

PLAYING THE GAME AFTER THE END OF ART: COMMENTS FOR HANS MAES

KALLE PUOLAKKA

INSTITUTE FOR ART RESEARCH, DEPARTMENT OF AESTHETICS, UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

In his philosophy of art history, Arthur C. Danto claims that in the 1960's the master narrative of art had come to an end, and that we had reached the end of art. This conception has been widely considered, but also misunderstood. Hans Maes has recently discussed Danto's conception of the end of art in his article, where he clears some misconceptions about the thesis, but at the same time challenges Danto's analysis of contemporary art.¹

Maes makes two important claims against Danto. Firstly, he thinks that in discussing the end of art Danto falsely moves his analysis of the visual arts to concern other art forms, and Maes insists that the same kind of situation doesn't characterize other art forms. In this respect his criticism resembles that of Marcia Eaton.² Secondly, Maes believes that in insisting that anything can be a work of art in the contemporary art world, Danto loses the normative grip for separating bad works from good ones.³

Although some of Maes' comments are illuminating, it's my intention in this short article to point out some aspects of Danto's theory that I think he has overlooked. At the end, some of these questions go to the heart of Danto's theory, and cannot be dealt with sufficiently enough in this article. My criticism can be summarized easily: it has to do with the role the word 'anything'

¹ Maes (2004).

² Eaton, Marcia (1998, 311).

³ Maes (2004, 62).

plays in Danto's theory.

Maes notices that Danto has mildly changed his views on contemporary art since 1985 when he first introduced the end of art-thesis. That year his writing had a nostalgic ring to it, but his book *After the End of Art* (1997) tries to establish that we might even be entering a new golden age of art.⁴ This conclusion Maes finds much too 'rosy', and accuses Danto for not paying enough attention to the fact that many laymen have problems with taking contemporary art seriously.⁵

The hero for Danto is, of course, Andy Warhol, because it was with his art that art came to an end. Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* showed that there were no perceptual constraints on what a work of art had to look like, so the narrative of art came to an end, because there was nowhere it could have continued. Warhol is Danto's primary example, but lately he has stepped back from focusing exclusively on his art, and has tried to show that in the 60s similar tendencies were happening everywhere in the art world. More recently Danto has written: '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.'⁶

This is the point with which Maes has a problem, and he believes that the analogies that Danto draws are false. As an example he refers to dance and literature, and claims that, for example, the automatic writing of the surrealists shouldn't be seen as a kindred soul of Pop Art. Whereas Warhol and his companions tried to push the boundaries of art to cover all ordinary objects, in literature, according to Maes, 'it was never claimed or believed that *anything* can be literature'.⁷

I think Maes is right in this claim,⁸ but I have problems understanding what he wants to achieve with this. Is he just claiming that, as an empirical thesis, the end of art is false, or is he

⁴ Danto (1997, 217).

⁵ Maes (2004, 61).

⁶ Danto (1998, 35). Also cited in Maes (2004, 63).

⁷ Maes (2004, 63) my emphasis.

⁸ In the light of this it's actually a bit strange that Danto himself seems to concede that the revolution in literature wasn't as substantial as in the visual arts. But he doesn't develop this concession further. (Borradori 1994, 94-95)

suggesting that this false analogy shows there is something more fundamentally wrong in Danto's general theory? I will attempt to answer both of these questions.

Firstly, as an empirical claim it's a bit of a shame that Maes doesn't analyse music, because I believe that there truly were analogous tendencies with Warhol in the musical movements of the sixties. John Cage, who tried to push the boundaries of music by creating music out of silence and other ordinary sounds, best exemplifies this. Like Warhol, he wanted to make a 'transfiguration of the commonplace'. These similarities aren't just confined to the relationship between Warhol and Cage—the minimalist movement in music had a strong relationship both to the visual arts and experimental theatre.⁹ So, I think music makes Danto's generalisation much more warranted.

Maes also criticizes this alleged generality from the spectator's side by insisting that the revolution wasn't as large in some other art forms as in the visual arts, because 'if one visits a bookstore today one will find novels, essays, poems, just as one would have one hundred years ago'.¹⁰ In this sense a contemporary reader of Jane Austen would have no trouble in reading most of the novels published today. This is true concerning literature, but, again, I believe the case of music makes Danto's claim more warranted, because a contemporary of Mozart would have trouble in hearing Edgar Varese's or Harrison Birtwistle's pieces as music. For such a listener, they would be mere sounds, not meaningful artworks.

Now I will take up the second question. I don't know whether Maes realizes it, but it actually relates to a very fundamental aspect of Danto's theory. Noël Carroll has pointed out that the end of art-thesis is tightly intertwined with Danto's general philosophy of art.¹¹ The end of art means that anything can be art, what is of course analogous to the starting point of Danto's philosophy of art, namely the problem of indiscernibles. But this interconnectedness means that if the thesis is considered problematic, a re-evaluation of Danto's general theory is called for.¹² Now, in claiming that Danto's proposal lacks the generality he supposes it to have, can Maes

⁹ Potter (2000, 6-10).

¹⁰ Maes (2004, 64).

¹¹ Carroll (1993, 91-92).

¹² Carroll (1993, 96-99).

claim that there is something severely wrong with Danto's general theory?

This is a very problematic issue, and I can only make some preliminary points within the space of this article, but my claim is that this conclusion does not follow. The problem has to do with the way we construe the meaning of the word 'anything'. I don't find it central for Danto's philosophical starting point whether any object can be an artwork, but rather that it's impossible to say by perceptual means alone, whether we are dealing with a work of literature or, for example, with a newspaper article or a phonebook.¹³

The basic failure of the history of aesthetics, according to Danto, was that it took for granted that artworks could be clearly separated from other objects by perceptual means alone. I don't believe that Danto would go so far as to claim that an airplane could be a work of literature, as Maes argues, and the validity of his philosophical starting point doesn't need this possibility, because what suffices, in my view, for Danto's general argument is that one just cannot separate a work of literature by perceptual means alone. And Maes' examples don't deny this possibility. As Stein Haugom Olsen writes: 'The difference between literary works and other types of texts thus lies in their circumstances and not in the texts themselves.'¹⁴ This is also Danto's starting point.¹⁵

Maes' second criticism is related to his first, and has to do with the possibility of evaluating contemporary artworks. Following the idea of rule-following in Ludwig Wittgenstein's late philosophy, Maes draws an analogy between playing games and the production conditions of art. He lists a bunch of different games—poker, Pacman, and chess—and claims that having presuppositions, which are of course different for different games, unites all of these. They are defined by the rules of the game, without which it would be impossible to draw a line between correct and incorrect moves and between success and failure.

Maes also sees art as a form of life that is governed by different rules and norms. Like games, art also has its own presuppositions. As he writes: 'Music, for instance, presupposes the interplay of sound and silence. And you cannot produce literature without in some way using

¹³ Danto (1981, 136-137).

¹⁴ Olsen (1987, 23).

¹⁵ Cf. Danto (1981, 144-146).

words or parts of words.¹⁶

Maes claims that the acceptance of this Wittgensteinian analysis shows problems in Danto's end of art-thesis, because it would make general evaluations hollow. Danto claims that the current state of the art world is marked by pluralism in which anything can be a work of art and where 'everything is permitted'. As he himself nicely puts it, in the sixties 'artists, liberated from the burden of history, were free to make art whatever way they wished, for any purposes they wished, or for no purposes at all'.¹⁷

So, in a way, there are no more prerequisite rules for making art, but, ironically, this also means, according to Maes, that there is no way of separating good art from bad art. By supporting freedom Danto loses the normative grip. As Maes puts it in a nutshell: '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. Yet, if it is impossible to make a mistake, it is equally impossible to do anything at all,' and continues, 'In an art world without limits or rules, it makes no sense anymore to distinguish between a right and wrong way of doing things.'¹⁸

On the face of it Maes' criticism seems valid, but it has one central problem, which again has to do with the way we understand Danto's phrase 'anything'. Danto truly claims that any object can be a work of art, but this doesn't mean that an artwork can be any *kind* of object. Maes makes a mistake when he forgets that Danto is an essentialist. This means that, according to Danto's theory, an object can be perceptually of any kind, but this doesn't mean that its *nature* can be. In the *Transfiguration* Danto produces a long argument for establishing the defining features of a work of art,¹⁹ but lately he has put it in a nutshell by saying that artworks are 'embodied meanings'.²⁰ For something to be a work of art it has to possess meaning, so it isn't possible for any object to be a work art, because not every object possesses meaning.

Another thing Maes is forgetting is that Danto tries to define art without evaluative concepts;

¹⁶ Maes (2004, 64).

¹⁷ Danto (1997, 15). Also cited in Maes (2004, 64).

¹⁸ Maes (2004, 65).

¹⁹ Noël Carroll has made an excellent reconstruction of the definition in Carroll (1993, 80).

²⁰ Danto (2003, 139).

he believes that it was only an historical contingency that beauty was assimilated with art.²¹ Now, Danto could reply to Maes that anything can be an artwork, but this doesn't mean that every work has to be a good one. It is, of course, an important question whether it's sensible to define art this way.

These replies aren't, of course, conclusive arguments against Maes because it is another question whether Danto's definition gives the normative bite required. It seems that there are Wittgensteinian traits in Danto, because many formulations suggest that he sees the art world as a form of life, which is characterized by a peculiar theoretical atmosphere, the art world. This atmosphere not only defines what can be called art at a particular point of time, but I believe it also gives grounds for evaluating artworks. Works made under the same theoretical atmosphere can be quite easily compared because the same criteria of success can be applied to them. This seems to be something Maes is after, but he claims that Danto cannot produce the same kind of normative grip for the contemporary art world, where 'everything is permitted'.

It should be noted that Danto takes up this important question in *After the End of Art*, but his analysis cannot be considered very thorough. Danto concedes that evaluating is much harder than before, but he doesn't consider it impossible. What he is saying is that it's not possible to evaluate an artwork on the basis of its style or genre, but that each work has to be taken 'individually'. He writes: 'Needless to say this leaves the options of criticism open. It does not entail that art is equal and indifferently good. It just means that goodness and badness are not matters of belonging to the right style, or falling under the right manifesto.'²² A pluralistic artworld requires 'pluralistic art criticism', which 'takes each work up on its own terms, in terms of its causes, its meanings, its references, and how these are materially embodied and how they are to be understood'.²³ These remarks are, as you can see, quite vague.

Danto analyses the nature of possibility in the contemporary artworld in the last chapter of *After the End of Art*,²⁴ and he claims that there is a peculiar way in which everything is

²¹ Danto (1981, 107).

²² Danto (1997, 37).

²³ Danto (1997, 150).

²⁴ See especially Danto (1997, 198-200).

possible, but at the same time that some things are not possible. For Danto this relates to the question, what is the relationship of contemporary art to the history of art? Everything is possible in the sense that it's nowadays possible to paint like in the Renaissance, like Rembrandt, or like the Cubists, but what is not possible is that we can't relate to these forms as those who lived through them, because our current theoretical atmosphere underdetermines our relationship to them. Danto writes: 'The sense in which everything is possible is that in which all forms are ours. The sense in which everything is not possible is that we must still relate to them in our way.'²⁵ I think this also relates to Danto's view on great contemporary art, because he seems to love the work of artists who wittily use the material of art history to make artworks for our present concerns—these include Russell Connor and the artist pair Komar & Melamid.²⁶

I have overlooked many interesting comments that Maes makes in his article, especially relating to the production conditions of the different arts. I also believe that Danto dodges many important sociological questions in his account of contemporary art, but the consideration of these questions must be dealt with elsewhere.

²⁵ Danto (1997, 198).

²⁶ Danto (1997, 207-214).

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