

# Arthur Danto and the End of Art

Raquel Cascales



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By

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# PREFACE

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## FOREWORD

# THE IMPOSSIBLE NOTION: ARTHUR DANTO AND THE END OF ART

TIZIANA ANDINA  
UNIVERSITY OF TURIN

The end of art is probably one of the most problematic and fascinating notions in the Dantian philosophy of art. This idea, indeed, seems to be intriguing both for Dantian and for Hegelian scholars, especially for philosophers working in the continental tradition. Therefore, the monograph by Raquel Cascales has come out at a particularly timely moment: in fact, not only is the Dantian community trying to focus on all the philosophical tensions implied by the use of the concept of the end of art, but the Hegelian community is also reflecting on the legacy of Hegel's gigantic philosophy. In this framework, the book by Cascales presents two valuable qualities: the first one is its methodological approach, very respectful of the Dantian text and really accurate in interpreting its spirit and logic. The second one is the unusually rich network of philosophical relations used by Cascales to put Danto in the correct context within contemporary philosophy.

The aim of the book, in fact, is to reconstruct, step by step, the logical structure of the Dantian arguments about the end of art without excluding the historical notions of the history of philosophy which have contributed to making that thesis possible. This reconstruction is necessary in Danto's case, because -- especially after the encounter with Hegel -- he ceaselessly attempted to fill the gap between analytical and continental philosophy, at least in the field of the philosophy of art. This attempt made Danto particularly sensible when approaching some of the aspects of continental philosophy -- especially toward its attention to history, which, by and large, implies the idea that the use of logic is not enough to explain much of the reality in the external world.



This awareness was the background of Danto's choice of the title of his masterpiece: *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981). After writing three books that, step by step, constituted the analytical analysis of the world -- an *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965), an *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge* (1968) and an *Analytical Philosophy of Action* (1973) -- it would have been obvious to write an *Analytical Philosophy of Art* to complete the picture. But that was not the case, and Danto wrote one of his best books walking on the border between analytical and continental thought. The title wasn't a coincidence but an expression of awareness as well as the first signal of the fact that Danto would follow that track in his future philosophy.

Through this careful analysis, Cascales puts Danto in the correct framework within the context of contemporary philosophy. This operation is exceptionally important because of the particular philosophical approach followed by Danto: it is not very common nowadays to find an analytical philosopher believing in the power of systematic explanation. Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher to whom Danto dedicated a small but brilliant book, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (1965), would say that Danto is an outdated analytical philosopher. This outdatedness has to push the interpreter to take the correct direction and I guess that the idea of interpreting Danto's philosophy of art as a dowel of a broader system with the human being in the center. Everything in philosophy -- this is Danto's idea -- is connected with everything else, so a holistic explanation is necessary to reach some progress in philosophy. Because philosophy does progress from time to time.

Cascales recognizes three points as particularly relevant and very useful to put the question of the end of art in the right light: first, according to Danto, the history of art understood in terms of subordination ends when art takes itself as its object and reflects on the question of what art is; second, we must take into account that Danto found support for his thesis in Hegelian philosophy, but also recognize that he carved out his own path when considering what had happened in the history of art. Finally, the particular historiographical feature of the end of art can be separated out and, for this reason, we can also define the "end" as the beginning of a new epoch. These three points taken together make the thesis quite clear and sustainable. By underlying these features internal to Danto's thesis, Cascales tells one side of the story which is fascinating and meaningful at the same time. However, to be able to understand Danto's philosophy of art, it is very important to see the whole structure of the system, of which the philosophy of art is but a small part.

Indeed, things become a little bit more complicated when it comes to understanding the idea of the end of art in the light of the Dantian system. This is a hermeneutic task that the Dantian interpreters have to pursue, also because Danto himself suggested this way to interpret his thought. Having in mind the whole system, one may legitimately ask, for example, how the thesis of the end of art may be compatible with the epistemological thesis developed in the *Analytical Philosophy of History*. More than twenty years had passed when Danto decided to end his philosophy of art with a quasi-philosophy of history. I'm speaking about a quasi-philosophy of history because Danto was conscious of the tension between the thesis expressed in his book on history -- which is still now considered as a milestone to explore the conditions of possibility of a research in the field of history -- and the way in which he finally developed a philosophy of history to explain the conclusion of a particular narration, that of the history of art.

The main thesis of the *Analytical Philosophy of History* is that it is not logically possible to develop a philosophy of history. If this is the case, then Danto can develop a philosophy of history applied to the arts, just because the position he is now occupying in history is exactly the position in which the history of arts has reached its end. In other words, this is the idea: he has written the philosophy of the history of art in the only moment in time in which this becomes possible, i.e. when the history of art is reaching its end. And the turning point that allows the arts to reach their end is Andy Warhol's complex and philosophically inspired artistic production. Warhol is the artist who has expressed the philosophical question about art in the most complete and accurate way. He is the hero of Danto's philosophy of art.

Nevertheless, If -- as Danto says -- everything is extensively associated with everything else, it is impossible to avoid putting the philosophy of art in relation with the whole philosophical system. I'm quite convinced about the fact that this reconsideration of the system will also imply reconsideration and probably new hermeneutics of some of the parts of Dantians philosophy of art.

Turin, March 31, 2019



## INTRODUCTION

### ARTHUR DANTO'S WORK AND LIFE

A philosopher's death does not usually make the headlines, yet Arthur C. Danto's 2013 death garnered a proverbial standing ovation and praise from around the world. Lydia Goehr, a prestigious Columbia professor, described him in the obituary she wrote as one of the four giants of the Anglo-American tradition, along with Stanley Cavell, Nelson Goodman and Richard Wollheim (Goehr 2013a).

Danto was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1924, and grew up in Detroit. In his intellectual autobiography, he relates the events and life circumstances that influenced his career, including the fact that his mother was an artist, the teachers he studied under, among them William Bossenbrook and Susanne K. Langer, and the artists he met, such as Pollock, Kooning and Giacometti. In 1945, he enlisted in the military, specifically in the American Corps of Army Engineers because he believed that his knowledge of art would help develop more sophisticated camouflage. He served in campaigns in Italy and North Africa where he learned both French and Italian. In addition to studying art at Wayne State University (1948), he also studied philosophy at Columbia University. Thanks to a Fulbright scholarship, Danto studied in Paris from 1949-1950 with Jean Wahl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and personally met George Santayana in Rome. He later returned to Europe to continue studying authors such as Nietzsche and Sartre.

Upon his return, he completed his doctorate at Columbia University (PhD, 1952) on questions of philosophy of history in an analytical environment. He was soon hired as a professor at the same institution and continued studying diverse topics. For example, he attended Dr. Suzuki's famous seminars on Zen philosophy, and began to approach John Cage, Fluxus art and the desire to overcome the gap between art and life. Danto taught in New York until 1992, when he became professor emeritus. He was married to Shirley Rovetch, with whom he had two children, until 1978 upon her death. In 1980, he married Barbara Westman with whom he remained until his death. From 1984 to 2009, he was an art critic for the

newspaper *The Nation*. He passed away on October 25, 2013 at the age of 89 in New York.

Perhaps these points are mere curiosities to some. Philosophical studies often ignore authors' biographical background and directly engage with and discuss their arguments. However, each scholar's biographical background has a decisive influence on his or her interests, concerns and arguments. If this applies to scholars more widely, it is also important in the case of Arthur Danto.

First of all, as noted, Danto experienced Europe firsthand, which must have influenced his openness toward and study of the European philosophical tradition, which was unusual among North American philosophers at the time. His effort to then integrate this tradition with his own, analytical philosophy, was certainly noteworthy. And in turn, as Andina points out (2010, 11-15), he allowed life to shape his philosophy, just as Pop artists reflected everyday life in their works. His first publications demonstrate rigorous analytical research in the philosophy of history,<sup>1</sup> the philosophy of action and the philosophy of knowledge—fields in which he established himself as a reference.

However, his career took a sharp turn when he discovered Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*. This piece, which he first saw in 1964 at a Stable Gallery exhibition in New York City, had a powerful impact on Danto. In fact, it inspired his first theoretical foray with the publication of his famous 1964 article, "The Artworld."

Although not an extensive publication, it squarely confronted the dominant Wittgensteinian theories of art. Danto managed to shift the focus of the question of art that prevented philosophers from advancing to another question, namely why is it that between two indiscernible objects one is a work of art and another is not? In this way, he reinvigorated aesthetic reflection and once again stood out in the American philosophical field.

Many years passed until Danto returned to reflection on art, but once he did, he did not pause again. In 1986, he garnered attention for proclaiming the "end of art" based on Hegelian aesthetics. This is

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<sup>1</sup> Among all the professors he had, two decisively influenced his thinking, including the famous philosopher Ernest Nagel and the successor to the Cassirer Chair, Suzanne K. Langer. Nagel, an expert in philosophy of science, distinguished deductive and probabilistic models, as well as functional and genetic models, and identified the latter as closest to historical explanation in his book *The Structure of Science* (1961). Langer wrote convincingly about Nagel's influence on Danto in *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1942). For a deeper look, see Danto's autobiography (Danto 2013b, 1-70).

undoubtedly Danto's best-known thesis, which reopened debate on contemporary aesthetics. Many professors at the time, as well as a broader audience outside of academia, discussed his intellectual acuity and novel arguments, making him one of the most prominent figures in the philosophy of art in America.

Danto's wide intellectual reach led him to touch on very different disciplines, significantly contributing to each of them, but he sometimes was unable to fully develop his ideas, which has led many to study his texts in isolation. His concept of action, that of history and narration, that of mental states, and his concept of art and the end of art thesis have all been studied separately. This way of approaching his work emphasizes its inconsistencies rather than its valuable contributions.

However, I believe that examining Danto's thought more holistically makes for a much more coherent and appealing philosophy. This does not involve assigning him some kind of external unity, but rather analyzing his philosophy from the perspective of the philosophical system that Danto himself proposed in his youth and styled after the philosopher George Santayana (1863-1952). Danto met Santayana in the summer of 1950 during his Fulbright scholarship, as he himself recounted (Danto 1988, xv-xxviii). This Spanish philosopher wrote *The Life of Reason* (1936), a work in five volumes dedicated to different aspects of reason, including science, art, religion, politics and common sense. It fascinated Danto and influenced how he understood his "system:"

I cannot remember when I conceived of the project of writing a system of philosophy in several volumes, something vaguely on the model of Santayana's *The Life of Reason*. It was very much a sort of nineteenth-century ambition, but for reasons comparable to those that compelled me to go from writing an article to writing a book, I felt compelled to move from writing a book to constructing a system. *Analytical Philosophy of History* was to be the first volume. There was to be a philosophy of knowledge and a philosophy of action, and then a philosophy of art. The last volume was to be a philosophy of mind. (Danto 2013b, 29)

To build this system, Danto focused on human beings and better understanding our relationship to the world. Danto conceived of human beings as *ens representans*, beings that use a variety of representations to relate to and understand the world. In this sense, representation is a fundamental part of Dantian philosophy and lends coherence to his philosophical system (Snyder 2018, 148-150).

The method he used to investigate these questions pertained, without a doubt, to analytical philosophy. In this way, we better understand why after *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965), which analyzes the type of

knowledge that corresponds to historical representation, came *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge* (1968), in which Danto concretely analyzes what knowledge is like, and then *Analytical Philosophy of Action* (1973), which contains analysis of how to distinguish between seemingly indiscernible actions and argues that we can only say that an event is an action using a description. However, *Analytical Philosophy of Art* never saw the light of day. Instead, in 1981, he published *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*:

I did not call it *Analytical Philosophy of Art* because that is not what it was. The Wittgensteinian theories, or the Institutional Theory, were what I thought of as the analytical philosophy of art, and I clearly wanted no part of either of them. (...) The viability of such examples had come from within art as a kind of necessity, so I knew, or felt I knew, that had to allow myself to be guided by art rather than the philosophy of art, at least as that had been practiced up till then. (Danto 2013b, 44-45)

This represented significant change in Danto's thought as he apparently moved away from analytical philosophy in an "institutional" way. Although he continued to use analytical tools to carry out his work, he was motivated by artistic practice rather than by theory. As Lydia Goehr says: "Danto designed his analytical method to lie between the substantive and reductionist extremes to avoid committing the error of each" (2013b, 361). Indeed, a large number of examples demonstrate his interest in understanding how everyday, ordinary objects can be indiscernible from works of art. As we will later explore, Pop Art, and Andy Warhol in specific, mostly drove Danto's changing perspective.

In this way, Danto's reflection on changes in artistic practice during his time led him to examine the history of art, assigning to the history of Western art a mimetic desire to capture reality in the best way possible. As the engine that impelled history, it would find its fulfillment in the emergence of photography and cinema, when art would reach its end. The idea of the "end of art" thus developed:

In consequence, there has been a certain internal evolution in what the idea means, and understanding the logic of this evolution opens up the possibility of what I came to think of as philosophical art history... I had in mind Hegel's famous and somewhat dispiriting utterance that when philosophy paints its gray in gray, then has a form of life grown old. In 1984, when 'The End of Art' was published, I was somewhat saddened by the idea of the art having come to an end. (Danto 2013b, 54)

Indeed, his argument that art contains an internal logic that propels its evolution in one direction or another brought him squarely into Hegelian territory. His thesis was so misunderstood and controversial that it garnered unanticipated attention. Everyone talked about it, often without having read it, and Danto was forced to continue writing to justify his positions. Thus, many intellectuals began to study Danto's philosophy of art separately from the rest of his philosophy, analyzing in many cases his last book without taking into account his previous ones. This is how many examined his work without noticing that his "end of art" thesis is continued in other books or the relationship between his philosophy of art and the rest of his philosophical thought.<sup>2</sup> However, with Danto's work now complete and enough time having passed, I believe that we are in a position to analyze his philosophy of art and assign it the proper place within his thought.

For this reason, the best way to study Arthur Danto's philosophy of art and, specifically, his end of art thesis involves beginning by analyzing his analytical philosophy of history. Danto sought after the conditions of possibility of historical knowledge in a positivist context, and his reflection on narrative led him to broaden his conception of what historical statements should look like. He postulated that narrative is a kind of representation that allows us to understand events in history since the work of the historian allows us to access the meaning of what happened in retrospect. Many of his contemporaries listened to these conclusions, but they most influenced his own thinking, leading Danto to unexpectedly approach Hegel's thought and redirect his own philosophy.

Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins called this redirection his "Hegelian turn" for the first time in 1993 (2012, 172-196). It is mainly characterized by acceptance of narrative realism—that is, acceptance of objective historical structures—and of history's teleological and progressive character. Hegel's thesis on the progress of history and his proclamation of art's past character seemed evident to Danto when trying to account for developments in the history of art. From then on, he argued that the history of art demonstrates an expansion of self-consciousness, thanks to which art can eventually free itself from the heteronomous elements that once conditioned it. All this led Danto to speak of the "end of art." The importance of grasping his philosophy of history becomes evident in that it directs us to Hegel and to better understanding Danto's research on art. Furthermore, as we shall see later, this American

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<sup>2</sup> However, there are some exceptions, especially Andina (2010), Carroll (1999), Parselis (2009) and Tozzi (2007).



philosopher not only applied his knowledge of the philosophy of history to the philosophy of art, but also definitively included in his philosophy the historical dimension as part of his analysis of art.

Before delving into detailed analysis of what Danto meant by the “end of art,” in the third chapter, I will outline his philosophy of art. For this reason, I will begin by analyzing his first article, “The Artworld,” and demonstrate the role that the historical configuration of art played in his subsequent thought. Thereafter, I will analyze the timeless definition of art that he presents in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981). In addition to highlighting the role that history plays regarding the conditions of the possibility of art, I highlight the interdependence between the possibility of enunciating an essentialist definition of art and the proclamation of the “end of art.”

I dedicate the last chapter to presenting a detailed analysis of the “end of art” thesis, which Danto formulated for the first time in 1984. The biggest problem found in seriously analyzing this thesis is that Danto never developed it extensively in a single work, but rather reformulated it several times over the years. Scholars have sometimes interpreted this reformulation and extension of the “end of art” thesis as a change of opinion or as a contradiction. However, a systematic explanation of Danto’s various works dispels charges of contradiction and reveals instead that his theory expanded and further developed the meaning of the end.

In the first place, a temporal distinction can be established, namely the ideas presented in his texts published in the 1980s are different from those published in the 1990s. This division does not suppose a clear delimitation of his ideas since his different ways of understanding the end of art are intermingled throughout his entire work.

Danto’s first texts<sup>3</sup> always justify the “end of art” thesis in a Hegelian key. For this reason, the first sense of the “end of art” is associated with Hegelian philosophy, i.e., a progressive conception of history (and of the history of art) and art’s submission to philosophy starting from Plato’s mimetic definition.

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<sup>3</sup> This first stage includes the following works: “The End of Art,” published in *The Death of Art* in 1984 and republished in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* in 1986; “Approaching the End of Art,” a conference Danto gave in 1985 at the Whitney Museum of American Art and included in *The State of the Art* in 1987; and “Narratives of the End of Art,” a “Lionel Trilling” lecture he gave at Columbia University and published in *Grand Street* in 1989 and republished in 1991 in *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present*.

Danto's later texts<sup>4</sup> confidently proclaim that the end of art has already taken place and point to other narratives that also subjected art over time. Two narratives or stories regarding art especially stand out. On the one hand, the mimetic story that, although original to Plato, spread following Vasari's work. On the other hand, Greenberg's modernist story, which, although it did not entirely break with the former, is based on a purist conception of art in which art tries to detach itself from anything not strictly essential to it. This narrative, Danto noted, ends with the appearance of cinematography, Duchamp's *ready-mades* and Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*.

In addition to these two narratives, there is a third meaning to the end of art related to the appearance of a new era of art, namely the post-historic era. In declaring the beginning of a new era, Danto did not intend to argue that another art narrative was coming to a close, another stage overcome, but rather argued that art had developed an awareness of and about itself that could hardly be retracted. With art no longer submitted to philosophy, an irreversible clarification about the concept of art emerged, allowing for a timeless definition of art.

Thus, Danto, starting from historical facts proper to his era, looked back and narrated a story with a clear ending. At the same time, he wondered how art should be understood in a post-historic era. Post-historical art is, for him, art no longer confined to the style of an era, but rather is characterized by freedom and plurality, by the peaceful coexistence of all currents absent any hierarchy. This expansion does not corner him into aesthetic relativism; rather, he endeavored to show how art could be understood in an age no longer marked by what art history says art has to be, in spite of the intrinsic historical dimension of all art. His analysis clearly demonstrates that historical consideration continues to be an essential element both in the creation and interpretation of artworks, and in the study of the philosophy of art.

Although Danto fervently defended the historical character of art, he did not merely subordinate it to history. He also did not fall prey to the temptation of arguing that, since art is linked to its historical realization, we are incapable of judging past works. The art criticism he developed for more than twenty years, on the contrary, provides us with insights into

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<sup>4</sup> This second stage includes: *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-historical Perspective* (1992); *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, 1997 (a publication of lectures given at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1995) and *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (2003).

how he believed concrete works of art should be judged in a post-historical era.<sup>5</sup>

From this perspective, his philosophy of history and philosophy of art are complementary rather than contradictory. At the same time, Danto's philosophy of art and the rest of his philosophy overlap, which brings us back to this introduction's argument, namely to understand Danto, we would do well to understand the breadth of his work and life. This text does not offer a complete picture, but does aim to provide sufficient brushstrokes so as to contribute to its completion.

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<sup>5</sup> A large part of the criticism he published in *The Nation* can be found in a variety of his texts, including *The State of the Art* (1987); *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (1990); *Philosophizing Art: Selected Essays* (1999. Berkeley: University of California Press); *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World* (2001. New York: Straus and Giroux).