

Arthur C. Danto or the Duality of Worlds

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What distinguishes a blank canvas from an empty frame? A simple object from a readymade? What is this mysterious gap that art digs as it separates from life? Such are the questions posed by Arthur Danto, a major figure of contemporary art theory.

Art or Philosophy

Reduced to the few dates in which it is customary to sum up a career, the intellectual and academic trajectory of Arthur Danto (1924-2013) seems thoroughly linear. Born in Michigan, Danto grew up in Detroit where he began studies in art, art history and philosophy, thanks to the scholarship he obtained after spending two years in the army. He completed his studies in the Philosophy Department at Columbia, where he began teaching in 1951 and where he remained until his retirement. This straight line, however, masks a crucial wavering and a decisive choice. For what first led Danto to New York in these late 1940s was less the prestige of Columbia than the aura of the great Abstract Expressionists. Indeed, in parallel with his studies and his later teaching, Danto pursued with some success a promising artistic career.¹ By his own admission, he became a professor because he felt this would allow him time to work on his art. After trying his hand at painting, he devoted himself primarily to woodblock printing. His woodcuts were strongly influenced by German Expressionism, which he had had the opportunity to discover in the rich collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts. They were also driven by the vitality of feeling, the concern for sincerity, and the gestural energy that, from Franz Kline to De Kooning, characterized the New York School, then dominant on an American artistic landscape that was beginning to think of itself as the center of the world for the first time in its history.

Yet gradually in the early 1960s, Danto came to sense that this type of art, which was geared towards the expression of life, was coming to an end. While in France for a sabbatical year, he discovered in the columns of *ARTnews* a reproduction of “The Kiss” by Roy Lichtenstein. To find in a highly respectable art magazine an image that looked like it was taken from a comic book seemed crazy to him—as crazy, he said, as if he had learned from the newspaper that a horse had been made bishop. At first, this postcard from New York left him

¹ Only at the very end of his life did Danto discuss his artistic career. This development is confirmed by Arthur Danto, “Stopping Making Art,” a conference pronounced on the occasion of the exhibition of his woodcuts at the University of Illinois (Springfield), 2009, http://artcollection.wayne.edu/exhibitions/REIMAGINING_SPIRIT.php#_edn2; Arthur Danto, interview with Zoe Sutherland, *Naked Punch*, 14, Fall 2010, (<http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/88>).

skeptical; rejection then gave way to doubt and, finally, to the certainty that something unprecedented was actually happening. Thus, the question opened up by Pop Art (but what, then, is art if *this* can be art?), which would become central to his philosophical work, was first lived, in biographical terms, as the intimate experience of asynchrony and of the irreversibility of historical time.

Although Danto never presented it as such, one can read his attachment to Henry James' short story "The Madonna of the Future" (1873)—an attachment so strong that he not only cited the story extensively, but also used its title for one of his most famous works—as the memory of that experience and the attempt to give shape to the quandary. Like the hero of the short story, who believed he could reconnect with Raphael while the nineteenth century was in the process of inventing *kitsch*, Danto suddenly discovered he was an outdated artist who believed in gesture, depth and feeling, at a time when Pop was literally dissolving these in its ironic acid bath. But while James's character intended to chart his own temporal path and sank into madness and the impotence of his belief in the eternity of art, Danto the artist gradually lost his taste for his own work as he came to this realization. It seemed quite clear to him that the art that interested him as an artist was outmoded, and that he was not especially gifted for the one whose newfound freedom enthused him as a philosopher and a connoisseur. Thus, he had to choose between remaining an artist of the 1950s and becoming a philosopher of the 1960s. Determined to board the train of history, Danto put away his tools and woodcuts in a closet.

Nevertheless, choosing philosophy as Danto did was then another way of choosing art, of giving oneself the possibility to be in tune with the artistic times, and of entering what he would soon call "the artworld" by playing the role of a theorist rather than that of a practitioner. Danto became a full-fledged philosopher, which is to say, a full-time philosopher who was to mark the history of philosophy by seizing an object—art—that until then had not been part of his theoretical concerns in any way. Indeed, the notions of taste and aesthetic pleasure, which were central to the philosophy of art at the time, had kept him away from that field, for they already seemed to him dusty and inadequate as regards the Abstract Expressionism that had fostered his own vocation as an artist.

This choice of philosophy was definitively confirmed by his visit, in the spring of 1964, to the Warhol exhibition at the Stable Gallery. This truly primitive scene, to which Danto returned in virtually all of his books, gave his subsequent work its central motif: the indiscernibles, embodied by the famous "Brillo Boxes," which are not the simple real Brillo boxes found on supermarket shelves even though they deceptively look like them. What makes an artwork an artwork? What is art? Such was the question with which Danto became a philosopher—the question he kept on asking, from his seminal article, "The Artworld,"² to his last book published the year of his death and also entitled *What Art Is*.³

Freedom Summer

The paradox of this question is that while it was made fully contemporary by Pop Art, it simultaneously appeared, in its somewhat naive Platonism, as philosophically obsolete. Danto's

² Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 61, Issue 19, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting, 15 October 1964, pp. 571-584.

³ Arthur Danto, *What Art Is*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2013.

originality consisted in wanting to revive the topicality and acuteness of the question of the essence of art, in a hostile philosophical climate dominated by the post-Wittgensteinian idea that art is an “open” concept—i.e., that it is neither possible nor in fact really interesting to define it.⁴ Thus, from a philosophical perspective, Danto’s project ran against the tide, at least in the field of American analytical philosophy in which he was trained and first became known. In parallel, Danto strove to embrace the present of art. Hence there was no question for him of ignoring the upheavals that had marked the history of art since Impressionism. For it was they that had inspired his thinking by constantly pushing the limits of the concept of art, and because the latest such upheaval, which he ultimately regarded as the last in the absolute of a completed history, had affected his own artistic practice to the point of depriving it of its meaning.

The theoretical challenge Danto took up was thus to try to link his principled essentialism (there is something that makes an artwork an artwork, a set of criteria that help to distinguish an artwork from other types of objects that are not art) with the historicism that was nevertheless constantly—and already fairly conventionally at the time—presented as an objection to it (the historical fluctuation of the criteria for defining artworks being interpreted as the mark of their inessentiality, there could be no “eternal” definition of art). He therefore strove to integrate the historical dimension of art into his definition, but without making the latter purely extrinsic.

Danto laid the groundwork for his thesis in the article that made him famous in 1964, “The Artworld.” A few lines repeatedly taken up ever since command attention: “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.”⁵ There is, in other words, first of all a “seeing-as” that confers on an artwork its status as artwork and that is absolutely irreducible to sensuous seeing. Art is not primarily a matter of sensation—thus Danto disqualified “aesthetics” understood in its etymological sense and took note of the untying of art from beauty. Positively formulated, this assertion construes theory as that which forms an artwork in both senses of the term: Theory ensures that the artwork can be seen as an artwork, and constitutes its very nature, its essence, even before it is accepted as such. Hence the second idea that the artworld (i.e., the world of artworks) is a region ontologically distinct from the real world of ordinary experience, though of course it can physically or perceptually overlap with it.

When years later Danto returned to this text, he strongly emphasized its publication date: 1964 was not only the year of the exhibition of the “Brillo Boxes” but also that of the “Freedom Summer,” which marked a decisive moment in the struggle for civil rights. Danto saw in the Warhol event an echo of the political and social emancipatory current then running through the United States. Pop Art gave objects a legitimacy they had previously been denied; it freed art from the last limits that were imposed on it. One might add that Danto the philosopher likewise freed himself from a certain analytical aesthetics by presenting himself as an essentialist, and by affirming the possibility of a historically informed return to the Platonist “What is...”

The success of “The Artworld” was nevertheless ambiguous, for the article became famous thanks to the interpretation George Dickie made of it, and on the basis of which he

⁴ See, in particular, Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 15, Issue 1, September 1956, pp. 27-35.

⁵ Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” *art. cit.*, p. 580

developed the institutional theory of art.⁶ This theory primarily holds that, more than being a reality, an artwork is a status granted or denied to certain objects by the actors of an “artworld” that is defined in a purely institutional manner (i.e., as composed of artists, but also critics, curators, gallery owners, etc.). Yet Danto always distanced himself from this position, which he looked upon as a sociologizing relativism that was not only insufficient, but also contrary to the very spirit of his essentialist project.

The Closure of Essence and the Pale of History

As part of this project, Danto had to work on two key fronts. First, and this was the main purpose of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*,⁷ he needed to ontologically complete his thesis in order to avoid any misunderstanding: He had to clarify that which art *is* in itself and which justifies that the status of artwork does not stem merely from the pure and arbitrary decree pronounced by actors socially entitled to do so. Thus, Danto defined the artwork by its aboutness, by its capacity to be “about”—that is to say, its intentionality, which distinguishes it from the commonplace objects with which it can sometimes be physically confused. For instance, an artwork consisting of a blank canvas may lack content, but this lack is itself a content: It is about nothing, or about aboutness. By contrast, a blank canvas in a studio or in a store is not, and cannot be, about anything at all. As the title *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* itself suggests, art “transfigures” the object it seizes by making it an “embodied meaning.” To support his primary intuition of the invisible duality of nonetheless incommensurable worlds—the real world and the artworld—Danto extended the metaphor of Christian transubstantiation. For Danto, who was raised in a non-practicing Reform Jewish family and whose father was a Freemason, there was something intellectually fascinating and utterly exotic about Christian theological tools. He was nevertheless reproached for using such language, notably by Richard Shusterman, who saw in the latter, beyond the pure analogical game, the symptom of a renewed religious alienation. In reality, claimed Shusterman, the separation of art from life, the invisible “gap” on which Danto insisted so much neutralizes art by making it harmless, and tears life apart from itself as it does so.⁸ This is especially true given that Danto’s emphasis on theory and interpretation disqualified the very notion of aesthetic experience, which was crucial to the pragmatist tradition Shusterman belongs to. Yet against the critiques sometimes leveled at Danto’s intellectualism, it should be emphasized that the artwork defined as *embodied* meaning cannot do without its own body, however immaterial, and hence cannot be simply replaced by its interpretation—an interpretation that the artwork certainly calls for, but that it resists in the same moment.

Second, in order to present his definition of art as the transhistorical definition of its essence, and not as a historically determined and hence dated definition, Danto also needed to

⁶ See George Dickie, “Defining Art,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 6, Issue 3, July 1969, pp. 253-256 and *The Art Circle*, New York, Haven, 1984. For a general and retrospective presentation of this theory, see George Dickie, “The Institutional Theory of Art,” in Noël Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, p. 94 ff.

⁷ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Harvard University Press, 1981.

⁸ Richard Shusterman reconsidered this opposition and relativized his own position in “Art as Religion: Transfigurations of Danto’s Dao,” in Mark Rollins (ed.), *Danto and His Critics*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, pp. 251-266.

develop a philosophy of history (of art)—a task he tackled in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. He had to account for the definitive—because unsurpassable—character of the definition of art reached by Pop Art. He did this by construing the pivotal moment of the 1960s as “the end of art history,” by which he meant that, at the end of a teleological progression, art achieved consciousness of its own essence by understanding itself as philosophy of art.⁹ While the end of art coincided for Danto with the end of his career as an artist, it did not mean its disappearance or death. Indeed, the closure of the definition of art in terms of comprehension implied its opening in terms of extension: The end of art primarily meant the advent of pluralism, the impossibility of excluding *a priori* anything from the field of art and of giving a direction to the latter. As a result, it did not simply launch a new era in art history, but rather, to take up a formula often used by Danto, it launched a new kind of era—one which lacks stylistic unity, in which the notions of progress or overcoming have lost all relevance, and which cannot be read as one stage in a “grand narrative.”

Although Danto did sometimes use the term “postmodern” to characterize art from after the end of history, he generally preferred that of “post-historical,” which had the advantage of summing up his thesis. Indeed, from his perspective, the term “postmodern” contained at least three ambiguities that he wished to avoid. First, it could still be understood as a “historical” category: While the postmodern, as the word literally suggests, is that which comes after the modern, or modernism—and this whether the “after” is chronological or dialectical—it is also inscribed within a history. Second, because the term was often used *de facto* as a stylistic category, its scope was too narrow, as it could evidently include the artworks of Julian Schnabel, David Salle or Frank Gehry—to take the examples cited by Danto—while ignoring those of Jenny Holzer and Robert Mangold, despite their being both contemporary and thoroughly post-historical.¹⁰ Finally, postmodernism was not supposed to be the prerogative of art, and though Danto was at once a theorist and an advocate of artistic pluralism, he categorically denied being a postmodern philosopher: Truth remained for him the horizon of philosophy, which essentially distinguished it from art. Consequently, there could be no post-historical phase in philosophy, because “when the truth is found, there is nothing further to do. Nothing could be more dismal to contemplate than philosophizing without end, which is an argument that philosophy is not art and that pluralism is a bad philosophy of philosophy.”¹¹ This, at any rate, was a philosophy incompatible with Danto’s essentialism.

A Philosophical Style

Thus, little by little, Danto mobilized continental authors who are generally neglected by analytical philosophers: Hegel, who inspired his philosophy of history, Leibniz, from whom he took up the question of the indiscernibles, Plato, not only the dialectician but also the metaphysician concerned with moving from words to Essences, but also Heidegger, Nietzsche, Sartre—authors whom he drew on very freely, if not erroneously with respect to the academic

⁹ See Arthur Danto, “The End of Art,” in Berel Lang (ed.), *The Death of Art*, Haven, 1984, reproduced as chapter 5 of *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986. See also *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton University Press, 1997; “Art, Evolution and the Consciousness of History,” chapter 9 of *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, *op. cit.*; “The Work of Art and the Historical Future,” last essay of *The Madonna of the Future*, New York, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2000.

¹⁰ See, in particular, chapter 1, “Introduction: Modern, Postmodern, and Contemporary,” in Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* *op. cit.*

¹¹ Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

criteria of the history of philosophy. Overall, Danto never intended to be the careful commentator of the texts he quoted, sometimes simply from memory or at least fairly roughly. Similarly, his knowledge of art history, which was far from limited to modern and contemporary art, never took the form of antiquarian scholarship. Danto's accuracy played out elsewhere than in footnotes.

Danto's work is characterized by a unique style that is both rigorous in its own logic and particularly pleasant, and whose rhetorical resources and strategies are highly inventive. Thanks to the charm and apparent simplicity of his writing, which contrasts with the ambition of his philosophical interrogation, his work has attracted readers well beyond specialized philosophical circles—as well as fierce detractors. Without ever quite losing his tongue-in-cheek humor, he shone especially in his descriptions and evocations, as well as in his choice and use of examples, which he borrowed from art history and literature (Henry James, as we saw earlier, but also Borges, Shakespeare, Keats, Joyce, etc.) or sometimes entirely fabricated. Thus, he deployed numerous thought experiments around his question—that of the indiscernibles—which he regarded as the philosophical question *par excellence*. While this method was part of an already well-established practice in the analytical movement, he renewed it in a very personal way, by constructing a multitude of highly imaginative and often amusing fictitious “pairs” of indiscernibles, which led to sometimes dizzying analyses thanks to an acute sense of assemblage.¹² To mention one example, in *The Madonna of the Future*, Danto imagined that the time-traveling curator of a hypothetical Museum of Monochromy, which had opened in Cincinnati, discovered in the studio of Theobald, the failed painter of James's short story, the canvas whose blankness summed up the tragic impossibility of his quest after years of hard work. In the eyes of the 1973 curator, this canvas appeared not as the obvious failure that it was in 1873, but as a brilliant masterpiece, the starting point of the entire history of the white monochrome. Danto described the scene as follows:

“Has it a title?” [... the Curator] asks. Theobald replies: “It has been referred to as ‘The Madonna of the Future.’” “Brilliant!” the Curator responds. “What a comment the dust and cracks make on the future of religion! It belongs in my monograph—it belongs in my museum! You will be celebrated!” This “Ghost of Art Worlds Future,” as a curator, will have brought some slides—of Malevich, Rodchenko, Rauschenberg, Ryman. The slides are pretty much all alike, and each resembles Theobald's blank canvas about as much as they resemble one another. Theobald would have no choice but to regard the curator as mad. But if he has a philosophical imagination, he might say this: It does not follow from those blank canvases being artworks, together with the resemblance function between their work and my blank canvas, that *this* blank canvas is an artwork.¹³

After the End of Art

Danto explored other modes of writing as he became, from 1984 onwards, an art critic for *The Nation*—the major “progressive” weekly created at the end of the American Civil War, in the wake of the abolitionist movement.

Once again, albeit in very different terms, he was confronted with the question of his own position in history. In the early 1960s, Danto was concerned with not staying behind, with not

¹² See Richard Wollheim, “Danto's Gallery of Indiscernibles,” in Mark Rollins (ed.), *Danto and his Critics*, Cambridge, Blackwell Publishers, 1993.

¹³ Arthur Danto, *The Madonna of the Future*, *op. cit.*, p. 422.

missing the present and the future it foreshadowed. By the mid-1980s, the present had disappeared from this “post-history” he theorized. Danto was sixty years old and the time of the revolutions, of the avant-garde ferment whose zenith he had known and celebrated, was past by definition. He himself wrote the eulogy that magnified this era, and from then on seemed condemned to spend the rest of his life looking back. By his own admission, his idea of the end of art was also a “response to the dismal state of the artworld”¹⁴ in the 1980s, for “when one can do anything, there does not seem any longer much reason to do one thing rather than another.”¹⁵ The time of repetition and pastiche had arrived. After history, can one even be somewhere? Is there any sense in trying to remain in touch with the present if it is no longer located in the course of history, understood in the strong sense Danto strove to give to the term? If there is no frontier left for artists to transgress, if the truth of the essence of art has been unveiled, what remains for the philosopher to think and to pursue? What happens to heroes after the conclusion of the novel? Happy people, the saying goes, have no history. Danto’s fear was that, like them, he would be pushed out of the history he had in a sense himself written, and be relegated to what he called “post-narrational insignificance.”¹⁶

Yet against all expectations, as Danto’s critical essays multiplied, this anxious melancholy turned into a renewed enthusiasm for freedom conquered and finally recognized. He no longer regarded history as the great engine that assigns tasks and lays down challenges, offering everyone the possibility to take part and find a meaningful place in it. Through assiduously attending art in the making, he came to view history as a burden that it is obviously good to be free of. Thus, the volume Danto devoted in 2009 to *Andy Warhol*¹⁷ is curiously dedicated “to Barack and Michelle Obama, and the future of American art.” Curiously because—without mentioning the American-centric naivety that is on display here, and that remains, to a large extent, a blind spot in Danto—the claim that art “has no future” was the provocative leitmotif of his very first article about the end of art.

As an art critic, Danto found the opportunity to scrutinize this future that is not one, in the sense that the surprises it has in store are not historical in nature. However, he did not refrain from rereading the past, as he seized on the pretext of an exhibition or a retrospective to devote occasionally unexpected texts to canonical figures of art history (Giotto, Chardin, Tintoretto, Manet, etc.). Above all, criticism was a way of testing his major philosophical theses by giving them practical application. In this sense, these essays—hundreds of texts scattered in catalogs and journals, but also in many cases gathered in volumes¹⁸—belong in their own right to his philosophical work: They constitute the latter’s concrete component that manifests, beyond the reservations that it might give rise to, all its fecundity.

¹⁴ Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

¹⁵ Arthur Danto, *Unnatural Wonders. Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005, p. xiv.

¹⁶ Arthur Danto, “The End of Art,” *art. cit.* p. 32.

¹⁷ Arthur Danto, *Andy Warhol*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2009.

¹⁸ A certain number of these reviews can be consulted online, on the website of *The Nation* (www.thenation.com). His main volumes are: *The Madonna of the Future*, *op. cit.*; *Unnatural Wonders*, *op. cit.*; *The State of the Art*, New York, Prentice Hall, 1987; *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990; *Philosophizing Art*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999.

On the other hand, Danto's theses themselves require a renewed conception of the role of the critic, whose discourse can no longer afford to be teleological or even "aesthetic"—as was that of Clement Greenberg, the great theorist of Abstract Expressionism and formalist Modernism who preceded Danto in the columns of *The Nation*. Indeed, if history is finished, the critic can no longer judge artworks as a pundit or a professor would, in light of the "progress" or "backwardness" to which they might attest. Danto explicitly refrained from writing "negative" reviews; he only wrote about artists whose work he deemed worthy of interest. Moreover, if the artwork is embodied meaning, then the critic's essential task is not to describe the pleasure it gives to a refined eye, but to deploy such meaning and to account for the way in which artworks embody what they mean. For instance, Danto strove to show that Lucien Freud makes nakedness, whose coldness and rawness distinguish it from classical nudity, an artistic possibility able to reveal "the *bodily unconscious*" which lies just below bare skin—that "surface text writing upon by our lives."¹⁹ For their part, Rauschenberg's "Combines," in which old tires, cracked dishes, rusty license plates (all traces of a certain life of the American soul reduced to the figure of the garage) are splattered with paint drips, embodied in his eyes the tension between the earthly world of commonplace objects and the artworld which can give them a second chance and a new form of existence.²⁰ Furthermore, following a typically post-historical structure, Danto considered that the work of Jeff Koons is about the readymade, but that the way it positions itself beyond good and bad taste also confers on it a moral meaning.²¹ By contrast, Rothko's paintings present a metaphysical truth in purely sensuous terms, "something that has vanished from the visual world, in which burning bushes are, well, just burning bushes"²²: they signify beauty in a strange way. And pluralism, even though it has decentered beauty and untied it from the essence of art, can only make the place for it that artists are willing to give.

Not Andy Warhol

As an anecdote, it appears that Danto kept under the coffee table of his New York apartment a gift from Mike Bidlo: "Not Andy Warhol," an "appropriation" of the "Brillo Boxes"²³ that created an additional degree of indiscernibility. Thus, in accordance with his desire as an artist and then as a philosopher, Danto remained a man of his time; or rather, he never stopped trying to become one. He was a man who believed, perhaps beyond reason, in the actuality of freedom, and who attempted to love that which dissolves history, while also hoping to leave his mark somewhere—a man who, for this purpose, was sometimes able to look at the present backwards, from the perspective of an imaginary future that transforms it into the past. He was a man who consistently sought to place himself in a vanishing point, in the imperceptible—and yet for him unbridgeable—gap that separates art from life.

Danto's Major Works:

"The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 61, Issue 19, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division, Sixty-First Annual Meeting, 15 October 1964.

¹⁹ Arthur Danto, *The Madonna of the Future*, *op. cit.*, p. 37 and p. 34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

²¹ Arthur Danto, *Unnatural Wonders*, *op. cit.*, pp. 286-302.

²² Arthur Danto, *The Madonna of the Future*, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

²³ According to the interview published in *Naked Punch*, *art. cit.*

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