

THE END OF ART: A REAL PROBLEM OR NOT REALLY A PROBLEM?

HANS MAES

KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN, BELGIUM

In 1984, Arthur Danto wrote an article with the telling title ‘The End of Art.’ Just a few years earlier, Richard Rorty had declared the end of philosophy and Michel Foucault, the end of politics. A few years later, Francis Fukuyama was to declare the end of history. So, on the face of it, Danto’s thesis fits in nicely with the ‘endism’ that was popular in the 1980s.¹ In important ways, however, I believe it also stands out.

For instance, if you were to ask the average man whether history and politics came to an end in the 1980s, he would not know what you are talking about. ‘Of course history and politics did not end then,’ he would answer, ‘only philosophers who have lost all contact with the real world could come to such conclusions.’ By contrast, if you were to suggest that *art* came to an end a few decades ago, that suggestion would probably not fall on deaf ears. More than one, to say the least, would agree, for it is no big secret that the man in the street has a rather low opinion of contemporary art. Art-making is not the same as it used to be and numerous people think this is a real problem (and not just a pseudo-problem invented by some armchair philosopher).

Judging by some of his remarks in ‘The End of Art,’ one might think Danto to be one of those opponents of contemporary art, and champion of a wide felt nostalgic longing for the past. For example, he concludes his essay with an almost audible sigh, stating that ‘it has been an

¹ To be sure, Rorty already wrote about the end of philosophy in his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, published in 1979, though he thematised the end of Philosophy with a capital ‘P’ in *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, published in 1982. And Fukuyama’s book *The End of History and the Last Man* was published 1992, but in 1989 he already wrote an article entitled ‘The End of History?’

immense privilege to have lived in history'² and ever so often one finds him complaining about 'the dismal state of the art world'³ and artists creating 'subservient art'⁴ and 'works which lack the historical importance or meaning we have for a very long time come to expect.'⁵ As a motto for his text, moreover, he chose the following statement by Marius de Zayas: 'Art is dead. Its present movements are not at all indications of vitality; they are not even the convulsions of agony prior to death; they are the mechanical reflex actions of a corpse submitted to galvanic force.'⁶

Thus, on a cursory reading, Danto may seem the perfect philosophical representative for the malcontent of the man in the street. In reality, however, Danto is nothing of the kind.

Firstly, there is a marked difference between the disappointment usually expressed by people who do not appreciate contemporary art and Danto's disappointment in 'The End of Art.' A contrasting attitude towards modernism may explain this difference. Danto, on the one hand, always speaks with fascination and admiration of the modernist era in which artists were continuously transgressing and extending frontiers in search for a better understanding of art's essence. Warhol's discovery that anything, including a commonplace *Brillo Box*, could become art is described by Danto as the end point but also as the high point of that revolutionary period. After this discovery, there were no boundaries anymore to cross and hence no further steps to take towards greater artistic self-understanding. Artworks continued to be made, but the history of art came to a definitive halt. This is the principal claim of 'The End of Art' and, accordingly, the principal regret of its author seems to be that the exciting and pathbreaking progress of modernist art had come to an end in the late 1960s. People who dismiss contemporary art, on the other hand, usually do not like modernist art either and the discovery that anything can be art -- even a urinal or a *Brillo Box* -- is considered by most of them a low point rather than a high point. As a consequence, their greatest concern and regret seems to be that art has not yet

² Danto (1986, 115).

³ Danto (1986, 81).

⁴ Danto (1986, 115).

⁵ Danto (1986, 111).

⁶ Danto (1986, 81).

recovered from the crisis that had its origin in modernism.

Secondly, Danto's disappointment did not last long. In later writings he explicitly renounces his earlier pessimism and presents himself as an ardent advocate of contemporary art. In his book *After the End of Art*, Danto's aim is 'to show something of what it means to take pleasure in post-historical reality.'⁷ And in his book *The Madonna of the Future*, he comments on his famous thesis about the end of art: 'When I first wrote about this concept, I was somewhat depressed. [...] But now I have grown reconciled to the unlimited diversity of art. I marvel at the imaginativeness of artists in finding ways to convey meanings by the most untraditional of means. The art world is a model of a pluralistic society, in which all disfiguring barriers and boundaries have been thrown down.'⁸

So, Danto's 'artphilohistocritisophory'⁹ can certainly not be looked upon as an articulation, let alone a justification, of the unease and displeasure many people experience when confronted with contemporary art. Some will say that this is actually to his credit, but I tend to disagree. Danto, who calls himself an historicist, and rightly so, has always drawn attention to the great turning points in art history and has made painstaking efforts to explain what is distinctively new about modernism and 'post-historical reality.' Nonetheless, he has never offered an explanation for one of the most remarkable characteristics of the period that put an end to traditional art, namely the manifest and sharp division of public opinion since the end of the nineteenth century. For though some have welcomed the new art enthusiastically, countless others have utterly rejected it and unlike Danto, most of them are yet to renounce their pessimism. Now, since this relates to a fairly large number of people, one cannot just dismiss the issue, as Danto did in his own case, by saying that all these people are depressed. Surely they must have a point. Danto cannot account for it, however, and continues to paint a rather rosy picture of how things are ('Well, look around you. How wonderful it would be to believe that the pluralistic art world of the historical present is a harbinger of political things to come!'¹⁰).

⁷ Danto (1998, xiv).

⁸ Danto (2000, 430-431).

⁹ Danto (1990).

¹⁰ Danto (1998, 37).

To sum up, Danto's 'End of Art'-thesis has an initial appeal because it seems to indicate that there is a real problem, yet Danto himself tries to convince us of exactly the opposite: the end of art is not a problem at all.

I would like to place Danto's conviction under closer scrutiny. I wish to show that there are problematic aspects of contemporary art which are neglected by the author of *After the End of Art* and *The Madonna of the Future*. Naturally, this does not mean that those who have a black view of the art world are entirely correct. I only think that the rosy picture does not tell the whole story. To substantiate my point of view, I intend to focus upon three comparisons to be found in the books just mentioned. They are put forward by Danto to illuminate the situation before, at the time of, and after Warhol's milestone discovery. Although, as everyone knows, no comparison will hold water for very long, I believe these particular comparisons or analogies are faulty in a quite significant way.

(1) Danto equates Warhol's breakthrough in the visual arts with similar breakthroughs in music, theatre, and dance: 'I think of Warhol as having followed this line of investigation with greater conceptual imagination than anyone else, erasing false criteria at every step, until it began to be appreciated that there was nothing that could not be art. But that was happening everywhere at that time in the arts -- in dance, in theatre, in music.'¹¹

(2) He compares the artistic search leading up to Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, to the game of chess: 'Wittgenstein talks about a chess-player who puts a paper hat on a king, which of course, whatever meaning it has for him, means nothing under the rules of chess. So you can really take it off without anything happening. In the 1960s and beyond, it was discovered how many paper hats there were in art.'¹²

(3) The analogy between the artistic pluralism of the post-Warhol era and the political pluralism of a well-functioning democracy is definitely one of Danto's favourites (cf. supra).

By showing what is wrong with each of these comparisons, I intend to expose one or two weak points in Danto's argument and in so doing, place a finger on a sore spot of contemporary

¹¹ Danto (2000, 427).

¹² Danto (2000, 427).

art.

(1) Although the visual arts have always been the starting point for Danto, he often draws a parallel with other art forms, assuming the situation there, by extension, will be exactly the same. The passage quoted above was from ‘The Work of Art and the Historical Future,’ but it is easy to find other examples. In ‘Painting and the Pale of History’ he says: ‘I did not intend to give Warhol all the credit for this breakthrough to philosophy. It was taking place all across the art world.’¹³ And in ‘Three Decades after the End of Art’ the following statement is issued: ‘Warhol is but one of a group of artists to have made this profound discovery. The distinction between music and noise, between dance and movement, between literature and mere writing, which were coeval with Warhol’s breakthrough, parallel it in every way.’¹⁴

Do they really parallel it in every way? I have my doubts. In the 1960s Warhol and other visual artists ascertained that besides paintings and statues, other objects could just as well become art. Even performances, soundscapes and smells, which are not visible objects at all, were accepted after a while with the result that, ‘startling as it may seem, the concept of visuality itself was bumped from the concept of the visual arts’.¹⁵ So what was achieved was literally a breakthrough: visual artists broke through the boundaries of painting and sculpture and went beyond the visual until eventually there were no boundaries at all anymore. This transformation did not take place in other art forms. There have been experiments in, for example, literature, but these were always experiments with words or parts of words or texts.¹⁶ The alleged

¹³ Danto (1998, 113).

¹⁴ Danto (1998, 35).

¹⁵ Danto (2000, 426). In *After the End of Art*, he formulates it this way: ‘with the philosophical coming of age of art, visuality drops away, as little relevant to the essence of art as beauty proved to have been.’ (Danto, 1998, 16.)

¹⁶ A good example is ‘l’écriture automatique’ of surrealist writers like Andre Breton and Phillippe Soupault. Their experiments should not be compared to Warhol’s discovery that anything can be art, but rather to the formal experiments of abstract expressionism, i.e. experiments *within* the boundaries of painting. Danto himself seems to acknowledge this in some of his articles for *The Nation*. In his essay on Jackson Pollock, for instance, he states that ‘[Motherwell and Pollock] subscribed to the Surrealist concept of “psychic automatism” which they had learned from Matta and which Motherwell often spoke of as “the original creative principle.”’ (Danto, 2000, 345.) And in another essay he writes: ‘It was a recurrent theme in Robert Motherwell’s conversation no less than in his writing that the movement then indelibly designated Abstract Expressionism ought by rights to have been called Abstract Surrealism. This, he felt, was because of the role “psychic automatism” played in the kind of painting distinctive of the movement, as well as in the

transcendence of the boundaries of writing or reciting never took place. It was never proclaimed or believed that anything can be literature. A smell or a chair, for instance, cannot be literature, though obviously one could write a poem or a short story *about* those items. (In like manner, one could use certain smells in dance performances, but a smell itself cannot be a dance performance. And one could produce music with a chair, but a plain and simple chair, in itself, will never be considered as a piece of music.)

Furthermore, the culture of experiment did not come to dominate literature as it did dominate the visual arts. Thus, if one visits a bookstore today one will find novels, essays, poems, just as one would have one hundred years ago.¹⁷ If, on the other hand, one visits a museum of contemporary art, one will certainly not find the same stuff as one would have one hundred years ago. This may be one of the reasons why many people seem to have a profound distrust of the visual arts nowadays, but not so much of literature. To be sure, lots of people have their doubts about individual poems or novels, but they are rarely sceptical about literature as a whole. In any case, there seem to be sufficient grounds, *pace* Danto, to believe that the situation in literature (and music and dance) might *not* be the same and might not be as problematic as the situation in the visual arts.

(2) Just as there are different forms of art, there are different kinds of games. Jackstraws, poker, basketball, Pacman, chess, are examples that come to mind, each one having its own rules and its own specific presuppositions. You cannot play basketball, for instance, without a ball and some sort of basket. You cannot play cards, evidently, without cards. On the face of it, the same holds for separate art forms. They all have their own presuppositions. Music, for instance, presupposes the interplay of sound and silence. And you cannot produce literature without in some way using words or parts of words. Still, there seems to be an exception. The visual arts *used to have* certain presuppositions, but this changed during the second half of the past century. Before that time, roughly speaking, you could not be a visual artist without in some

explanation and justification of that painting.’ (Danto, 2000, 68.)

¹⁷ There has been an evolution, of course, but no radical change.

way applying paint to a surface or creating a sculpture. These and other prerequisites, however, were crossed off in the 1960s, until, eventually, there were none left. As Danto puts it: ‘artists, liberated from the burden of history, were free to make art in whatever way they wished, for any purposes they wished, or for no purposes at all.’¹⁸ ‘Everything is permitted’¹⁹ and ‘anything goes with anything, in any way at all.’²⁰

Returning to the analogy of a game, what could it possibly mean to play a game where everything is permitted and anything goes? Can one conceive of a game with no purposes at all, no presuppositions whatsoever, no rules? I am a little dubious about this. But I am sure that without rules and without a purpose, the concepts of winning or losing become meaningless. To put it more generally, without a rule or a criterion it makes no sense to distinguish between a right and wrong way of doing things. This, of course, is something we learned from Wittgenstein: ‘the test of whether a man’s actions are the application of a rule is not whether he can *formulate* it but whether it makes sense to distinguish between a right and a wrong way of doing things [...] Where that makes sense, then it must also make sense that he is applying a criterion in what he does even though he does not, and perhaps cannot, formulate that criterion.’²¹ And: ‘A mistake is a contravention of what is *established* as correct; as such, it must be *recognisable* as such a contravention. That is, if I make a mistake [...] other people must be able to point it out to me. If this is not so, I can do what I like and there is no external check on what I do; that is, nothing is established.’²²

According to Danto, everything is permitted in contemporary art. In other words, nothing is established as correct. As a consequence, it is impossible to make a mistake.²³ Yet, if it is impossible to make a mistake, it is equally impossible to do anything well. Indeed, opponents of contemporary art often seem to think that artists can’t do anything right, whereas proponents

¹⁸ Danto (1998, 15).

¹⁹ Danto (1998, 12).

²⁰ Danto (2003, 20).

²¹ Peter Winch on Wittgenstein’s interpretation of rule-governed behaviour in his famous book *The Idea of a Social Science and its relation to philosophy* (1990, 58).

²² Winch (1990, 32).

²³ As a matter of fact, many artists nowadays consider the exclamation ‘That is not art!’ a great compliment and a sure proof that what they are doing *is* art.

precisely seem to think that artists can do nothing wrong. I rather suspect that both attitudes are really symptoms of the same ‘disease’, namely the troubling fact that, in an art world without limits or rules, it makes no sense anymore to distinguish between a right and wrong way of doing things.²⁴

Many people believe this is not a healthy situation and one can hardly blame them. Take for instance the following testimony of a former artist explaining why he stopped painting in the 1960s: ‘everything was possible. [...] For me, that meant that it was all right, as an artist, to do whatever one wanted. It also meant that I lost interest in doing art and pretty much stopped.’²⁵ Elsewhere he says: ‘it became obvious to me that the tension had eased and that one could do anything without someone telling you “That is not art.” But from this point on, I realized that I lost interest because the tension was essential to my motivation and when that disappeared my motivation was gone as well.’²⁶ This former artist describes a shift of mind that numerous people will undoubtedly recognize and he seems to touch on a real problem in contemporary art. It might come as a surprise, therefore, to learn that the author of these words is no one less than Arthur Danto himself.

When I claimed that Danto could not account for the unease of the man in the street, this was not wholly true. In an unguarded moment -- giving an interview or in autobiographical statements -- he seems to acknowledge that there is something troublesome about the artistic revolutions of the past century. Still, he never takes into consideration that maybe the reason why he lost interest in the 1960s is similar to the reason why so many other people gave up around that time. His personal objections never find their way to the philosophical level. His confession of how he lost interest as an artist, for instance, appears in the same book as his philosophical laudation of the art world’s pluralism.

But before we turn to that theme, let’s take another look at the second comparison

²⁴ There are limits to what you can do in basketball and the best player is simply the one who knows best to exploit those limits (Goethe: ‘In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister’). By contrast, there are no limits to what you can do in a performance (or an installation) and this may be one of the reasons why it is so difficult to distinguish the best performance artist from an average one.

²⁵ Danto (1998, 123).

²⁶ Schneider (1997, 774).

mentioned at the outset. Danto compares art to a game, just as I did, and he calls on Wittgenstein, just as I did. Nevertheless, I have the feeling there is something not quite right with his particular analogy. Danto's suggestion is that artists in the 1960s were creative players who did a lot of revolutionary things, *but stayed within the rules of the game*. What rules? Are there then rules in contemporary art after all? Chess cannot be played without some sort of board with 64 squares and a king and a queen etc., but what are the presuppositions of contemporary art? Danto's analogy seems in direct conflict with his own characterization of the art world as a place where nothing is prohibited and anything goes.

(3) Opponents of contemporary art are frequently pigeon-holed as conservative and closed-minded, deeply afraid of what is radically new and different. Conversely, the present-day art world is often considered to be a model of open-mindedness, tolerance, multiculturalism, and freedom. Danto, for example, says literally that 'the art world is a model of a pluralistic society' and that he hopes that 'the pluralistic art world of the historical present is a harbinger of political things to come.' I cannot share his hopes. For what does that much-praised pluralism amount to? In Danto's own words: 'It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means.'²⁷ 'Everything is permitted.' (cf. supra) Well, I would not want to live in a society where everything is permitted and it does not matter any longer what you do. Of course, the throwing down of disfiguring barriers and discriminating boundaries should be encouraged at all times, but one must not throw down *all* barriers and boundaries. While freedom is a good thing, absolute freedom is a (dangerous) fantasy.

In Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* one finds a beautiful parable to illustrate this. The light dove, says Kant, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space.²⁸ As everyone knows, however, the dove would not fly faster without air resistance, it would simply drop dead. I wonder whether this has not already happened in contemporary art.

²⁷ Danto (1986, 115).

²⁸ Kant (1974, 51).

REFERENCES

- DANTO, A.C. 'The End of Art', *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- 'Introduction: Artphilohistocritisophory Today', *Encounters & Reflections. Art in the Historical Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- *After the End of Art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- *The Madonna of the Future. Essays in a Pluralistic Art World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- *The Abuse of Beauty. Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*. Chicago: Open Court, 2003.
- KANT, I. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. W. Weischedel (ed.) Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974.
- SCHNEIDER, H.J. 'Mit Pop wurde die Kunst philosophisch. Interview mit Arthur C. Danto', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 1997 (45:5): 773-784.
- WINCH, P. *The Idea of a Social Science and its relation to philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1990.