

What Arthur Danto Meant to Me

by Ben Davis

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(Courtesy of poemachine via Flickr)

Arthur Danto, who [died over the weekend at the age of 89](#), was that rare and heroic thing: a real weirdo. I say that admiringly. The legendary critic, who made his name writing about difficult art for a popular audience in the *Nation*, formed a school of one. Unmoved by the critical vogues of the 1980s and '90s, he drew on the supremely uncool doctrines of analytic philosophy (in which he was academically credentialed) and Hegel, the Enlightenment thinker most often cited by the enthusiasts of postmodernism as a foil, the prototypical intellectual totalitarian. Danto's core thesis, that sometime in '60s we had reached an "end of art," was itself pretty totalizing, though he expressed it in a serene, grandfatherly kind of way, even as he returned to it endlessly, always teasing out new nuances.

His muse was [Andy Warhol](#), and in countless essays and talks he considered the example of the Pop prince's *Brillo Boxes*, first unveiled at Stable Gallery in 1964. His encounter with these sculptures was the primal scene of his writing, the moment when, Danto said, he first became able to see art as the territory of philosophy. How do we know, walking into a gallery, that Warhol's *Boxes* are artworks and not actual boxes of scouring pads? The answer, Danto posited, was that we couldn't be certain

without the intervention of thought: “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry — an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld,” he wrote in an essay called “[The Artworld](#)” in the *Journal of Philosophy*, also in 1964. “What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art.” Theory was all; the thing was nothing — or rather it had now become so.

His most famous essay, “The End of Art,” from 1984 (which you can find in the collection *[The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art](#)*), built up an entire historical narrative to buttress this claim. The story Danto told was this: For a long time, art (by which he meant Western art, the tradition coming out of the Italian Renaissance) seemed like it had a mission. This mission was to reflect reality, representationally, and whatever else was going on, it was easy to place it against this standard. Over the centuries, painters and sculptors became increasingly skilled at this project, making work that was ever more lifelike. But then along came photography and film, and artists had to begin searching for a new mission. Instead of representing a way of seeing the world, artists started to stretch and curve and distort the image (the post-Impressionists were Danto’s inflection point), and the only way to justify this as good art was to say that it was trying not to show how things were or might look, but to capture an idea or a feeling the artist had about things. As a viewer, you had to speculate more and more about the artist’s intention in order to make sense of what was going on. Finally, since you could not say that one artist’s “feeling” was really better than any other’s, it became clear that there was no common artistic project, no shared criteria to judge by. You could be interested in [Raphael](#) and Caravaggio, or you could be interested in comic books and Brillo box packaging, or both — whatever floated your boat.

“The age of pluralism is upon us,” Danto says towards the finale of the “The End of Art.” “It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means. When one direction is as good as another direction, there is no concept of direction any longer to apply.”

Danto explicitly meant this line of thought, he would later say, as an attempt to explain “the dismal state of the art world,” by which I think he meant its apparent directionlessness and the often empty, overblown arguments that characterized it. Yet, in one way at least, few theses could be proved more spectacularly and

empirically wrong than his “end of art.” He closes that essay with a prediction about a world without aesthetic progress: “The institutions of the artworld — galleries, collectors, exhibitions, journalism — which are predicated upon history and hence marking what is new, will bit by bit wither away.” In fact, the opposite proved to be the case. Warhol, the great “business artist,” actually foretold the vast expansion of the visual arts sphere, to the point where people talk seriously about the “[Warhol Economy](#).” The pluralistic art world has, it turns out, been all about the diversification of the business of art.

Still, I have more use for Danto’s fable than maybe most observers do. In [an essay a few years ago](#), I noted that Danto’s big idea is strangely similar to the late Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm’s [provocative take](#) on the crisis of elite culture in the 20th century. For the most part, Danto speaks in Hegelian mode, as if the history of visual art was a for-its-own-sake process of unfolding ideas, ultimately and inevitably yielding up the “post-historical” condition for art. Yet a key aspect in his story arrives from without: It is the rise and commercialization of new technologies like photography and film that forces traditional visual art to surrender its historic sense of purpose, and new developments in the ever-rapacious “culture industry” only promise to further decenter it. (“The End of Art” contains a lengthy, and today somewhat funny-seeming, meditation on the possibilities of holographic and even tactile cinema.)

Read this way, Danto’s “post-historical” condition is not the story of visual art magically dissolving into its own philosophy. It is the story of the clash of different forms of cultural production, of what happens when studio-based artisans find their turf encroached on by more corporate forms of culture, like advertising, which in the ’60s was indeed taking a particularly visual and creative turn. That is what the *Brillo Boxes* are harbingers of: not of an “artworld” that has grown so self-aware that it can accommodate anything, but of an “artworld” that has tacitly to concede that its traditional forms and themes have lost any special claim on the cultural imagination. (“What is needed is an approach that does not depend on the exclusion of the symbols that most people live by,” Lawrence Alloway, the curator and champion of Pop art, [had already written in 1957](#).) Contemporary art’s tremendous pluralism, looked at in this way, represents the fact that its practitioners have no one totally satisfactory answer for how to carry on under contemporary conditions.

If we frame Danto's "end of art" as a case of relative and not absolute loss of cultural significance when it comes to "marking what is new," then his prophecy of decline becomes somewhat more plausible (though still probably overstated). The Metropolitan Museum's annual attendance record, set last year, [was 6.28 million visits](#). Pretty impressive — but *Grand Theft Auto 5* sold 11.2 million units [in a single day](#). It is difficult, therefore, to defend visual art as the go-to symbol of the now, once you step outside the gallery and look at the cultural world as a whole.

I value Danto's thinking because I see his "end of art" as a theory of realistic expectations. His was a very consistent, philosophical effort to argue against making too-grand claims for this or that style of art — a theory that neatly allowed him to sidestep some of the more futile art-critical obsessions of the day. For instance, despite the fact that it would seem to be the logical correlate of the "end of art," Danto had little time for that other shibboleth of contemporary art writing, the "crisis of criticism." He felt no "crisis," arguing that the notion implied a need to make Grand Claims for one kind of art or another, something he had preemptively ruled out. Instead, Danto preferred a cheerfully eclectic approach, making the case for art's various manifestations to the public rather than getting lost in internecine wars that were mainly of interest to the already initiated. That's what made the good philosopher such an unexpectedly effective ambassador for challenging art to a relatively broad audience. As he wrote in his essay "The Fly in the Bottle" (from the collection [Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of Their Practice](#)), "Even when I have reservations about the work I write about, as I sometimes do, my task is to give readers something to think about — about art, about life, and about the relationship between them."

Arthur Danto set out to find a way to address contemporary art as the modest thing that it actually was, rather than as the leading edge of a culture whose time had passed. You might twist this observation around and say that, for Danto, modesty and diversity were what contemporary art had to offer, positively. Which is to say, in the end, the "artworld" is still open to weirdos, potentially at least. That's not a bad place to start the conversation about what makes it still important.