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THE END OF ART: A PHILOSOPHICAL DEFENSE.

ARTHUR C. DANTO¹

ABSTRACT

This essay constructs philosophical defenses against criticisms of my theory of the end of art. These have to do with the definition of art; the concept of artistic quality; the role of aesthetics; the relationship between philosophy and art; how to answer the question “But is it art?”; the difference between the end of art and “the death of painting”; historical imagination and the future; the method of using indiscernible counterparts, like Warhol’s *Brillo Box* and the Brillo cartons it resembles; the logic of imitation—and the differences between Hegel’s views on the end of art and mine. These defenses amplify and fortify the thesis of the end of art as set forth in my *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (1997).

For the most part, historical narratives do not belong to the events they transcribe, even if their writers in fact were part of them. To be sure, one writes a narrative only when something is felt to have come to an end—otherwise one is writing a kind of diary of events, never certain of what will belong to the final narrative and what will not. Still, the narrative itself is external to what it transcribes: otherwise a further narrative must be written which includes the writing of the first narrative among the events narrated—and this can run to infinity. By contrast, I have the most vivid sense that *After the End of Art* belongs to the same history that it analyzes, as if it, itself, is that history’s end—a perhaps premature ascent to philosophical consciousness of the art movements that are its subject. I know, from his great commentator, Alexandre Kojève,² that Hegel saw himself situated in the same history of which he wrote the philosophy, as if the ascent to philosophical consciousness in his narrative was the end of that (of all) history. History, as he saw it, ended in the recognition that all were free—and how could there be history after that? Things would happen, of course, and freedom had to be fought for and preserved. But there would be no further narrative of the sort the history of freedom exemplified, but simply a vast postscript of free individual lives, as when, the war over, those who participated in it are scattered to pursue their personal ends. That was, with qualification, the same narrative vision Marx and Engels proposed—an end of history when class conflicts had been

1. I do not in these endnotes cite the papers I discuss, as they all appear in this issue of *History and Theory*.

2. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, transl. James H. Nichols (Ithaca, N. Y., 1980), 34-35.

definitively resolved, leaving the survivors to practice hunting or fishing or literary criticism as they wished, in a world of *fay ce que voudras*. But in an immeasurably more modest but similar way, the claim that art history is at an end could have been the end of art history—a declaration of artistic freedom, and hence the impossibility of any further large narrative. If everyone goes off in different directions, there is no longer *a* direction toward which a narrative can point. It is a wholesale case of living happily ever after. And that, I have claimed, is the state of the art world after the end of art.

I know that without certain transformations in artistic practice, a philosophy such as mine would have been unthinkable, so that my philosophy of art history is necessarily different from what I might have achieved had I written philosophically about art when abstract expressionism was at the flood, or cubism or futurism, or impressionism or neo-classicism. I hold myself fortunate to have lived through the sequence of artistic styles which culminated in pop art and minimalism, and to have learned more from what I saw in New York galleries in the 1960s than I possibly could have learned from studying aesthetics, based, as the latter inevitably must be, on earlier artistic styles. And yet I do not feel that the philosophy of art I developed both in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* and *After the End of Art* was only relevant to the art that occasioned it. I did not, for example, as if writing a manifesto, declare that pop art was what the history of art had been stumbling toward, its *telos* and fulfillment. No: pop art and minimalism made plain the immediate promise of a radical pluralism, of which they of course could be part if someone cared to pursue them—but with no greater right than realism, surrealism, performance, installation, cave art, or folk art or whatever. My aim has been essentialist—to find a definition of art everywhere and always true. Essentialism and historicism are widely regarded as antithetical, whereas I see them not only as compatible but complicated with one another, at least in the case of art. It is the very fact, I believe, that there is an essence of art that makes artistic pluralism a possibility. But that means that art's essence cannot be identified with any of its instances, each of which must embody that essence, however little they resemble one another. What gave essentialism a bad name was precisely such an identification, as in the case of Ad Reinhardt or Clement Greenberg. What made essentialism *seem* impossible was the condition of ultimate pluralism, since works of art had outwardly so little in common. My contribution was to make plain that only when these extreme differences were available could one see the possibility of a single, universal concept.

Such were among the extravagant theses I found myself defending at the remarkably intense discussions which took place in the author's colloquium organized for the *Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Forschung* in Bielefeld by Prof. Dr. Karlheinz Lüdeking, of the Hochschule der Bildenden Kunst in Nuremberg, and Dr. Oliver Scholz, of the Frei Universität Berlin. Lüdeking and Scholz made a radical departure from academic protocol—a paper, a commentary, a response to the commentary, and questions from the floor in the remaining few minutes. Instead, they asked for two fifteen-minute presentations to begin each section,

leaving two and a half hours for the give and take carried forward by the more extended papers printed here. In candor, the first session was so intense that I wondered what there could be left to say. But in fact the intensity was—well—intensified through the remaining sessions, as members of the wider Bielefeld philosophical community joined the discourse. It is as a monument to these marvelous interchanges that David Carrier invited the participants to move the discussion on to a different plane—and, thanking everyone involved, I would like, within my powers, to respond to the challenging essays that have resulted. The colloquium was not so much an honor as an education.

I. THE DEFINITION OF ART

By *essence* I mean a real definition, of the old-fashioned kind, laying out the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to fall under a concept. The main effort of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*³ was to provide a fragment of a real definition for art. This was in no sense a mere philosophical exercise. It was, rather, a response to an urgency in the art world of the mid-1960s. The prevailing wisdom regarding the definition of art, based on a thesis of Wittgenstein, was that there can be no definition of art, since no single property or set of properties was exhibited by the class of artworks, as can be verified when we try to find it. But neither is a definition really needed—for we all are able to pick the artworks out of a set of objects, leaving the non-artworks behind. And clearly we cannot account for our ability to do this by appeal to a definition, since there is and can be none. What we have at best is a family-resemblance class of things, among which there are partial but only partial resemblances.

In the mid-1960s, however, it was no longer clear that we could pick the artworks out from the non-artworks all that easily, since art was being made which resembled non-artworks as closely as may be required. My favorite example was Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*, which looked sufficiently like actual Brillo cartons that one could not tell, from a photograph, which of them was which nor which was art and which was not.⁴ A set of metal squares, arrayed on the floor, could be a sculpture or a floor covering.⁵ A performance by an artist teaching funk dancing to a group of persons appeared similar to a dance teacher instructing a group in funk dancing.⁶ A 600-pound block of chocolate could be an artwork while another such block would be merely 600 pounds of chocolate.⁷ And so on, all across the face of the art world. Clearly, there were no manifest overarching similarities in this partial class of artworks. But equally clearly, neither could we pick out which was the artwork in an indiscernible pair, and which was not. But this was in principle perfectly general: for any non-artwork, an artwork could be

3. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

4. Arthur C. Danto, "The Art World," *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), 571-584.

5. This refers to certain works of Carl André.

6. The work referred to is Adrian Piper's video, *Funk Lessons*.

7. This work is *Gnaw*, by Janine Antoni.

imagined which resembled it as closely as might be required. And for any artwork, a non-artwork could be imagined like it to whatever degree. So what *couldn't* be an artwork, for all one knew? The answer was that one could not tell by looking. You could not after all pick the artworks out like cashews from a pot of peanuts.

This was the situation to which the *Transfiguration* endeavored to respond. It began by treating artworks as representations, in the sense that they possessed *aboutness*. Since not all representations are artworks, this did not carry us very far, but it at least helped force a distinction between an artwork and its non-art counterparts, real or imagined. An artist was affirming some thesis by means of the block of chocolate, or at least it was appropriate to ask what it was about, whereas it would have been inappropriate to ask what a mere large lump of chocolate was about. But one could always, on the hypothesis that one was dealing with an artwork, ground an interpretive hypothesis—an ascription and a meaning—on certain of its properties, which would have no particular salience if the object were merely an object. An artwork, in this sense, *embodies* its meaning when it is seen interpretively. Anything, of course, can be seen interpretively as long as one supposes it to embody a meaning. Upon discovering that it does not, the interpretation withers away. A flight of birds gets read as a sign from the gods until one stops believing in the gods, after which a flight of birds is a flight of birds.

Aboutness and embodiment was as far as I got in the *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. I had no sense that it was more than a start. In attempting to define knowledge in *Theatetus*, Socrates got as far as saying that knowledge was true opinion—but he was aware that something more was required, and though a third condition was added later—knowledge is *justified* true opinion—every epistemologist knows that a fourth condition is required, and no one is entirely certain what this would be. Still, my two conditions solved the problem I set out to solve, and I had a pleasant shock of recognition when, later, I found in Hegel's famous statement about the end of art precisely the same two conditions cited when he attempted to explain artistic judgment: "(i) the content of art, and (ii) the work of art's means of presentation."⁸ Parenthetically, I think that Hegel believed no such intellectual effort was required when art, by its own means alone, was able to present even the highest realities in sensuous form.⁹ Part of what he meant by talking of the end of art was that art was no longer capable of this. It had become an object rather than a medium through which a higher reality made itself present. But in any case, it seemed to me that the two components of the definition were in effect imperatives for the practice of art criticism, namely, (i) determine what the content is and (ii) explain how the content is presented.

8. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, transl. T. M. Knox (Oxford, 1975), 11.

9. *Ibid.*, 7.

II. QUALITY

Kudielka feels, perhaps rightly, that I have resisted the addition of the concept of *quality* as among the “essential factors of art.” When Hegel speaks of content and presentation, he makes explicit that artistic judgment should address “the appropriateness or inappropriateness of one to the other.” It bears remarking that the second critical imperative does not seem to apply to what Hegel calls *symbolic* art, whose meaning lies outside itself. It stands to its meaning the way a name stands to its bearer, and though, in naming our children, we seek names that will embody the person we hope they will become, names and bearers are external to one another. Since symbolic art fails the second imperative, this may count as a criticism of symbolic art, which Hegel in any case regarded as primitive. On the other hand, Hegel appears never to have conceived of abstract art. Who did in 1828? The critic Thomas Hess wisely observed that “Abstract art has always existed, but until this century, it never knew it existed.”¹⁰ If, from the perspective of abstraction, we think of the pyramid, to use Hegel’s paradigm of symbolic art, an interpretation of its meaning as embodied does not seem out of the question. Classical and romantic art, in Hegel’s scheme, explicitly embody their contents. Kudielka says, *en passant*, that classical art was, for Hegel, the highest art—but Hegel speaks indifferently of “The beautiful days of Greek art, like the golden age of the later Middle Ages.”¹¹ Classical statuary and Gothic rose windows serve as examples of art “in its highest vocation.” But so does symbolic art, if we think of it as abstract.

The notion of quality has recently become, in the American art world especially, a vexed matter.¹² It has, for example, seemed to be inconsistent with the multiculturalism which has raised the possibility of incommensurability between and among the artworks of different cultures. It may be true that we ought not to judge the work of one culture by the criteria of excellence which belongs to another. Still, that does not abolish the concept of quality, since within the work of a given culture, not everything is of the same quality, and there is some sense of how works are to be ranked, insofar as they differ at all. I am, on the other hand, unprepared to add quality as a third condition, for the same reason that I would be reluctant to place conditions on the concept of content. It has sometimes been argued by American critics that the category of art rules out certain contents—that the gamy photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe cannot be art because of their gaminess. It may be a criticism of Mapplethorpe that his content is offensive, but that is a moral rather than an art-critical assessment. On the other hand, there is a difference between not embodying content—as in every instance of symbolic art as Hegel understood it—or embodying it badly. It is an artistic criticism of a work that it embodies its content poorly. Once content is estab-

10. Thomas Hess, *Abstract Painting: Background and the American Phase* (New York, 1951), 4.

11. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 10.

12. See Michael Brenson, “Is Quality an Idea whose Time has Gone?” *New York Times* (July 22, 1990), section II, 1.

lished, a whole menu of hypothetical imperatives comes up on the screen, and one discusses how the work might have been better—or might have been worse—from the perspective of embodiment. Perhaps I made these considerations insufficiently explicit, but since quality, on this account, is a modality of embodiment, I see no grounds for adding it to my list.

What desperately requires analysis, of course, is the notion of embodiment. The simplest case of embodiment is *exemplification*, to which Nelson Goodman drew attention:¹³ a sample *shows* what it means because it itself is what it means, the way a swatch of gabardine exemplifies the kind of fabric it is. But things quickly get more complex. Christ was God's embodiment—the word made flesh—and representations of Christ endeavor to show how his divine nature is made manifest: by beauty, luminosity, or whatever (his fleshliness is made manifest through blood and the expression of pain.) But these quickly become conventions. What does the fact that a pitcher in a Cubist painting is embodied in nested facets imply? I concede to Kudielka that I have not developed these matters at all rigorously.

III. AESTHETICS

Martin Seel finds unacceptable what he perceives, I believe rightly, as a certain "irritating bias" in my writing against *aesthetic appearance*. His argument is that "the creation of unique appearances in the world" is the point of all artistic production. Hence I show a certain *Erscheinungsvergessen*. Even Hegel, after all, spoke of art in its prime as presenting "the highest realities in *sensuous* form."¹⁴ And it must be conceded that *something* must embody the content—the way the face embodies feelings—and that it is, as Seel contends, difficult to imagine a completely dematerialized work of *visual* art (though Henry James comes close in his story "The Madonna of the Future" by calling the unrealized painting a "masterpiece"). Of course, this is using "aesthetic" in the way Kant used it in the "Transcendental Aesthetic" section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as having to do with the senses as sources of knowledge. This is not how the term is customarily used today, where it refers, rather, to appreciative responses to beauty—to the aesthetic as contrasted with the phenomenal properties of things. I don't think that I have been neglectful of the material presence of meanings in art, since so much of my writing is an effort to show how meanings are, so to speak, inscribed in the objects which present them. But I will admit there may be a problem with aesthetics understood as "the sense of beauty," to use Santayana's expression. It is not that I am indifferent to aesthetic considerations as a person or even as a philosopher, nor that I would deny that a good many works are made specifically to produce aesthetic pleasure in viewers. It is just that I am disinclined to include this as a third condition in the definition of art.

13. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, 1976).

14. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 7.

In this, I think, I follow Marcel Duchamp, who set out specifically to sunder aesthetics from art through the *Readymades*, which he selected in part on the basis of their dull and uninflected appearances. They were, he hoped, beyond good and bad taste. No one, he once remarked, even sought to steal the metal grooming comb which might, with the snow shovel, serve as a paradigm of this portion of his oeuvre. It may be that in other cultures these very objects would be anything but dull—Francis Nauman once told me that a woman in France had never seen a snow shovel, and we can imagine cultures in which a grooming comb would be beyond their metallurgic means. But in our culture, they are commonplace and dull. And since they are art, it is difficult to say that Duchamp was interested in “unique appearances.” They are unique as art—but not as objects. Such aesthetic response as there may be is accordingly not to the comb or the shovel as such, but to whatever remains of the artwork when one subtracts, as it were, the sensuous properties. As I see it, Duchamp was endeavoring to exclude aesthetics from the concept of art, and, as I think he was successful in this, I have followed his lead.

Indeed, the idea of uniqueness encounters a serious problem with the kinds of examples to which I typically have recourse in these discussions—pairs (or triples or whatever) of indiscernible counterparts, like the eight or so indiscriminable red squares with which the *Transfiguration* begins.¹⁵ They share all sensuous properties, which is what makes them sensuously indiscernible. But they are unique as works of art, each having, and indeed each embodying, a different content. We respond to them as *art*—but that is not responding to them as mere red squares. It is not seeing but interpretive seeing that is at issue, which in effect means framing interpretive hypotheses as to meaning. One may respond to them aesthetically as well—or one may not.

I had a further reason for distancing aesthetics from art. Aesthetics has been a fairly marginal philosophical subject, especially in analytical philosophy. But I felt that art has a philosophical excitement to which philosophers, however analytical in bent, should be responsive. I glumly studied aesthetics with Irwin Edman and, far more philosophically, with Suzanne K. Langer. But I was never able to connect what they taught me with the art that was being made in the 1950s—and I could not see why anyone interested in art should have to know about aesthetics. It was only when I encountered Warhol’s *Brillo Box* that I saw, in a moment of revelation, how one could make philosophy out of art. But *Brillo Box* has only the sensuous properties possessed by Brillo boxes, when the latter are conceived of merely as decorated containers. A lot of Warhol’s works are aesthetically as neutral as the personality he endeavored to project.

By way of concession, I think that aestheticians have had far too restricted a range of aesthetic qualities to deal with—the beautiful and the ugly and the plain. And have assigned to taste far too central a role in the experience of art. I feel that expanding this range will itself be an exciting philosophical project. But it

15. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 1-3.

falls outside the range of defining art. Just think of how exciting coming into a new piece of knowledge can be—and how irrelevant cognitive excitement is to the humdrum task of defining knowledge. Two and a half millennia, and we still have not found a fourth condition!

IV. ART AND PHILOSOPHY

However important to the concept of art, neither quality nor aesthetic considerations appear as if they immediately bear on the end of art as a historical thesis. They do bear on it, however, in virtue of challenging the definition of art through philosophical argument. My thesis was that once art raised the question of why one of a pair of look-alikes was art and the other not, it lacked the power to rise to an answer. For that, I thought, philosophy was needed. Even were I to grant Seel's view that reference to the sensuous properties of artworks is essential, it would be interesting to ask whether it would be possible to represent the idea of art's "highest reality" entirely in sensuous terms. The "highest reality" of art is its own essence, brought to self-awareness, and this requires the sort of philosophical argumentation of which Kudička and Seel are masters. The pyramid, classical sculpture, the rose window give sensuous embodiment to what the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Christian community of the Middle Ages took to be the highest realities. But there are internal limits on what art can achieve—and philosophical self-understanding is beyond those limits. What marks the end of art is not that art turns into philosophy, but that from this point on, art and philosophy go in different directions. Art is liberated, on this view, from the need to understand itself philosophically, and when that moment has been reached, the agenda of modernism—under which art sought to achieve its own philosophy—was over. The task of definition belonged to philosophy—and art was thereby free to pursue whatever ends, and by whatever means, seemed important to artists or their patrons. From that point on there was no internal historical direction for art, and this is precisely what the condition of pluralism amounts to.

Michael Kelly contends that turning the definition of art over to philosophers amounts to a disenfranchisement of art. I introduced the concept of a philosophical disenfranchisement of art in an eponymous essay¹⁶ which argued that the canonical philosophies of art sought a metaphysical demotion of art by assigning it to the domain of dream and illusion (as in Plato), or by showing it to be an inferior way of doing what philosophy itself does better. My explanation for these strategies, which weave art into the structure of the universe as philosophers have variously conceived of it, is that, for complex reasons, philosophers have feared art (rather in the way in which, fearing female sexual power, society has evolved ways of keeping women in their "place"). There have been, of course, *non-philosophical* disenfranchisements throughout history—censorship, repression, iconoclasm. I have nothing to say about these here. But is my theory any more

16. Arthur C. Danto, "The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art," in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York, 1986).

enlightened than the philosophies that depended on some form of artistic disenfranchisement?

Kelly makes central to his deconstruction a model I have frequently employed for making vivid the idea of a history which comes to an end when the subject of the story attains self-knowledge—the idea of a *Bildungsroman*, which, according to Josiah Royce,¹⁷ Hegel's *Phenomenology* was said to exemplify. Hegel's hero, *Geist*, goes through an ingenious sequence of states, through which he (she?) arrives at last at an idea of his or her own nature. It is an idea that does not have to be true, since *Geist* is revealed as *Geist* even (or especially) when it gets things wrong. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* is such a novel, as are feminist novels, in which the heroine first understands her differences from males, and then, through a sequence of episodes, attains consciousness of what it means (hence what it is) to be a woman. I have certainly presented the history of art as a kind of *Bildungsroman* in which art struggles toward a kind of philosophical self-understanding. And now, Kelly notes, the task of such understanding has been handed over to philosophy, because it lies beyond the limits of art to carry it any further.

This is an acute criticism and it is, I think, true. The question for me, however, is whether this is a philosophical disenfranchisement of art. It is certainly not a re-enfranchisement. But the liberation of art from the philosophical task it has set itself is the liberation of art to pursue its—or society's—individual ends. The thesis of “The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art” was that art and philosophy were from the beginning joined at the hip—that the great metaphysical systems designed the universe as a kind of prison for art. *After the End of Art* is intended to separate art from philosophical oppression, and leave the task of finding definitions to a practice designed to provide them. That is as much as philosophy can do for art—to get it to realize its freedom. The joint narrative of philosophy and art is then a *Freiheitsroman*—the story of freedom gained or regained—as in *The Tempest*, when Ariel is set free at last.

V. “BUT IS IT ART?”

In Hegel's somewhat disenfranchising analysis, under which art is a thing of the past, he says such things as “it has lost for us genuine truth and life,” or “we subject to our intellectual consideration . . .” or “Art invites us to intellectual consideration . . .”¹⁸—and the question is to whom this “we” refers. It is perhaps natural for philosophers—and who else for the most part reads Hegel?—to suppose that it is philosophers who are addressed. But in fact “we” could be anyone who thinks critically about art—who ponders what art is about and how its aboutness is registered in the matter of art. Hegel is talking about art criticism here, and art has attained a sufficient degree of self-awareness that it is made with art-critical questions in mind. Art criticism mediates between art and philosophy, to the

17. Josiah Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism*, ed. Jacob Loewenberg (Cambridge, Mass., 1920).

18. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 11.

point where today artists are their own best critics, explaining what they are after and why, as if conceding that art has “been transferred to our *ideas*.”¹⁹ This means that art has become an object for its practitioners as well as for philosophers, and this may somewhat temper Kelly’s charge of disenfranchisement on my part. It means that the practice of art is “two-tiered,” to use Brigitte Hilmer’s useful phrase. There is a division of labor, in that the analysis, as against the ascription of content, is more a philosophical than an art-critical matter, as is the analysis, in contrast with the identification, of *modes of presentation*.

Penetrated as artistic practice is today by art-critical considerations, especially when works of art do not wear their meanings on their faces, there is not quite so sharp an interface between art and philosophy as my arguments have perhaps implied. Hilmer is entirely correct in saying that Hegel, thinking of philosophy as the domain of thought and art the domain of sensation, was obliged to think that art had come to an end when it becomes suffused with critical thought about itself.²⁰ The sharp division between thought and sensation is pure Romanticism. The idea that the work of art can—or once did—convey its truths immediately through the senses, without the mediation of thought, was thinkable when art was mimetic. But it is less and less that today, hence less and less capable of being addressed by sense alone. When, moreover, art becomes its own subject, as it evidently has under modernism, then the practice of art has gone even further into the philosophical domain through the various manifestoes in which art is said to be this and that: “art” has in its own right become part of art’s own reflection on itself. It is not necessary, on the other hand, for artists themselves to have a clear idea of what is meant by art. “The discovery of art as an independent human activity demanding higher intellectual capacity than mere craftsmanship” to quote Hilmer, is already to have discovered a great deal.

I am struck by the expression “mere craftsmanship” in this formulation, and wonder whether or not it stipulates a disenfranchising boundary. However arrogant philosophy may be, its disenfranchisements are rarely as vehement as those which arise within artistic discourse itself, where artists and critics are disposed to say of something that it is not art when there is very little other than art that it can be. When Judy Chicago first showed her *Dinner Party* in New York, “But is it art?” was the question of the day. Such controversies have unquestionably extended and deepened the concept of art, and except with reference to such work as Chicago’s, it is difficult to imagine how the vaguely grasped concept can have been made more explicit. We can even ask whether there was, in Hans Belting’s phrase, “art before the era of art,”²¹ so that we can identify cave paintings and altar pieces as art even if those who made them had no concept of art to speak of. Hilmer asks, from a feminist perspective, Why not “beautiful works of knitting or weaving or patchwork?” If “art” and “mere craftsmanship” exclude

19. *Ibid.*

20. But Hegel also says “The artist himself is infected by the loud voice of reflection all around him and by the opinions and judgements on art that have become customary everywhere, so that he is misled [my emphasis] into introducing more thoughts into his work.” *Ibid.*, 11.

21. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: The Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago, 1994).

one another, then there is no hope for craft to become art unless . . . And it is here that the philosophy of art has a task.

I do not think that adding beauty to craftsmanship is the formula for transfiguring it into art. That is like, to borrow a thought from Robert Venturi,²² decorating a shed to turn it into architecture. But it is a problem for craftspeople today to get for their productions the kind of respect they suppose recognizing them as art creates—an impossibility if craft automatically excludes what they do from the domain to which they aspire. At the same time, in America at least, works of craft really are beginning to be recognized as art—the glasswork of Dale Chihuly, the ceramics of Betty Woodman,²³ the fiber art of Ann Hamilton,²⁴ the furniture of John Cederquist.²⁵ The “discourse” has a “He said-she said” form, when it already seems to me that however impoverished my definition, it can help. Craftwork is art when it is about what it embodies. Woodman’s vases are *about* the vase, even though they also exemplify the vase to the point where her work can be filled with flowers, as they are at the admissions desk of the Museum of Modern Art in New York where they are brilliantly present. Retrospectively, *The Dinner Party* is about sisterhood, presented in terms of the ritual of a spiritual community, namely, sitting down to a meal together. It is possible to criticize it even so—but one is already treating it as art when one does so.

VI. THE “DEATH OF PAINTING”

Noël Carroll asks whether the end of art history has not been confused by me with the end of *painting*. Since my theory was first published in 1984, at a time when the so-called “death of painting” was widely canvassed by art world theoreticians, it was perhaps unavoidable that the two kinds of theories should have been confused. This is a good place to consider them together, in order especially to make plain how different in fact they are from one another. The “death of painting,” described here perfectly by David Carrier, is a theory of exhaustion. The “end of art” instead is a theory of consciousness—of how a developmental sequence of events terminates in the consciousness of that sequence as a whole. It is for that reason that it is not implausible that the history of art has something like the form of a *Bildungsroman*, despite the difficulties which Michael Kelly has shown with that model. The “death of painting” theory fits an entirely different kind of model. It fits, indeed, a model which haunted nineteenth-century thought in a number of domains.

According to John Keats’ biographer, the poet felt at a certain moment that “there was now nothing original to be written in poetry; that all its riches were

22. Robert Venturi, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbols of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976).

23. See my text, *Betty Woodman* (Amsterdam, 1996).

24. Ann Hamilton has just been selected to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, 1999.

25. See my text, “Illusion and Comedy: The Art of John Cederquist” in *The Art of John Cederquist: Reality of Illusion* (Oakland, Calif., 1997).

already exhausted, & all its beauties forestalled.”²⁶ A comparable view regarding music was advanced by John Stuart Mill: he deduced that all possible combinations of sounds would sooner rather than later have been made, and with that thought the possibilities of indefinite musical creativity were closed.²⁷ Nietzsche’s notorious theory of Eternal Recurrence was based upon the similar notion that sooner or later all possible combinations of states of affairs would be exhausted, and with this there was no choice other than to begin all over again, with nothing to look forward to save an eternal repetition of the same. Unlike Mill and Keats, Nietzsche found in this thought a form of courage: we must live in the knowledge that whatever we do, it will be done over and over for all eternity. But he also felt his theory was fatal to any possibility of an enduring progress, and that we must learn to live within the limits of our condition.

Now it would have come as a surprise to the painters of the Renaissance that painting would sooner or later run out of possibilities, simply because the possible subjects of painting were to begin with restricted to biblical and classical motifs. The demand was for annunciations, adorations, crucifixions, images of the saints, as well as portraits of notable personages. An artist who tried for novelty in motif would have been eccentric. Of course, patrons may have wanted not only a Madonna and Child, but a Botticelli Madonna and Child. Was there a closed number of ways of presenting that motif? Probably—but the closure would not have been interesting. It would be like worrying that human character is finite, that all the characters and personal styles would all be used up. Since no two individuals have the same character, this is a needless fear.

I knew a Chinese artist, Chiang Yee, who was proud to have opened up the canon of Chinese painting by adding pictures of pandas to the bamboo, the iris, the chrysanthemum, the plum blossom, and the like. This achievement is evidence that he had internalized a western idea of novelty as the concomitant of originality—for the traditional Chinese artist had no interest in originality at all. The ambition was rather to appropriate the paradigms of the masters. It was part of the structure of Chinese art that the same motifs could be painted and repainted forever without the motifs being added to. In the 1980s, however, and perhaps in consequence of the fact that art under modernism had come increasingly to be about itself, painting began to show limitations. Artists were expected to find some unoccupied niche in the range of possibilities in order to demonstrate originality. But these niches were getting harder to find in the 1980s, and less and less rewarding to occupy.

But whatever the internal limitations of painting—if there are any—it was painting as a whole which was held to be dead in the 1980s (despite the wave of neo-expressionist figural paintings that began to be shown in the galleries); this was based mainly on certain political conclusions radical critics of “late capitalism” had reached: painting was finished because the social and economic struc-

26. Andrew Motion, *Keats* (New York, 1998).

27. John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. J. Robson and J. Stillman (Toronto, 1981), 148.

tures which supported it were held no longer to be viable. As Carrier observes, this did not mean to the death-of-painting theorists that art, as such, had come to an end. Douglas Crimp,²⁸ for example, thought that painting had now given way to photography—an example of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, raising questions on the future of museums, collections, and the like.

One limitation on Crimp's idea—that photography was to be the central art form of the coming age—is that photography was but one disjunct in a vast disjunction of expressive possibilities into which art-making exploded, with painting as another such disjunct. This I have referred to as “art after the end of art.” It was no part of my thesis that the history of painting stopped dead in its tracks after the ascent to consciousness took place in the 1960s. It is on the other hand true that painting after the end of art had stopped being the *medium* of art-historical development that it had been before. There was in consequence a break in history, and the advent of a new period of art—the one in which we find and shall find ourselves. Painting was the medium of development in traditional art because there could be progress in the pictorial representation of the world, through perspective, chiaroscuro, foreshortening, and the like. It was the medium of progress under modernism because its task was to determine the essence of painting, if Greenberg is right. There is an important historical question of why traditional art gave way to modernism, but I do not know its answer. Perhaps the challenge came from photography and moving pictures. Perhaps it came from a complex loss of cultural faith in Western values, as we find it in the views of the Orient held by Gauguin and Van Gogh. In my view, however, the end of modernism was the end of art in the sense that from within art's history there emerged at last the clearest statement of the philosophical nature of art. Like abstract art, as Hess recognized, the problem had always been there, but nobody could have known of its existence. Philosophical imagination is limited. What would it have meant in the eighteenth century to speak of two things, one of which was Gainsborough's *Saint James Mall* and the other something that looked just like it but was not a work of art at all? Not until art reached a stage where it could put the question by exhibiting it did the proper philosophical problem of art become visible. After delivering over this immense gift to the philosophy of art, art could go no further. But once it had done this, the post-historical artworld became radically open and no longer subject to the kind of narrative the history of art had until then showed.

We live at a moment when it is clear that art can be made of anything, and where there is no mark through which works of art can be perceptually different from the most ordinary of objects. This is what the example of *Brillo Box* is meant to show. The class of artworks is simply unlimited, as media can be adjoined to media, and art unconstrained by anything save the laws of nature in one direction, and moral laws on the other. When I say that this condition is the end of art, I mean essentially that it is the end of the possibility of any particular internal direction for art to take. It is the end of the possibility of progressive

28. Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

development. That much the theory has in common with the end-states feared by Keats and by Mill. In my case, however, it means the end of the tyranny of history—that in order to achieve success as an artist one must *drive art history forward*, colonizing the future novelty by novelty.

How can I know this, Carroll asks. How can I know that there will not, out of the whole range of artistic choices, be one—performance, say—which gives rise to an entirely new art history? The answer is that I cannot know this. Nor can I imagine this, any more than a medieval artist could have imagined the spectacular illusions the history of painting was to provide. One has, of course, to be open—the end of art theory means to be an empirical theory. But the future is what we cannot imagine until it is present.

VII. POST HISTORY AND THE LIMITS OF IMAGINATION

Carrier brings forward the concept of the narrative sentence, which I first presented in the pages of this journal nearly forty years ago.²⁹ He wonders whether the use of such sentences is compatible with the end of art having been reached. For narrative sentences make an appeal to the future, if only to the future of the events we describe, if not our own future. When the Museum of Modern Art mounted a retrospective exhibition in 1950 of the paintings of Chaim Soutine (who died in 1943), Monroe Wheeler asked if Soutine was an abstract expressionist?³⁰ If we say he was, then it is certainly not something Soutine could have said, since the concept of abstract expressionism was not to become current until after his death. And this is generally the case with narrative sentences. They refer to two time-separated events, describing the earlier with reference to the later, which we can do without cognitive dissonance, though those who were contemporary with the earliest of the two events cannot have done. Soutine could not have said that he was or was not an abstract expressionist, the idea not being within his temporal range.

It is no part of my claim that there will be no stories to tell after the end of art, only that there will not be a single metanarrative for the future history of art. There will not in part because the previous metanarratives excluded so much in order to get themselves told. As Carrier observes, Greenberg excluded surrealism from modernism since he could not defend his version of modernism if he admitted it. But—and this returns me to the discussion with Noël Carroll—we can exclude nothing today. This makes narration impossible. Within artistic practice, artists will influence artists they never heard of, since unborn. Art historians will always have stories to tell.

The epistemological dimension of narrative sentences is, as noted, that they can be known by historians of events but not, generally, by those contemporary with the events. They cannot because the concepts required to know them are

29. Arthur C. Danto, "Narrative Sentences," in *History and Theory* 2 (1962), 146-179. Substantially reprinted in my *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, Eng., 1965).

30. Monroe Wheeler, *Soutine* (New York, 1950), 50.

often not available. Soutine could not have understood the question whether he was an abstract expressionist. We understand it enough to be able to give a qualified answer. This is the kind of thing I had in mind in saying that the future is (often) “unimaginable.” Quite possibly, there was in Soutine’s artistic environment enough material to teach him the meaning of abstract expressionism—if only there could have been, like Dickens’s *Ghost of Christmas Future*, a visitor from our present to his to explain the meaning. Jakob Steinbrenner has reservations about the limits of historical imagination, thinking that we can account for everything along those lines by appealing to the concept of the *genius*, as in the philosophy of Kant. One cannot anticipate what the genius will do next. But in my view it would be extremely awkward to suppose that everything we are unable to imagine from a certain location in history will be somehow the product of genius. Maybe the abstract expressionists were geniuses, maybe not. But there was a lot Soutine could not have imagined, dying as he did in 1943, only including the art of the future. Could he have imagined bubble-wrap? Modems? Cloning?

In truth, I would like to be able to take advantage of Hilmer’s idea of re-introducing the concept of Spirit, as used by Hegel but rather outlawed by analytical philosophy.³¹ I think perhaps Spirit might possess some of the attributes Kant restricts to the genius, which would account for the constant generation of novelty. What Spirit would be unable to do is to predict its own future production. But I am loath, approaching the end of my responses, to embark on the project of analytical rehabilitation the concept of Spirit requires if we are to enjoy its philosophical benefits.

VIII. INDISCERNIBLES

I need hardly emphasize the impact on my philosophy of art of Andy Warhol’s 1964 *Brillo Box*, which for all relevant purposes was indiscernible from the Brillo boxes of warehouses and storerooms. It encourages me to think that if I could show in what way the two were distinct, I would have found what seemed to me central to my philosophical undertaking—to distinguish artworks from what I called “mere real things.” It has latterly become clear to me that the ordinary Brillo carton is a poor example of the latter category, largely because it exemplifies the same philosophical structures that *Brillo Box* itself does. It is about something—Brillo, namely—and it embodies its meaning. The difference is only that it is commercial art, whereas *Brillo Box* is fine art. And at the least that reveals what must have been a prejudice of mine when I began using the example—I was unwilling to consider commercial art as art. This is a prejudice which has a distant ancestry in the animus of Socrates against the Sophists, who could make the better look the worse, or vice versa—if they were paid a fee.

31. But see “The Realm of Spirit,” in my *Connections to the World* (Berkeley, 1997), section 40.

In fact, the design of the Brillo cartons is exceedingly ingenious, as I have explained elsewhere.³² It celebrates the product it contains through a certain visual rhetoric, enlisting color, shape, and lettering. (It may even make the worse soap-pads look better than their competitors!) Warhol's *Brillo Box* does not celebrate Brillo. It celebrates a fragment of daily life in the American *Lebenswelt*, defined by what Warhol calls "all the great modern things,"³³ which would doubtless include the Brillo cartons and their contents. It might even say something about art, which is excluded from that reality, though it looks just like it. Or, if we may credit Warhol with a grasp of the history of aesthetics, it could have shown that *free* and *dependent* art, to use Kant's distinction, cannot be told apart, having in principle all the same phenomenal properties.³⁴

It is, however, as free art that art shares a metaphysical space with philosophy: the questions Warhol raises are philosophical questions, whereas the Brillo box as a piece of commercial art merely strives by rhetorical means to make Brillo preferable to other soap pads. Different as the indiscernibles may be phenomenally, they have different meanings which they embody correspondingly, and the plain cardboard box qualifies as art in just the way *Brillo Box* does. One may take this as a challenge to press for the third condition in the definition. Or one might seek a better candidate as an example of reality, and then go on to imagine a work of art indiscernible from it. This, however, is less easy than it may seem. For anything I choose to exemplify reality will differ from reality through having the property of exemplification—it becomes a minimally representational object. Bishop Berkeley argued that the hypothesis that there are mind-independent things is incoherent, because the moment one tries to present an example, it is ipso facto in the mind and not outside it.³⁵ And something like this argument must have served as a fulcrum for Hegel to lift matter into the realm of spirit, since we cannot think away the way we think about it. (Q.E.D.)

Valuable as the exercise has been, my example failed to articulate the difference between art and reality, since both the objects, however indiscernible, are works of art already—granted that they differ in ways other than those in which commercial shipping cartons differ from one another (or Warhol's differs from the various other boxes artists were using at the time for [free] artistic purposes—Donald Judd, Richard Artschwager, Eva Hesse, and many others).

IX. IMITATION

Frank Ankersmit has discovered another vexation for the example. He offers an interpretation of *Brillo Box* that makes it a "material illustration" of the theory that art is imitation. "The fun would be," Ankersmit writes, "that with the Brillo

32. See my "Art and Meaning," in *Modern Theories of Art*, ed. Noël Carroll, forthcoming from the University of Wisconsin Press.

33. G. R. Swenson. "What is Pop Art?: Answers from 8 Painters, Part I, *Art News* 64 (November, 1963), 26.

34. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §16; and Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 11.

35. George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, §23.

box the history of art paradoxically comes to an end precisely where it began three thousand years ago." So much, if Ankersmit is right, for the theory that the history of art is progressive and developmental! The only philosophy of history to which I would be entitled is that of a Vichian *corso e ricorso*—a 3000-year cycle come full circle in 1964!

Ankersmit is correct in saying that since we cannot know what Warhol had in mind, we cannot rule out this interpretation, which plainly fits the facts: *Brillo Box* really is an imitation of the Brillo boxes. It would need to have been an imitation if Warhol's ulterior purpose had been to achieve "a playful parody of the Imitation theory." It would be a self-conscious exemplar of an imitation in the service of philosophical parody. But it then has a kind of meaning imitations in their own right lack—it would be about a theory of its relationship to a thing, rather about the thing it imitates. So it would not be merely, or entirely, an imitation. It would exemplify part of its meaning—that here is an example of an imitation—without imitating that part of its meaning. So Ankersmit's marvelous counterexample takes its place as among the foundations on which the philosophy of art rests. Imitation does not explain why *Brillo Box* is art. It only explains the kind of art *Brillo Box* is, in which imitation is a means.

X. CONCLUSION

The papers I have responded to here are wonderfully rich, each packed with interesting ideas I would love to have gone into further, which, though they bear on the ostensible topic of the colloquium, namely the philosophy of Arthur Danto, do not especially bear on what everyone was anxious to talk about—the philosophy of art history and the end of art. I am certain that my resourceful critics will find ways of responding to the responses. If so, that would mean that this symposium in *History and Theory* protracts the spirit of the Bielefeld colloquium by continuing rather than closing off discussion!

New York City