

Columbia Classics in Philosophy

Columbia Classics in Philosophy celebrates the longstanding tradition of publishing novel and influential works in philosophy.

The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art

Arthur C. Danto

Foreword by Jonathan Gilmore

Foreword

Jonathan Gilmore

THE NINE ESSAYS collected in this book are written on different topics for different occasions, but they exhibit and, from one to the other, develop a shared theme: the philosophy of art history. This form of inquiry seeks to explain not so much the nature of art at any given point in its history but why art has a history at all. In what sense, in other words, does art history exhibit an internal shape or structure, such that later art does not follow earlier only chronologically but developmentally, feeding into the realization of some overarching and defining goal? This sort of question was once at the center of philosophical thought about the arts in, for example, Hegel's grand vision of art as but one stage in the teleological progress of Spirit toward an adequate form of self-knowledge. And such an internal artistic evolution, once extracted from the larger world-historical narrative of which for Hegel it was only a chapter, was a central theoretical problem and premise in the foundation of the scholarly discipline of art history. So Alois Riegl described how an artwork's historically specific technique and materials served only as negative factors influencing how its *kunstwollen*, or "inner determination," is realized; and Heinrich Wölfflin construed art as "a form working

itself out inwardly," relegating an artist's social context to the status of only subsidiary causes that may have encouraged or frustrated a visual tradition's autonomous development along its own trajectory.¹ But just as later art historians descended from such dizzying heights of theoretical speculation to redirect their emerging field to the more historically grounded concerns of influence and attribution, source and technique—sequestering until recently such philosophically minded forbearers within the safe confines of art historiographic scholarship—so later philosophers of art largely dispensed with such speculative thought, dismissing it as metaphysical afflatus, and traded in speculation about the meaning of history for analysis of the meaning of terms.

In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto's major work on the concept of art, he proposed a definition of art adumbrated as a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions.² Where this theory departed from prevailing forms of conceptual analysis (including that of Danto's earlier work in the philosophy of action, knowledge, and history) was that built into one of its conditions was the recognition that the theory's object is constituted in different ways in different times. That is, Danto argued both that a work of art is made possible by a theory of art indexed to a particular historical moment and that it is a partial function of an interpretation limited by historical possibility (the latter point given specification in this volume's "The Appreciation and Interpretation of Works of Art."). So even two manifestly identical objects may be ontologically distinct, one a work of art and the other not, where the difference is explained by the different theories of art embedded in historical contexts from the objects emerge. In this theory, an artwork is constituted in relation to an interpretation; the interpretation does not, that is, come into play only after the fully formed artwork arrives. Both in terms of the interpretations that constitute them and the theories that make them possible, artworks have an ineliminable historical dimension. Thus, Danto's definition is both essentialist and historicist: two modes of understanding often thought to distinguish contrary kinds of theories are, in Danto's philosophy of art, conjoined.

But in recognizing that history plays a constitutive role in his definition of art, Danto was led back to one of those grand questions whose type the analytic philosophy of art had foresworn, one that is perhaps not far from the kind whose philosophical legitimacy he had specifically argued against in his *Analytic Philosophy of History*.³ This was the question of whether, in addition to there being an external connection among works of art, each one in Danto's theory having an ineliminable historical dimension, there might be an internal connection as well: a narrative-like development that unfolds from work to work, movement to movement, or period to period. It is specifically with reference to the development of a genuine philosophy of art that art exhibits an internal history, one that "The End of Art" describes as coming to a close. The following essays are about many philosophical questions concerning the arts—autonomy, beauty, politics, interpretation, expression, embodiment, and style—but Danto's philosophy of art history informs them all.

It is a feature of an internal development—where an ending is in a sense contained within a beginning—that either terminus of the development says something about the nature of what develops between them. "The End of Art" treats the philosophy that is revealed by art when it reaches its historical end; "The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art" treats the philosophy that shapes the nature of art in its historical beginnings. For Hegel the history of the world is coextensive with the history of the dialectical progress of consciousness, or Spirit, in coming to know itself. The end of this history arrives when Spirit, which has been embodied in human culture and institutions throughout its progress, is no longer self-alienated by misconceptions of its proper nature but recognizes itself *in* itself. When Hegel spoke of the "end of art" he meant that art had reached its limits insofar as it stood as a cognitive vehicle by which Spirit's self-knowledge could progress, ceding that role to religion and then philosophy. This was often treated by those Hegel influenced as proclaiming a falling-off of artistic quality, but this is far from Hegel's view. The end of art is for Hegel only the end of art's capacity to continue to serve as an adequate source for Spirit's self-reflection,

being too bound up with material matters and sensuous presentation to achieve the purely conceptual form that the more advanced state of Spirit's knowledge requires. Art, after this end, is "set free," meaning not that it stops being produced but that it no longer carries the burden of being the principle organizing mode of Spirit's self-consciousness.

Danto's approach to history is unabashedly Hegelian. But, unlike Hegel's metaphysical vision, Danto's is an empirical thesis. That is, his thesis rests not on a view of what history, and thus art history, amounts to but on the attribution of certain projects to artists in the past that admitted of progressive development toward a common goal. He has recently described his view as proclaiming "that a certain kind of closure had occurred in the historical development of art, that an era of astonishing creativity lasting perhaps six centuries in the West had come to an end."⁴ This history covered two distinct episodes: one corresponds to the progressive attainment of painterly realism, a Renaissance model of art associated with Giorgio Vasari; the other corresponds to the progressive, self-reflexive attempt of art to identify its essential conditions, a modernist model of art that Clement Greenberg proposed.

Vasari, construing art as representational, sees it getting better and better over time at the 'conquest of visual appearance.' That narrative ended for painting when moving pictures proved far better able to depict reality than painting could. Modernism began by asking what painting should do in the light of that? And it began to probe its own identity. Greenberg defined a new narrative in terms of an ascent to the identifying conditions of the art. And he found this in the material conditions of the medium. Greenberg's narrative . . . comes to an end with Pop. . . . It came to an end when art came to an end, when art, as it were, recognized there was no special way a work of art had to be.⁵

Although the development of art in the earlier period may be explained by its internalization of a theory of verisimilitude and the development of art in the later period by its internalization of a theory of medium specificity, neither succeeded in being a genuinely adequate definition of art. But in nominating themselves

as candidates for a theory of art, however nullified by counterexamples of subsequent art history, such theories do occupy two moments in the progress, as Danto understands it, toward realizing a successful definition of what art essentially is.

A crucial element in Hegel's historical scheme was that he saw not only the means or genres of artistic representation as exhibiting a progressive developmental history but the *content* of that representation—an account of the nature of Spirit—as admitting a development as well. So it is not that early on a fully realized notion of Spirit is unclearly expressed because of a too-primitive technique; rather, the understanding that Spirit has of itself, in its early stages, is itself inchoate.

Likewise, in Danto's view, the philosophical self-consciousness of art developed along with the modes of representing it. Only with the arrival of such things as Pop and Fluxus, the music of John Cage, and the dance of Merce Cunningham—art that takes as its substance everyday objects, sounds, or actions—does the question of the nature of art get put into its proper form, as a question of how one thing can be a work of art and another not, when the two are in their manifest properties indiscernible. Greenberg saw this indiscernability as a sign of the art's failure, saying of minimalism, for example, that "a kind of art nearer the condition of non-art could not be envisaged."⁶ Danto, however, saw this moment as art's triumph, when it finally realized its own philosophy, embodying, that is, a nearly complete theory of what art is. Danto has suggested that all philosophical problems revolve around such indiscernible pairs, whether the individual questions are concerned with the difference between actions and involuntary movements that look the same; with dream life and waking life, where nothing internal to the experience tells one to which order it belongs; with the *Republic's* question of the advantage in being just over getting away with only appearing so; and so on.⁷ In Danto's view it was finally art itself, not industrious armchair aestheticians, that put the central philosophical question about art in the right form. But while the question What is art? reaches its most perspicuous expression in such works as Warhol's *Brillo Box*, Danto thinks that in such works art has

reached a limit in how far toward providing a definition of itself it can go. There can be no more historical development of art in these terms because now that the question of art is put in its proper form, art is not the proper sort of practice typified by the theoretical and abstract reasoning that could provide an answer, but philosophical reflection is. This does not mean, as is often misunderstood by Danto's critics, that art becomes philosophy. ("My thought was not that art henceforward would just be philosophy, in a deflected form. It was rather that, having raised from within itself and as a matter of historical inevitability, the question of its own nature in philosophical form, art had gone as far as it could go in this direction.")⁸ Rather, it is that art after this ending no longer plays a role in generating its own definition. There can be developments of art after the end of art, but no *essential* development, that is, no more progress in art's pursuit of an adequate self-definition.

Danto is aware, of course, that this kind of claim to witness the end of art has a tradition of its own: whether that meant that art had reached its zenith, as in Vasari's lauding of Michelangelo as marking "the perfection of art"; its nadir, as in Hans Sedlmayr's scornful charge that what was once an organic whole has now deteriorated into "stylistic chaos"; its political obsolescence, as in Berlin Dada's "Kunst ist tot"; or its exhaustion, as in Donald Judd's remarks on painting: "A form can be used only in so many ways. The rectangular plane is given a life span. The simplicity required to emphasize the rectangle limits the arrangements possible within it."⁹

Danto's theory shares with these kinds of claims an apparent structural similarity in which each recognition of art's end is internally connected to a kind of classificatory or conceptual definition of what art is. The difference is that in Danto's theory, the question of what is art has been the engine of art's development toward its end, an end that consists in the emergence of, to the extent possible within its own limits, a definition of art by which its own history can be understood. So the history of art is the history of the philosophy of art as well.

What is striking about Danto's writing is how substantial the relationship is between his philosophy and the art contemporary to it. It is not just that the range and concreteness of examples give a vividness to his discussions—a kind of flesh to spirit—not often found in Anglo-American philosophy but that his essays can be read as much as interventions in contemporary art-world concerns as for the abstract philosophical claims they advance. But here misunderstandings can arise, for the idea that art, or at least painting, had come to an end was very much in the air when Danto's essay was written, and he has acknowledged the period's "bad aesthetic times."¹⁰ But in others' writings such a pronouncement was generally offered less as a historical claim than as an evaluative criticism of what art had become. Danto may have shared the critical judgment of the art that provoked such pronouncements of its death, but it would have been consistent with his thesis, at the moment he propounded it, if art had been flourishing. For Danto's is not a theory of contemporary art so much as a theory of art the discovery of which was made possible by contemporary art. It may have taken the 1960s' extraordinary demolition of the boundaries thought to limit the terrain of art to make possible the kind of generality of application a philosophical theory requires, but the theory was in principle available to philosophers of art of earlier times, even the great speculative philosophers for whom the definition of art was not a question about concepts but about art's relationship to truth, humanity, and the divine. And it is a marvelous irony that Danto's philosophical vision of art history could be generated from a range of contemporary artistic paradigms whose pared-down aesthetic was motivated in part by an antipathy to precisely the exalted view of art that those speculative philosophers proposed. Indeed, allowing for differences in language and philosophical style, the central claims of Danto's philosophy of art history would be recognizable as philosophy to the great German philosophical tradition of Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche in a way that the art that serves as examples in his theory, as art, could not.¹¹

It should be noted that Danto's examples play distinct roles in his philosophy of art and philosophy of art history. In the first, a work such as Warhol's *Brillo Box* serves to advance a theory of art that, if true, applies no more nor less to *Brillo Box* than to any other instance of art, past or contemporary, even though works that have ordinary objects as indiscernible twins lend themselves to a better philosophical exposition. In the philosophy of art history, however, the particular works that Danto appeals to do have an internal connection to the philosophy he advances: for there they function not as examples of art so much as parts of art history, and where in that history they arrive, with what sort of content, and made possible by what sort of theory, serve as the empirical phenomena to which Danto's historical narrative applies. Baroque ceiling paintings and minimalist squares are in equal measure instances of art, but it matters for a philosophy of art history in what temporal order they emerge. In grounding his thought in the warp and weft of history, Danto initiated a revolution in philosophical thinking about the arts—a move from the predicable hypothetical examples that, while designed to probe the limits of art, always ran short of the art world's own answer to what art could be, toward a form of analysis that much more closely tracked the actual historical explanation of its objects, their meaning and identity. This made it possible for the philosophy of art to advance in ways the philosophy of science had once Thomas Kuhn and others showed the philosophical payoff of attending to science's history in trying to understand its nature: asking not just about the structure of science but the structure of its history.

If the above account describes the state of the philosophy of art today, the title essay of this volume describes philosophy and art in its Socratic and Platonic beginnings. There Danto identifies two prevailing perspectives on art: one, that art is dangerous and thus subject to political censorship or control, and the other, that art exists at several removes from ordinary reality, impotent to effect any meaningful change in the human world. These two ways of understanding art—really, two charges laid at art's door—seem contradictory, he writes, until one realizes that the second is a

philosophical response to the first. That is, in a "kind of warfare between philosophy and art," philosophy sees art as a rival, as a challenger to the supremacy of reason over the minds of men. Thus Danto describes the philosophy advanced in book 10 of the *Republic* that art is mimesis or in the *Ion* that the artist lacks knowledge of what he does—"his powers being not those of reason but of darker and more confused forces"—as components of a generally disabling theory of art, designed not so much to come to terms with the essence of art as to neutralize its power through metaphysical exile, denying art causal efficacy or epistemic validity in the real world. And the history of aesthetics, in Danto's view, continues this disenfranchisement, whether in the Kantian ephemerization of art as an object of disinterested judgment, outside the realm of human practical and political concerns, or in the Hegelian "takeover" of art, in which it is demoted as an inadequate form of philosophy.¹² In "Art and Disturbance," Danto describes how some artists, largely in performance art, seek to pierce the protective membranes these theories of artistic autonomy and aestheticization set up, precisely by employing such things as blood, nudity, actual pain, or real danger in their art, to which one must respond in a way continuous with how one responds to them outside of art as well. Although sharing the conceptual self-reflective sophistication of art in the modern period, such art suggests an effort to reconnect with the kind of power art had in the medieval period and in the orgiastic Dionysiac ritual that Nietzsche describes as a precursor to classical tragedy, in which the saint or god is not simply symbolized by the art, but present within it. And this power of art, or the perception of it, Danto writes, "was one of the things philosophers may have been afraid of when they turned to the ephemerization of art as a matter of theory" (this volume, 128).

Danto intends his archeology of these attitudes toward art to go some way toward their undoing, like a therapeutic diagnosis that in itself serves as a cure. But he is concerned not with the actual historical or, say, statistical question of whether, in Auden's words, "poetry makes nothing happen," but with an explanation of why philosophy has made that claim a metaphysical tenet of

its powerfully disenfranchising theories. That is, although the essay is about a view of art generated by philosophy and subsequently taken up as internal to art's own self-understanding, it is also about how philosophy, through that characterization of art, understands itself. For if philosophy propounded a disenfranchising theory of art in arriving at its own self-understanding, what happens to that self-understanding when that theory of art it depended upon no longer seems legitimate? Indeed, although Danto does not countenance the proposal that philosophy and literature are, in the way they relate to reality, assimilable as just two genres of *écriture* (a theme taken up in this volume's "Philosophy as/and/of Literature"), he does describe art's and philosophy's self-conceptions as sufficiently related to each other that his theory of the posthistorical nature of art cannot but suggest that some theory of the posthistorical nature of philosophy might also be required.

It is perhaps ironic that, in telling the story of art along Hegelian lines, Danto ends up, like Hegel, telling the story of philosophy as well, of its perambulations through various misconceptions such as in high positivism, under which the same operation of ephemeralization that philosophy applies to art—making it out to be either a sham form of knowledge or an inferior one—is applied to philosophy vis à vis science in turn. Here, for art to emerge from its philosophical misconception might be one step on the way to philosophy forming a more adequate conception of itself, a thought not far from Hegel's comment that after its end, "Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is."¹³ However philosophy in general may conceive of itself today, the vision Danto offers of the philosophy of art is a glorious one. Proposing in "Philosophizing Literature" that a re-enfranchisement of art will mean a revision of philosophy's own self conception, he concludes, "On my view the philosophy of art is the *heart* of philosophy" (this volume, 169). If an earlier generation of philosophers sought to show that the philosophy of art was, at bottom, but a set of problems ultimately assimilable to ordinary philosophical inquiry in epistemology, logic, metaphysics,

and mind, Danto showed that the most compelling questions in art concerned not the similarity or identity between art and everything else, but the *differences*.

Notes

1. Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901; reprint, Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 1985); Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: the Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, 7th ed. (1915; reprint, New York: Dover, 1950), 14.
2. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).
3. In arguing against what he calls "substantive philosophy of history," Danto writes that such theorists try "to see events as having meaning in the context of an historical whole which resembles an artistic whole, but, in this case, the whole in question is the whole of history, compassing past, present, and future." But, unlike the way a person can see the significance of one event within a fictional story when he has the whole of that story at hand, "the philosopher of history does not have before him the whole of history. He has at best a fragment—the whole past" *Narration and Knowledge: Including the Integral Text of Analytical Philosophy of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 8.
4. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 21.
5. Danto, *After the End of Art*, 125.
6. Clement Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture" (1967), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 254.
7. See Danto's *Connections to the World: The Basic Concepts of Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).
8. Arthur C. Danto, "Responses and Replies," in *Danto and His Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 212.
9. Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* no. 8 (1965): 74–82. See the discussion of such internal narratives of art history in Jonathan Gilmore, *The Life of a Style: Beginnings and Endings in the Narrative History of Art* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000).
10. Arthur C. Danto, "Bad Aesthetic Times," in *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990).

11. Except, perhaps, as a kind of literary metaphor, as in what Danto describes in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* as Kierkegaard's imagining of the Red Sea painted as a red square.
12. Danto takes up the theme of the deforming effect of such aesthetic distancing on our understanding of art in *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (New York: Open Court, 2003).
13. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 11.

Bibliography and Further Reading

- Belting, Hans. *The End of the History of Art*. Trans. Christopher S. Wood. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Carrier, David. *Artwriting*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987.
- Carroll, Noël. "Essence, Expression, and History: Arthur Danto's Philosophy of Art." In *Danto and His Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins, 79–106. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993.
- Danto, Arthur C. *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*. New York: Open Court, 2003.
- . *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- . "Approaching the End of Art." In *The State of the Art*, 202–18. New York: Prentice Hall, 1987.
- . "Art After the End of Art." In *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, 321–33. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994.
- . "Bad Aesthetic Times." In *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present*, 297–312. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990.
- . *Connections to the World: The Basic Concepts of Philosophy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989.
- . *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990.
- . "Learning to Live with Pluralism." In *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, 217–31. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992.
- . *Narration and Knowledge: Including the Integral Text of Analytical Philosophy of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- . "Narrative and Style." In *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, 233–48. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992.

- . "Narratives and the End of Art." In *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present*, 331–45. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990.
- . "Responses and Replies" in *Danto and His Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins, 193–216. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993.
- . "The Shape of Artistic Pasts: East and West." In *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, 115–29. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992.
- . *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Gilmore, Jonathan. *The Life of a Style: Beginnings and Endings in the Narrative History of Art*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000.
- Goehr, Lydia. "Art and Politics." In *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson, 471–85. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Greenberg, Clement. *The Collected Essays and Criticism*. 4 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986–93.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Trans. T. M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Herwitz, Daniel. *Making Theory/Constructing Art: On the Authority of the Avant-Garde*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Judd, Donald. "Specific Objects." *Arts Yearbook* no. 8. 1965: 74–82.
- Riegl, Alois. *Late Roman Art Industry*. 1901. Reprint, Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 1985.
- Wölfflin, Heinrich. *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*. 7th ed. 1915. Reprint, New York: Dover, 1950.