■ ■ ■ ■ ■ *FOREWORD TO THE PRINCETON CLASSICS EDITION*

Philosophy before the End of Art

ARTHUR COLEMAN DANTO was born January 1, 1924, in Detroit, Michigan, and died October 25, 2013, in Manhattan, New York. He spent much of his life as a professor of philosophy at Columbia University and, from 1984 on, as art critic for *The Nation* magazine. He wrote more than thirty books and more than a hundred articles and art-critical pieces. When he started out in the postwar period, he wrote on the analytical philosophies of action, mind, knowledge, and history; on Nietzsche and Sartre; and, drawn into "Eastern" currents, he dipped his pen into a philosophy of Zen as he heard it espoused by Dr. D. T. Suzuki in lessons offered at Columbia University. A voracious reader, he explored German and French idealism, phenomenology, and existentialism as much as Anglo-American positivism. However, he never relinquished engaging analytical philosophy as his way to explore how far philosophy can take one before it oversteps its limits. *After the End of Art* describes an end to which art came in virtue of a philosophical passage, after which it freed itself from philosophy's grip, so that, from that moment forward, it would call not for philosophical justification but for criticism. That Danto became an art critic was a response, woven through a philosophical narrative, to what the times demanded of him. But the turn also perfectly suited his talent as a writer.

Early on as a professional philosopher, he wrote in a rather dry style, a decision, he notes in this book, that was somewhat forced upon him (and others) by the need to get tenure in the philosophy department of an American university. Nevertheless, even then, one could see his need to become an essayist. Through the essay, he showed his sparkle and wit, his enormous capability to describe, and his impressive knowledge of contemporary art. Walking through museums and galleries was how he came to understand how artworks could serve as more than examples supporting readymade philosophical theories. He became an essayist who could think like a philosopher through the different mediums and challenges of art. His contribution to how we think about art in philosophical terms and beyond those terms was enormous.

Before he became a professor of philosophy, he was a maker of woodcuts. Toward the end of his life, his prints were collected and exhibited much to his pleasure and pride. Having given up the life of an artist, he did not turn straightaway to the philosophy of art, but somewhat bracketed this interest until he was asked,

rather by accident, to give a lecture on art at the American Philosophical Association in place of someone else. When the lecture was published in 1964 in the *Journal of Philosophy*, it was titled "The Artworld," a phrase and idea for which he became famous. "To see something as art," he argued, does not rely on what is given to the merely seeing eye, but requires a world or "atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art." He built his "Artworld" first off from what he was witnessing around him in the city where he lived, but when he gave it its philosophical sense, its dependence on knowledge more than on the merely seeing eye, he drew parallels to all the other areas of analytical philosophy that he had already pursued. Through these parallels, he came to see that the basic metaphysical question about identity—the "what is X" question—could only be answered by taking seriously the experience of indiscernibility: that two quite different kinds of things can sometimes look exactly the same. Let me explain.

Influenced by Descartes and Leibniz, he argued that the identity of things cannot be reduced to how things appear. Since different things can look alike in virtue of the base or commonplace material from which they are made, their identity cannot be reduced to their material constitution. Wherever he looked in the world, he found things that are meaningful as products of human making or culture that nevertheless sometimes look like "mere," "basic," or "commonplace" things bearing either the most minimal properties of human significance or no such properties at all. What gives things their identity or essence, he claimed, is the transfigurative engagement of the human mind, the existence of those things in forms of life that are saturated by the presence of human spirit, atmosphere, and intellect. He asked us to consider, first, what is shared between a narrative historical sentence and a mere description of an event; a dream and a wakeful experience; an authentic and inauthentic action; an original wife and a machine-made duplicate; the blood of Christ and a glass of red wine; a wink of a desiring eye and an uncontrolled blink; a revolutionary salute and an unwilled movement of the arm; or a piece of music and a string of mere noises. Once you have accounted for all that causes each of these pairings to be indiscernible, then ask yourself wherein their differences lie and you will be drawn into worlds of love, personhood, history, politics, morality, religion, and art.

In the late 1960s, Danto achieved considerable renown in the philosophy of history for his systematic determination of what he called "narrative sentences." He explored the logic of reference and description to explain how historical statements or narratives could assume a significance that was neither inflated to the German heights of a teleological world-history nor yet reduced to a merely empirical chronicle of events. At the core of his theory lay the observation that a given event that occurred in a certain year might be noticed but not understood

fully, or marked as a piece of history, until some later event occurred. Given the later event, the first event could be brought under a description or interpretation to which it could not have always or earlier submitted. To repeat Danto's favorite example: one could not have known or said that the year 1618 marked the beginning of the Thirty Years' War until 1648, when the war had come to its end. "The Thirty Years' War" picked out something that was more than merely factual, an event in a mere chronicle of events. It became, through the interpretation of events, loaded with human significance and, with this, it became historical.

What Danto said about history, he later adapted to art, but now with a Hegelian turn. To take account of Hegel allowed him to overcome in a true passage of dialectical thinking an arrogant teleology that had so dominated philosophy, history, and art up to his time. Art as a *concept*, he argued, reached its end, realization, or self-understanding in an event that happened in the Artworld in 1964, which he actually witnessed. Walking into the Stable Gallery on East 74th Street, he saw Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* stacked up on the floor such as one might see in any supermarket or warehouse. Struck by the indiscernibility, he was able, he said, to raise the question of discernibility as the only way to come to understand the identity of art. And yet, two decades had to pass before he could understand this event as also having marked "the end of art." Only in 1984 (in an article that became the basis for the present book) could he read the event of 1964 historically in a way consistent with what, by then, he had worked out as his analytical philosophy of art. To understand "the end of art" was to enter "the Artworld," freed from the assumption that art is defined according to how artworks look, knowing now that all manner of "embodied meaning" is found in an Artworld that includes all and everything that is art.

One way to understand what happened in the two decades in between would be to dig deep into Danto's intellectual biography. A far more immediate way would be to read *After the End of Art*. For step-by-step through this book, Danto explores the three decades of his thinking philosophically about art. He begins with temporal and historical categories, periods and movements, after which he turns to the movement between the philosophy of art, aesthetics, and art criticism. Toward the end, he turns to the philosophy and politics of a modernist art, which, by tending toward a pure monochrome or a pure materiality, threatened most to turn the museum away entirely from the eye to cater only to the mind. How should we understand this last movement if not as prompting thought about the end and ends of art?

In contrast to some of his later books, this book does not show what Danto did "after" philosophy when he turned to art criticism. Instead, it retraces the passage that led him, in 1984, to declare with a deliberately provocative slogan that

art had come to its end. Yet, in every part of this book, we are reminded that "the end of art" marked the end not of art's production, but only of thinking about art in a historicist way, according to what he described as a "disenfranchising" master narrative. As art, "after Hegel," had gradually moved into its "modernist period," its production had increasingly come to be held hostage—in servitude—to a misguided philosophical pursuit to answer the question: "what is art?" As Danto described the situation, the pursuit was misguided, first, because too many definitions of art turned on how art appeared, on what was made either materially manifest or made manifest to sight, and second, because too many definitions proved, in one "whiggish" way or another, exclusionary. The commitment to a teleological history had led too many artists and theorists to produce definitions that would include some art—as the correct way for art now to be or appear—and then to exclude all the rest—as "beyond the pale." What lay beyond the pale was all art that was deemed historically aged or artistically insignificant because it did not advance the project of coming to know art's essence: what art *is*.

When Danto declared the end of art, his purpose was to stop the movement of this master narrative. Looking at all the contemporary art of pop and readymades, cartons and cartoons, slogans and proclamations, Danto showed how none of this art fits any existing definition of art. The only definition that would include all this, he argued, and then all and only everything that is art, would be one that brought down all the historicist, normative, and evaluative walls of the museum. To bring down these walls would be to release art, in Danto's terms, from a mistaken "generic cleansing," as he termed it, that had gone on too long and too often in parallel with the ethnic cleansing of persons in the wider world. *Nothing* about art's appearance, meaning, place or time of origin would have anything anymore to do with art's definition, its essence, as it falsely had before. For art to be art, he argued, it had to have a meaning that was embodied in a way that made sense in the art world, but no restriction or specification of sense beyond that. Only by withdrawing all content from the definition of art could one take what Warhol had brought to consciousness: the fact that artworks could now look like anything ordinarily found in the world and yet, as artworks, never be identical to these commonplace things. From the earliest to the latest art, from the highest and most sacred to the lowest and most banal, and from every place in the world, the new world of art would show an art that was free and equal to present itself any way it wanted to the public. If and when judgments of value then followed, they would do so from a pluralistic approach to criticism equally freed from the inflated posture of any philosophically grounded exclusive vision of art.

The chapters of this book presuppose but do not make fully explicit many of Danto's philosophical views. They were written as lectures primarily for art his-

torians and, accordingly, show Danto's engagement with those he regarded as the primary contributors to perpetuating or ending the master narrative of the Western history of art: from Vasari through Wölfflin, Riegl, Gombrich, Panofsky, Fry, and Kahnweiler, to Greenberg, Belting, Krauss, and Crimp. To be sure, we see Danto often reading their views strikingly against their own grain—what Greenberg, for example, worried about, Danto took as Greenberg's view. But this he did, I believe, to express the urgency and excitement that he clearly felt when, in the postwar culture of New York, he saw a liberation of art that might signal a freedom for the world as a whole from all manner of segregation. He never forgot that urgency. It allowed him, until the end of his life, to stay in a place, *at* the end of art, convinced that through repetition, the signal—the demand for freedom—would become ever stronger.

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