ACCORDING TO WHAT: ART AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE "END OF ART"

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ABSTRACT

In 1964, when Danto first encountered Warhol's *Brillo Box*, Jasper Johns made a painting titled *According to What*. Danto's new book *After the End of Art* also provokes this question because in his restatement of Hegel's verdict on art's historical role he drops an essential part of the implied definition of art: the issue of adequacy between content and presentation. Why dispense with this crucial point of quality judgment? My critique falls into three parts. The first part shows how the whole historical argument rests upon a shift of criteria. According to Hegel art reached its highest point of achievement in classical antiquity when adequate embodiment seemed indispensable to the presence of the spirit. It subsequently lost this exclusive rank—first through Christianity, then through modern philosophy—when a new spiritual self-awareness emerged which no longer seemed to need external manifestation. Although Danto disputes the concept of absolute self-possession as the metaphysical vanishing point of Hegel's construction, he nevertheless subscribes to its apparent evidence in late twentieth-century art and culture. In the second part I discuss the characteristic distortions of Hegelian-type historicism and confront them with both the obvious misrepresentation of the works of art themselves and the different code of conduct in practical art history. This leads to a rather disenchanting conclusion: according to an old, deeply ingrained philosophical prejudice there is no problem about quality in art, because the true yardstick and fulfillment of art is philosophy itself. The final part tries to unpick this tangle by showing that there was in fact, contemporaneous with Hegel, a remarkably different interpretation of the self-same auspices of modern art which comes much closer to its actual achievements, and this without denying the basic philosophical predicament of which Danto has reminded us.

When I went to Bielefeld in April 1997 to join an author's colloquium arranged by the Center of Interdisciplinary Studies to celebrate Arthur C. Danto's new book, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*,[1] I had prepared a paper with questions and objections prompted by my first reading. These were mainly concerned with the historiography of modern art, methodological problems deriving from Hegel's metaphysics of history, and the seeming evidence of his time-worn dictum on the "end of art" in the current American art scene.[2] But as so often in the practice of philosophy, dialogue and dispute mod-

1. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, 1997) (= The A. W. Mellon Lectures in Fine Arts, 1995). All quotations from this book are indicated by page numbers in parentheses.

2. This paper has been published under the title "Die Befreiung der Kunst von der Kunst—Arthur C. Danto und das Happy End des philosophischen Bildungsromans," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 45 (1997), 765-771.

ified preconceived positions. For three memorable days of intense and spirited discussion Danto impressed us all by the range, agility, and pertinence of his responses. So it was all the more surprising that there was one area in which he appeared virtually intransigent. Whenever the question of "quality" was raised, and this was a recurrent issue, Danto's attitude became curiously rigid and evasive: No, quality was not an essential factor in art.

During the colloquium I ascribed this reaction to his criticism of aesthetics in general and of Clement Greenberg's decree of "quality" in particular and refrained from probing further into this issue. But on rereading *After the End of Art* I realized that in his embrace of Hegel's philosophy of art Danto quietly drops the relevant passage altogether. It is therefore worthwhile quoting in full Hegel's crucial statement, as Danto himself does in chapter two of his book:

> Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our ideas instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place. What is now aroused in us by works of art is not just immediate enjoyment, but our judgment also, since we subject to our intellectual consideration (i) the content of art, and (ii) the work of art's means of presentation, and the appropriateness or inapproriateness of both to one another. The philosophy of art is therefore a greater need in our day than it was in the days when art by itself yielded full satisfaction. Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is. (30f.)[3]

In transferring this proposition to the world of contemporary art as it has evolved since the mid-1960s, Danto fully subscribes to Hegel's view. Moreover, he cites the famous verdict again at the end of chapter five, when claiming that aesthetics should be replaced by art criticism, though with a significant omission: "Hegel speaks of intellectual judgment of '(i) the content of art and (ii) the work of art's means of presentation.' Criticism needs nothing further. It needs to identify both meaning and mode of presentation, or what I term 'embodiment' on the thesis that artworks are embodied meanings" (98). This omission of the question of "appropriateness or inappropriateness" could be passed over as a mere slip, were it not for the final chapter of the book in which Danto confirms the abbreviated version as his definition of art. He paraphrases: "To be a work of art is to be (i) *about* something and (ii) to *embody its meaning*" (195).

Why this dispensing with the criterion of adequacy? One might wonder whether the omission was prompted by the translation of T. M. Knox who inserted the brackets (i) and (ii) into the original text, thus turning a classic tripartite clause—*"den Inhalt, die Darstellungsmittel des Kunstwerks und die Angemessenheit und Unangemessenheit beider"*—into a list of priorities.[4] But I do not believe that philosophical understanding depends on such philological

3. Danto quotes from the English edition of *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art by G. W. F. Hegel*, transl. T. M. Knox. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1975), 11.

4. All German quotations refer to vols. 13-15 (*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*) of the new edition of G. W. F. Hegel's *Werke*, 1832–1845, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel. 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1986). The present reference is to vol. 13, 25.

minutiae. Far from being a subordinate consideration, the shifting relationship of adequacy between the content of art and the means of presentation is, in fact, the key to Hegel's philosophy of art: the reason why he conceived it as a *history* of art, and not as a definitive, timeless system. And beyond this specialist concern the importance of the means of expression being somehow adequate to the content is almost a truism. Certainly most artists would agree with the slangy definition of their task given by the German poet Gottfried Benn: "The opposite of art is not nature, but well-meant."[5]

There are many valuable forms in which meanings can be embodied without ever being meant to become present as content. One might tie a knot in one's handkerchief which will be meaningful only to oneself; lighting a candle in a Catholic church is an offering the meaning of which remains the secret of the person who lights it; and children play with sticks and stones, which to them may mean horses, places, or even people—in short the world, as Heraclitus saw—although to the adult eye these means of presentation seem strangely inadequate to what they are meant to represent. These are only a few examples of embodiments which are definitely about something, but no one would regard them as works of art because they conceal or withhold their meaning, rather than reveal and express it.

On the other hand, there are many things which obviously manifest their content without ever being treated as works of art. These are of course, first and foremost, the objects of everyday use which present their meaning through their function, in clearly distinguishable degrees of appropriateness. But there are also meaningful things that are less obvious because they do not fulfill a need or serve a purpose. A bunch of flowers, for instance, conveys a broadly recognizable message: namely an appreciation of our being in the world. And yet such a thing lacks the quality of a work of art, however aesthetically satisfying it may be. It could even be said that too "artful" an arrangement destroys the very affinity to art, as Renoir realized when he said that a bunch of flowers usually looks best on the side opposite to the one that has been arranged.[6]

The concept of art which Danto puts forward thus begs some critical questions: Is the term "embodiment of meaning" really specific enough to distinguish sufficiently between works of art and other meaningful manifestations? Does the omission of Hegel's criterion of adequacy imply that after the "end of art" we are left with an indiscriminate range of presentations of meaning which owe their raison d'être solely to the continuing veneration of a past form of human self-assertion? Or is the subjection of works of art to an intellectual judgment assessing their content and their form of presentation altogether a questionable way of relating to their presence? Without claiming to answer these questions fully myself I shall try to outline and clarify some of the controversial issues involved,

5. Gottfried Benn, "Roman des Phänotyp" (1944), in G. Benn, *Prosa und Autobiographie in der Fassung der Erstdrucke*, ed. B. Hillebrand (Frankfurt am Main, 1984), 156.

6. Renoir's observation has been related by Matisse in the "Notes" accompanying *Jazz* (1947). In Henri Matisse, *Écrits et propos sur l'art*, ed. D. Fourcade (Paris, 1972), 236.

first by discussing the criterion of quality that governs Hegel's construction of art history and consequently affects Danto's conception, then by confronting this narrative with the practice of art on which it draws, and finally by directing attention to a different interpretation of the modern crisis in art which dates from about the same time as Hegel's thesis, and therefore may help to put Danto's Hegelianism into perspective.

The most astonishing aspect of Danto's involvement with Hegel is his re-instatement of the difference between the objective and the absolute spirit. It seems to have needed the penetration of an analytical philosopher to see through the blatantly metaphysical phrasing of this distinction and to recognize its significance. Academic art history long ago abandoned this embarrassing Hegelian heritage, settling for Wilhelm Dilthey's more convenient, all-embracing concept of a *Geisteswissenschaft*: a science that investigates the objective manifestations of the human spirit in history. From this point of view a work of art is seen as being essentially not very different from any other historical document such as a contract, coin, or creed; and it is left very much to the individual scholar, or to current intellectual fashion, as to whether works of art are thought to express the social, psychological, religious, economic, or any other conditions of their time. These considerations are of course not entirely wrong or irrelevant. Every conscious statement somehow reflects the needs, obstacles, and intentions under which it came into being. But Hegel saw that, apart from representing the objective concerns of the human mind, works of art also reveal—"in their highest vocation"—something of the intrinsic identity, the active nature of the spirit itself; and it is in this capacity that he regarded art, together with religion and philosophy, as one of the expressions of what he called absolute spirit.

Danto acknowledges this difference in his treatment of art as equal to philosophy and sympathizes with the idea of it being "a fount rather than merely an object of knowledge" (188). But this awareness does not seem to have entered into his definition of art as "embodiment of meaning." Although he frequently refers to Hegel's phrase of art's "highest vocation" (the German word *Bestimmung* means both distinction and vocation), he goes to great lengths to avoid any admission that the essence of art is concerned with some sort of excellence, probably because of the obvious clichés and resentments associated with this attribute. Hegel's claim for a certain superiority of art, placing it above other meaningful representations, is however fairly clear and objective: he distinguishes between subject matter and content. A portrait for instance may be completely successful in objectively rendering a likeness of the sitter to anyone who knows him or her. The content is then seen as identical with the subject matter. But this is not the achievement of a work of art "in its highest vocation." In a portrait by Titian or Rembrandt the identity of the sitter may be unknown and the physical appearance in any case not verifiable at all; and yet the lack of this information does not impinge on our recognition. One might even go so far as to say that it actually enhances it, because what we recognize as the content of the

painting is the presence of a spirit which, although it may be remote in time, nevertheless communicates directly with us.

Time obviously plays an important role in bringing out this essential quality in works of art by freeing them from the web of interests and ambitions that surrounded their inception. (One wonders how Warhol's *Brillo Box* will present itself once Danto's "indiscernibility problem" has disappeared and only specialists versed in twentieth-century American consumer culture will know what the "real thing" was.) But this does not mean that the immediate spiritual presence of a work of art is a phantom brought about by the distance of time. On the contrary, this quality is very much at stake in the actual making of art, as Titian demonstrated with his portrait of Francis I, now in the Louvre, which he painted on the basis of Pietro Aretino's descriptions and other artists' renderings of the Emperor. Without ever having seen his subject he managed to present the most vivid and memorable image of royalty that any king of France could possibly wish for. Subject matter on this level is clearly part of the "means of presentation," to use Hegel's term: something without which the spiritual essence of the work could not have been realized. However, Titian's gesture may also be slightly misleading in suggesting that content is something that can be freely commanded by a great artist. This is by no means Hegel's understanding. Content is, in his sense, the one thing an artist cannot attain consciously, that is to say, as an object of intention.

It is one of Hegel's great insights into the working of the human mind that *not knowing* is an essential prerequisite to the manifestation of the spirit in art. "The spirit only works itself around in things so long as there is something secret, not revealed, in them" (*Hegel's Aesthetics* I, 604).[7] Such intimacy with the elements of making allows for the spirit to express itself as a source rather than progress by its familiar notions and ideas. Although this "working itself around" is inaccessible to the intellect, the final result is far from obscure. Through not being entirely absorbed in serving an explicit need or purpose, the means of presentation acquire a certain independence and eventually turn into the agents, the actual matrix of expression. There is no mystery or dialectical trick involved: the transformation of the *means* into expressive *factors* is the act that constitutes at once the articulation and the content of art "in its highest vocation."

Hegel draws the evidence for this concept from Greek art. In classical sculpture in particular he sees the complete "interpenetration of spirit and its shape in nature" (I, 431), as opposed to earlier, "symbolic" forms of art which render their meaning through the overt inadequacy between content and presentation. Whereas in his understanding the Egyptian pyramids are "prodigious crystals

7. My English quotations from Hegel's *Aesthetics* are also taken from Knox's translation (see note 3) and will be indicated in parentheses by the number of the volume and the page. When the translation has been corrected on the basis of the German original (see note 4), this will be noted. In this case Knox's version "The spirit occupies itself with objects . . ." is philosophically misleading because the spirit that is "occupied with objects" is our normal, practical, or theoretical consciousness of the world. Hegel's phrase "sich in den Gegenständen herumarbeiten" (vol. 14, 234) is unusual in German, too, but very precise, almost graphic, in the description of a pre-objective state of creative awareness.

which conceal in themselves an inner meaning" (I, 356), the anthropomorphic gods of Greek sculpture manifest the ideal relationship between inner and outer: "an existent embodiment which is perfectly adequate to the true content" (I, 438). All Hegel's descriptions emphasize that "embodiment" is more than just representation, which may still indicate something too big and too powerful to be grasped and shaped: embodiment means sheer presence—the human body being "completely pervaded by the breath of the spirit" (I, 441), and the reverse, the spirit appearing "entirely immersed in its external form" (I, 483). In this way classical sculpture is regarded not only as one expression among others of the highest vocation of art, but as its perfect fulfillment. It provides the criteria which allow Hegel to qualify symbolic art in general, including Egyptian art, as "pre-art" (I, 314)[8] and criticize earlier stages within Greek art, such as the pediments of the Aphaia temple in Aegina, for their lack of "*spiritual* animation" (II, 786).

It is important to see that this is a second quality judgment which sets up grades among the artistic manifestations of the absolute spirit. Obviously for Hegel the highest achievement of art had already been attained in Greek classical art. That is to say, the shadow of the "end of art" has been looming over western art ever since antiquity! "Classical art became a conceptually adequate representation of the Ideal, the consummation of the realm of beauty. Nothing can be or become more beautiful" (I, 517). But at this point in his lectures, when introducing the "romantic" approach to art, Hegel takes a decisive step and switches the basis of the argument: "Yet there is something higher than the beautiful appearance of spirit in its immediate sensuous shape, even if this shape be created by spirit as adequate to itself" (*ibid.*). If art as an expression of spirit cannot provide more than its perfect embodiment, the spirit itself seems nevertheless to strive further. "The spirit knows that its truth does not exist in its immersion in corporeality; on the contrary, it only becomes sure of its truth by withdrawing from the external into its intimacy with itself and positing external reality as an existence inadequate to itself" (I, 518). This ingenious twist, however, does not originate in art itself, nor is it tutored by philosophy: the new lease on life is granted by Christianity, the basis of what Hegel calls "romantic art."

The content of romantic art, as opposed to the classical ideal, does not come into being by plastic embodiment but is revealed through religion. Hegel states: "The Divine, God himself, has become flesh, was born, lived, suffered, died, and is risen" (I, 505). The life of Christ as related in the gospels provides a particular iconography, ranging from Nativity to Resurrection, and at the same time spells out the spiritual content to be expressed. Incarnation is obviously a common theme between the biblical legend and Greek mythology; but in Christian belief the divine embodiment is only transitory, being eventually superseded by Christ's Ascension. The Christian spirit in art is therefore profoundly ambiguous. Though dependent on realization it cannot find fulfillment in embodiment alone; it is adequately expressed only when presented as ultimately incommensurate

8. Knox kindly translates as "the threshold of art." But Hegel's invention "*Vorkunst*" (vo. 13, 408) should be preserved in its crudeness as "pre-art," because this is the beginning of historicist jargon.

with the physical world. This paradox demanded a new mode of presentation. Hegel's rigorous insistence on the highest vocation of art made him recognize that painting, far from being simply another artistic discipline, is *the* appropriate art for the Christian era, because it substitutes the physicality of sculpture for an imaginative presence which confirms the pre-eminence of the inner life of the spirit.

But this masterpiece of speculative ingenuity should not detract from the fact that the Christian narrative of how God himself has become flesh—"was born, lived, suffered, died, and is risen"—is the model for Hegel's own concept of history as a progression of the spirit which finally rises above all earthly boundaries, except the consciousness of the philosopher. Precisely in Hegel's conception of romantic art lies the seed of his philosophy of the "end of art": Is there presence beyond embodiment? Can one imagine, let alone think, any meaningful relation of the spirit to the spirit as such? In earlier publications Danto has stated his "reservations" about this vanishing point of Hegel's historical perspective.[9] In his initial essay "The End of Art" (1984) he even denounced the concept of absolute knowledge as mistaken: "Such a conception of knowledge is, I believe, fatally flawed."[10] But in *After the End of Art* these reservations seem to have been dropped. Danto apparently thinks that one can agree with Hegel on almost everything that he has to say about the relationship of philosophy and art without subscribing to the metaphysical principle involved. This is an interesting turn in the philosophical exchange because it reveals that the seductive effect of Hegel's thesis on the "end of art" tends to obscure its doubtful basis. What is it that makes this highly constructed, though "fatally flawed" evidence so suggestive, so appealing? The only way to find out is to confront Hegel's and Danto's arguments with the practice of art upon which they call.

Danto's nonchalant treatment of the metaphysical culmination of Hegel's historicism is all the more perplexing as he is clearly aware that this is anything but a simple finale. The philosophical self-fulfillment of the spirit provides both the basis from which past and present are viewed as well as the resolution towards which the material is selected and structured. The method of constructing history as a progressive development is thus highly partial. Hegel himself expressly justified this partiality, believing in a kind of spiritual survival of the fittest. In his eyes only those aspects of human endeavor which have been successfully carried forward—that is to say, which are preserved in the final achievement—merit consideration. But however ruthless this construction may be, it is also extremely vulnerable because it betrays the preconceptions inherent in that all too grandiose concept, absolute knowledge. When removed from this overbearing context the individual works of art are quite capable of drawing attention in themselves to the distortions and exaggerations that have been imposed on them.

9. Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York, 1986),16.
10. *Ibid.*, 113.

It is worth staying with Hegel for a moment because his example seems to have set a pattern for the philosophical appropriation of art. First of all, he continually isolates certain aspects of the individual works in order to absorb them into his own cohesive vision. Anybody who has read his persuasive chapters on classical art will remember the recurrent references to Greek sculpture as still lacking "the light of the eye," or in strict philosophical prose "the actuality of self-aware subjectivity" (I, 520). The metaphor is almost too good to discard. However, it has to be said that Hegel didn't take into account sufficiently the fact that these sculptures were painted and decorated, with particular emphasis laid on the treatment of the eyes. Furthermore, such errors lose all their charm when the philosopher's intention is seen to affect the choice of evidence. Hegel mentions several times the "extremely attractive and lovable sculpture" of Silenus holding the infant Bacchus in his arms, which he saw in Munich, in order to contrast this "naive love" with the expression of the "inner soul, the depth of the heart which we meet in Christian painting" (II, 801). The reference is of course to images of the Virgin Mary. Had he chosen instead the late classical statue of Eirene with the infant Plutos from the same collection, he would have found it difficult to maintain this distinction.[11] Finally, this construed evidence blinds perception. From today's point of view Hegel's treatment of the Aeginetan sculptures, a celebrated acquisition of the Bavarian Collections in his time, is almost unbelievable. After dutifully acknowledging "the truest treatment and imitation of nature" in these configurations of combat, he goes on to point out that the postures and the heads are "relatively spiritless": "the noses are sharp, the forehead still lies back without rising freely and straight; the ears stand high, the long-slitted eyes are set flat and slanting; the closed mouth ends in angles drawn upwards, the cheeks are kept flat but the chin is strong and angular" (II, 786). The enigmatic smile with which these combatants face one another, and some of them even death, has completely eluded his idea of spiritual expression.

All these fallacies reappear in Danto's revision of modernism because they are methodological deficiencies rather than questions of taste. However much Warhol's exhibition in 1964 at the Stable Gallery in New York may have meant in Danto's philosophical life, the apotheosis of the *Brillo Box* as a decisive turning point in the history of the human spirit is a clear instance of precariously singling out an aspect of an artist's work, and maybe not even a central one at that. Warhol experts would most likely agree that in the entire body of his work there are more significant pieces such as, for example, the *Marilyn* series or the *Self-Portraits*. And how is one to subsume the *Electric Chairs* under the pop accolade of "the celebration of the ordinary" (132)? This disregard of context and proportion becomes even more pronounced in Danto's selection of the protagonists of modern art. Probably no one would dispute that Duchamp and Warhol are two

11. A slight uncertainty still exists about what Hegel really saw when he visited Munich in 1815, and how much of his knowledge is owed to secondary sources. The Crown Prince of Bavaria, whose collection is now in the Munich Glyptothek, had acquired by that time the Silen (1812), the pediments from Aegina (1812), and the Eirene with the infant Plutos (1815).

outstanding figures in twentieth-century art, but quite apart from that curious, barely explained interval of half a century between *Fountain* and *Brillo Box*, the millennial status conferred on Warhol for ending a philosophical quest that began with Plato is hard to accept, particularly when the work of some of the most potent artists of the last 150 years does not come under consideration at all. On the evidence submitted by *After the End of Art*, Cézanne and Matisse for instance could well be legendary inventions of Clement Greenberg's modernist "master-narrative."

This distortion of the history of modern art seems to spring from the historicist ambition of the book. Danto has set himself the task of accomplishing two different tasks at once: on one hand to refute Greenberg's concept of modernism, and on the other to explain why Hegel's dictum took such a long time to have effect. The result is a highly idiosyncratic reading of history. By rephrasing Hegel he proposes a new objective: modern art, far from simply continuing art, was primarily concerned with "*creating art explicitly for the purpose of knowing philosophically what art is*" (31). In order even to begin this construction Danto of course had to exclude impressionism from any serious artistic aspiration, turning it into a kind of Fellini-type cruiser which ran on long after the engines had been shut off, with parties for "immediate enjoyment" being celebrated on deck. This still leaves the question of how the philosophical enlightenment of art actually progressed. Here Danto calls upon what Hegel described as the "cunning of history." He conjures up "The Age of Manifestos" as a banner headline for the whole of modern art, and explains: "The point about the Age of Manifestos is that it brought what it took to be philosophy into the heart of artistic production" (30). Now, there certainly is a history of manifestos within modern art, ranging from the Pre-Raphaelites and Nazarenes, as Danto rightly acknowledges, via symbolism, futurism, and abstract art to surrealism. But even if one ignores the impressionists, it is impossible to apply the label "manifesto-driven art" (33) to Manet, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, fauvism, cubism, and abstract expressionism. The evidence simply does not exist.

In view of the subject of the book—the posthistorical state of contemporary art—one has to ask oneself why this historical fabrication is at all necessary. In substance the notion of manifesto art does not fundamentally affect Greenberg's modernist narrative because, with the exception of abstract art, all major movements that could be called upon to support Danto's view belong anyway to the romantic tradition which Greenberg had denounced as a deviation from the true course of modern art. So why not simply point out that there always has been more than one tradition, and that none is exclusive? To do so would seem in harmony with Danto's view of a posthistorical period in which no art form is *historically* privileged. To justify this state through updating Hegel's historical narrative is only confusing because it re-introduces the problematic implication at the root of Hegel's historicism—that art in its highest vocation and its progressive role in history are one and the same. Does Danto really want us to think that, with the end, as he sees it, of art's historical mission and its fulfillment in phi-

losophy, the crucial issue of quality has been disposed of? Phrases such as "One thing is as good as another" (44) or "All art is equally and indifferently art" (34) seem to point in this direction. I would have thought that after the end of the historicist narrative it should be possible to discuss what is good and not so good in art without being beleaguered by the tedious equation of quality with "advancedness" any longer.

The conflict of interest between art and philosophy is obviously deeper than the immediate methodological questions provoked by Danto's book. Inadvertently he has touched upon the crucial point. In his efforts to integrate cubism into his construction he extends the concept of the "manifesto" to any attempt at defining art and quotes Françoise Gilot quoting Picasso saying that the cubists "abandoned colour, emotion, sensation, and everything that had been introduced into painting by the Impressionists." Danto concludes: "Each of the movements was driven by a perception of the philosophical truth of art: that art is essentially X and that everything other than X is not—or is not essentially—art" (28). This is a plain misunderstanding. Picasso's much quoted remarks about the relationship of cubism to impressionism say nothing about the essence of art nor do they dispute the achievement of the latter. He simply asserts an ambition to make something different and better. This competitive intention is, as far as we know, the oldest agency through which art comes into being; and it doesn't seem to be rooted in any particularly belligerent psychology in artists, but in the nature of the activity itself. In the *Divine Comedy* Dante threatened his contemporary Giotto with a place on the first ring of Purgatory for eclipsing the fame of Cimabue: not a heavy sentence, but a finely judged reprimand for the earthly conceit of his vocation. All artists know this spur to their practice, one which they both suffer and desire; though few of them behave with the grace and dignity of Haydn, who said after hearing the string quartets Mozart dedicated to him: "the greatest composer I know in person and by name."[12]

But why should a philosophical inquiry be interested in these sorts of practicalities? Indeed, knowing about the creative circumstances of art is not essential to the appreciation of the works themselves. On the other hand, if one is trying to penetrate the *history* of art such knowledge is indispensable to understanding its own particular momentum. Otherwise works of art, just because they are not fully defined by serving an objective purpose, easily fall prey to speculative interpretations such as the Hegelian construction of history. The awesome but devious skill of Hegel's method consists in appreciating the achievements of art while substituting a new creative agent at their origin: the spirit on its journey through time. Thereby the most problematic assumption is not even the metaphysical nature of this identity but the idea that works of art are merely *expressions* of it. The power of this assumption can still be seen in the popular cliché that works of art "represent their time." There, if anywhere, is a subject for critical analysis. Jacob Burckhardt began his lectures on Greek culture with a warning given by

12. *Mozart, Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, ed. W. A. Bauer and O. E. Deutsch. 7 vols. (Kassel, 1963), III, 373.

August Böckh, a famous classical scholar: "The ancient Greeks were less happy than most people think."[13] That is to say, their art is misunderstood when seen as the direct expression of an ideal, balanced view of life. Burckhardt himself and Nietzsche, both in their different ways, went on to show that Greek art was formed in response to an overwhelming, almost terrifying awareness of the splendor and the perils of human existence. The serene composure of classical sculpture was something to be won and realized, rather than a state of being simply embodied and reflected. The same could be said of Raphael's gentle Madonnas: their "sublimity and charm," so much revered by Hegel, were by no means emblematic of the Italian Renaissance.

Of all great philosophers only Nietzsche seems to have seen this creative tension at the root of art: "A sense for that which we somehow could manage when actually confronted by it—as danger, problem, temptation: this sense distinguishes our aesthetic acceptance."[14] The main tradition of philosophy from Plato to Hegel regarded this balancing on the edge of competence as a lack of resolution: at best a preliminary stage to achievement, at worst a deviation from true purpose. However grave the differences in principle among philosophers may be, they are generally inclined to answer the artistic question "according to what?" by judging art as adequate or inadequate according to a measure they themselves have established. Danto is no exception: "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" (107). There is nothing much to be added except that this concern with self-possession is at odds with what has hitherto been called art. "What art wants" is certainly not an "end," but a keeping alive of desire and aspiration. Paul Valéry wrote: "Les peintres ou les poètes ne se disputent que le *rang*; les philosophes se disputent *l'existence.*"[15] He called this "the drama or the comedy of philosophy": artists struggle for nothing but the *best*; philosophers argue about *being*.

Nevertheless, it could still be that philosophy has the last word in what Plato already had called an "old dispute." But something new has happened in the interval between Hegel's dictum on the "end of art" and Danto's re-instatement of it. Modern art responded to a situation which indeed called art's existence into question, and the answer it found has been anything but philosophical self-effacement.

In the 1820s when Hegel proclaimed the end of art's historical mission in his lectures on the philosophy of art, the contemporary evidence must have seemed fair-

13. Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Kunst der Betrachtung. Aufsätze und Vorträge zur bildenden Kunst*, ed. Henning Ritter (Cologne, 1984), 183.

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari. 15 vols. (Munich, 1988), XII, 556.

15. Paul Valéry, "Léonard et les Philosophes" [1929], in Valéry, *Œuvres*, ed. J. Hytier (Paris, 1957), I, 1236.

ly conclusive. Art was going through a severe crisis, although this did not seem to apply to all arts equally. Curiously enough the great flowering of German philosophy almost coincides with that of Viennese classical music, one of the highest artistic achievements ever attained. But apart from having no real access to music, to say the least, Hegel, like most philosophers after Plato, keeps close to the visual arts as his aesthetic paradigm. Despite the peripheral position of Berlin in relation to European art centers, Hegel was well informed and cultivated enough to recognize the significant features of the art of his time: the decline of standards, the eclectic disposition, the tendency to retreat into an idealized past (like the Nazarenes) and, most importantly, the disengaged masquerade of feelings, forms, and subject-matter which was called "romantic irony" in Germany. All this supported his view that the spirit was no longer "working itself around in things" but had emancipated itself from any outward dependence and become conscious of its autonomous reflective powers. At most he saw art continuing as a noncommittal play of the intellect with the forms it had outgrown: "Bondage to a particular subject-matter and a mode of portrayal suitable for this material alone are for artists today something past, and art therefore has become a free instrument which the artist can wield in proportion to his subjective skill in relation to any material of whatever kind" (I, 605).

As Danto sees, this is virtually a description of the postmodernist attitude. But neither the simulationist and appropriationist procedures of the 1980s nor, it seems to me, Warhol's *Brillo Box* come close to the center of Hegel's argument. They are more like echoes and reverberations. It was Duchamp who gave the precise equivalent within the confines of artistic conduct. Hegel postulated: "What through art or thinking we have so completely as an object before our physical or spiritual eye that its content is exhausted, that everything is revealed and nothing obscure or inward remains any longer, this then has lost all absolute interest for us" (I, 604).[16] Duchamp laconically summed up: "There is no solution because there is no problem."[17] His unique position lies in having exposed inadequacy per se as an ultimate content of art: not in the form of an inappropriate or ironically broken representation, but through expressing inadequacy with *any* form of representation as the adequate manifestation of the mind. This "meta-irony," as he calls it, governs the *Readymades* as well as the "Large Glass," *La Mariée Mise à Nu par ces Célibataires, Même*. Whereas the former are distinguished by being physically indiscernible from their counterparts as real objects, the latter—with its transparency, its accidentally broken glass, and its erotic subtext—demonstrates the futility of embodiment as such.

The enduring role Duchamp has played in the art of the twentieth century has characteristically not been one of influence in the strict sense of the word. For a long time he was remembered just as some sort of *éminence grise*, until he was

16. The English syntax of Knox's translation has been slightly adjusted to recover the German emphasis which is clearly on "so completely" ("*so* vollständig," vol. 14, 234).

17. Henri-Pierre Roché, "Souvenirs sur Marcel Duchamp," *La Nouvelle revue Française* 1 (June 1953), 1136.

rediscovered by the Americans in the 1960s as the artist who had exposed the intellectual predicament of modern art. However, his radical statement could never have been made had art remained in the state that Hegel found it in the 1820s. Duchamp became possible only because during the intervening ninety years art had risen against the very condition he re-invoked and, by this response, provided the context in which the point could be made at all. This is, of course, the story of modern art. But the dissent at the root of its beginning surfaced earlier, in the relationship between Hegel and the poet Friedrich Hölderlin. They had met as students and, together with Schelling, had formed a legendary friendship, sharing a passionate commitment to both philosophy and the arts, until their ways separated. Hölderlin had great apprehensions about turning the spirited intellectual climate in Europe after the French Revolution into a philosophy, because he realized that self-awareness, taken as an absolute, was a double-edged principle, a weakness as well as a strength.

It was the sort of insight an artist would have. Hölderlin, like Hegel, was an enthusiastic admirer of Greek art and discovered, especially through his translations of Pindar and Sophocles, that contemporary art aspiring to the classical ideal was hopelessly handicapped because it set out from the very condition Greek art had set itself as a goal. That is to say, the Greek artist, to whom the "holy fire," as Hölderlin calls it, was natural, strove for the utmost formal composure; the contemporary artist, on the other hand, began with a clear idea in mind of what art at its best should look like. Or in Hölderlin's words: "Their [the Greeks'] main tendency is to compose themselves because there lay their weakness, whereas the main tendency in the ideas of our time is to hit the target, and that with ease."[18] In essence this is the same diagnosis as Hegel's, save that Hölderlin saw that this heightened self-possession, instead of being simply a triumph of consciousness, was in reality accompanied by a serious deficiency: it lacked presence. The new countenance was as easily gained as it was lost or altered, because it did not have much either to contend with or to contain. Mere self-assuredness is, as intellectual fulfillment, a rather poor end in itself. But as an artist Hölderlin had no interest in philosophically disputing this position. He divined the task of modern art as responding to the challenge by reversing "the lively relationship and skill"[19] seen in the art of the past. Could one possibly balance the apparent facility of modern self-possession by allowing into art a certain portion of those informal aspects of experience that it had previously either shunned or set out to master?

In 1801, when Hölderlin wrote down these reflections on the future of art, his ideas must have appeared as farfetched as Hegel's, and certainly commanded as little attention. But fifty years later, painting seemed to be well set to prove his intuition right, although his theories remained obscure until the beginning of this

18. Friedrich Hölderlin, "Anmerkungen zur Antigonae"[1804], in Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. F. Beissner (Stuttgart, 1954), V, 296.

19. Friedrich Hölderlin, Letter to Ulrich v. Böhlendorff, 4 December 1801, in *ibid.*, VI, 455-458. This letter is the most important document of Hölderlin's theory of a fundamental reversal of the "lively relationship and skill" in art.

century. Hölderlin had simply intimated a truth. The scandals of modern art were provoked by the introduction of qualities of rawness and immediacy hitherto unknown in western painting. Manet shocked the sophisticated Parisian public by cutting short the subtleties of the tonal system. When *The Balcony* was exhibited in 1869, Berthe Morisot wrote to her sister: "As always his paintings give the feeling of an uncultivated and even somewhat green fruit."[20] The impressionists extended this new sense for the unfashioned and artless by directly confronting art with nature; and they brought home fugitive, sub-formal, and disorderly sensations that drew the criticism of "unfinished work." Since then the inclusion of elements previously considered alien to art has become almost a convention of modern art. One has to remind oneself from time to time that those procedures enacting chance or tapping the unconscious, those tough and coarse materials, those injections of *l'art brut* and *arte povera*—all of which we have come to appreciate in art—would have been regarded as the epitome of non-art by the western tradition as well as by most other world cultures. And indeed, it is essential to see that art's preoccupation with its opposite has not been a goal in itself but was a device for renewing that "lively relationship and skill." This creative tension could not be commanded by the conscious application of facility alone nor can it be expected from simply surrendering to an aesthetic of non-art.

Interestingly this constellation has been noticed by Danto's chosen antagonist in *After the End of Art*, Clement Greenberg. In 1953 Greenberg wrote: "Every fresh and productive impulse in painting since Manet, and perhaps before, has repudiated received notions of finish and unity, and manhandled into art what until then seemed too intractable, too raw and accidental, to be brought within the scope of aesthetic purpose."[21] Unfortunately this insight never entered his modernist narrative, determined as it was by concern for the "purity of the medium." Only once, when presenting David Smith in 1947 as the greatest American sculptor, did he admit that purity was not all: "Smith's periodic lapses from excellence come when the Baroque gets the upper hand, yet these lapses are essential, so to speak, for his art, for they provide the raw material for the successes."[22] Otherwise Greenberg has persistently suppressed the fact that abstract expressionism, at least at its inception, owed a great deal to surrealism and the romantic involvement with subject matter, in order to tie up its form of abstraction with the "pure" style of cubism. So it is not surprising that his modernist narrative steadily loses any relationship with the content of art and culminates in more and more exaggerated claims for "aesthetic quality," until he finds his own level of indiscernibility: "Art and the aesthetic don't just overlap, they coincide."[23]

20. Berthe Morisot, Letter to Edma Pontillon, 1 May 1869. Quotation from *Edouard Manet: Nach eigenen und fremden Zeugnissen*, ed. Hans Graber (Basel, 1941), 140.

21. Clement Greenberg, "Symposium: Is the French Avant-Garde Overrated?" [1953], in Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian. 4 vols. (London, 1986–1993), III, 156.

22. Clement Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture" [1947], in *ibid.*, II, 167.

23. Clement Greenberg, "Counter-Avant Garde," *Art International* 15 (May 1971), 18.

Danto rightly points out that Greenberg's modernist narrative was abruptly brought to an end in the mid-1960s by the arrival of pop art. But I do not agree with Danto's assertion that "the train of art history was blown off the tracks" (135) because there never was such a train except in the mind of the critic and his followers. Modern art's vital relationship to that which is not art does not allow for the kind of perfectibility which is indispensable to a continuous progressive development. Pop art regained the friction that was lost in the depleted forms of abstract expressionism, and Warhol defeated the modernist aesthetic in its own terms. In 1959 Greenberg had published an essay called "The Case for Abstract Art" in which he singled out two plastic qualities, "unity" and "at-onceness," as answering to the need, as he saw it, of American society for "disinterested activity."[24] No artist fulfilled these criteria more strikingly than Warhol through the sheer impact of his images of glamour, death, and banality. If Greenberg had unduly overstated the aesthetic aspect of works of art, Danto, in his fascination with philosophical readings of *Brillo Box*, seems to have blinded himself to precisely that presence in Warhol's work. He generally tends to equate aesthetics with an emphasis on appearance. However, in a work of art, as opposed to a natural object, the aesthetic quality, at best, is not just surface but the embodiment of that which is uncertain: that which is dangerous, problematic, tempting—to use Nietzsche's words. This is as true for Warhol as in Hegel's time it was for Goya. One might even say that art of the highest order only begins where philosophical knowledge ends.

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24. Clement Greenberg, "The Case for Abstract Art" (1959), in Greenberg, *Collected Essays*, IV, 80f.