THE END OF ART?

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the arguments that Arthur Danto has advanced for alleging that the developmental history of art is over. The author is skeptical of Danto's conclusion and maintains that Danto has failed to demonstrate that art history is necessarily closed. The author also contends that Danto's end-of-art thesis is better construed as a specimen of art criticism than as an example of the speculative philosophy of art history.

In 1986, at a time when things looked bad—with Neo-Expressionism ascendant everywhere and appropriation flourishing as the art world equivalent to the leveraged buyout—Arthur Danto had a scandalous idea.[1] He said that art history had come to an end. Nor was this a passing journalistic jeremiad—a grumpy, cyclic doldrum of pessimism meant to be forgotten and consigned to the kitty litter with the onset of better days. Danto's verdict came armored in philosophical argumentation and apparent deductive finality. This *really* was the end of art.

Perhaps at first Danto greeted the conclusion of his own argument with despair. The end of art appeared to be a fall from grace. But as time went on, Danto learned to live with his findings. He no longer thinks that the end of art is such a bad thing. The end of art, by his account, has ushered in an age of pluralism where thousands of different flowers may bloom. For just at the moment when art history was divested of its goals and direction, art acquired a plenitude of new freedoms.

This is the story that Arthur Danto wishes to tell in *After the End of Art*.[2] He intends to explain how art history came to an end, what it means to say that art history is over, and why this is a good thing. But all of this, of course, presupposes that art history *has* come to an end. And yet it seems to me that not only are the alleged reasons for this almost never interrogated in the literature, but also that Danto's own arguments on behalf of this conclusion are so hurried and elliptical that they are easy to miss. This is at least surprising, since so much would appear to hang upon them. Thus, in this essay, I would like to concentrate on the questions of why Danto believes that art history is over and whether his reasons are compelling.

1. Arthur Danto, "The End of Art," in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York, 1986), 81-115.

2. Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, 1997).

Here it is important to begin by clarifying what Danto does *not* mean by the end of art. Frequently, when people hear Danto's conjecture, their first response is to say that it is obviously wrong—for, as anyone can see, there are still lots of artists making artworks. In fact, there are probably more artists working today than in any other period in history. There are certainly more art schools, art fairs, galleries, museums, shows, artists, and artworks than ever before. How could art history be over when art is being produced at such a dizzying rate? But this objection rests on a misunderstanding.

For when Danto speaks of the end of art, that is an abbreviation for the *end of the developmental history of art.* Historical accounts may be divided into two sorts: narratives and chronicles. A chronicle of events is a list of time-ordered happenings. First x happens, then y happens, then z, and so on. But in a narrative, the events are connected by more than temporal succession: there is a beginning that gives rise to complications that converge on closure. Events compose a story; they head toward a climax. When Danto says that the history of art is over, he means a certain development—a certain narrative development—is finished. He does not mean that the chronicle of art history is done. Artworks will still be created *ad seriatim.* What is over is a particular process of evolution.

Events follow each other helter-skelter in time. However, on occasion, events coalesce in large-scale developments or movements. In human affairs, this often occurs when people embark upon a project that has a determinate goal or end. Human flight, for example. The history of flight can be told as a narrative. Successive attempts, theories, and inventions can be configured as an evolutionary process culminating in Kitty Hawk.

Similarly, large swaths of art history can be told as a linear, developmental narrative. Beginning with the Greeks, artists embraced a project: verisimilitude. That is, they aspired to render the appearance of things with such surpassing accuracy that any normal viewer could recognize what pictures were pictures of simply by looking. Artists aspired to pictorial realism—to making images that bore greater and greater likenesses to whatever they were images of. This project underwrote the production of artworks for centuries. It enabled writers from Vasari to Gombrich to write narratives of art history—developmental stories tracing impressive and more impressive feats of realism (closer and closer approximations to the look of things).

Narratives like this have a definite structure. They posit a goal; events are included in the story inasmuch as they contribute to the realization of the goal. Moreover, insofar as the goal is well-defined, it is conceivable that it could be achieved. And if and when such a goal is achieved, the story—as a progressive, developmental narrative—is over. Furthermore, Danto contends, this happened to art history when, in the nineteenth century, photography and cinema perfected the mechanical means to render appearances—including the appearance of movement—accurately. At that point, a certain narrative was finished, though, of course, pictures continue to be made. The chronicle of picture-making is still

being told, but the story—the evolutionary saga of the conquest of visual appearances—is, for all intents and purposes, over.

But if film and photography closed one chapter of art history, they did not shut the book. For eventually artists found other projects to pursue, and at least one of these was developmental. Verisimilitude as the object of high artistic ambition appeared otiose in a world of mechanical reproduction. But artists came to reconstrue their aspiration in terms of another target. Art—or at least serious art—was no longer dedicated to capturing the appearances of things, but to characterizing something even more elusive—the nature of art itself. Art, that is, became engaged in the project of self-definition.

Recounted magisterially by critics like Clement Greenberg, modern—or, more aptly, modernist—art conceived of itself as a Kantian critique of its own conditions of possibility. Step by step, the picture plane contracted, putatively to disclose its essential nature as a flat thing. Insofar as art has a determinate nature, the project of self-definition, like the project of verisimilitude, had a developmental structure. And presumably the project could be brought to completion.

However, at this point, Danto introduces a complication to the story of modernism as it is traditionally told. In 1964, as part of the continuing project of art's self-definition, Andy Warhol, presaged by Duchamp and his readymades, presented his *Brillo Box* at the Stable Gallery in New York. For Danto, this work has enormous theoretical repercussions. On his account, *Brillo Box* demonstrates that something can be a work of art at the same time that its perceptually indiscernible, real-world counterparts are not. This raises the question of why Warhol's *Brillo Box* is art whereas identical-looking Brillo boxes by Proctor and Gamble are not. According to Danto, this is to pose the question "What is art?"—the question of art's definition—in its proper philosophical form.[3]

But, Danto continues, once artists like Warhol posed the question "What is art?" in its proper philosophical form (that is, as an indiscernibility problem), they could make no further theoretical contribution. Answering that question is a job for philosophers, not artists. Danto writes: "The artists have made the way open for philosophy and the moment has arrived at which the task must be transferred to philosophy."[4]

That is, once embarked upon the project of the definition of art, there was only so far that artists *qua* artists could take it. They could visually focus the question "What is art?" in its proper philosophical form—as the problem of indiscernibles—but they could pursue it no further as artists doing the things that artists do. Any further progress on the definition of art would require the kind of work typical of philosophers.[5] If artists were to undertake this chore, they would

3. It is a long-standing metaphilosophical conviction of Danto's that paradoxes of perceptual indiscernibility are the natural topics of philosophical research.

4. Danto, "The End of Art," 111.

5. Presumably: framing theories in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions and arguing for them.

have to give up being artists—and working in the manner typical of artists—and become something else, namely, philosophers.

Thus the second developmental narrative of art history comes to an end, as artists turn over the project of defining the nature of art to philosophers. Unlike the end of the project of verisimilitude, the project of defining the nature of art does not end in completing the job, but in assigning it elsewhere. Nevertheless, with Warhol, art advances the plot as far as it can, and art history as a progressive linear narrative comes to an end, or, at least, a stopping point. That is why Danto calls the present epoch of artmaking "post-historical art"—it is art after art history, constructed as the progressive, developmental narrative of art's self-definition.

Artworks will continue to be made after the end of this story, but they will no longer fall within the trajectory of a linear evolution converging on the discovery of the nature of art. Nor, Danto consoles readers, is this so horrible, since artists, now freed from the burden of self-definition, can experiment in every which way, liberated, as well, by Warhol's revelation that art can look like anything. The chronicle of future art production will be multifarious. But the narrative of art history as an evolutionary (teleologically driven) process is over.

This is a nice story. Not only does it have a happy ending—indeed, one quite uplifting for a period like ours that consistently flatters itself for its pluralism—but it also appears to do a serviceable job of explaining the stunning diversity of art practices on offer today. But the account pretends to do more than simply illuminate what has happened. It also predicts the future. Art history will never be developmental again for reasons of philosophical necessity. But I am not really certain that we should believe this.

The crux of Danto's argument is that artists can only take the question of the definition of art so far. As anyone familiar with artists knows, this is like waving a red flag at a bull. Modern artists specialize in exceeding the limitations philosophers of art attempt to foist upon them. So why is Danto so sure that he has located a barrier that contemporary artists cannot breach? Danto is not always very forthcoming about this. However, his suggestion seems to be that in order to take the project of defining art further than posing the indiscernibility question, artists would have to give up being artists and become something essentially different—philosophers—where the underlying assumption is that one cannot be an artist and a philosopher at the same time. But why not?

Danto must be presuming that not only is what artists and philosophers do essentially different, but that the one activity precludes the other. What artists do is put paint on canvases and design visual appearances. And this is just the wrong medium for framing definitions. Making definitions is not what artists qua artists are trained to do, and paintbrushes and canvases are not the right tools for the job in any case.

But if this is what Danto has in mind, there is a problem with the argument at the outset. For this version of the argument equates art with painting, and that is surely an equivocation. Art, including visual art, today (and for many yester-

days), is no longer a matter of painting in the narrow sense of that concept. Visual artists engage in all sorts of inventions, including installations that frequently mix word and image in rebus-like structures where text, context, and visuals operate like cinematic montage, juxtaposing fragments in order to elicit inferences from spectators. Why can't verbal/visual arrays like these be contrived such that viewers are brought to an awareness of the nature of art maieutically, after the fashion of Socratic puzzles?

Perhaps some may be persuaded that painters doing what painters traditionally do cannot advance insight into the definition of art. But visual artists are not just painters—they are rebus-makers, performance artists, conceptual artists, language artists, collagists, and so on. Danto knows this; indeed, he commends Warhol for making this proliferation of genres historically possible. But why then suppose that these genres necessarily cannot contribute to the definition of art? Danto does not say. But without closing off these possibilities, there is no reason to think that art history as the story of the self-definition of art is necessarily over.

The place where to my knowledge Danto most explicitly and elaborately propounds the reasoning behind his end-of-art thesis is in the essay "Approaching the End of Art." Because this argument is so important to his overall project, I will quote it at length. Danto writes:

> My sense is that with the trauma to its own theory of itself, painting had to discover, or try to discover, what its true identity was. With the trauma, it entered into a new level of self-awareness. My view, again, is that painting had to become the avant-garde art just because no art sustained the trauma it did with the advent of cinema. But its quest for self-identity was limited by the fact that it was painting that was the avant-garde art, for painting remains nonverbal activity, even if more and more verbality began to be incorporated into works of art—"painted words" in Tom Wolfe's apt but shallow phrase. Without theory, who could see a blank canvas, a square lead plate, a tilted beam, some dropped rope, as works of art? Perhaps the same question was being raised all across the face of the art-world but for me it became conspicuous at last in a show of Andy Warhol at the Stable Gallery in 1964 when the *Brillo Box* asked in effect, why it was art when something just like it was not. And with this, it seemed to me, the history of art attained that point where it had to turn into its own philosophy. It has gone as art as far as it could go. In turning into philosophy, art had come to an end. From now on progress could only be enacted on a level of abstract self-consciousness of the kind which philosophy alone must consist in. If artists wished to participate in this progress, they would have to undertake a study very different from what art schools could prepare them for. They would have to become philosophers.[6]

Here it is quite clear that Danto is collapsing the prospects of painting with art in general—including all sorts of visual art—despite his reference to lead plates, tilted beams and dropped ropes. Apparently he does this on the grounds that painting is *the* avant-garde art, and, therefore, a reliable indicator of the possibilities and limitations of art in general (That is just what it means to be *the* avant-garde art: to be in advance of all the others in pertinent respects). But, since paint-

6. Arthur Danto, "Approaching the End of Art," in *The State of the Art* (New York, 1987), 216.

ing is nonverbal (presumably by definition), trading essentially in appearances, and since answering the question "What is art?" requires a capacity for verbal articulateness, Danto surmises that painting—and, by extension, art in general—can at best show forth (demonstrate) the problem of indiscernibility, but can make, so to speak, no further "comment." Here Danto's view seems loosely analogous to Hegel's suggestion that Romantic art must cede pride of place to philosophy because in its aspiration to render an imperceivable rational idea perceivable, Romantic art aimed to do something that art was ill-suited to do, especially when compared to philosophy (and religion).

Danto's argument, then, is roughly:

1) If x is the avant-garde art, then the condition of x reveals the condition of all the arts. (premise)

2) Painting is the avant-garde art. (premise)

3) If painting is to advance the project of the self-definition of art, then it must be verbal. (premise)

4) Painting is essentially not verbal. (premise)

5) Therefore, painting cannot advance the project of the self-definition of art. (from 3 and 4)

6) If painting cannot advance the project of the self-definition of art, then we have reached the end of the art of painting. (premise)

7) Therefore, we have reached the end of the art of painting—such is the condition of painting. (from 5 and 6)

8) Therefore, we have reached the end of art—all the arts have ended. (from 1, 2 and 7)

This argument is proffered not merely as an explanation of why it is the case that artists today have in fact left off the modernist project of self-definition. It is an argument designed to prove that art—that is, the developmental history thereof—is over. But though the argument is logically sound, most of its premises are deeply controversial.

The first premise seems to me essentially definitional. It stipulates that if anything is *the* avant-garde art, then it reveals the condition of all the other arts. It does not claim that there is such an art, but only states the criterion such an art form would have to meet, if there were one. Since this is a matter of stipulation, I think we should grant Danto this premise for the purposes of argument. However, further premises in this argument are less acceptable.

Danto maintains that painting is *the* avant-garde art. His reason is that cinema brought about a epochal identity crisis for painting in a way that was more traumatic than the identity crisis suffered by any other art. This is a historical hypothesis, one difficult to evaluate. Was the identity of painting really more shaken by cinema than that of theater? But, in any case, there are also philosophical problems with Danto's claim.

One would suppose that if anything were *the* avant-garde art in Danto's sense—an indicator of the possibilities and limitations of all the other arts—the so-called avant-garde art would be so in virtue of some property or set of properties that it shared with all the other arts. That is, the avant-garde art will share certain necessary conditions with the other arts, and variations along this dimension of correspondence will predict variations along the same or similar dimensions in the other arts. But by Danto's own account, there are strong disanalogies between painting and at least some of the other arts. He claims, for example, that painting is necessarily not verbal. But many other arts—like literature and theater—are verbal. On the one hand, this leads us to ask why the prospects for verbal arts should be predicted on the basis of a putatively nonverbal art. But on the other hand, with respect to the second premise of Danto's argument, it also prompts one to suggest that perhaps Danto should not regard painting as *the* avant-garde art. For on his account, it is marked by a peculiarity—its allegedly nonverbal nature—that it does not share with a number of other art forms. Thus, it will not be a reliable indicator, along certain pertinent dimensions (namely, the capacity to articulate), of the condition of various other arts (including other visual arts, like installations), and, therefore, it should not be taken to be *the* avant-garde art—that is, a predictor of the destiny of art in general.

In other words, the second premise of Danto's argument may be false in a way that indicates that one cannot infer from the prospects of painting to the prospects of art in general. In this respect, the second premise may be the origin of Danto's tendency to equivocate between painting and art in general. But if painting is nonverbal in the way that Danto alleges, then it cannot be *the* avant-garde art in his sense, since other arts may possess the verbal means to articulate the problematic of self-definition in the way he requires. Other arts, like literature, are articulate in the requisite sense. Indeed, in his "The Last Work of Art: Artworks and Real Things," Danto hints playfully that his article is an artwork;[7] but if his article is an artwork—perhaps an exercise in *belles lettres*—then surely artists are capable of doing philosophical aesthetics.

Admittedly this a paradoxical example. Maybe Danto is just speaking ironically here. But there are other examples of art—indeed, of visual art—that Danto should accept and that are articulate in a way that Danto thinks painting is not. These include installation art, conceptual art, language art, performance art, collages, and rebuses of configurations not yet imagined. Possibly just because these genres have the capacity or the potential to take the problematic of the definition of art further than does painting, as Danto conceives it, they should be considered the avant-garde arts.[8] But then painting is not the avant-garde art, and its

7. Arthur Danto, "The Last Work of Art: Artworks and Real Things," in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. George Dickie and Richard J. Sclafani (New York, 1977), 551-562.

8. Here it is important to emphasize that I am not claiming that these art forms have in fact advanced research into the definition of art, but only that Danto has not supplied any reason to suppose that, in principle, they cannot do so. Since they are not as remote from verbal expression as Danto alleges painting to be, he at least owes us an explanation for thinking that they cannot—as a matter of logic—continue to contribute to the developmental history of art (construed as a process of self-definition).

putatively nonverbal status has no implications about whether the history of art, including visual art, is necessarily foreclosed.

The third premise of Danto's argument claims that if painting is to advance the project of the self-definition of art, then it must be verbal. This presupposes that if any art is to advance the project of self-definition, it must be verbal. This seems to be pretty commonsensical; language appears to be the natural medium for framing definitions and for mounting the kinds of arguments necessary to support such definitions. Nevertheless, as art history richly illustrates, there may be an aspect of the dialectic of the self-definition of art which is not necessarily verbal—not necessarily a matter of stating or defending a definition—to which artists may contribute without literally trafficking in words.

What I have in mind is the use of the artwork as a counterexample. Throughout the twentieth century—from Duchamp's readymades to Warhol's *Brillo Box*—artists have created problem cases designed to challenge prevailing art theories and to provoke the formulation of new, more accommodating theories. A work like *Fountain*, on the one hand, problematized aesthetic theories of art, while, on the other hand, it also alerted philosophers to the importance that context, including institutional frameworks and art history, might bear on art status. That is, *Fountain* functioned both as a putative refutation of certain views about particular necessary conditions for art status, while also contextually suggesting (conversationally implicating?) the need to consider other possible necessary conditions. In its role as a counterexample or provocation, *Fountain* made a contribution to the evolution of the project of the self-definition of art and it did so in a way that did not necessarily rely on words. Posing a deft example—even a nonverbal one—then can advance the project of self-definition. Therefore, it is not the case that art must be verbal for art history to continue to move forward philosophically.

Of course, it is true that the preceding examples are just the ones that Danto invokes to commend artists for raising the indiscernibility problem. And he adds that artists can go no further than this. But why? In the past, artists used telling inventions to address theoretical issues not reducible to indiscernibility issues. Painters refuted the representational theory of art by means of abstractions. On what grounds can Danto argue that future "theoretical" examples, hailing from the precincts of art, won't provoke further theoretical insight and refinement? Perhaps even nonverbal artworks can sometimes "test" theories, both in the sense of contesting settled views and suggesting new lines of research.[9]

9. Danto may think that after Warhol's indiscernibles there can be no further counterexamples—that Warhol makes the *last* counterexample—not only because it is essentially visual but because it has either said it all or because any other indiscernible would say the same thing. The latter is not true, as Danto himself has shown; different sets of indiscernibles—such as Danto's own nine red canvases and the Menard case—make different points. So, future indiscernibilia may have something new to say that is pertinent to the project of self-definition. Furthermore, there is no reason to think that art world counterexamples can only take the form of indiscernibles. Aleatoric music, poetry, and pictures (*The Exquisite Corpse*) need not take the form of indiscernibles and yet they effectively challenge expression theories of art. Thus artists may advance the project of self-definition—even in exclusively visual terms—without resorting to indiscernibles. Warhol's indiscernibles have not said it all nor must all that remains to be said be "phrased" in the idiom of indiscernibles.

In *After the End of Art*, Danto presents a theory of art, but one that he admits only proposes two necessary conditions for art status which, he concedes, are not jointly sufficient.[10] This leaves room for the addition of further necessary conditions; even philosophy—or at least Danto's—hasn't completed the project of the definition of art. But why does Danto presume that it is beyond the ingenuity of nonverbal artists to contrive hard cases of the sort that might reveal maieutically further essential criteria of art status?[11]

I do agree that there are profound limitations on the type of contribution that avant-garde artworks can make to producing art theory and that many of the ways in which art critics describe such works as "theoretical" are exorbitant.[12] Insofar as avant-garde artworks are by definition disjunctive and elliptical, they are not, for example, functional vehicles for presenting detailed philosophical arguments.[13] But this concession does not preclude the possibility that avant-garde works, even nonverbal ones, can make *some* contribution to art theory, including the definition of art. For carefully chosen and/or crafted hard cases can not only undermine existing art theories; they can pointedly indicate new theoretical directions.

If philosophers can *imagine* and/or *describe* counterexamples that dialectically advance theoretical breakthroughs—such as the addition of a necessary condition to an essential definition—then artists, even nonverbal ones (even painters), can *make* them. Counterexamples can, so to say, be proposed either abstractly or concretely. Thus, it is too draconian to maintain that only if art is verbal can it advance the project of defining art. Consequently, even if painting were essentially nonverbal, it would not, in principle, be debarred from continuing to contribute to the definition of art, and, thereby, to keeping art history in the evolutionary sense a going concern. Logically, that is, whether or not painting or any other art is nonverbal provides no grounds for presupposing that the project of the definition of art "from inside" art history has necessarily reached its ultimate limits of possibility.

The fourth premise of Danto's argument is that painting is essentially not verbal. This is not strictly true, since paintings can literally incorporate words, and

10. Danto, *After the End of Art*, 195. I have discussed this theory in Noël Carroll, "Danto's New Definition of Art and the Problem of Art Theories," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 37 (October, 1997), 386-392.

11. One might suspect that Danto believes that the project of defining art is over because he thinks he's come up with the definition, thereby leaving artists nothing else to do in this line than—at best—to illustrate it. But since Danto allows that he's only supplied two necessary conditions for art status so far, there is still work to do, and, if the arguments above are right, there is nothing to stop artists from pitching in.

12. For further argument, see Noël Carroll, "Contemporary Avant-garde Art and the Problem of Theory," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 29 (Fall, 1995), 1-13.

13. Of course, this observation does not entail that there cannot be artworks of a non-avant-garde, verbal nature that can pose philosophical definitions and arguments in a coherent, classical manner. Perhaps Danto's "The Last Work of Art" is one of them. But if this is so, then we have good reason to believe that art faces no logical impediment to advancing the project of self-definition from "the inside."

there can even be paintings of words. Nor is the former merely a modern possibility. It is a recurring feature of several established genres, including religious, didactic, and historical painting. Perhaps it is true that premodern painting never incorporated words for the purpose of making art theory outright. But inasmuch as the tradition of painting provides a legitimate space for the use of words, it cannot be that painting is essentially nonverbal, nor can it be said that, because it is nonverbal, it provides no possibility to contribute to the definition of art.

Moreover, if what is really at stake in this premise is the issue of whether or not visual art (or art in general) is verbal, then, as we have already shown, many forms of visual art, including collage and installation art, literally possess verbal resources and, therefore, cannot, without further argument, be alleged to be disqualified from the definition game.

And, of course, as Danto himself concedes, much modern painting (and visual art) is "verbal" in the extended sense that it occurs in an atmosphere of art theory. As a result, many visual choices (such as emphasis on the shape of the support) can be "read" in charade-like fashion as implicating theoretical points. This is the "painted word" phenomenon to which Danto alludes in the preceding quotation. But doesn't this afford painting enough of what Danto calls "verbality" (or verboseness) to make it theoretically possible for painters (and other visual artists) to continue to engage (in some sense) in the project of the self-definition of art?

Here it might be argued that insofar as painters are verbose, they are not really painters as such; they are not engaged in pure painting. But isn't this just a modernist conceit? It begs the question about the nature of painting, and, anyway, it is irrelevant when it comes to visual artists in the extended sense of the term.

Perhaps it can be said that such a presupposition concerning painterly purism supplies reasons internal to the modernist project of why it could not carry its conception of self-definition further after the arrival of *Brillo Box*. Danto says as much in *After the End of Art*.[14] But the limitations of modernist painting on its own terms cannot be mistaken for the limitations of either visual art or art in general. Modernism as conceived by Greenberg may be historically closed in Danto's sense, but the possibilities for the developmental history of art may still be open. That is, the Greenbergian project for pure painting may be finished, but it is misleading to herald that as "the end of art history"—at least as that phrase has been standardly taken since Danto reintroduced it in 1984.[15]

In *After the End of Art*, Danto writes:

> My own sense of an ending suggests that it was the remarkable disjunctiveness of artistic activity across the entire sector, not the rather reduced formulas of monochrome paint-

14. Danto, *After the End of Art*, 14-16.

15. I think that the phrase has generally been regarded as describing a condition that putatively ranges across the arts. For example, Warhol's achievement in visual art was paralleled by Cage's in music and that of the Judson Dance Theater with respect to choreography. One naturally supposed that, as with the case of Warhol, these artists also brought the history of their forms to an endpoint. It would come as a bit of a philosophical letdown, then, to learn that the end-of-art thesis was only meant as a comment on an episode, albeit an important one, in American painting.

ing, that provided evidence that the Greenbergian narrative was over, and that art had entered what one might call a post-narrative period. The disjunctiveness became internalized in works of art which also might have included painting. Whereas Crimp sees evidence of the "death of painting" in painters allowing their work to be "contaminated with photography," I see the end of the exclusivity of pure painting as the vehicle of art history.[16]

But if this is Danto's current interpretation of the end-of-art thesis, then it is not so dramatic a claim as it has seemed for nearly a decade and a half. For it only amounts to the assertion that pure painting is no longer the best candidate for the vehicle of art history. And that leaves open the logical possibility that there may be other vehicles to do the job—other vehicles to carry the developmental history of art forward. Moreover, since talk of a task that only philosophy can acquit has dropped out of the story, there is no reason in principle to suspect that there are no other available vehicles conceivable. The only limit here is the ingenuity of artists, and that is a contingent matter.

Danto also presupposes that if painting cannot advance the project of the self-definition of art, then art history—or the history of painting—in the developmental sense is over. This, in turn, presumes that self-definition is the only available engine for art history in the evolutionary sense. That is, if either painting, visual art, or art in general can no longer play in the definition game, then art history as a progressive, linear narrative is done for. But why is the project of self-definition taken to be the only available engine for art history? In earlier times, by Danto's own account, verisimilitude was sufficient to drive art history forward. So even if Danto has prescinded self-definition as a possibility for art history, why does he think that no other project can propel art history onwards?

In a perhaps Hegelian mood, Danto appears to "privilege" self-definition as the highest goal that art history could have—the artistic variant of consciousness becoming aware of itself through an unfolding process of self-disclosure. But his argument is about the prospects for the continuation of a linear, developmental history of art, and such a narrative logically requires only that art have a goal, not that the goal be the allegedly highest one. Possibly artists convinced by Danto's arguments about the project of self-definition will enlist in another project—albeit not such a lofty one—and that project will yield a developmental narrative. They might rededicate themselves to discovering the most effective means for delivering visual pleasure. And, with the promise of evolutionary psychology, who is to say that there may not be some fairly determinate strategies to this end that artists can approximate successively as they did the rendering of visual appearances? There is no a priori argument to show that there are no projects like this one to be embraced and, therefore, no reason to suppose that there can be no more developmental histories of the sort that the projects of representation and self-definition entailed.

It is interesting to note that Hegel himself—though agreeing with Danto that art history is over—did not think that the engine of art history was the project of

16. Danto, *After the End of Art*, 171.

self-definition. For Hegel, art was not about the self-disclosure of the nature of art, but about the revelation of the nature of consciousness to itself, an enterprise he thought philosophy was better qualified to discharge. I do not wish to endorse Hegel's viewpoint on this matter. However, the fact that he and Danto locate the developmental prospects for art in different projects illustrates the point that there are more grounds for an evolutionary history of art than self-definition. And if there are more grounds for an evolutionary history of art than self-definition, they may remain in principle to be discovered and implemented by artists. Thus, even if Danto has shown that the project of self-definition is necessarily foreclosed to artists—a conclusion that I resist—it still would not follow that art history is necessarily over.

Danto's argument that art history is finished is an ambitious philosophical conjecture. It is *philosophical* because it pronounces finality of necessity. But if premises 2), 3), 4) and 6) of the argument, and their underlying presuppositions, are imperiled, then the case seems an unlikely one. Art, in an evolutionary sense, is not over. It remains, at least in principle, open.

On the other hand, Danto's philosophy of art history might be "demythologized" in a way that reveals something important about the contemporary state of the visual arts. The prospects for the continuation of the developmental history of art and the project of self-definition may not be necessarily foreclosed, as I hope that I have shown. And yet, as a matter of contingent fact, it does seem that for at least a decade or more, many serious artists are no longer concerned—no longer obsessed—with the project of self-definition. Someone like Robert Gober is more preoccupied with the theme of trauma than he is with the essence of art, and many of his peers care more about what they think of as politics than ontology. There has been a palpable shift in mainstream artworld concerns since the early 1970s and the heyday of modernism, and maybe Danto's end-of-art thesis can be reconstrued as a partial explanation of this.

For Danto has, in effect, skillfully elucidated the way in which the purist modernist project of the self-definition of the *medium* of painting faced limitations, limitations that cannot be surpassed by modernist painting for reasons internal to the Greenbergian dispensation. This, in turn, forced ambitious artists to look elsewhere for their inspiration and many of the interests that they have taken up in the wake of modernism's demise are not congenial to the prospects for a developmental history of art. And this accounts, in part, for why we find ourselves in a moment where art history conceived of as the pursuit of the project of self-definition seems stalled.

But, as I have argued, there is no reason in principle to suppose that this is anything more than a hiatus, a resting point. Logically, it is possible that the project of the self-definition of art could be revived, or that another suitably developmental end might be anointed. And yet Danto is right that something has happened; something has changed. The modernist project has collapsed internally for the reasons he brilliantly, if left-handedly, dissects, yielding the outbreak of pluralism he so astutely describes in *After the End of Art*. Thus, though the end-

of-art thesis fails as an argument in the speculative philosophy of art history, as art criticism, it is exemplary and important. What Danto calls "post-historical art" is not a philosophical category. Rather, it is a telling description of a significant, though contingent, stylistic interlude.[17]

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17. I would like to thank Arthur Danto, David Bordwell, and Sally Banes for their help in the preparation of this paper, though the flaws herein are my doing, not theirs.