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DANTO AND HIS CRITICS:  
*AFTER THE END OF ART AND ART HISTORY*

DAVID CARRIER

ABSTRACT

In Bielefeld, Germany in April, 1997 an author conference was devoted to Arthur C. Danto's 1995 Mellon Lectures *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, 1997). This essay provides an introduction to seven essays given at that conference and expanded for this Theme Issue of *History and Theory*. Danto presented his view of the nature of art in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981). He then added in the Mellon lectures a sociological perspective on the current situation of the visual arts, and an Hegelian historiography. The history of art has ended, Danto claims, and we now live in a posthistorical era. Since in his well-known book on historiography, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965), Danto is unsympathetic to Hegel's speculative ways of thinking about history, his adaptation of this Hegelian framework is surprising. Danto's strategy in *After the End of Art* is best understood by grasping the way in which he transformed the purely philosophical account of *The Transfiguration* into a historical account. Recognizing that his philosophical analysis provided a good way of explaining the development of art in the modern period, Danto radically changed the context of his argument. In this process, he opened up discussion of some serious but as yet unanswered questions about his original thesis, and about the plausibility of Hegel's claim that the history of art has ended.

Hegel . . . did not declare that modern art had ended or would disintegrate. . . . his attitude towards future art was optimistic, not pessimistic. . . . According to his dialectic . . . art . . . has no end but will evolve forever with time.<sup>1</sup>

Arthur C. Danto's 1995 Mellon Lectures *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, 1997), bringing together the concerns of aestheticians, art critics, and historiographers, offer a very rich perspective on recent American painting and sculpture, and their history. In its original context, this text might be described as a reply, certainly critical but at bottom oddly sympathetic, to the 1956 Mellon lectures of Ernst H. Gombrich published in 1961 as *Art and Illusion*. Gombrich traces the history of naturalistic art, offering a theory explaining why this figurative tradition has a history; and in the conclusion, turning away from representation to expression, he suggests why this tradition

1. Zhu Liyuan, "Hegel and the 'Disintegration of Art'," *Contemporary Chinese Aesthetics*, ed. Zhu Liyuan and Gene Blocker (New York, 1995), 303-305.

probably has come to an end. Like Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, Danto's *After the End of Art* is an exercise in historiography; but where Gombrich describes the origin and seeming conclusion of a particularly European tradition, Danto aims to offer a universal account—he describes the essential nature of art, art as it must be at any time in any culture.

And yet, so immense are the differences between *Art and Illusion* and *After the End of Art* that these books seem to come from different intellectual worlds. Although Gombrich mentions some modernist artists, and draws upon contemporary psychology of perception, his basic intellectual framework is highly traditional. John Ruskin would have understood *Art and Illusion's* discussion of landscape painting—it builds upon his treatise, *Modern Painters*—though he would have preferred that such a history be focused on Turner, not on Constable, as Gombrich chooses; and Vasari shared, and so would readily have grasped, Gombrich's essential idea that the history of art is marked by progress in naturalism. Gombrich has very little to say about twentieth-century art. Danto, by contrast, is concerned not just with modernism, mentioned in a dismissive way by Gombrich, but with Andy Warhol and his successors, the figures in what Danto calls our posthistorical era. That the argument of *After the End of Art* could be presented a mere thirty-nine years after *Art and Illusion* shows how quickly and how far our visual culture has moved.

*After the End of Art* offers a theory of the nature of art; discusses some of the more important recent artistic movements; and links Danto's aesthetic theorizing to his earlier work in historiography. It is this last concern, of course, which is of special interest here. In Bielefeld, Germany in April, 1997 an author conference was devoted to *After the End of Art*; there discussion focused close attention on diverse readings of Danto's work, with replies by him and full discussion by the participants. I thought it desirable to memorialize this very agreeable occasion in print, and so solicited papers from all participants for *History and Theory*.<sup>2</sup> The seven essays published here are only a selection of the work presented at the conference—but a rich selection.<sup>3</sup> My sense of how to deal with these issues has been very much influenced by all the papers I heard, not only those published here, and by the discussions in Bielefeld, which continued long into the evenings.

We have here Noël Carroll's "The End of Art?," Michael Kelly's "Essentialism and Historicism in Danto's Philosophy of Art," Frank Ankersmit's "Danto on Representation, Identity, and Indiscernibles," Brigitte Hilmer's "Being Hegelian after Danto," Robert Kudielka's "According to What: Art and the Philosophy of the 'End of Art'," Martin Seel's "Art as Appearance: Two Comments on Arthur C. Danto's *After the End of Art*," and Jakob Steinbrenner's "The Unimaginable."

2. Apart from the authors whose writing is presented here, the participants included Thierry de Duve, Boris Groys, Gregg M. Horowitz, Karlheinz Lüdeking, Bernhard Lyp, Hans Julius Schneider, Oliver R. Scholz, Günther Seubold, Christian Steiner, and Wolfgang Welsch. This introduction borrows ideas from an as yet unpublished manuscript by Jonathan Gilmore.

3. Danto's work on the historiography of art history has been much written about—see also *The End of Art and Beyond: Essays after Danto*, ed. Arto Haapala, Jerrold Levinson, and Veikko Rantala (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1997).

Building upon their oral presentations in Bielefeld, now writing independently from one another, they offer a rich array of perspectives, admirable in their clarity and wide-ranging argumentation, on Danto's concerns. My aim in this introduction is to place Danto's work in a larger framework—in the context of recent discussions of American art critics; in relation to his broader philosophical arguments; and, most especially, in relationship to debates within historiography.

If we think of the academic discipline of "art history" as a special branch of history, that division of history concerned with a particular kind of material artifact, then it may appear surprising that art historians interested in methodology have not devoted serious attention to historiography.<sup>4</sup> When in the recent past art historians have taken a new interest in questions about theory, it might have seemed obvious for them to look across to learn what writers in *History and Theory* have to say about historical explanation. But although Arthur C. Danto and Ernst Gombrich have long been on the Editorial Board, few contributions devoted specifically to art-historical issues have appeared in *History and Theory*. Nor, to the best of my knowledge, have art historians publishing elsewhere taken much interest in historiography. This is unfortunate, for one lesson *After the End of Art* teaches is that the concerns of *History and Theory* are at present highly relevant to art history.

Prior to the Mellon lectures, Danto's own well-developed interests in historiography and aesthetics seem quite distinct concerns; an account of the argument of his *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981) would not need to appeal to the much-discussed claims of his *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965).<sup>5</sup> *The Transfiguration* is centrally concerned with defining art and showing the consequences of Danto's definition for the practice of interpretation. Arguing against the traditional accounts defining art as representation or as a form of expression, Danto claims that Warhol's *Brillo Box* (1964), a sculpture indiscernible from its equivalent in the grocery, is an artwork because it exemplifies a theory of what art is. *Analytical Philosophy of History*, arguing against Carl G. Hempel's claim that historical explanations implicitly appeal to general laws, shows that historical change is best understood by identifying the role of narratives in historians' writings. In these two books, Danto is dealing with quite diverse subjects; although these volumes share an intellectual style with his books on the theory of action, epistemology, and Nietzsche, there is no particular reason to connect his claims about the nature of art with his view of historical explanation.

The approach of these books is surprisingly hard to place in relation to the broad divisions in this country between analytical and continental philosophy. Danto has always identified himself as an analytical philosopher, but he also has played a distinguished role in championing Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre, con-

4. On the relation of history to art history see my "Art History," *Contemporary Critical Terms in Art History*, ed. R. Nelson and R. Shiff (Chicago, 1996), 129-141.

5. A discussion of Danto's system appears in my "Danto as Systematic Philosopher, or; comme on lit Danto en français," in *Arthur Danto and His Critics*, ed. M. Rollins (Oxford, 1993), 13-27.

tinental figures he frequently identifies as his key intellectual influences. Danto's rejection of positivism and his focus on the role of narratives, amplified by the addition to the 1985 edition of *Analytical Philosophy of History*—the book was republished as *Narration and Knowledge*, with the addition of several newer essays in 1985—might seem to link his concerns with those of Hayden White and the many French scholars interested in narratology. But unlike White and most narratologists, French or American, Danto was never tempted by any form of relativism; his view, rather, is that analytical philosophers should extend their basic ways of thinking, using their well established methodologies, from propositions to larger narrative units. Analytical philosophers tend to think that language can transparently describe the structures of the world; narratologists, that any hard and fast distinction between the features of the world in itself and the texts used to represent that world is problematic. Danto has no sympathy with the narratologists, or with the deconstructionists who frequently are their allies. He has consistently rejected the suggestion that the end of art history as he identifies it is merely the end of one narrative, not the end of this actual sequence of events in the world's history. *After the End of Art* describes the nature of art, not just one way of telling art's history.

*Analytical Philosophy of History* mentions Hegel only a few times in passing, observing that there is some limited analogy between Danto's account of narrative and "the alleged *dialectical* pattern which Hegel famously contended is exhibited everywhere throughout history."<sup>6</sup> Noting this "certain resemblance" between Hegel's thesis/antithesis/synthesis and his narrative structure which also involves three stages—beginning/middle/end—Danto says that "it is difficult . . . to know how far this analogy could be pressed, and I shall not attempt to elaborate upon it here." It is unsurprising that he did not pursue this analogy, for it would be hard to find much point of contact between his analytical concerns and Hegel's dialectic. Insofar as Danto's goal was to propose an alternative to Hempel's analysis, discussion of Hegel's historiography would have been entirely irrelevant. Indeed, Danto suggests that so-called speculative philosophy of history exemplified by *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is cognitively illegitimate.

The style of argument of *The Transfiguration* also falls within the world of analytical philosophy. One of its targets is the denial, influentially derived by analytical philosophers of art from Ludwig Wittgenstein's later work, that art can be defined. Danto aims to identify the essence of art, to give necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be an artwork. To understand a thing, philosophers always have argued, we need to know its defining qualities. Merely by looking at an object like *Brillo Box*, Danto allows, we cannot determine its identity as artwork; but with proper knowledge of its history—and that includes for him reference to the artist's intentions—interpretation is entirely unambiguous. So, to take one of his best-known thought experiments, although Giorgione's unfinished history painting *The Drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea* and a

6. *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, Eng., 1965), 237.

minimalist painting called *red square* would appear visually indistinguishable—both of them are solid fields of red—they will be seen to be quite distinct objects once their histories are understood.<sup>7</sup> This example permits us to understand some of Danto's reasons for rejecting the deconstructionists' view that interpretation is an open-ended process.<sup>8</sup> The self-same object, a red square, has an identity which depends upon how it is put into context.<sup>9</sup> By itself, the painting *red square* is visually indistinguishable from *The Drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea*. The deconstructionists' arguments in favor of openness of interpretation tend to appeal to the idea that this context can be established in an indefinite number of ways; Danto argues, rather, that the history of such an object determines its context unambiguously.

*The Transfiguration* offers a theory of the identity of artworks, and *Analytical Philosophy of History* a view of how to explain historical events. What broadly links Danto's concerns in these books is his general view of what philosophy is. Problems in all domains of philosophy, Danto argues, are defined by the identification of what he calls indiscernibles—two perceptually indistinguishable things which can be told apart only with the aid of some theory. Thus, Descartes's *Meditations* argues that there are no internal criteria permitting us to distinguish between dreaming and being awake; only an epistemology permits us to make that distinction. In the theory of action, ethics, and indeed in every branch of philosophy, we find—so Danto thinks—something like this distinction. This basic way of thinking is totally ahistorical and apolitical—as is typical of, and traditional with, analytical philosophy.

Descartes is a useful reference point here, for an older Marxist tradition and a more recent style of feminist writing criticize him for projecting onto the structure of things as they are a merely parochial worldview, that of a seventeenth-century Latin-speaking Frenchman. Descartes's style of argument, some Marxists and feminists have claimed, is not and cannot be universal; universality requires impartiality, and as Iris Young writes:

Impartiality names a point of view of reason that stands apart from any interests and desires. Not to be partial means being able to see the whole, how all the particular perspectives and interests in a given moral situation relate to one another in a way that, because of its partiality, each perspective cannot see itself. The impartial moral reasoner thus stands outside of and above the situation about which he or she reasons. . . .<sup>10</sup>

But, as Young goes on to argue, all points of view are necessarily perspectival and are thus inherently connected to some viewpoint and its constitutive interests. This argument draws heavily on Nietzsche's perspectivism, and it thus has to seem interesting that although Danto's early book on Nietzsche has played a seminal role in opening up American philosophers' discussions of that writer,

7. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 1-2.

8. I argue for this claim in my "Derrida as Philosopher," *Metaphilosophy* 16 (1985), 221-234.

9. See my *Artwriting* (Amherst, Mass., 1987), Overture.

10. "Impartiality and the Civic Public," *Feminism as Critique*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis, 1987), 60.

Danto himself has never taken seriously the claim that impartiality is an impossibility.

Set in the context of Danto's philosophical development, what then is so surprising about *After the End of Art* is the appearance in it of an essentially Hegelian view of art's history. Danto's claim in *The Transfiguration* was that purely logical analysis could reveal the nature of art; and so it was not unexpected that Andy Warhol and Hegel each make but one cameo appearance in that book.<sup>11</sup> *Brillo Box*, like Danto's various imaginary examples—a forged tie by Picasso, the red monochromatic painting mentioned earlier, and Borges's celebrated example (a perfect copy of a portion of *Don Quixote*) presented in his short story, "Pierre Menard, Symbolist Poet"—merely illustrate that general theory. Danto's theory of art could have been generated at any time by anyone capable of creating these thought experiments; that theory—like the Cartesian account of epistemology or any of the other examples cited by Danto as illustrating the general nature of philosophical thinking—is timelessly true. Unlike Hegel, analytical philosophers do not think in historicist terms.

What happened, then, between *The Transfiguration* and *After the End of Art* so that in the later book Hegel and Warhol become central figures? Observing that "I am likely today to take a more charitable view of substantial philosophies of history than I would have done in 1965, when my book was written in the late stages of high positivism," Danto rejects his earlier claim that such philosophies of history as Hegel's are in principle illegitimate.<sup>12</sup> Now he takes very seriously indeed some remarks which when presented in 1981 in *The Transfiguration* seemed of but marginal significance: "Not everything is possible at every time . . . certain artworks simply could not be inserted as artworks into certain periods of art history, though it is possible that objects identical to artworks could have been made at that period."<sup>13</sup> Only in retrospect, in light of the sustained attention given to Hegel and Warhol in *After the End of Art*, does this remark seem so important. (The phrase, "not everything is possible at every time" alludes to the historicist account of Heinrich Wölfflin, whose views are taken up in *After the End*.)

Set side by side, *The Transfiguration* and *After the End of Art* thus are books which illustrate Danto's view of indiscernibles. The same argument about the nature of art appears quite different when set in a new context. In moving his argument from a framework given by analytical philosophy to the perspective provided by an Hegelian historiography, Danto inevitably changes how that argument will be understood. What seems to have happened—this reconstruction of Danto's change of mind at least is consistent with both the obvious historical evidence and the account he presents in *After the End of Art*—was that he realized

11. More exactly, in *The Transfiguration* Warhol's *Brillo Box* is mentioned as an example on p. 44; and according to the index, "Hegel" appears on p. 86—but that is a minor error, for his name is not mentioned on that page.

12. *After the End*, 43.

13. *The Transfiguration*, 44.

Hegel's historicism was consistent with both his own view of historiography and his general inclinations as an analytical philosopher under one special condition: the end of art's history had already occurred.

More exactly, the development of Danto's aesthetics was a three-stage process. In 1964, inspired by an exhibition of *Brillo Box*, he published "The Artworld," an essay whose concerns were not immediately taken up by him; his aim then was to explain how such a banal object could be an artwork, a startling experience for an aesthetician.<sup>14</sup> When seventeen years later he finished *The Transfiguration*, he used that example to generate a general aesthetic theory, saying little in that book specifically about Warhol. Finally, after the 1980s—when he became an art critic—Danto repositioned his philosophical analysis, now refocusing attention on his starting point, the experience in 1964 of Warhol's art.

What really happened, I surmise, to transform the ahistorical analytical analysis of *The Transfiguration* into the quasi-Hegelian account of *After the End of Art* was that Danto's writing in the 1980s as an art critic led him to recognize that his abstract philosophical account provided a good explanation of what a great many people were then saying, that the history of art had ended. What was originally presented by Danto as a timelessly true analysis became transformed into a historical analysis of the 1980s; in this way it became clear that this theory had implications which in 1981 neither Danto nor anyone else grasped. The difference in tone between *The Transfiguration* and *After the End of Art* is immense. The former book deals with recognizably traditional aesthetic questions—the nature of art, its relation to philosophy, the analysis of metaphor; the later volume treats a variety of concerns of the working art critic—issues about the nature of the museum, the status of Clement Greenberg's art criticism, and the evaluation of particular art movements—not yet much discussed by aestheticians. Nothing in Danto's basic theory has changed, but now the implications of that account are understood in a new way, which now permits him to link his analysis of aesthetic issues to concerns in historiography.

What Warhol's *Brillo Box* shows, Danto argues, is that the history of art has ended. No one else interpreted Warhol's achievement in this way. One Marxist tradition praised Warhol for criticizing commodification in bourgeois culture; some admirers of the Abstract Expressionists, and many people who loved aesthetically pleasing art, hated him; and, more recently, his role as a gay man has begun to be explored. One reason that Warhol has become the most influential artist in the last half of the twentieth century is that so many challenging perspectives on his achievement are possible.<sup>15</sup> In this large literature Danto's account stands alone, for no one else claimed that Warhol's art advanced any philosophical thesis. As Danto himself notes, Warhol was not a bookish sort of person; no one else has identified him as a philosopher–painter.

14. *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), 571–584.

15. A useful survey of the literature appears in *The Critical Response to Andy Warhol*, ed. Alan R. Pratt (Westport, Conn., 1997).



In *After the End of Art* Danto (following in his independent way some earlier readers of Hegel) argues that art's history has ended, though history in general continues. How odd that Clement Greenberg, a Marxist, had a Kantian aesthetic theory, while Danto, an anti-Marxist, constructed a neo-Hegelian account.<sup>16</sup> Both Greenberg and Danto use ideas grounded, ultimately, in Hegel, but to very different effect; this shows how tricky are connections between the history of philosophy and the history of art-historical historiography. Recently Francis Fukuyama has made fashionable the idea that political history has essentially come to an end; but when at Bielefeld I presented a paper "Ernst Gombrich, Clement Greenberg, Arthur C. Danto: Narratology and Its Politics" taking up that claim, Danto declined to speculate one way or another about the political implications of his view of art history. The end of history, Fukuyama writes, "will mean the end . . . of all art that could be considered socially useful, and hence the descent of artistic activity into the empty formalism of the traditional Japanese arts."<sup>17</sup> Fukuyama's end of history thus also marks the end of art's history; but the converse need not be the case. Nothing said in Danto's published work (or our extensive discussions and personal correspondence) requires that he take any particular view of this thesis about the end of history as such. The special role he gives to *Brillo Box* is consistent with any number of views of political history; indeed, since Danto's analysis is an ontological thesis, it is hard to see how this view of art could have any equivalent in political theory. Whatever the merit of Fukuyama's arguments, they give no reason to support (or deny) Danto's claims.<sup>18</sup>

Danto has repeatedly expressed his debt to Hegel's aesthetics. But since Hegel himself appears to have thought both that art's history and history as such had come to an end, in ways which are connected, obviously he had a different conception from Danto. Still Danto does in *After the End of Art* and elsewhere appeal to the Hegelian idea of art coming to self-consciousness in order to explain the importance of Warhol—"to my mind the nearest thing to a philosophical genius the history of art has produced."<sup>19</sup> That may seem to the art critic an odd use of this Hegelian idea; as Danto himself notes in the full discussion of Clement Greenberg in *After the End of Art*, Greenberg appealed to this Hegelian conception of self-consciousness to explain the origin of modernism, identifying with Manet's modernism a moment in history which Danto links to Warhol. For a historicist like Hegel, who blurs the distinction between how the world is and how

16. Danto once told me that in the 1950s, he discussed Marxism at Columbia University, in lectures that attracted the attention of watchful FBI agents seeking political subversives, who were soon bored with his critical philosophical analysis.

17. *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992), 320.

18. Fukuyama's general view has real plausibility, even though many details of his account are oddly unconvincing. What has blocked serious consideration of this issue is the tendency of American academics to cling, still, to an obviously obsolete Marxist worldview; see my "Art Criticism and the Death of Marxism," *Leonardo* 30 (1997), 241-245.

19. Arthur C. Danto, *Encounters & Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (New York, 1990), 287.

it appears to be, identifying such a moment of self-consciousness is very important; for analytical philosophers, such historical concerns characteristically seem less important. After all, since Descartes discovered at one historical moment that dreams were indiscernible from waking life, and other philosophers at other moments identified the indiscernibles marking out the structures of action and ethics, why should we give any privileged role to what Warhol taught us about art in 1964? In any event, since Danto is a very lucid writer, and Hegel famously obscure, attempting to explicate Danto by appeal to Hegel seems an obviously wrongheaded way of proceeding.

The 1980s' accounts of the end of art's history so often discussed in the New York art world relied on no high-powered theorizing; they were responses to the *Zeitgeist* of a prosperous era when a small group of young artists whose merits appeared highly controversial were heavily promoted. Many people then felt that nothing especially new was happening. Everything that could be painted or sculpted had appeared, it seemed to them; and so novel art was but a recombination of what had come before. Sometimes this thesis was presented in a stronger form: nothing especially new could happen because everything interesting had been done. This essentially intuitive way of thinking both differs from Danto's analysis and yet could, I believe, be seen as giving it support. But here a briefly sketched historical perspective is necessary to understand the context of *After the End of Art*.

Before the era of Abstract Expressionism, there was little developed market in American art. Once the triumph of Jackson Pollock and his contemporaries showed that major art, work which museums everywhere competed to collect, was being made in this country, then inevitably there was great pressure to find equally interesting artists of the next generation. The pop artists, the minimalists, the feminists, the conceptual figures of the 1960s continued to make internationally significant art in New York. The development of a sophisticated support system—galleries, art journals, museums of contemporary art, critics, and collectors—devoted to such new art demanded, in turn, that highly significant artists continue to appear. I recall at the opening of a younger artist's exhibition in the late 1980s being shown an art history survey text discussing contemporary art, a book in which appeared color reproductions of paintings from this man's previous exhibition. This was what inevitably was happening when many people expected the tradition of ambitious American art to continue. Once Pollock and the other Abstract Expressionists had become canonical figures, and once their successors from the 1960s, in turn, had this role in the museums and the history books, then it was natural both to enjoy the good fortune of the American art world and to wonder how long this situation could continue.

A glance at the history of modern French art is suggestive here. Jacques-Louis David was succeeded by two very different, seemingly opposed figures, Ingres and Delacroix; they, in turn were followed by Manet, the Impressionists, and the post-Impressionists; and then by Picasso and Giacometti (Frenchmen by adop-

tion), Braque and Matisse. But when we get to the 1950s, it becomes hard to point to any French successors to these masters. Ultimately a tradition depends upon a surprisingly few individuals—a group of industrious second-rate artists do not constitute a tradition. Once a serious tradition gets going, people tend to expect it to continue, but this does not always happen.

Once artists could easily study in excellent reproductions the history of art everywhere, once contemporary art of all cultures was displayed in fully illustrated journals, once there were so very many artists working in New York, then it was not absurd to think that everything significant might have been done. When, therefore, in the early 1980s, it was not obvious who were the successors to then-distinguished famous mid-career figures—Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Mangold, Dorothea Rockburne, Robert Ryman, and others who already had received a great deal of attention—then it was not absurd to worry that perhaps the tradition of American art had been exhausted. Just as people enjoying the benefits of a rising stock market are uneasily aware that such economic trends are cyclical, so anyone in the art world with an even modestly self-conscious historical perspective would worry about whether important young artists would continue to appear. Some critics welcomed this expansion of the art market; others, critical of the obvious ties between attention given to such artists and commodification of artworks, were critical of this whole process. This situation produced odd bedfellows. Conservatives like Hilton Kramer and his fellow critics at *The New Criterion* agreed with Rosalind E. Krauss and her leftist colleagues at *October* about one thing: the 1980s were bad aesthetic times, with much grossly overrated art being made.

A very striking critical perspective on this situation appears in Douglas Crimp's influential essays, recently published as *On the Museum's Ruins*. "During the 1960s, painting's terminal condition finally seemed impossible to ignore. The symptoms were everywhere. . . . The dimension that had always resisted even painting's most dazzling feats of illusionism—time—now became the dimension in which artists staged their activities, as they embraced film, video, and performance."<sup>20</sup>

A large part of Crimp's concern is political—to continue to make paintings when photography has changed the very nature of art is, he thinks, politically reactionary. Crimp links this art market with the conservative national politics of the 1980s. When the politically critical art he admires is truly understood, he argues, "the end of painting will have been finally acknowledged."<sup>21</sup>

Writing as an art critic, I never accepted these dour views of the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> That much bad art was being displayed and sold gave no reason, I thought, to believe

20. With photographs by Louise Lawler (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 92-93, 105.

21. As Crimp and the other critics then associated with *October* must surely recognize today, whatever their intentions, the effect of their criticism was to promote artists they admired, some of whom—Cindy Sherman, Richard Serra—benefited greatly from the expanding art market. Such is the cunning of history.

22. A selection of my criticism published as *The Aesthete in the City: The Philosophy and Practice of American Abstract Painting in the 1980s* (University Park, Pa., 1994) includes some judgments I now question; but the basic view of this period remains convincing.

that the end of art's history was at hand. But widespread interest in this plausible-seeming pessimistic view helps explain why people in the art world were prepared to give attention to Danto's claims, and why he was able to transform the strictly philosophical arguments of *The Transfiguration* into the very different formulation of *After the End*. *The Transfiguration* would not have attracted any attention outside of the small world of academic aesthetics since art critics and artists have only a very little interest in the argumentation of academic aesthetics. The goal of *The Transfiguration* was to show how, contrary to the view of various followers of Wittgenstein, "art" could be defined and to demonstrate the consequences of this definition and the way in which this theory of art fitted within Danto's broader philosophy. Only when—in his art criticism and in his writings directed not just to philosophers but also to an art world audience—Danto turned the abstract analysis of *The Transfiguration* into the account of art's present situation in *After the End* did art critics have reason to look seriously at his work. Danto, it gradually became clear, was making claims about the present situation of art that deserved attention by everyone in the art world.

As a number of commentators have noted, it has to seem odd that *After the End* says so much about art criticism, the museum, and the evaluation of recent art, and so little about what would seem to be the central philosophical issue, the definition of art. About this task, *After the End* says:

*The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, in its effort to lay down a definition, hence chart the essence of art, did little better than come up with conditions (i) and (ii) as necessary for something having the status of art. To be a work of art is to be (i) about something and (ii) to embody its meaning. . . . my book ekes out two conditions, and I was (and am) insufficiently convinced that they were jointly sufficient. . . . But I did not know where to go next, and so ended the book.<sup>23</sup>

Insofar as all of the rest of Danto's analysis depends upon the adequacy of this definition, it may seem surprising that he has not returned to this point. This seeming omission may explain the oddly divided reception of *After the End*: philosophers, respectful of Danto's status as a philosopher, but mostly ignorant about the art world, worry about the details of this definition; people in the art world, uninterested in this philosophical issue, focus on the sociological implications of Danto's analysis.

What for the purposes of *History and Theory* matters about this change in the presentation of Danto's ideas was the way that the concerns of historiography entered his writings on aesthetic theory. Danto's abstract claim that artworks can be indiscernibles, visually identical with physical objects, becomes transformed into a historical theory about what had happened since 1964 when Warhol made one such artwork, *Brillo Box*. This sculpture identified explicitly the problem of indiscernibles because it is perceptually indistinguishable from the ordinary Brillo box in the grocery store, which is not an artwork. What defines an artwork, Warhol thus demonstrated, is not a thing's mere visual properties. In the proper

23. *After the End*, 195.

setting, given suitable theorizing, perhaps any kind of object whatsoever could be an artwork. This means that the modernist project is over, for there is nothing left that artists can do to advance this project. Hence the history of art has ended because no longer is it possible to make new sorts of artworks, and so we live in what Danto, here borrowing from Hegel's aesthetics, thought of as a posthistorical era. Appeal to Hegel's vision of history thus permitted Danto to engage the concerns of art historians as well as artists and art critics.

In *After the End of Art* Danto observes how ironical it was that his early essay "The Artworld" (1964) spawned a whole school of analysis, developed by the philosopher George Dickie and his followers, devoted to what became known as the Institutional Theory of Art. According to these theorists, what defined art depended upon the decisions made by authorities within the art world. This claim has nothing to do with Danto's views; he holds that what defines art is not such conventions, but the metaphysical considerations developed in *The Transfiguration*.

Analogously, it now should be observed, what was ironical about the art world's fascination with Danto's arguments is that they have little to do with the strictly philosophical merits of his work. Danto's own view—this point he has explained many times—is that the end of art's history means, simply, that since art can no longer develop, now all things are possible. He is not asserting or suggesting that the market in contemporary art is over-extended, but neither is he denying that. Nor does he advance any general view about the quality of contemporary art. His very general analysis does not, and cannot, offer any view on these parochial concerns. As Danto has been at pains to specify, his aesthetic theory is naturally associated with his general view, a way of thinking very familiar within analytical philosophy, that philosophy merely shows us how the world is, changing nothing in the world it interprets. His general aesthetic theory, Danto has observed, provides no clues about the particular judgments he makes as an art critic. Sometimes in the arts, we speak of an ending when no truly significant new figures emerge. Operas continue to be composed in Italy, but the tradition of Rossini, Donizetti and Verdi ended with Puccini. But Danto's essential thesis is not of this sort; he is making a metaphysical claim, not a judgment about the quality of recent art. Since an aesthetic theory must be general, it is compatible with all kinds of art; a critic's judgments deal with individual cases. And so, anyone who reads *After the End of Art* expecting that it will be making substantial claims about such a parochial concern as the situation of art in the 1980s is simply confused.

The slogan to which Danto's fine-tuned argumentation can be reduced, "the history of art has ended," has attracted many misunderstandings. It seems as if he is offering a sociological thesis, a claim about the merits of contemporary art; but really he is not, for such an ending of art's history is compatible with the appearance of excellent new artists; indeed, in his criticism, Danto has responded positively to many such figures. Often Danto suggests that the end of art's history may be a good thing for artists, in something like the way that the end of the cold-

war struggles between communism and capitalism was a good thing because it dramatically lessened the danger of nuclear war, and made it easier to solve regional conflicts, or like the end of history as we have known it in the arrival of communism, which is for Marx the genuine beginning of authentic labor.

Well, if that be the end of art's history, then that event does not have very much effect on everyday life in the art world. (The same could be said, presumably, about Hegel's view of the end of art history, which seemingly was a historical prophecy compatible with ongoing interest in art.) The end of the Venetian Republic meant that Venice ceased to be an independent state; the site depicted by Canaletto and Guardi continued to charm tourists, but that place now was incorporated into Italy. In this process, many lives did change. The end of such a political entity is unmistakable—disagreements arise, of course, in arguments about whether that ending was a good thing, and perhaps about whether such a state could again come to exist, as when recently some Northern Italians have proposed that their region secede from the rest of Italy. The end of Venice was a clearly defined historical moment. By contrast, the end of art's history is a bit harder to pick out. And yet, this rational reconstruction of the situation does not explain everything, for if this were the whole story, then *After the End* would add nothing to *The Transfiguration*.

One obvious critical question is that Danto's approach to historiography in *After the End of Art* is only in part Hegelian. Unlike Hegel, Danto speaks only of art's history, not of history in general; and this presumably means that art can achieve self-consciousness without the larger culture also reaching that endpoint. For Danto, speaking of self-consciousness in conjunction with *Brillo Box* is to say that Warhol taught us what kind of things artworks are, in the way that Descartes in his *Meditations* taught us what kinds of things dreams are, or other philosophers taught us the nature of action and knowledge. Art, actions, and knowledge always had their identities, the discovery of which occurred at some particular historical moment. Here Danto's general way of thinking seems quite un-Hegelian.

Danto, as we have seen, claims that now he is much more sympathetic to speculative histories like Hegel's than he was when he published *Analytical Philosophy of History*. But why does he say that when in fact *After the End* adopts a very limited Hegelianism? What in *Analytical Philosophy of History* worried Danto about speculative histories was their claim to be able to write complete narratives of the past, a claim Danto thought inconsistent with the basic nature of narrative itself and the sentences characteristic of it. So, to use one of his striking examples, no one witnessing Petrarch's ascent of Mount Ventoux could have said, "Petrarch is opening the Renaissance," for that judgment could only be made at a later date.<sup>24</sup> "What we don't know . . . is what the historians of the future are going to say about us. If we did, we could falsify their accounts. . . ." In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel seems to be writing just such a complete history of

24. *Analytical Philosophy of History*, 61, 108.

the present. He can do that because he believes that history has ended. Analogously, now that the history of art has ended, Danto thinks that we can write a complete history of art—for he knows how the story has ended.

When Braque and Picasso were painting their cubist pictures, no one could have known that in the 1950s Clement Greenberg would write, “Pollock’s 1946–1950 manner really took up Analytical Cubism from the point at which Picasso and Braque had left it when . . . they drew back from the utter abstractness for which Analytical Cubism seemed headed.”<sup>25</sup> But Danto thinks that no such limitation obtains regarding Warhol’s *Brillo Box*. Warhol can have no successors whose art will stand in relation to *Brillo Box* the way that Pollock stands, for Greenberg, in relation to Analytical Cubism. We cannot imagine, for example, a critic writing of Elizabeth Margaret, whose first show opens in 2018: “Liz’s 2018 manner really took up Pop Art from the point at which Warhol left it in 1964.” No critic can possibly make any such claim, says Danto, for there is no way that what Warhol did can be taken further. Warhol has gone beyond the modernist project—he has answered, once and for all, the question about what art is. Having demonstrated that there is nothing more that artists can further do, and hence that there is no future point in time in which art will develop further, art is, in this sense, over.

Formulating Danto’s claim in these terms raises real questions about the plausibility of his view that art’s history has ended. Suppose that we take as given, for the purposes of argument, Danto’s ontological thesis—Warhol’s *Brillo Box*, let us agree, defines once and for all the nature of (modern) art. Why then should we accept this as showing also that art’s history has ended? When Danto writes about such artists he admires as Robert Mangold, Sean Scully, Cindy Sherman, and Mark Tansey, he certainly demonstrates how they make art which looks different from anything made earlier. Scully, for example, for all of his immense admiration for Mark Rothko, makes paintings that appear quite different. Why confine art to the task of self-definition, to the quest to determine what art is? Even if *Brillo Box* definitely demonstrates the falsity of the modernist analysis, it does not follow that in the future art cannot undertake yet now unknowable quests. The attempts to represent the world or express the artist’s feelings were superseded by the modernist quest for self-definition. Perhaps in the future art will identify other such goals, in ways we cannot today predict. (This point is made by Michael Kelly in his essay in this volume.) And so, it would seem that accepting Danto’s ontological thesis is compatible with allowing that after Warhol artists continue to do new sorts of things. Perhaps this difficulty arises because Danto’s original ontological thesis, presented in *The Transfiguration*, has now become confused with the sociological claims presented in *After the End*. At any rate, since Danto himself has not found my present critical argument at all persuasive, obviously there is something that I (and some other critics) fail, as yet, to understand about his aesthetic theory.

25. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, 1961), 218.

Danto also got from Hegel the idea that the end of art history means that the distinction between art and philosophy has collapsed; art, it seems, since at least the 1880s, has been implicitly philosophical, in ways highlighted by the 1960s conceptual artists who, refusing to make objects deserving visual attention, presented verbal materials, sometimes including philosophical texts. No doubt there is a philosophical dimension to Warhol's work, as it is described by Danto, but it is hard to see why acknowledging this fact collapses the distinction between art and philosophy. *Brillo Box* (1964) was an artifact displayed in a gallery, "The Artworld" (1964) a text published in *The Journal of Philosophy*: they are distinct sorts of entities. Could Danto's essay become an artwork, or Warhol's artwork an essay in philosophy? There have been conceptual artists who displayed philosophy books, turning them into art; and there was in the 1970s one artist, Bruce Boice, who wrote about philosophical aesthetics. When I attempted to interest the then-editor of *Artforum* in my writings, I was told that Boice was that journal's ideal of an artist-philosopher. But none of these cases gives any reason to think that art now is, or is tending to become, a branch of philosophy.

Earlier I distinguished between the strictly philosophical thesis about the essence of art developed in *The Transfiguration*, and the sociological use of that analysis in *After the End*, which employs Hegel's historiography. Some of the problems I have discussed seem to arise because it is a little difficult to see how that more recent sociological analysis is consistent with Danto's earlier thesis. There always has been a rather dramatic difference between philosophy as practiced by philosophers and "philosophy" as it is understood by writers in the American art world. The great promise of *After the End* is that now a sophisticated philosophical account is accessible to the art world. My own sense is that because Danto's philosophical analysis is intimately bound up with the everyday concerns of the present-day American art world, it is too soon as yet to definitely evaluate his argument.

My present introduction is thus just that—an introduction to important issues which demand much further discussion. But something needs to be said in closing about Danto's own personality, for his personal style has influenced (and will continue to influence) the style of the argumentation about his ideas.

Most famous philosophers produce mere followers, pupils who offer commentary in the style of their master, elucidating points that he has not had the opportunity to discuss; such inevitably scholastic writing has little lasting value. Danto's greater human and philosophical achievement is to inspire genuine dialogue, to teach his readers to think through issues in ways that disagree with his. He has affected many people, and not just his pupils, in this way. When I was in Bielefeld, I was struck, as was everyone I talked to, by the good-natured discussion, and by the willingness of Danto and all the participants to consider a variety of points of view. Many of us were highly critical of Danto's claims, and he enjoyed very much debating with us. Few of us were willing to accept all of his claims; but no one had an equally pregnant alternative historiography of art his-



tory to propose. No one, I think, believed Danto's entire account, but everyone—of this I am sure—thought that his argument deserved passionate engaged discussion. For that all too brief period, we lived in something like that happy posthistorical era identified by Danto as characteristic of the present day art-world.<sup>26</sup>

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26. I thank Alexander Nehamas for the loan of some ideas; for attempting to explain perspectivism to me; and for facilitating a public discussion with Danto at Princeton University, when I was a visiting lecturer in the department of philosophy in February, 1998.