

WILEY

Wesleyan University

Being Hegelian after Danto

Author(s): Brigitte Hilmer

Source: *History and Theory*, Vol. 37, No. 4, Theme Issue 37: Danto and His Critics: Art History, Historiography and After the End of Art (Dec., 1998), pp. 71-86

Published by: Wiley for Wesleyan University

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505396>

Accessed: 04-03-2018 14:58 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505396?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Wesleyan University, Wiley are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *History and Theory*

BEING HEGELIAN AFTER DANTO

BRIGITTE HILMER

ABSTRACT

In this article I will discuss some systematic issues of Arthur Danto's philosophy of art and art history from a Hegelian perspective. Belonging to "Absolute Spirit," art can be called a "spiritual kind." Since spiritual kinds are reflective and self-determining, they are not susceptible to philosophical definition. Nevertheless, elements of essentialism can be maintained when describing art's historicity and conceptual structure. To this end, "art" can be interpreted as a two-tier concept: in inherently reflecting its concept, it projects its own conditions into the past, co-opting "prehistorical" artworks as predecessors and classical examples. Hegel's view of art as conceptually structured in itself can have disenfranchising or reenfranchising consequences: either reducing art to minor philosophy, or acknowledging its privileged access to its own essence. After Danto's detachment of the philosophy of art from aesthetics, Hegel would himself be deprived of the possibility to "define" art by intuition (*Anschauung*). Even if the spirit consists of essential kinds, philosophy is not in a privileged position to establish the essence of art and thus the difference between art and philosophy. Rather, philosophy must acknowledge art as a neighbor (Heidegger) and as partner in a dialogue.

If one has savored the power and elaborateness of Hegel's philosophy of art it is an exciting experience to meet in Arthur Danto a very quick and alive Hegelian. Danto has succeeded to an impressive extent in redeeming some of Hegel's most interesting insights from being of mere historical interest by incorporating them into his own advanced and systematic theory. Still, Danto himself is uncomfortable with being identified as an Hegelian; indeed, he leaves no doubt as to the limited range of what he takes from Hegel. He borrows primarily from Hegel's philosophy of art history and his end of art thesis, but is quite cautious where Hegel's system as a whole and its metaphysical background are concerned: "It is hard to know to what degree one can separate Hegel's historical vision of art from the larger body of his thought, and I must admit that even as what I sometimes call a 'born-again Hegelian', I am uncertain how much of that larger body I am capable of accepting."¹ This might lead those who are interested in Danto's more liberal and pragmatic tendencies to recommend a complete detachment of Danto from his predecessor.

In this article I will not endorse this recommendation. On the contrary, in my view Hegel's philosophy itself offers a way out of some problems in Danto's art

1. Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-historical Perspective* (New York, 1992), 9. (Books by Arthur Danto will be cited henceforth without the author's name.)

theory (which could follow from a rigid Hegelianism as well—as we know, Hegel himself was not a Hegelian). What is generally considered as “Hegelianism” can be characterized as a certain commitment to contextualism and historicism embedded in systematic philosophy.² Together with some empirical insights about contemporary art this incorporation of history in philosophy is supposed to imply the end of art thesis. But in my opinion, this picture shows Hegel weaker than he is, his mere historicism not being among his best ideas (if not for the most part an invention of his disciples).³

What could become an interesting point in mediating a dialogue between Danto and Hegel is the project both attend to, namely, to link essentialism and history. In Danto’s theory this connection has been among his most controversial points. Noël Carroll has impugned the circularity in Danto’s defending his essentialist art theory by introducing a theory of art history that presupposes his very concept of art.⁴ As far as I can perceive, Danto has noticed the tellingness of this objection, but up to now has given up neither the end of art thesis nor his essentialist bias.

I will only be able to give a very rough account of what could be the Hegelian way of managing these problems, and it will be based on a controversial reading of Hegel.⁵ Danto once made an astonishing remark concerning the task of philosophy: “to draw the boundary lines which divide the universe into the most fundamental kinds of things that exist. There may of course be no differences so fundamental as all that, in which case a task still remains for philosophy: namely, to show how lines believed to divide the universe in fundamental ways can be erased.”⁶ Basically, Danto still adheres to the former task, conceiving philosophy as ontology proceeding by definitions. I would like to read Hegel as a thinker for whom the latter task provides the agenda, as a thorough criticism of traditional ontology (though without dropping essentialism altogether). This means reassessing the notions of history, essence, and definition. I would like to discuss these concepts as far as they enter into the business of the philosophy of art and are questioned by the latter, using problems rising within Danto’s theory as a guide.

I

Before bringing Hegel and Danto into closer contact it may be advisable to ask whether they are talking about the same subject, or if not, whether the difference

2. Hegel is thus pictured by Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, “Atomism, Art and Arthur: Danto’s Hegelian Turn,” in *Danto and His Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 107-126.

3. Ernst H. Gombrich has pointed to the problems that arose from a “Hegelianism without metaphysics” reduced to progressive cultural history, problems he didn’t entirely succeed in escaping from himself: “Die Krise der Kulturgeschichte,” in *Die Krise der Kulturgeschichte: Gedanken zum Wertproblem in den Geisteswissenschaften* (Stuttgart, 1983), 27-64 (in English: *Ideals and Idols* [Oxford, 1979]).

4. Noël Carroll, “Essence, Expression, and History: Arthur Danto’s Philosophy of Art,” in *Danto and His Critics*, 98.

5. For a broader account of this interpretation I refer to my book *Scheinen des Begriffs: Hegels Logik der Kunst* (Hamburg, 1997).

6. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box*, 6.

is of any consequence. In his first examination of Hegel's theory of art Danto commends him as follows: "if we are to think of art as having an end, we need a conception of art history which is linear, but a theory of art which is general enough to include representations other than the sort illusionistic painting exemplifies best: literary representations, for example, and even music. Now Hegel's theory meets all these demands."⁷ The interesting idea Danto takes from Hegel is the cognitive function of art, namely its aiming at self-knowledge. Of course we can imagine each of the arts capable of self-knowledge, leaving open the historical date of the achievement. In doing this, though, a perhaps crucial shift in Danto's use of "self-knowledge" surfaces: he tends to speak of art as the subject of self-knowledge, its historical task being to arrive at the knowledge of what art is (or what painting, sculpture, and so on are). This process can be paralleled to the narrative of a person's gaining identity through self-knowledge,⁸ but it is not clear whether it actually contributes anything to the self-knowledge of a human being, whether finally being able to define the essence of art will be of any use for anybody. Several candidates whose self-knowledge could be furthered by art's progress suggest themselves: a nation, or humankind in general, or men, or women. Hegel conceives of art's contribution to human self-consciousness as arriving indirectly from its being part of the evolution of spirit, his favorite candidate as a subject of self-knowledge. He is thus saved from simply functionalizing art as a means of the self-education of humankind, as his Enlightenment predecessors might have been tempted to do. But I think by adjusting art history to the history of the spirit he still had more in mind than reducing art to the role of giving philosophy the cue to complete its definitions, though knowing itself in the sense Danto understands it might be a manifestation of art's being a part of Absolute Spirit.

The difference between Danto and Hegel can be demonstrated by the different ways they interpret the claim that art is "past" in its highest vocation. For Danto, this vocation consisted mainly in developing towards its own self-knowledge. For Hegel, the highest vocation has something to do with art being connected to religious, social, and political life in a way no longer possible in modern times.⁹ Art was, in this rather romantic view, able to partake of the functions of the other

7. "The End of Art" [1984], in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York, 1986), 107. As far as I can see Danto didn't come back systematically to the Hegelian surmise that the end of art must include all arts. This might be due to the fact that it would require further analysis to show which notion of representation would even cover music. But this is a question we can ask Hegel as well, whose concept of music appears to be quite narrow. To concentrate on the visual arts, which Danto does in his writings with an amazing depth and erudition, need not be of any consequence for his philosophy of art.

8. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, 1997), 68.

9. See the following outstanding contributions in the discussion: Willi Oelmüller, "Hegels Satz vom Ende der Kunst und das Problem der Philosophie der Kunst nach Hegel," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 73 (Munich, 1965), 75-94; Dieter Jähnig, "Hegel und die These vom 'Verlust der Mitte,'" in *Spengler-Studien: Festgabe für Manfred Schröter zum 85. Geburtstag* (Munich, 1965), 147-176; Dieter Henrich, "Kunst und Kunstphilosophie der Gegenwart (Überlegungen mit Rücksicht auf Hegel)," in *Immanente Ästhetik—ästhetische Reflexion, Poetik und Hermeneutik* Bd. II, ed. Wolfgang Iser (Munich, 1966).

realms of spirit and hence to play an important role in the cohesion of society and its actual self-knowledge as a totality. Hegel preserves in his end of art thesis a nostalgia for the notion of art he cherished in his own youth, which bears certain similarities to what Danto perhaps would call “Disturbatory Art.” According to the young Hegel, art reached its highest vocation as tragedy in ancient Greece in a way which Danto’s description of performances as “drama in its most archaic stage” would fit perfectly, “as a way of invoking a divine epiphany; and when it occurs, everyone is transfigured onto a new level of identity and becomes a new being, in a new order of social being, where old distinctions are overcome and old roles discarded and everyone is bonded by a new communitarian feeling analogous to love.”¹⁰ “This is a very tall order,” Danto continues, and in fact this must have been the insight that motivated Hegel to abandon his hopes for a revolutionary renewal of society by art and to confine this “highest vocation” to the past.

It has been a controversial issue whether we should believe the younger Hegel for his alleged political progressiveness, or follow his more bourgeois end of art thesis. I read Danto as one who accepts as a premise the loss of art’s “highest vocation” in the sense mentioned above. His approach presupposes even more than this: not only can the end of art liberate art from this more comprehensive cultural task—indeed, it is an open question whether art ever had this “higher” vocation—it allows us to concentrate on its historical vocation to learn about itself. Of course, Danto is aware of connections and parallels the history of art has to other historical and philosophical phenomena, to the *Zeitgeist*, of which he can give very vivid pictures, but this doesn’t entail anything about the *function* art has for the entire historical or social process.

In my view, Danto’s reserve concerning the overall Hegelian project, though somewhat parochial at first sight considering the claim to operate philosophically at the highest level of abstraction, has important advantages. Hegel’s ambition to cover all arts led him to bring them into a hierarchy in which rankings are supposed to represent the various arts’ respective capacity to contribute to the spirit’s cognitive evolution. Danto liberates the visual arts from this hierarchy by stressing their inherent historical goal. I sympathize with this approach, which opens up the possibility of analyzing the partial logic of art without being burdened with constantly accommodating a whole encyclopedic system. Not only does this make the philosophical procedure more manageable, but it also seems a legitimate expansion of the ultimate purpose of Hegel’s philosophy: progress in the consciousness of freedom.

On the other hand, I wonder whether this theoretical liberation jettisons the possibility of analyzing philosophical questions about art in a broader context too soon.¹¹ One of the most provoking and inspiring insights in Danto’s philosophy

10. *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (New York, 1990), 300.

11. Danto is not a defender of purity in a Greenbergian sense, whom he charges with “aesthetic Serbianism” (*Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays & Aesthetic Meditations* [New York 1994], 326) or of analogies to totalitarianism (*After the End of Art*, 70). But he sees philosophical purism as the only means to allow aesthetic pluralism and liberalism (*Embodied Meanings*, 326-327; *Beyond the Brillo Box*, 230). This seems to me to be a rather desperate argument, and I hope there are other philosophical possibilities to escape all kinds of totalitarianism.

of art is that “there is a philosophy of art . . . because philosophy has always been interested in itself.”¹² The world is certainly not waiting for philosophical experts to give definitions of art or to identify artworks. Even avant-garde and post-avant-garde artworlds can very well manage with a more diffident order of theory devoted to this task. Philosophy will hardly be able to avoid patronizing art once more if it does not keep its own concern in mind. In Hegel’s treatment philosophy looks after its own concern by construing art as its prehistory and, this prehistory being closed, by leaving art generously to itself. Danto adopts this procedure by and large, escorting art further on as an art critic. But he is far too intrigued by the postmodern artworld and its threads for philosophy as he understands it to remain completely untouched as a philosopher. I’m interested in exploring the possibilities of this open and exciting situation, where philosophy perceives the difference between “Art” projected as its own mirror that furnishes the difference philosophy needs (or is supposed to need) to understand itself, and works of art to be taken seriously as a partner in a dialogue (or as a neighbor, as Heidegger would term it).

II

Danto thinks a characteristic trait of Western art requires explanation: its having a history in the very special sense that it was produced over 500 years in the course of a progressive narrative in which its participants for the most part believed. This history is especially interesting for the philosophy of art because Western art was engaged in philosophy’s own enterprise, namely, to discover the essence of art. It is the sort of history that is finished when the goal is achieved. We can, to cite a philosophically well-known example, think of cultures using gold for ornament or payment, esteeming its value without having an idea of its chemical formula; the members of such cultures are therefore not entirely safe from mistaking a less valuable, but outwardly indiscernible, metal for gold. We can further think of some of these people trying to discover the essence of gold by certain symbolic and spiritual procedures and alchemic experiments, still not knowing that it was a chemical formula for which they were looking. There can be no doubt that an aim has been achieved and the history completed once the formula has been laid down—if it is by a formula that the essence of gold can be exhaustively revealed.

The striking difference between this story and the story of art according to Danto is that the latter is over before having reached the formula: what has been achieved is merely the insight that there are indiscernibles, and that the task remains to tell them apart. Neither Western art, nor philosophy having taken over the task, has so far reached the endpoint of defining art in a way comparable to chemistry’s uncovering the essence of gold. Is there a difference between gold and art, beyond their suitability to form treasures, that might explain this difference?

12. *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 57.

Danto informs readers at the beginning of his book *Connections to the World* “that philosophical problems arise in connection with indiscriminable pairs, the difference between which is not a scientific one. I am supposing that the distinct kinds to which either member of such a philosophical pair belongs are not natural kinds. . . .”¹³ Duchamp’s readymades are among his examples. Speaking about philosophy of art, however, where he is not so much concerned with protecting philosophy from being swallowed up by science, Danto approves the Expression Theory for its “great merit of having approached works of art as constituting a natural kind . . . and to have responded in the spirit of science to what has been a brooding question since Plato—namely, What is Art?”¹⁴ Of course, Danto doesn’t endorse the Expression Theory, which might explain why, in another context, he introduces art as a “philosophically natural kind.”¹⁵ It is not entirely clear, however, what a “philosophically *natural* kind” should be if “it is plain that philosophical differences are external to the worlds they discriminate.”¹⁶ In his *Connections to the World* art is not a natural kind of any sort. Indeed, in the concluding paragraph, Danto writes: “we begin to enter the domain of what Hegel fittingly called spirit in contrast to nature: the area of politics, law, morality, religion, art, culture, and philosophy itself. Having brought the readers to this point I must leave them, for the bulk of philosophical reflection has itself not crossed this boundary, and until it does we are very much on our own. This side of the boundary is philosophically explored territory, the geography of which I have sought to describe. The realm of spirit is dark and difficult *terra incognita*. . . .”¹⁷ Danto’s philosophy of art can be seen as a bold expedition to elucidate this *terra incognita*. However, in this he uses tools that serve well inside the boundaries, without sufficiently sound grounds to let “us” hope that they will work on the other side. While “we” wait to see whether they will, we might as well see how far we can get with Hegel. Perhaps he can help to trace the outlines of what we could term “spiritual kinds.”

Considering the difficulties in defining the essence of art in a way safe from counterexamples, while providing necessary and (jointly) sufficient conditions, the big question is whether spiritual kinds are susceptible of definition at all. Without precluding the possibility that satisfying definitions will some day be discovered, what can be said in advance is that the task is complicated by a certain reflexivity of the subject in question.¹⁸ Spirit is essentially and necessarily self-conscious. There is no unconscious art, religion, or philosophy, as there is no unconscious freedom. This consciousness is not a mere matter of knowledge, but

13. *Connections to the World* (New York, 1989), 11.

14. *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, 109.

15. *Beyond the Brillo box*, 7.

16. *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, 171.

17. *Connections to the World*, 274.

18. At the end of Danto’s *Connections to the World*, 272, there is an interesting example: “All sciences aim at true representations. But a science which deals with scientific representation as its subject aspires to true representations or representational truth, where truth and such relationships enter into the structure of what this sort of representational science undertakes to represent.”

entails a certain amount of self-determination. The nearer, for instance, art comes to know “what it is,” the larger will be the scope for it to determine what it shall be. But this reflexivity is not only the result of history; it is, for Hegel, a defining trait from the beginning. In Danto’s theory of art this characteristic is met by the thesis that works of art are individuated as such through a historical theory of art they require as a background. There must, in other words, be someone who knows, however insufficiently, what art is. In my view the problem with this thesis is not that consciousness is required, but that it should take the form of a separate and explicit theory. Carroll has pointed to the problem that in Danto’s theory the question arises: “how are we to identify *art* theories?”¹⁹ Is there an art theory when the subject of the theory is termed “art”? This criterion is certainly over-inclusive: we might, for example, be forced to cope with wine-growing, armoring, or wool-making, considering the system of *artes mechanicae* of Hugo de St. Victor, one of the very few theories available in the Middle Ages that would partially include our so-called visual arts.²⁰ Or shall we acknowledge as art theories only those whose referents include only objects we from our point of view at the end of history deem as art (whatever name they might earlier have been called)? This criterion might be very exclusive, and I can hardly imagine any theory that could fulfill it.²¹ In fact Danto seems to have dropped the art theory condition as a defining characteristic when he writes: “what is a work of art at one time cannot be one at another. . . . Many of the world’s artworks (cave paintings, fetishes, altar pieces) were made in times and places when people had no concept of art to speak of. . . .”²² We are hence back again to the uncomfortable alternative of either projecting an unwarranted narrow (for example, aesthetic) notion of art upon those objects, or claiming a philosophical and therefore neutral concept in order to identify those objects as art without the security that it can actually be found in the heaven of essences. (The third possibility, obviously too frustrating for a philosopher of art, would be to give up speaking of art in those cases bereft of a concept of their own, just calling them “pictures,” “sculptures,” and so on, like an “art” historian, who can get along perfectly well with this designation as a practical Wittgensteinian or narrativist.²³)

19. Carroll, “Essence, Expression, and History,” 103.

20. See Paul Oskar Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 (1951), and 13 (1952).

21. However, in a way this is the only approach that warrants the contention that Plato, for instance, had an art theory.

22. *After the End of Art*, 95. This change obviously took place under the impression of Hans Belting’s *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago, 1994).

23. In his essay “The Appreciation and Interpretation of Works of Art” (*Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, 23-46), Danto states that the interpretation of an object as an artwork constitutes it as a work. This interpretation can be correct or not, which depends on the artist’s own interpretation (44-45). Given this criterion, the “many of the world’s artworks” Danto is speaking of in the above quotation are obviously misinterpreted as artworks, the third possibility being the only one open to him. On the other hand, “the interpretation is not something outside the work,” 45. Danto wants to speak of the artist as something inside the work, which in those “many cases” will be the only possibility but which brings us back to the question whether we are talking about a property of the artwork that makes the interpretation true.

I would like to discuss whether there is a way out of the dilemma (or trilemma) in holding art as reflective, as incorporating its own theory of sorts, whatever its other defining conditions may be. This proposal would certainly cover historical and posthistorical art, where at least the concept of art is available. It could, on the other hand, like any other definition, be easily applied to prehistorical art lacking this concept: due to the impossibility of objects that claim to be “art,” there won’t be any such “art” objects, and so no counterexamples to the definition! There remains, however, an uneasy feeling in establishing a license unlimited by any historical insight, to pick out certain prehistorical objects as art, while leaving others aside as mere products of crafts, of everyday needs, or religious practices. For instance, a feminist could ask, why accept cave paintings or altar pieces and refuse beautiful works of knitting or weaving or patchwork? I think this uneasiness can be coped with, while at the same time it complicates the problem: the question is asked from the point of view of a historical (or posthistorical, if you wish) situation, where the concept of art is used and reflected in contemporary productions that test its boundaries. Contemporary knitwear may be self-consciously artistic, while prehistorical knitwear seems not to be.²⁴ Nevertheless, we may feel a certain right in granting the latter the compliment of being an artwork. Does this simply mean extending the license for projecting “art” into the past beyond the condition of reflectivity? I think the condition of reflectivity need not be given up; we should at this point not get trapped by the temptation to take it as a criterion, asking how we should *identify* reflectivity in an object or to discuss the question of reflectivity’s *really* being there. The reflectivity of art, as I see it, somehow encompasses the process of projecting its own condition. That’s where the end of art enters, not as a symptom of art’s taking place in history apart from its having an everlasting essence, but as part of its concept.

III

In the narratives of the end of art we are confronted with a number of supposed ends competing with each other. The respective theories don’t give very satisfying hints as to how we are to decide which is the *real* end of art. Is it, as Hegel suggests (as a disciple of Schiller), the inception of Christianity? Or is it the Reformation, or Romanticism as a movement freeing art from any higher content by establishing reflective irony? Or does art end with the beginning of modernism, where the quasi-philosophical reflection of its own means supplants its mimetic goals? Does it end with Duchamp or with the *Brillo Box* and minimalism, or has the end been protracted by Jeff Koons and by Appropriation Art? Or shall we believe Nietzsche and his suspicion that Socrates in joint efforts with Sophocles already succeeded in ushering art into reflectivity and thus into its end?

24. At least not in a way we could know of. It is, in other words, a striking example of the indeterminacy of interpretation. See *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, 43-44.

Danto sees the problem of historical repetition in his taking up the Hegelian thesis. In an astonishing turn he resorts to Paul Grice's conversational implicatures in order to explain that he meant something completely different from Hegel, which can only be understood from his own historical experience.²⁵ This contention forms a marked contrast to his conviction, often enunciated, that "internally speaking, philosophy does not have a real history."²⁶ Danto even refers to Heinrich Wölfflin's *dictum* that "taking history seriously, . . . not everything is possible at every time"; but he continues: "Philosophy seems immune from this historicity. . . . The same philosophy is always possible."²⁷ Why should we believe that this is not true of the end of art thesis?²⁸ The answer seems to be plain enough, if we take the thesis as a comment on art history in a certain moment. But what makes it a *philosophical* thesis?

From a historical or even posthistorical perspective it is hard to say what an end of the ends of art would be. Perhaps this time it would be the death of art. The array of alleged ends suggests that we can find the end even in the very beginning of Western art history, and that consequently we will find it whenever there is art in the full sense.²⁹

There have been proposals to read the end of art thesis as a misleading symptom of a deeper metaphysical characteristic of art that Hegel did not appreciate. In a Heideggerian inspiration both Paul de Man and Jan Patočka (independently from each other, I suppose) interpret the thesis as referring to art's capacity to give an experience of the essence of the past, since the knowledge artworks may convey never comes to full presence.³⁰ These interpretations try to gain something from the end of art thesis for a phenomenological description of the essence of art, namely its inherent temporality (which I cannot discuss here); in so doing they cut off any reference to art history. I would like to follow a somewhat similar path by disconnecting the end of art thesis from the discussion of its historical instances, but I'd like to maintain its connection to the historicity of art.

"Art" in the Dantonian (and perhaps Hegelian) sense has a threefold extension: art before, in, and after its history. In *After the End of Art*, Danto stresses the symmetry of the "before" and "after."³¹ But there is also an important asymmetry: after the end of art history the concept of art is available, whereas before its beginning it is not. If the historical possibility of applying the title of "art" to an

25. *Embodied Meanings*, 321-333.

26. *Connections to the World*, 5.

27. *Ibid.*, 19.

28. In fact, presenting the Hegelian thesis as a discovery in 1984, Danto appears to have been overwhelmed by the *correspondence* of the insight. "The End of Art," in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, 81-115.

29. It is of little relevance to my argument where we fix the beginning, whether we follow Hegel (who could have had, for instance, but a very dim picture of the Middle Ages, no concept of the Renaissance at all, let alone knowledge about late antiquity, and so on) or more modern narratives.

30. Paul de Man, "Hegel über das Erhabene," in *Die Ideologie des Ästhetischen*, ed. Christoph Menke (Frankfurt am Main, 1993), 59-79; Jan Patočka, "Die Lehre von der Vergangenheit der Kunst," in *Beispiele: Festschrift für Eugen Fink zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. L. Landgrebe (The Hague, 1965), 46-61.

31. *After the End of Art*, 25.

object is crucial to its ontological status, the beginning of art history seems to be the important threshold. If, on the other hand, the end of art diagnosis can be made more or less at this “beginning,” it would become meaningless to speak of “art after the end of art” as something different from “art.” In my view, it is not a characteristic solely of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art to have an inherent awareness of its historical past as something it depends on and reacts to. The reflectivity of art (and thus art in the full sense) consists in a sort of nostalgia-of-the-golden-age syndrome. If art acquires a concept of itself, this may yield conditions such as being a human product, being a joy to the gods, being beautiful, having a subject, imitating reality, stirring and purifying human emotions, being a means of instruction or insight, being embodied meaning, being inscrutable, and so on. All these conditions may be found to be complied with by objects from former times or other cultures, thus making them recognizable as “art.” These ancient or strange “works of art” may even fulfill the wanted conditions in a much higher degree than historical (self-reflecting) art itself. The respective phenomenon is known as all sorts of “classicisms,” “renaissances,” or revivals throughout European art history. Its logical structure may be described as follows: art is unconsciously reflective in developing a concept of what it is, in which case art is often exemplarily fulfilled in a preceding naive state. Art may, for example, be discovered as an independent human activity demanding higher intellectual capacities than mere craftsmanship (as in platonistic European Renaissance art theories), in which case, paradoxically, art might be seen as brought to an end (like Greek or Roman antiquity). If this structure of historicity is a function of reflectivity, we need not resort to external coeval theories or interpretations of the artist him or herself, probably unknown to us, to be able to interpret something (scientifically) as a work of art. The reflectivity can be gathered from the way the work refers to its predecessors—not just being “under their influence,” but actively choosing among different historical (even remote) possibilities or rejecting them.³²

Coming back to the problem mentioned above (how the interpretation of a pre-historical object as a work of art can be justified), “art” can be treated as a two-tier concept due to its historicity. Art after the end of art then is reflective in the sense that it relates itself to the concept of art, whatever this concept might be. Prior to this, every object suitable to be co-opted by art proper as its unconscious predecessor will pass for art before art (or before the end of art, if you wish). This suitability will have as its minimal condition being a (mostly) human product betraying a certain skill or intention.³³

32. Danto rejects the concept of intertextuality, underlining the difference between explicit and recognizable reference on the one hand and cause or provenance on the other (*The Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, 145-149). In my view, thinking of historicity as a matter of reference need not preclude that there are other, perhaps more interesting, semantic dimensions of the artwork. The reference in question can be quite esoteric, below the level of allusions and hints addressed to the public, and still rational and transparent enough to those who arrive at taking it in (maybe as scholars), to be more than the mere effect of a cause.

33. There might be the objection whether this proposal can deal with relics of catastrophes of the sort invented by Danto (Carrara quarries or color shops blown up and leaving something identical to

If we treat the end of art as an experience of *longue durée*, revealing a characteristic of art as a “spiritual kind,”³⁴ it vanishes as a problem specific to modernism and postmodernism. Indeed, the structure remains the same at first sight: art emerges by bringing to an end a more naive and perhaps more genuine state of itself in reaching a higher level of reflectivity. This reflectivity may incorporate an attitude of nostalgia or aggressiveness, but this will not make a logical difference. What matters is the transition from unconscious to conscious reflectivity. When art becomes aware of its reflectivity as its perhaps essential characteristic it will become difficult to project this condition on prehistorical artworks. (Compare the difference between: 1) a urinal or Brillo box placed in a museum as an act of conscious reflectivity; 2) design claiming the status of art by discovering its own historicity and referring to predecessors like the creator of the urinal—not of *Fountain*—as a naive artist; and 3) ancient or not so ancient knitwear or pottery claimed to be art as predecessors to postmodern art.)

Historicity in this view is not wedded to a progressive narrative and therefore need not be seen as something that comes to an end with such a narrative. I can now complete my speculation about what the end of the ends of art might be. What I termed “prehistorical” art suitable to co-optation by art itself will continue to be produced as well as art in the historical sense,³⁵ the latter coming to a definitive end only when what art was or could be has been so entirely forgotten that it is not even possible to refer to its concept by overcoming it, by longing for it, or asking the question, What is art?³⁶ Reflective art would thus be survived by prehistorical art. But perhaps the obliteration of collective memory or parts of it is the event least to be imagined in the so-called postmodern world.

I won't deny that the interpretation I have given of the end of art thesis doesn't take into account the much more obvious sense that can be read in Hegel and is taken up by Danto, namely, its being the end of a narrative. I don't sympathize very much with this view, which encompasses a—as Danto calls it—narrativism *de re*,³⁷ yielding a very rigid and oversimplified reconstruction of the course of art history. This thesis seems to require an illustration, found in the narratives of Gombrich or Greenberg for instance, that is far too concrete for my taste to main-

well-known works of art). I don't know whether the answer will satisfy, but if we think of the co-opting process not as a matter of science but of practitioners discovering examples they admire, I don't think there is a problem. In their *Kunst- und Wunderkammern*, for instance, European Renaissance collectors fully accepted nature (*natura naturans*) as a competing artist whose work was worth being juxtaposed with products of human skill.

34. The idea of reflectivity *qua* historicity as something essential to art can be found in Hegel's analysis of his “classical artform.” See my *Scheinen des Begriffs*.

35. The difference I'm discussing will somehow match up with what Danto means by High and Low Art. In Bielefeld, he conceded that (contemporary?) art theories might be restricted to High Art. See “High Art, Low Art, and the Spirit of History” in *Beyond the Brillo Box*, 147-160.

36. There is an interesting aspect in the Hegelian thesis I can't discuss here, namely the distinction between the end of art, as far as new artworks are concerned, and art being seen as subject to historical knowledge, the latter perspective being an achievement of the historical consciousness of the last two hundred years. Historicism brings up the conflict between the artwork being located in a past unredeemably over and its presence to further (and unpredictable) experience.

37. *Beyond the Brillo Box*, 241.

tain philosophical liberality.³⁸ If I had to choose among narratives, I would prefer the non-teleological to the teleological version of the story. If there is an interesting sense in Hegel's construction of the artforms, it lies not in their succession having an aim to be achieved, but in the possibility of reconstructing the logic of the steps that are taken in reacting in a motivated way to already given possibilities.³⁹ In this "narrative" (if it is one), the end is achieved when the logical possibilities of transitions and reactions are exhausted and can be theoretically grasped. Counterexamples to this version of the thesis would have to show not so much that history is continuing but that it proceeds in a logic hitherto unknown.

IV

In my account of its inherent historicity, art can be conceived as an activity bent on discovering and determining its own concept by constant application. This is far more than Danto allows, for whom art is only capable of asking the question, What is art? If the task of defining is left to philosophy, the latter can indulge in the hope that its definitions will leave things as they are.⁴⁰ If essentialism is the only possibility to do so, the question still remains whether the optimism concerning the liberality of definition is justified even in the case of art being in itself a preemption of any definition. Danto's attempt to define art as embodied meaning can be held liberal enough to keep up with art's own self-"defining" activity only by being open to a metaphorical use of its constitutive conditions. What "embodiment" or "meaning" mean if applied to a work of art can only be fully understood if their meaning is made concrete and adapted.⁴¹ This doesn't prevent their being of great use in describing possibly essential traits of artworks (metaphorical description perhaps being the only tool available), but they thus fail to furnish the independently determined conditions a definition requires.

38. I would very much like to understand how Danto can in this case be convinced of escaping the charge of the philosophical disenfranchisement of art he raises against Plato and Hegel.

39. For Hegel's non-teleological view as a methodological principle, see Dieter Henrich, "Hegels Logik der Reflexion," in *Hegel im Kontext* (Frankfurt am Main, 1967), 95-96.

40. "Responses and Replies," in *Danto and His Critics*, 207.

41. I'm not sure whether it is of much help to clarify the notion of meaning in artworks by stating it as metaphorical in itself. If, for example, the figures of a novel are said to be metaphorically about the reader (*Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 172; *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, 154-157), in my view this presses the notion of metaphor to an extent that it can be said to be used metaphorically itself. There is no otherwise known use of "metaphor," as far as I know, as based on the necessity of the target to identify itself with the source domain.

As to the notion of embodiment, I'm becoming aware of a difference between German and English, "Verkörperung" being more concrete, while in English the language has already done part of the job by extending the meaning of "embodiment" to (even linguistic) "expression." I learn this from my dictionary, but I am in doubt whether Danto wants to make use of this advantage of the English expression, which would include, for example, a thought simply being embodied by having achieved a linguistic form. Instead he is speaking of "incarnation" as an equivalent (*The Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, 177-181) as though deliberately preparing the term for metaphorical use.

I should mention here that Hegel offers a closed disjunction of specific meanings of "meaning" in his theory of the artforms, and the concept of "outwardness," which encompasses material appearance as well as being addressed to another mind or to a public. But the former will probably be too exclusive, the latter not specific enough.

If definition in a strict sense will probably not succeed in leaving things as they are, perhaps essence will. This is the notion of essence Heidegger offers: letting things be what they are in granting their way of being. But doubts are justified if we are simply told to believe that there is that mighty essence, however unfathomable to methodological scrutiny: all we then get is the process of art producing and co-opting new instances, and philosophy discovering perceivable or logical similarities between them (which is what metaphors, in a rather makeshift theory of metaphorical meaning, are supposed to do).

I am not so sure about the Hegelian way out of the problem, but I would at least like to put it forward for discussion. Following very roughly Hegel's logical analysis, the notion of essence has in itself the structure of reflectivity I used above as a model of the historicity of art. It can be construed as a two-tier concept, which under the rule of definition inevitably appears as circular.⁴² In Hegel's view, philosophy can cope with this structure satisfactorily only by superseding "essence" by the concept of "concept." He maintains that we can give definitions only of objects of a determined purpose or of objects that are not altered, like geometrical ones, by being instantiated. However, for spiritual objects (and also in his theory natural ones, though I can't discuss this here), a concept is wanted.⁴³ Definitions proceed by finding the general (*genus proximum*) and the particular (*differentia specifica*) of a given object, thus using the elements the concept consists of (generality, particularity, and the singular). But definition keeps in immediate touch with the singular object, and is thus susceptible to instances and counter-instances. It will therefore never be able to grasp the essential *differentiae* because, in Hegel's argument, there are always possible counterexamples simply lacking the essential property in being *schlecht* (deficient).⁴⁴ Instead, it is the concept which is capable of giving the essential characteristics because it is oriented towards truth (as a quality of the object) in trying to understand the object's principles.

This looks like exclusiveness worse than ever before. If we need only to find what a *true* artwork is, we can rule out any further counterexample as deficient, even if we accept it as an artwork. But to me there is more to it: there is a disenfranchising and an enfranchising path the Hegelian turn can follow.

The Hegelian concept is able to display the truth of an object insofar as the latter is in itself conceptual. Even if this is not convincing as an ontological thesis in general, in the case of spiritual kinds like art the object can be described as relating the general (maybe its own concept) to a singular instance (the artwork itself) by embodying it through particular properties.⁴⁵ The disenfranchising way

42. The commentary by Christian Iber, *Metaphysik absoluter Relationalität: Eine Studie zu den beiden ersten Kapiteln von Hegels Wesenslogik* (Berlin, 1990) helped me to understand this conception.

43. See the interesting chapter about definition in G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik: Die Lehre vom Begriff* [1816] (Hamburg, 1994), 250-256.

44. *Ibid.*, 255-256.

45. In my interpretation, however, this relation can take such a complicated form that the distinctions between the related moments become irrelevant, which is part of the logical narrative of art history.

to continue philosophically would hence be to allow, as Danto expresses it, “a degree of validity to art by treating it as doing what philosophy itself does, only uncouthly.”⁴⁶ In this case, philosophy must take over the job of art. Since the concept of art includes its being instantiated, philosophy can feel justified in taking up the works of art as it needs them (or can even invent or deduce them), and may aspire to exhaust what can be said about the essence of art by turning into philosophical art history, as hidden or overt art criticism.⁴⁷ If it comes to this, it would certainly be more generous to stick to definition, leaving artworks alone apart from using them as examples or counterexamples. In Danto’s view, philosophy after the end of art can even dispense with examples and counterexamples altogether.⁴⁸ But, as others have said before me, I doubt whether this will be possible as long as the task of definition remains on the agenda.

A less disenfranchising way to read Hegel is to stress the way he takes up the Aristotelian notion of essence in his concept of the concept. Artworks are salient instances of the conceptual essence being necessarily concrete and individualized in itself. Even if they follow the structure of the concept, the instantiations are completely underdetermined by any general rule (and the reverse). Philosophy depends on the artwork to be able to give its concept a meaning, but not in the sense that the concept is learned by examples. Rather one single instance is necessary and sufficient to learn it, if it is taken seriously.

At the end of Danto’s most Hegelian essay we find an interesting remark. He says the conception of absolute knowledge at the end of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is “fatally flawed.”⁴⁹ But if anything comes close to exemplifying it, art in our times does—for the object in which the artwork consists is so irradiated by theoretical consciousness that the division between object and subject is all but overcome, and it little matters whether art is philosophy in action or philosophy is art in thought.⁵⁰ I see it the other way round: what art exemplifies, perhaps partly against Hegel’s own intention, is the way the concept gets lost in the singularity.⁵¹ Paradoxically this loss of the concept will perhaps become the more obvious the more the artwork seems to become similar to philosophy in its reflectivity and conceptual structure: it is just by this similarity that philosophy seems to be deprived of its means to draw firm distinctions and thus to meet the intuition that there *is* a difference.

46. *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, 7.

47. Danto seems to find a way of following the disenfranchising path concerning art history, while keeping art criticism apart.

48. *Encounters and Reflections*, 344. However, the reason given here is that manifest properties lose their importance for the definition, which raises the question why there shouldn’t be counterexamples in the field of non-manifest properties. See Carroll, “Essence, Expression, and History,” 95.

49. But compare the following astonishing avowal: “It has always seemed to me that the aim of philosophy should be the production of a system in which all philosophical problems are solved and the interconnection between these solutions demonstrated.” “Responses and Replies,” in *Danto and His Critics*, 208.

50. *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, 113.

51. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik: Die Lehre vom Begriff*, 56.

V

I have brought up reflectivity and conceptuality as possible characteristics of art as a “spiritual kind,” more precisely as a kind of Absolute Spirit. But can we think of Absolute Spirit in itself as a genus made up of its kinds? Indeed, Hegel doesn’t entirely escape the temptation to give something like a quite traditional definition in stating that there are three kinds of Absolute Spirit, their *differentiae* concerning their medium or mental modality: thought for philosophy, representation for religion, and intuition (*Anschauung*) for art. Reading Hegel after Danto, for me at least, has meant being unable to accept this characterization any longer. Danto’s compelling contribution has been to detach philosophy of art from aesthetics. And if deprived of aesthetics, Hegel will be at a loss to tell art and religion, and art and philosophy, apart by a defining property. It would mean starting another investigation to find out whether what has been roughly outlined above as a Hegelian contribution to the logic of art might not equally apply to religion and philosophy.

There are many remarks spread throughout Danto’s writings that suggest that the lurking question behind *Brillo Box* is not, Is it art or a real thing?, but Is it art or Is it philosophy? And, behind that, What is philosophy? To me the intriguing point regarding *Brillo Box* is that from the possibility of a work of *visual* art being philosophy we can gather that philosophy itself is not restricted to language. The interesting questions will only begin when we look beyond the surface correspondence between philosophy and literature (which—so far—consists in their both using language), philosophy having some literary aspects besides aiming at truth.

I confess I’m infected enough by Danto to be haunted by exotic examples. Think of someone just copying word for word extant philosophical books (analytical philosophy of the highest quality if you wish) and publishing them under her own name. She would perhaps be charged with plagiarism, a phenomenon already known to the philosophically sophisticated artworld. But imagine also that the texts are chosen intelligently enough to betray some purposiveness. Would this be a *philosophical* comment on the institutionalized practices of academic philosophers? Or on their incapacity to produce new ideas (think of the “cloying sameness” of philosophical systems⁵²)? Or perhaps a parody of philosophers stressing creative, scientific, innovative thinking? Or might this compilation show an inherent systematic connection among philosophical texts never perceived before? This would at least evidence some philosophical competence, the work to be compared to that of an editor rather than to that of a medieval copyist or to Hanne Darboven in her *Bismarckzeit*. But would people philosophically interested in those systematic connections find it worthwhile reading these texts instead of just reading the texts of their legitimate authors?

Why should we not call this kind of comment on philosophy a work of literature, or rather of art, for its being actually performed and materialized in a body

52. *Connections to the World*, 19.

of printed matter? We could meanwhile term as philosophy a simple bibliographical list, containing the books the author of the list would find interesting to anthologize in order to display her systematic ideas—the texts themselves having to be looked up by the reader. And why, after all, should we not call this list a piece of conceptual art, shunning embodiment (as art) as well as conceptual exposition (as philosophy)? Could this lifework of an “appropriation philosopher” (or artist, or both) be considered as an embodied contribution to the question, “What is philosophy?” (philosophy consisting—following Heidegger—*im Ausarbeiten der Frage*, in elaborating the question). Would this be a question asked artistically using philosophical thought as material by way of turning into its own philosophy? And who should answer the question?

It has been a comfortable position for philosophy to dwell on the question of What is art? while being itself quite sure about its own everlasting essence guaranteed by the laws of logic. Danto has observed that the strategy of aestheticization has served to control both art and women (noting that “the power to classify is the power to dominate”⁵³). It has certainly been a means of dominating women, not only to aestheticize them but to incessantly explore their essence as furnishing the interesting difference, while men were spared the investigation, being only essentially human. Danto has recommended his essentialism to feminists.⁵⁴ I think it is a recommendation worth considering, but whatever the upshot will be, it will have to meet the fact that neither side will have the privilege to lay down the essential difference.⁵⁵ In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf gave an admirable analysis of how what women consider to be men’s essence differs from what men themselves believe it to be, and how what men consider to be women’s essence differs from how women see themselves. What could we gather from this when it comes to that unhappy couple, art and philosophy? The reenfranchising strategy Danto offers amounts simply to divorce. My idea is that if there is an essence, notwithstanding all sorts of cross-boundaries, there will always be a privileged access to it from within the respective system, by its own means. This need not prevent a dialogue; on the contrary, it might be its indispensable condition. But philosophy will have to alter its attitude in the conversation—and perhaps it already has, trying to achieve a consciousness of what we could call its end and liberation.⁵⁶

Universität Basel

53. *The Disenfranchisement of Art*, 12.

54. At the Bielefeld author colloquium in April 1997.

55. I should mention that in my view gender studies have so far sufficiently established that biology or “natural kinds” will not settle the matter.

56. This paper is very much indebted to the participants in the fertile and dense Bielefeld author colloquium with Danto in 1997. I have not been able to trace back to their sources all the ideas I might have taken up there.