-

sitely economical way for focusing attention upon making essential distinctions. It is, so to speak, a tool inextricably linked with essentialist theorizing. It has been designed expressly for that purpose. But then to suppose that the advent of the indiscernible issue is the decisive moment in the reflexive artworld conversation about “What is the nature of art?” is to prejudge any debate in favor of essentialist theory. Moreover, to invoke indiscernibility in a characterization of a philosophy of art history that is meant to defend the possibility of essentialist theory is circular; for it supposes the viability of essentialist theory—by dint of its assumptions about indiscernibility—in the course of an argument whose very conclusion is ostensibly that essentialist theory is viable.¹⁰

According to CT, to declare the arrival of *Brillo Box* as the historical moment marking the end of art just is to announce the truth of essentialism. Here, CT is implicitly assuming that indiscernibility is only of interest and of use to the essentialist—that the anti-essentialist would find neither the method of indiscernibles nor Warhol’s *Brillo Box* interesting: they do not focus on any interesting aspect of art, given that they only focus on essentialist distinctions.

But, Carroll provides no support for the claim that the method of indiscernibles raises *only* essentialist distinctions, or for the claim that it cannot be useful or helpful to the anti-essentialist. It is entirely plausible to imagine that the method of indiscernibles may raise non-essentialist issues, or may even provide the anti-essentialist with a tool for focusing on anti-essentialist issues. Indeed, the anti-essentialist may find that *Brillo Box* marks an historical moment in the artworld but fail to take *Brillo Box* to reveal anything at all about the truth of essentialism.

Imagine, for example, that Warhol, or someone like him, loves the Brillo boxes from the hardware store. To persuade others to appreciate them, he creates the artwork *Brillo Box*. By hypothesis, it is crucial that the artwork *Brillo Box* be indiscernible from its store-bought counterpart; yet its indiscernibility is irrelevant to essentialist theorizing. Carroll’s assumption that indiscernibility (and, hence, the artwork *Brillo Box*) is *solely* a tool for essentialist theorizing overlooks the possibility that even someone who does not care at all about essentialism can find uses for the artwork *Brillo Box*. His restriction

of the function and role of indiscernibility to essentialist theorizing is at best a controversial assumption in need of justification.

But, if the conceptual tie between essentialism and indiscernibility can be broken, do we really have a convincing argument that Danto begs the question against the anti-essentialist? It seems Danto may invoke Warhol’s *Brillo Box* as the decisive moment in art history without presupposing essentialism: indiscernibility may support a variety of philosophical claims—in support of, against, or neutral with respect to essentialism—privileging Warhol’s *Brillo Box* in his philosophy of art history neither confirms nor denies any of Danto’s claims regarding his philosophy of art.

ii. Let us turn now to ET. ET makes the following argument: (a) Danto’s philosophy of art ends with Warhol, because there is nothing left for artworks to do after *Brillo Box*. (b) There is nothing left for artists to do, because there can be no new counterexamples to an essentialist definition of art. So, (c) the evidence that there are no new counterexamples to Danto’s definition of art is the very same evidence that art history has ended. Danto’s defense of his philosophy of art is—Carroll claims—that there is nothing left for artists to do after Warhol; but of course, there is nothing left for artists to do after Warhol because at that point, there can be no new counterexamples to Danto’s philosophy of art:

To maintain that, once the method of indiscernibles has arrived, no further theoretical breakthroughs are possible in the artworld seems to beg the question in the debate between essentialist and anti-essentialist theorists, where anti-essentialist theories might argue that art indeed still has a developmental history, namely the overcoming of the error of essentialism both in theory as well as practice, which, in turn, may produce counter-examples in virtue of non-manifest properties that Danto’s theory cannot countenance. The point here is not that Danto’s philosophy of art proper will not be able to withstand counter-examples, but rather that his philosophy of art history may not be able to protect it from counter-examples without begging the question.¹¹

ET charges that Danto’s philosophy of art can defend itself against counterexamples only because nothing new will occur on the art scene

after Warhol. But, there is nothing left for artists to do after Warhol only because of his essentialist assumptions.

To evaluate the legitimacy of ET, we must first examine why there is nothing left for artists to do after Warhol. If the reason is that Danto's philosophy of art has been vindicated, then Carroll is correct in his charge that Danto begs the question. If, however, there is an explanation for why artists have nothing to do after Warhol that is *independent* of Danto's philosophy of art, then Danto can still avoid Carroll's charge.

Ironically, Carroll *himself* suggests the following explanation:

But why can artists only raise the problem of the nature of art? Why can't they solve it, once they discover that the crux of the problem revolves around indiscernibility? Though Danto does not state his reasons explicitly, I suspect that the answer is that art—perhaps most especially avant-garde art—does not have the logical apparatus required to generalize or to mount coherent arguments. Art, especially avant-garde art, would seem to be too elliptical and disjunctive to serve the purpose of constructing and defending a coherent theory of art. Thus, it can at best only frame the issue of the nature of art in its most appropriate form. Once art discovers the issue of indiscernibles, the developmental history of art is at an end.¹²

On Carroll's *own* interpretation of Danto, the reason art history ends and the reason there is nothing left for artists to do after Warhol is *not* because Danto's philosophy of art has been vindicated, but rather because the next logical step for artists to take after they have raised the problem of the nature of art is *to answer* this question;¹³ but, according to Carroll, artists do not have the logical apparatus to answer questions; consequently, there is nothing left for artists to do.

So, on Carroll's own interpretation of Danto, the evidence for art history's end is pried apart from the evidence supporting essentialism. Hence, for the very reasons that Carroll himself notes, evidence of the end of art history is not evidence for Danto's definition of art.

Mobilizing the fact that Danto ends art history with the raising of a question, rather than with an answer, we might suggest another way of motivating ET that avoids the above criticism on

Carroll's behalf. Carroll might note yet another connection between the evidence for the end of art history and for Danto's definition of art: that there is no art history *after* raising the question implies that the answer favors the essentialist position. Only an essentialist would end art history once the question has been raised—for this implies that the answer is obvious: the end of art history vindicates the essentialist; hence, there is no longer any reason for art history to continue. In this way, Carroll might argue, Danto rigs his art history to defend his definition of art. After all, art history ends once the question "What is the nature of art?" has been raised, and because there is no art after this point, Danto's philosophy of art history also implies that essentialism is correct. Call this the modified ET argument (MET).

Before considering the central problem with MET, we should note two smaller ones. First, if Danto can be accused of loading the dice, then he must only be loading the dice in support of a particular formulation of essentialism. For, as Carroll himself notes, Danto's philosophy of art history "at best would show that there can be no counter-examples in terms of the manifest properties of artworks."¹⁴ Hence, MET grants that Danto's end-of-art thesis does not imply that *any* essentialist definition of art is correct; rather, it shows only that an essentialist definition of art that relies on the *nonmanifest* properties is correct. So, MET applies only if we interpret Danto as claiming that the end of art history implies the truth of an essentialist definition of art relying on *nonmanifest* properties of artworks.

Second, if Danto can be accused of circularity, because his philosophy of art history is used in defense of his philosophy of art, then MET is broader than Carroll perhaps realizes: for then *any* philosopher who appeals to certain decisive moments in the history of art in defense of his or her philosophy of art can also be accused of circularity. If Danto is susceptible to circularity on these grounds, then he is susceptible to the same extent as is any other philosopher who interprets art history in light of their definition of art. Hence, MET applies not just to Danto, but to any philosopher who appeals to art history in support of a philosophy of art.

But, there is still a more serious issue with which MET must contend: the fact that art history ends after the question "What is the nature

of art?" has been raised does *not* imply that the answer to this question is an affirmative one in favor of the essentialist. If art history ends only once the question has been posed, but not answered, then art history leaves room for the possibility that the question "What is the nature of art?" either (a) fails to have an answer, (b) is answered in the negative, or (c) is answered in the affirmative. Of course, if the history of art or art itself were to provide an answer to the question "What is the nature of art?" then surely Danto would be loading the dice in favor of the truth of an essentialist definition of art. In such a case, MET would be appropriate, for the fact that the history of art would end once there was an answer (presumably an affirmative one) to such a question would assume the truth of an essentialist definition of art. But, the mere fact that art history ends once the question has been *posed*, but not *answered*, implies nothing about essentialism's truth.

So, what reasons might Carroll have for suggesting that art ends because artists have nothing to do after Warhol? On Carroll's line of reasoning, (1) art history comes to an end after Warhol's *Brillo Box* raises the question "What is the nature of art?" in its proper philosophical form, and (2) art history cannot continue after this question is raised, because artworks, due to their elliptical and disjunctive nature, are incapable of answering this question, since an answer requires mounting a coherent argument. But, this line of reasoning further assumes that art history ends after Warhol because (1) whatever art would have been created after Warhol would have to be art that is interested in answering the question "What is the nature of art?" and (2) there is no art that would even be capable of answering such a question. In other words, whatever art would have occurred after Warhol, it would belong to a period of art history governed by a narrative whose goal is to answer the question "What is the nature of art?" and no art could realize such a goal.

Is Danto genuinely committed to such a view about art history? Must Danto grant that the narrative governing post-Warholian art must address the issues raised by the narrative governing art prior to *Brillo Box*? We cannot begin to answer such questions without first taking a careful look at Danto's views regarding the his-

tory of art and the narratives that govern art history.

II. DANTO'S OWN MISTAKE

According to Danto, the history of Western art is divided into two main periods, the first of which he refers to variously as the "Vasari episode," the "era of imitation," or the "mimetic period" and the second of which is alternately termed the "Greenberg episode," "the era of ideology," or "modernism." It is somewhat misleading to identify modernism with the Greenberg episode, for this mistakenly suggests that Danto agrees with Greenberg about the characterization of art during this period in art history. To avoid any confusion, I shall refer to this second period as modernism.

Consider Danto's characterization of art history:

The history of Western art divides into two main episodes, what I call the Vasari episode and what I call the Greenberg episode. Both are progressive. Vasari, construing art as representational, sees it getting better and better over time at the "conquest of visual appearance". That narrative ended for painting when moving pictures proved far better able to depict reality than painting could. Modernism began by asking what painting should do in the light of that? And it began to probe its own identity. Greenberg defined a new narrative in terms of an ascent to the identifying conditions of the art, specifically what differentiates the art of painting from every other art.¹⁵

Thus sketched, the master narrative of the history of art . . . is that there is an era of imitation, followed by an era of ideology, followed by our post-historical era in which, with qualification, anything goes. *Each of these periods is characterized by a different structure of art criticism.* Art criticism in the traditional or mimetic period was based on visual truth. The structure of art criticism in the age of ideology . . . characteristically grounded its own philosophical idea of what art is on an exclusionary distinction between the art it accepted (the true) and everything else as not really art. The post-historical period is marked by the parting of the ways between philosophy and art, which means that art criticism in the post-historical period must be as pluralistic as post-historical art itself.¹⁶

There are two noteworthy points in these pas-

sages. First, Danto is claiming that art history can be divided into different periods, each of which has its own narrative governing the art of that period. The narrative of a given period describes the goals toward which art during that period progresses and specifies the internal development of art during that period. Each narrative makes sense of how and toward what end a particular art historical period progresses. Narratives and their goals define successive, actual art-historical periods. Second, because each period is governed by a different narrative charting the progress of art during that period, each period also has its own distinct art criticism. A narrative provides a way of understanding the development of art during a given period.

The reason a narrative explains how a given period in art history progresses is that it contains a conception of what art is about and what its nature is. In other words, each narrative of art history advances its own conception of art's essence. To support this, Danto suggests that every period has its own style, where style is understood somewhat eccentrically to constitute a definition of art for that period:

I am going to use the word style in a somewhat eccentric way in order to get my story told. I shall use it in this way: *a style is a set of properties a body of artworks share, but which is further taken to define, philosophically, what it is to be an artwork.* For an extended historical period, it was taken for granted that to be an artwork, especially a work of visual art, was to be mimetic. . . . "Imitation" was the standard philosophical answer to the question of what art is from Aristotle down into the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Hence mimesis, on my use, is a style. . . . Mimesis became *a style* with the advent of modernism, or, as I termed it, the Age of Manifestos. . . . The age of Manifestos, as I see it, came to an end when philosophy was separated from style because the true form of the question "What is art?" emerged. That took place roughly around 1964.¹⁷

These passages commit Danto to the following: (1) each period in the history of art is governed by its own narrative that measures progress within a particular art-historical period; (2) each narrative contains a conception of what art is. This makes it possible that an art-historical period—a particular narrative of art history—comes to an end. A period ends when artworks

achieve the goals specified by the narrative (as occurred during the age of mimesis, when artworks achieved perfect pictorial representation, or during modernism, when artworks raised the question "What is the nature of art?" in its proper philosophical form); (3) modernism *in fact* ends once the question "What is the nature of art?" is raised in its proper philosophical form.

So far, however, Danto's account provides narratives that apply only to a specific period in art history. But, Danto *also* purports to provide a philosophy of art history according to which it is possible that there will be no more narratives of art history, and that there will be no more periods of art history. Indeed, he wants to advance an account of art history on which the end of *all* of art history is possible.

Specifically, Danto claims that after modernism, that is, after the true form of the question "What is the nature of art?" has emerged, art history *itself* (not just some specific period within art history) has ended. But, if modernism is merely one of many possible narratives of art history, with its own standard by which to measure progress during a specified period of time, then we can easily imagine *another* narrative of art history that could follow modernism. To say that modernism has ended is simply to say that *this* narrative's internal development has been exhausted, but this says nothing about *future* narratives to come. To say there is no more art history generally after modernism presupposes not only that this *specific* narrative ends, but also that there is some standard by which to measure the development of the *entire* history of art, as it moves from one narrative to another. In other words, we need a master narrative that explains how the history of art progresses from one narrative to the next. In addition, that master narrative must provide a goal for the history of art as it moves from one narrative to the next, and that goal must be realized in 1964, when Danto claims art ended.

As it stands, however, Danto's philosophy of art history fails to make good on the claim that the *entire* history of art has ended, because he specifies neither a standard by which to measure progress from one narrative to the next, nor a goal toward which art history might strive, from one narrative to the next. The failure to provide a standard by which to measure progress from one narrative to the next is what I shall refer to

as the “yardstick” problem. Because of the yardstick problem, Danto’s philosophy of art history fails to allow for the end of art history as such.

It is strange that Danto fails to specify a yardstick by which to measure progress across all periods in art history, given that his main thesis is supposedly to defend a conception of art history in which the end of art history is possible.

It is equally strange that *Carroll* fails to notice this omission in Danto’s philosophy of art history. It is absolutely essential for *Carroll* to have asked whether Danto’s philosophy of art history can accommodate the end of art history: if Danto’s philosophy of art history cannot accommodate such a possibility, neither *Carroll*’s diagnosis of Danto’s hidden agenda nor his criticisms of Danto can be motivated.

Since accepting at face value what Danto says leads to certain problems, it would be uncharitable to simply accept this account as it stands. In what follows, I shall develop an alternative interpretation of Danto that avoids the yardstick problem. If such an interpretation is plausible, then we can interpret Danto as claiming that art history has come to an end. After that, we shall need to investigate the reasons for believing that art history comes to an end when Danto says it does—i.e., after modernism.

On my interpretation of Danto, it is possible to identify a standard by which to measure the progress of art history from one narrative to the next. Every time a new narrative of art history begins, that narrative not only provides a narrative for that particular period of art history (as Danto’s view suggests), but it *also* provides a narrative of art history that makes sense of and applies to all *previous* artworks from *previous* periods. Thus, the yardstick by which to measure progress *within* a particular period of art history is also the yardstick by which to measure progress from one period to the next.¹⁸

So, for example, the modernist narrative of art history interprets artworks during modernism as trying to formulate the question “What is the nature of art?” in its proper philosophical form. In addition, this narrative also reinterprets artworks from *prior* periods of art history, such as art from the Vasari episode, in light of the goals specified by modernism. Not only is there a standard by which to measure art’s progress within a particular period, but also art’s progress in moving from the Vasari episode to modernism.

On this interpretation, as we move from one narrative to the next, we will always see *previous* narratives as false or incorrect. For, each new narrative purports to have discovered the appropriate or suitable way of understanding not just the artworks of its own period, but also all artworks from the entire history of art.

Danto himself hints at this view, when he writes:

In my own version of the idea of “what art wants,” the end and fulfillment of the history of art is the philosophical understanding of what art is, an understanding that is achieved in the way that understanding in each of our lives is achieved, namely, from the mistakes we make, the false paths we follow, the false images we come to abandon until we learn wherein our limits consist, and then how to live within those limits. The first false path was the close identification of art with picturing. The second false path was the materialist aesthetics of Greenberg, in which art turns away from what makes pictorial content convincing, hence from illusion, to the palpable material properties of art, which differ essentially from medium to medium.¹⁹

In this passage, Danto seems to suggest that the goal underlying the entire history of art is to formulate the question “What is the nature of art?” in its proper philosophical form. He presents previous narratives of art history—the Vasari episode and modernism—in light of the current way of understanding art history, viz., as instances of learning about the essential nature of art. He does not simply take the goal of *modernist* art to raise the question about the nature of art in its proper philosophical form; he interprets the goal of *all* of art history to raise this question, too.

One might worry that this interpretation of Danto would require attributing to him a form of relativism with respect to art history that he would surely deny. I think such a worry is unfounded. The entire history of art is progressive; hence, as we move forward, we come to realize that what we believed in earlier narratives to be true was in fact misguided. Danto does not believe that all narratives are equally correct, or that they apply equally to the entire history of art. The above passage serves to highlight that, on Danto’s view, earlier narratives are mistaken;

recent narratives more closely represent the genuine goals of art.

This interpretation allows us to make sense of the possibility that art might come to an end. Of course, whether Danto is *correct* depends on his arguments in support of his claim. We must now ask whether Danto has provided any reasons for believing that art in fact ends once art raises the question “What is the nature of art?” in its proper philosophical form. That is, what reason do we have for believing that there can be no new narratives *after* modernism? Why cannot another narrative follow modernism?

Recall that Carroll’s suggestion for why art must end after modernism was that whatever art is created after Warhol would be art intended to answer the question “What is the nature of art?” and since no art is capable of answering such a question (since artworks are too elliptical and disjunctive to mount the necessary coherent arguments), there is no art after modernism.

But having examined Danto’s own philosophy of art history more closely, it does not seem as if Danto must grant, as Carroll seems to think, that the narrative governing post-Warholian art must address the issues raised by the narrative governing art prior to *Brillo Box*. If the art of each narrative is characterized by its own distinct art criticism, then there is no reason to believe that art after Warhol would have to deal with any of the issues raised by modernism. There is no reason to suppose that a narrative following the modernist narrative would have to address issues that are even remotely relevant to those that characterize modernism.

Once we grant that the narrative after modernism need not be concerned with answering a question regarding the nature of art, it should be obvious that there is no reason that art history must end after modernism. It appears that Carroll, and perhaps Danto himself, is conflating the conditions under which a *particular* narrative of art history ends, and the conditions under which the *master* narrative of art history—the entire history of art history—ends. The fact that according to modernism, art is concerned with posing the question “What is the nature of art?” means that this particular narrative in art history ends once this question has been posed. But, this fact alone constitutes insufficient grounds upon which to conclude that the entire *master* narrative of art history must also end.

There are two morals to be drawn, one for Carroll and one for Danto. If art history need not end after modernism, then it is trivially true that Danto’s account can avoid Carroll’s charge of circularity. For Carroll’s circularity charge requires assuming the end of art after modernism. Until an argument for the end-of-art thesis is given, Danto is not committed to any circularity at all. We have saved Danto from Carroll, but now we must save Danto from himself. For Danto can only avoid the circularity charge by admitting that his account of art history fails to motivate the end of art. It seems that Danto has traded one minor problem for a more serious one.²⁰

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1. Arthur Danto, “The End of Art,” *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 81–115.

2. Noël Carroll, “Essence, Expression and History: Arthur Danto’s Philosophy of Art,” in *Danto and His Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 79–106.

3. I shall rely on Danto’s arguments as they are presented in “The End of Art,” in *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*; “Learning to Live with Pluralism,” in *Beyond the Brillo Box* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992), pp. 217–231; *After the End of Art* (Princeton University Press, 1997); *Philosophizing Art* (University of California Press, 1999); “Responses and Replies,” in *Danto and His Critics*; and “The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense,” *History and Theory* 37 (1999): 127–143.

4. In fact, in *Danto and His Critics*, Danto praises Carroll’s interpretation highly: “Carroll’s is quite the best account I can imagine, for its lucidity, comprehensiveness, acuity, and sympathy; and it is to Carroll’s text that I would send anyone who sought a statement of what I might have achieved. . . . One of his most ingenious thoughts is that, as an essentialist, I really require the kind of historicism which culminates in the theory of The End of Art, with which I have been identified” (“Responses and Replies,” pp. 205–206).

5. Oddly, Danto nowhere offers any response to Carroll’s criticisms. See *Beyond the Brillo Box*, p. 229, where Danto presents and admires Carroll’s criticism: “A friendly critic, Noël Carroll, has argued for an internal connection between my view that art has historically ended and the philosophy of art advanced in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. His thought is this: The history of the philosophy of art has been the story of philosophical theories overturned, one after another, by counter-examples from the artworld. Only a the-

ory indemnified against counter-examples can stand the test of time. How convenient, then, that there won't be any more art history, so far as my own theories are concerned . . . I admire this criticism."

6. Danto, *After the End of Art*, p. 195, and "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense," p. 130.

7. See Danto, "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense," pp. 129–130.

8. Carroll, "Essence, Expression and History," pp. 94–95, emphasis added.

9. See Danto's reply to Carroll's charge in *Danto and His Critics*, esp. pp. 205–206, as well as Danto's discussion of Carroll's criticism in *Beyond the Brillo Box*, p. 229.

10. Carroll, "Essence, Expression and History," p. 98.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

13. One might worry that there is a prior problem with Carroll's argument, viz., that Carroll has misinterpreted Danto to be assuming that art history ends with the *raising of*

a *question*, rather than with an *answer*. However, such a worry is unfounded. Danto has *repeatedly* maintained that art ends with the formulation of the question "What is the nature of art?" in its proper philosophical form. See, for example, *After the End of Art*, pp. 35, 46, and 113; see also *Philosophizing Art*, p. 5, and "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense," p. 134.

14. Carroll, "Essence, Expression and History," p. 96.

15. Danto, *After the End of Art*, p. 125.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 47, emphasis added.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 46, emphasis added.

18. This is not a new or novel approach to art history: expressionism and formalism were also theories that claimed to comment on or to apply to all prior periods of art history.

19. Danto, *After the End of Art*, p. 107.

20. I am indebted to Lee Brown, David Eng, and an anonymous reviewer for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.