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Art is Dead?: A Critical Analysis of Arthur Danto's End of Art Theory

Laura M. Ginn

Western Michigan University, lauramginn@gmail.com

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THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE

CERTIFICATE OF ORAL EXAMINATION

Laura M. Ginn, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in Fall 2001 successfully presented the Lee Honors College Thesis on April 15, 2005.

The title of the paper is:

"A Critical Analysis of Arthur Danto's End of Art Theory"

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michael A. Pritchard".

Dr. Michael Pritchard, Philosophy

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Karen Bondarchuk".

Professor Karen Bondarchuk, School of Art

Art is Dead?:
A Critical Analysis of Arthur Danto's End of Art Theory

Honors Thesis
Lee Honors College

Laura Ginn
April 15, 2005

On Sunday February 6, 2005 the “Arts and Leisure” section of the Sunday New York Times¹ contained a photograph² of a woman, her face framed by what appeared to be a piece of half eaten wall. As I read the article, I was informed that my initial inference had been true. The woman, Emily Katrencik, was indeed devouring the entire wall of a gallery³ as a performance piece, and had, in fact, begun working in this way in her graduate days at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology when she had consumed part of a well known Harvard building. She referred to her art as a kind of ‘negative sculpture’.

The idea of art as a reductive process is not new within the art world. In 1953, Robert Rauschenberg created the piece “Erased DeKooning” for which he erased a painting by DeKooning and displayed the end product (a blank canvas). Another example came during the years 1969 to 1970, when the recluse sculptor Michael Heizer (also recently written about in the New York Times)⁴ created a negative sculpture of immense scale called “Double Negative,” in which he displaced 240,000 tons of rock from a peak in Nevada.

As I read the article about the wall-eating woman I found myself considering the drastic way in which art has changed over the course of the twentieth century, bringing us to a point at which artists not only create works of art to be hung on the wall, but devour the walls themselves.

¹ Mia Fineman, “The Munchies,” The New York Times, 6 February, 2005, sec. AR, p. 6.

² Photograph accompanying the article by Nancy Siesel

³ The gallery in question is the satellite location of the LMAKprojects gallery located in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, the wall being eaten separated the main gallery from the bedroom of Louky Keijsers, the gallery’s director.

⁴ Michael Kimmelman, “Michael Heizer,” The New York Times Magazine, 6 February 2005.

There are often strong reactions to contemporary art. Some people (largely artists) offer a big hurrah for the way in which art has broken through conventions that have dominated it for centuries. Others lament that “true art” has been lost and all that remains are tattered remnants of what was once a vital representation of the culture and intellect of mankind. Regardless of how one feels towards the art of today, it is difficult to determine why art has taken its current form and what this means for the future of art.

When reviewed, the twentieth century, (beginning with the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp and continuing with abstract expressionism, the combines of Rauschenberg, minimalism, pop, and conceptual art, and peppered throughout with a hearty dose of the photograph and other means of image reproduction), was a time in which it seems the main purpose of art was to destroy all artistic conventions and redefine the nature of art. Some would say, after this flurry of activity, that art has come out unfocused and without a singular purpose. In this light, it seems necessary to take a step back from the chaos and ask the question, “what is the state of art today, and where is art headed?” Arthur Danto concerns himself with this very question in his essay “The End of Art.”⁵

Danto and the End of Art

I feel it is important to note here that what I am dealing with in this essay is not a discussion of aesthetics. Rather, I am attempting to examine a theory put forth by Arthur Danto that deals with the nature of art rather than the formal aspects of art. I intend to present Danto’s theory of the “end of art,” a theory that seeks to explain the current status of art by exploring a progressive model of art history and relating it to Hegel’s

⁵Arthur Danto, “The End of Art,” in The Death of Art, (New York: Haven Publications, 1984), 5-35.

philosophy and Danto's own experience with, and inferences about, the art world. I intend to describe Danto's theory and then to present the academic responses elicited by that theory, and, also, to compare Danto's understanding of art to that of conceptual artists'. Finally, I will attempt to explain what effect, if any, a theory such as Danto's "end of art" has upon current and future art-making.

In the "End of Art," Danto puts forth a theory that was first published as a short commentary in the Soho News⁶ and later, in a more complete form, as the lead essay in a book titled The Death of Art⁷ in 1984. In his theory of the "end of art" Danto makes an attempt to explain the contemporary condition of art by examining the changing status of art in society, not only through art history, but also through the historical relationship between art and philosophy.

Danto begins his discussion by acknowledging that in order to understand the current and future condition of art one must first have a general theory of the history of art. The point that Danto wishes to make about art history is that the two most common models of art history, when considered independently, do not sufficiently explain the course of art throughout history. After making this claim, Danto goes on to propose his own model of art history, a blend of the first two theories coupled with a heavy dose of Hegelian philosophy, which he claims makes it clear that art has indeed reached its end.

The first model of art that Danto addresses is the progressive model of art history. This model, the origination of which Danto credits to Giorgio Vasari,⁸ views art as a continuous attempt to image reality with increasing accuracy and faithfulness to nature.

⁶ I have tried to find this edition of the Soho News and the exact date but with no success so far, Danto refers to it in his introduction to "The End of Art."

⁷ See footnote number 6.

⁸ Danto, "The End of Art", 9.

In other words, art continued to move forward because each generation of artists desired to create images that were more illusionistic and faithful to nature than those of their predecessors. This model of art history does seem valid when one considers that the introduction of perspective, and the increased accuracy achieved in painting with such devices as the camera obscura, are generally heralded as great achievements in art history.

The problem with the progressive model of art, however, is that with the invention of the photograph and motion pictures, the struggle to duplicate the world as seen essentially ended.⁹ So, if art was only a means of mimetic representation it would have ended completely around the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁰

This, however, is not the case as art continued on with vigor into the twentieth century.

Rather than destroy art, photography and motion pictures seemed to set it free from many traditional constraints, and as art shed its mimetic quality, another aspect of art came to the forefront: the use of art as a means for individual expression. By this I mean art began to be understood as a way in which the artist could communicate how they *felt* about something. Danto provides the Fauvists as an example.¹¹ The Fauvists were a group of painters in the early twentieth century, (included among their ranks was Matisse), who painted things in the world not as they were seen, but rather in unnatural and often lurid colors. The colors used by the Fauvists deviated from any colors that their subjects would be in reality. This obvious deviation of color was meant to signal

⁹ Ibid, 20-21.

¹⁰ One aspect of the photograph Danto does not discuss is the trend among photographers to manipulate the photographic image so that it is no longer a direct representation of reality. This is certainly an interesting phenomenon that may have some bearing on Danto's argument. In the future I would like to devote more time to photographic manipulation and its place within Danto's thesis.

¹¹ Ibid, 21-24.

that the artist was not trying to create an illusionistic image, but rather that the artists was attempting to express how they personally felt towards the subject.¹² Thus, the Fauvists offer one example of how deviation from faithful depictions of reality became essential to the artist's message.

This new emphasis on expression in art illustrates the second model of art history discussed by Danto, in which art becomes a "communication of feeling."¹³ In such a view, art does not progress along a linear path, but rather is simply a discontinuous manifestation of each artist's independent attempt at self-expression. In fact, this view of art history is necessarily non-progressive since human beings have not developed new sets of emotions over the course of history.

This second view of art history, that the "history of art is just the lives of the artists one after another,"¹⁴ with no connection between them, shows its essential failing in that no artist exists in a vacuum and each artist is aware and influenced by what came before him. This is evidenced by the obvious progression even in what is considered expressionistic art. The Fauvists eventually gave way to the cubists, and so on, until abstract expressionists such as Pollock began creating works completely devoid of any recognizable forms. By examining these movements in art history, it is clear that expressionism did chart a progressive course.

Thus it becomes clear that a view of art history as a progression towards ever more faithful optical duplication, and a model of art in history as purely expressionistic both fail to encompass art history in its entirety, and neither one explains the advent of

¹² This, of course, is an oversimplified explanation of the Fauvists. Their discordant color choices were also a means of criticizing the narrowness of academic painting.

¹³ Ibid, 23.

¹⁴ Ibid, 25.

conceptual art in the twentieth century, a movement which not only scoffed at mimetic representation but, in fact, did away with the art object all together, and roundly condemned any expression of feeling in art as distracting from the intellectual purpose of conceptual art. Therefore Danto finds it necessary to introduce a third model of art history based largely on Hegel's philosophy. As Danto writes:

...what emerges from this dialectic is that if we are to think of art as having an end, we need a conception of art history which is linear, but a theory of art which is general enough to include representations other than the sort illusionistic painting exemplifies...¹⁵

Danto goes on to say:

Hegel's theory meets all these demands. His thought requires that there be genuine historical continuity, and indeed a kind of progress. The progress in question is not that of an increasingly refined perceptual equivalence. Rather there is a kind of cognitive progress...When the cognition is achieved, there really is no longer any point to or need for art. Art is a transitional stage in the coming of a certain kind of knowledge. The question then is what sort of cognition this can be, and the answer, disappointing as it may sound at first, is the knowledge of what art is.¹⁶

I believe it is pertinent here to say a bit about the philosophy of Hegel to which Danto is referring. Danto refers to Hegel's philosophy as laid out in his Phenomenology of Spirit, in which the protagonist, Geist, (the spirit of the world), works to achieve self-knowledge. Indeed Geist works to achieve Absolute Knowledge as Hegel terms it, in which, "there is no gap between knowledge and its object, or knowledge is its own object, hence subject and object at once."¹⁷ It is this achievement of absolute knowledge that marks the end of movement and change.

It is in the achievement of such absolute knowledge that Danto sees the end of art. Danto cites the numerous and highly varied movements in art of the twentieth century (cubism, futurism, minimalism, pop, conceptualism, etc.) as having one common thread.

¹⁵ Ibid, 27.

¹⁶ Ibid, 28.

¹⁷ Ibid, 33.

That thread, he claims, is the way in which each of these movements in art not only moved further and further away from direct representation, but in fact moved progressively further away from any art object at all, relying on a minimal art object coupled with increasingly complex theory. In this way art eventually reached a point in conceptualism where the object was no longer even necessary to art, art becoming, as it were, pure theory; or as Danto puts it quite eloquently:

...the objects approach zero as their theory approaches infinity, so that virtually all there is at the end is theory, art having finally become vaporized in a dazzle of pure thought about itself, and remaining, as it were, solely as the object of its own theoretical consciousness.¹⁸

So, Danto claims, just as the quest of Hegel's Geist ended in absolute knowledge, the quest of art, and thereby art's history, has ended in art becoming purely philosophy. As Danto phrases it, "...the division between object and subject is all but overcome, and it little matters whether art is philosophy in action or philosophy is art in thought."¹⁹

Danto does not suggest that the end of art means the end of art making. Rather he believes we have now entered an "age of pluralism"²⁰ within which all art forms are equally valid (a view already heartily embraced in the post-modern perspective of art) and one may do what one likes. Danto likens this pluralism in art to the state which Karl Marx referred to as the "Post-Historical Period", in which mankind, freed from the forward movement of history, would exist in a Utopian state in which all activities would be equally valid and it would not be necessary to limit oneself by a defined role.²¹ In this view the 'end of art' is not a catastrophic apocalypse in which art ceases to exist, instead,

¹⁸ Ibid, 31.

¹⁹ Ibid, 33-34.

²⁰ Ibid, 34.

²¹ Ibid, 32-35.

it would seem, art has merely reached a Utopian state in which all striving can cease and art can exist merely for its own sake.

Danto's end of art theory is elegantly constructed. Within it he manages to streamline all of art history so that it runs towards one simple goal, the discovery of the nature of art and thereby the end of art. One cannot expect to construct a theory with such finality as Danto's without eliciting a response. In the following pages I would like to consider the responses, or lack thereof, of two groups to Danto's theory. These groups are academics (including philosophers), and working artists. There has been a direct response to Danto's thesis from the academic community. This is not surprising since copies of "The End of Art" were sent out to various academics directly by Berel Lang. The fact that academics felt compelled to respond can also be taken as evidence that they found Danto's thesis interesting and thought-provoking enough to warrant a response. In contrast, artists have greeted Danto mainly with silence. This could be symptomatic of a general hostility in the art world toward critics and art theorists,²² or it could be that the responses to Danto are more subtly conveyed through the artwork of these artists. In light of the lack of direct responses to Danto by practicing artists, however, I will instead examine how statements by some contemporary minimalist and conceptual artists align with, or counter Danto's thesis. I will focus mainly on writings by a few conceptual artists who participated in what Danto might term the last days of art. I will also consider some of the problems that stem from outsider analysis of art, particularly philosophers'

²² This possible hostility towards critics could be traced back to Clement Greenberg and a time when artists began to be seen as mere object producers while critics, such as Greenberg, assigned meaning to the works of art through their own writings. This usurpation of art's meaning by critics could arguably be one of the driving forces behind the advent of conceptual art. Within a conceptual piece the idea is intrinsic to the piece and therefore remains more within the artist's control. There is not room here for a full discussion of this phenomenon, although I do touch on it briefly later in the paper in conjunction with Joseph Kosuth.

analyses in light of the tumultuous relationship that has existed for years between art and philosophy. I recognize that I am dealing with very broad groups and, as such, will have to generalize a great deal. I acknowledge the pitfalls of generalization, but I believe, nonetheless, that my analysis will serve as a useful beginning to a more in depth analysis of Danto's theory at some later date.

The Academic Response to Danto's End of Art Theory

The academic response to Danto is well-represented by one book, The Death of Art,²³ the same book in which Danto's theory was first published in its complete form. In The Death of Art, Danto's theory serves as the lead essay and is responded to in a series of essays by various academics. The essays in The Death of Art respond to Danto in various ways, but common throughout all the essays is dissatisfaction with the end of art theory, and more specifically a sentiment that Danto has failed to consider the complexities that exist within art. Therefore, it is argued, Danto is guilty of oversimplification which leads to falsity in his argument. Indeed, some of the respondents accuse Danto not merely of overlooking art's complexities, but of going so far as to purposefully ignore aspects of art that were problematic to the construction of his theory.

I do not wish to give the impression that over-simplification is the only challenge brought against Danto in academic responses. Robert A. Pois contributed an essay to The Death of Art titled "Danto's Apocalypse,"²⁴ which offers a very pointed criticism on Danto's interpretation of both Hegel and Marx. I feel that in the philosophical arena

²³ Berel Lang, ed., The Death of Art (New York: Haven Publications, 1984).

²⁴ Robert A. Pois, "Danto's Apocalypse," in The Death of Art (New York: New Haven Publications, 1984), 183-197.

these are certainly areas for discussion, but as my goal in this paper is more geared toward the impact of Danto's theory on the art community, I will not seek to discredit Danto's interpretation of Hegel or Marx. Moreover, I feel Danto has used Hegel and Marx for illustrative purposes and not, because they present irrefutable arguments themselves. Therefore, for my purposes, I will leave it to Pois to challenge Danto on this particular point, and I will focus my attention instead on Danto's treatment of art history, and the art world as a whole.

The four essays in The Death of Art which most directly deal with the allegations of over-simplification raised against Danto are those by Joyce Brodsky, Norman Miller, Christopher Butler, and Richard Kuhns. It is these four essays that I wish to analyze. I will begin with Brodsky's critique of Danto in her essay "Only the End of ART."²⁵ Joyce Brodsky advocates a pluralistic approach to art that she feels Danto rejects because it doesn't fit neatly into his theory.²⁶

Brodsky looks at each of Danto's models of art history and shows how each is too narrow in its interpretation. For example, the first critique she offers is of Danto's mimetic model. Rather than simply viewing optical fidelity as an end in itself, as Danto does, she suggests that optical fidelity served not only a technical but a symbolic purpose as well. As an example of this she offers the care given in rendering the Christ child's genitals realistically in Renaissance paintings.²⁷ Such realistic genitals were not painted

²⁵ Joyce Brodsky, "Only the End of ART," in The Death of Art (New York: New Haven Publications, 1984), 57-76.

²⁶ Danto is not blind to pluralism, he addresses it as the outcome of the "end of art." Brodsky, however, is saying that pluralism existed long before Danto claims that art ended, and it is the very reason why art cannot end in the first place.

²⁷ Brodsky, 60.

merely for the sake of optical fidelity, but as a symbol which emphasized Christ as God made “man in the flesh.”

Brodsky also explains, in great detail, what she means by a “pluralistic” approach, and, most importantly, describes why a pluralistic approach does not necessitate an “end” to art. She says of the pluralistic approach that:

This model tells no grand story about Art with a purpose, either like the one that tries to mirror (capture) nature, or like the one that reflects upon itself as pure essence (denies matter). Instead it defines art as things formed in matter or ideas about such possible formulations, that serve all kinds of human needs. It considers that a successful art thing embodies its use in its forms of signification or symbolization.²⁸

Brodsky, in short, is saying that art is so varied and connected to so many aspects of society that it is impossible to distill it down to one simple, linear model which fits neatly into a theory.

Norman Miller offered his own critique of Danto in his essay “Three arguments on the Death of Art.”²⁹ Like Brodsky, Miller feels Danto has an overly simplistic approach to art. Miller even goes so far as to say that Danto blatantly ignores some aspects of art because of their “badness-of-fit.”³⁰ Like Brodsky, Miller feels that Danto does not give enough consideration to societal and political influences on art, and, therefore, only deals with art in a disconnected and partial fashion. Christopher Butler also makes this same critique of Danto in his essay “Art and its Interpretation.”³¹ As he states, “It is...only by privileging a limited area of artistic activity that we can produce

²⁸ Ibid, 67.

²⁹ Norman Miller, “Three Arguments on the Death of Art,” in The Death of Art (New York: New Haven Publications, 1984), 141-157.

³⁰ Ibid, 141.

³¹ Christopher Butler, “Art and its Interpretation,” in The Death of Art (New York: New Haven Publications, 1984), 161-180.

the antitheses that are the necessary morals of a Danto-like story, moving towards the end of art.”³²

Richard Kuhns of the Department of Philosophy at Columbia University, offers a critique along the same lines as Brodsky, Miller, and Butler in his essay “The End of *Art?*”³³ Kuhns admits that art may have ended according to the three models of art which Danto offers, that is the mimetic, expressive, and in the Hegelian view, but, Kuhns argues, these three models, all progressive, do not represent the full nature of art.³⁴ In words that summarize the general academic sentiment laid out in The Death of Art, Kuhns states, “The very stuff of art is the stuff of culture and culture never ends as long as there are human societies...it is my belief that art meets needs of both a public and private kind that make it culturally essential for what we are as human beings.”³⁵

Of course, the first question that springs to mind when reading Kuhns’ statement is what those needs are that make art so culturally essential. Art exists not merely as personal expression and isolated objects in Kuhns’ view, but as cultural objects which aid individuals in their introduction to, and understanding of, culture.³⁶ Therefore art objects (or the ideas that comprise them) exist not merely as artifacts of society, but as an intrinsic part of society. As such, art, be it manifested as object or as idea (as in conceptual art), will not cease to exist or to have a viable function until society changes radically or ceases to exist all together.

³²Ibid, 174.

³³ Richard Kuhns, “The End of *Art?*” in The Death of Art (New York: New Haven Publications, 1984), 39-53.

³⁴Ibid, 42.

³⁵Ibid, 45.

³⁶ Ibid, 49.

Kuhns goes on to argue that while the end of art may be something that can be considered possible in a philosophical sense, it is in fact impossible psychologically due to its necessity as a means to introduce the individual to the culture of their society.³⁷ The reason, Kuhns argues, that Danto finds it so easy to pronounce the end of art is that Danto's perspective is that of a philosopher, and therefore, in Kuhns' view, Danto's perspective is a narrow and partial one that allows him to see only part of the variegated whole of art. Kuhns is quick to point out that both Danto and Hegel are only a small part of a cultural discussion that will look very different from a future vantage point than it does today.³⁸

Thus in his essay Kuhns presents not only the sentiment that Danto has oversimplified art within his theory, but also offers two of the reasons why he believes this is so: first, because Danto is viewing art through a philosophical lens, and second, because Danto is treading on dangerous ground by making a proclamation about the present that he can only partially perceive and the future which exists merely as conjecture. I believe that in these two limitations Kuhns has hit upon the main weaknesses in Danto's theory, and I will, in the following, offer a more in depth discussion of how each of these limitations may have affected Danto's arguments. I shall begin with the problem of Danto's philosophical perspective.

I realize that saying philosophers are over stepping their bounds, in terms of subject matter, is dangerous ground. Philosophers have a long tradition of tackling any subject matter that appeals to them, be it government, the after-life (or lack thereof), the meaning of life, morality, and art. My argument against Danto is not that he is in error in

³⁷Ibid, 48.

³⁸Ibid, 47-48.

attempting to analyze art, (he is certainly not the first philosopher to do so), but rather that his role as philosopher may serve to color and limit his understanding of art.

In support of this claim I offer a discussion formulated by Danto himself in The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art.³⁹ In the first essay of this book Danto discusses the tumultuous, and as he understands it, antagonistic relationship between art and philosophy beginning with Plato's dismissal of art and artists in his Republic as dangerous distractions from the search for the ideal.⁴⁰ While it might be tempting here to indulge in oversimplification and claim that, owing to the seeds of animosity sown so early between art and philosophy, Danto is understandably compelled, at the first opportunity, to pronounce triumphantly the end of art. This, however, would be a grossly unfounded conjecture indeed, (bordering on the absurd), and would overlook Danto's personal relationship with the art world (I will say more about this shortly). Rather, I wish to comment on the general tendency of philosophers to attempt to create finite limits for all practices so that they may be quantified and systematized in a manner that allows for easier human comprehension of the complexities of existence.⁴¹

It is this search for universals and answers which makes for the fundamental difference between philosophy and art. Philosophers tend to seek to quantify human existence while artists generally seek instead to explore, and in some ways, even invent it. Kuhns discusses this difference between artists' and philosophers' methods of understanding culture in "The End of *Art*?" In it he states:

³⁹ Arthur Danto, The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 1-21.

⁴⁰ Danto, The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art, 6.

⁴¹ Another example of this exists in the realm of ethics in which philosophers such as Kant have sought to create systems and sets of universals against which all actions and motives can be measured.

For the philosopher to “possess culture” is to interpret it philosophically, to write, as it were, *the last manifesto*. For the artist, to “possess culture” is to continually reestablish the tradition through the making of cultural objects whose function continues to be that of the transitional object [of the individual into culture]...Unlike the philosopher who seeks to write the last manifesto, the artist lives in the ever re-born belief that the task of art is the establishment of new manifestoes on into the unseeable future.⁴²

I recognize that this statement, made by Kuhns, makes the ever-dangerous foray into the realm of generalization. I believe, however, that Kuhns has not gone too far into the realm of conjecture for his pronouncement to cease to carry any weight. In stating that philosophers generally seek to write “the last manifesto”⁴³ Kuhns is indulging in poetic language to be sure, but he is also merely summarizing the acceptable practice of philosophy which is to seek answers, however elusive those answers may remain.

In contrast, artists do not generally proclaim their art to be a summation of all art, but rather are content to call their work mere *pieces*. Perhaps I am lending too much weight to pure semantics, but I believe the utilization of the word piece by the art community does have some significance. A work of art is rarely, if ever, treated as the grand summation of all culture, providing an argument for all that came before and all that will come after. Rather, art is more a symptom of the greater culture, and also the personal expression of the artist. An artist may hope to discover truth in their art, but often art serves a more instructive purpose. Art is a form of communication, like language, through which an artist may speak to the viewer or the viewer to themselves, by using the work of art as a mirror of sorts. Philosophy, on the other hand, is not meant to be transparent. Rather it utilizes the communicative element of language to present what it believes to be solid truths.

⁴² Kuhns, 52.

⁴³One philosophical trend Kuhns does discount here, due to generalization, is pluralism. Pluralism does not seek one definitive truth, rather it allows for many different ideas to be valid at the same time. Pluralism is only a small part of philosophy as a whole, however, and so I feel its existence does not debase Kuhns' argument.

I set forth this distinction between the general approach of the philosopher and that of the artist not as proof that the philosopher cannot understand art, nor as an ultimate defense of art against philosophical quantification. I am simply drawing attention to this difference to say that the philosopher may be in danger of misunderstanding the nature of art in his theorizing due to this difference, and therefore I feel this distinction deserves mentioning in any discussion of Danto's theory of the end of art.

Artists' Statements and their Relationship to Danto's "End of Art" Theory

Danto is in a unique position as a philosopher however. Danto fully took advantage of being in New York, and thus able to view first hand, many of the movements of contemporary art of the last half of the twentieth century. He has also, as is obvious from his well thought out accounts, given much time to studying contemporary art. He is the author of several books that deal with philosophy and contemporary art, and also served as an art critic for The Nation for many years. Therefore, Danto must be given credit as far as having a great deal of experience with both viewing art first hand, and with interpreting and criticizing contemporary art.

With all of this discussion about artists versus philosophers, I feel it is pertinent to examine some of the opinions of the artists who were creating art at the time which Danto views as the "end of art," the time in which the art *object* became inconsequential and *idea* became the focus of art. This is the advent of conceptual art; an art which is perhaps

best represented by Sol LeWitt's famous quote, "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."⁴⁴

Conceptual Art is specifically defined in Gardner's Art Through the Ages as, "An American avant-garde art trend of the 1960s that asserted that the 'artfulness' of art lay in the artist's idea rather than its final expression."⁴⁵ In a broader sense, conceptual art is understood as art in which the idea takes precedence over the art object, even to the point of the object being eliminated all together. It is this elimination of the art object in favor of a sort of 'philosophy' of the piece that seems to be the concrete illustration of what Danto means when he refers to art becoming the philosophy of art and thus ending by discovering the nature of what it is. As such, I believe it is of particular interest to examine the writing of conceptual artists, and to compare what it is they believed they were doing by creating conceptual art pieces as opposed to Danto's interpretation of such art. For the purpose of this particular discussion I will limit my analysis to a few prominent conceptual artists: Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, Donald Judd and Dan Graham.

In defense of Danto and his Hegelian "end of art" one may concede that on the surface the art world of the mid to late twentieth century⁴⁶ certainly seemed to follow the Hegelian model that Danto applies to it. First, there was a prominent trend toward reducing the complexity of the art object. This was best embodied by minimalism in which artists, like Donald Judd, created stark cubic shapes. The starkness of these art

⁴⁴ Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 12-16. This essay was originally published in Art Forum, 5:10 (Summer 1967), 79-84.

⁴⁵ Fred S. Kleiner, et al., Gardener's Art Through the Ages, 11th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 931.

⁴⁶ Here I limit myself to the Western art world and, more specifically, to the art scene in the United States.

works was increasingly complemented by more and more complex artists' statements and expositions on the artists' intent and philosophy.

Around the same time, artists, such as Dan Graham, began to dissolve the notion of art as object all together. Dan Graham, in part as a challenge to the museum and gallery structure that ruled art, skipped the creation of an object for display all together and took to creating magazine spreads instead. Thus, his creation had no physical locus but rather existed merely as a reproduction.

Joseph Kosuth took a slightly different approach than Graham, but also with the same philosophy that the object was not as important as the idea. Kosuth's most famous work, "One and Three Chairs" consists of an actual chair, a picture of that chair, and a definition of the word chair; the idea being that there was only one physical chair, but within the piece there were really three forms of a chair; Kosuth's piece then becomes a visual representation of the abstract levels on which an object or work of art can exist that go beyond their physical presence.

Sol LeWitt took the final step from minimal object, to decentralized object, to visual portrayal of abstraction, to finally creating a work in which no object was necessary at all and the work could exist as pure idea. (Maybe Plato would have liked conceptual art...). In his work, "Serial Project Number One," LeWitt creates a system of boxes within boxes that explores all the logical combinations possible of one box placed inside another box. Some of these boxes are open outside and inside, thus, were they to be constructed, one could easily see one box inside the other. The trick comes when a box is placed inside a closed exterior box. In such a case one cannot see the box inside

and must trust the system as to what is inside the closed box. In this way LeWitt creates a work that is not about boxes at all, but rather deals with the idea of logic and a logical set of combinations.⁴⁷

To refresh, Danto proposes in his thesis that art has become philosophy, and therefore has achieved the ultimate understanding of itself, thereby ending art. Certainly the dissolution of the object in art in favor of “idea” art, which occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century, seems to be evidence that art did indeed morph into pure philosophy. Examination of actual artists’ statements will aid in clarifying what artists of this time actually believed they were engaged in.

I will now examine the writing of three of the four artists I have previously introduced in this essay: these artists are Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Joseph Kosuth. Each artist wrote before the publication of Danto’s “end of art” theory and, as such, their comments cannot be construed as direct responses to Danto. Rather, their opinions about the art they were making, and the status of art during the time they wrote, provide us with evidence about the perceptions of working artists during the time that Danto points to as the last days of art.

I would like to begin this discussion with an article by Donald Judd, a minimalist artist. In a short commentary by Judd, titled “Specific Objects,”⁴⁸ and first published in 1965, Judd addresses the question of what type of art he believes his stark cube-based sculptures are, and how his art fits into the artistic tradition. Judd speaks of the modern artist’s tendency to stray from traditional art forms such as painting and sculpture,

⁴⁷LeWitt’s Serial Project #1 may be viewed online at www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/serialproject.html as of April 13, 2005.

⁴⁸ Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” in *Art and Theory: 1900-2000 An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 824-828. (This is a condensed version of the essay originally published in *Arts Yearbook* in 1965).

claiming that this is due to the completion of these traditions in art, and now artists must find a new method of expression. Judd claims there is no cohesive movement emerging in the wake of the rejection of painting and sculpture, rather there are many disparate paths being explored by himself and his contemporaries.

This sentiment of Judd's, that painting and sculpture have ended, seems at first to be supportive of Danto's conjecture that nothing new can be done in art, this being a system of art's death, and that the disparate paths that Judd sees himself and his fellow artists pursuing are merely a manifestation of the plurality that Danto believes must be the result of the death of art. There is even a line in Judd's essay that would seem to reveal that Judd follows the same line of thinking as Danto, in which Judd states that, "linear history has unraveled."⁴⁹

Despite the seeming agreement between Judd and Danto, a closer look at Judd's essay reveals that, although he does most certainly believe the classic traditions of art have become irrelevant in the contemporary dialogue and that pluralism has taken the place of the traditional pattern of movements in art, Judd sees very different implications in this than Danto. Rather than feeling that some definitive end has been reached where what is done in art no longer matters (As Danto says, in the age of pluralism "It does not matter any longer what you do.")⁵⁰ Judd seems to feel that minimalism marks not an end but the beginning of a new exploration in art. This sentiment is evidenced by Judd's reference to minimalism as the "new art," and the manner in which he discusses minimalism as a new and vital forward movement within art.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 825.

⁵⁰ Danto, Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art, 115.

Judd is not the only working artist that sees art in the second half of the twentieth century in a way that diverges from Danto's view. The conceptual artist Sol LeWitt expresses ideas about the status of art that contradict Danto. In 1967, LeWitt authored an article, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,"⁵¹ which lays out his definition of the type of art termed "conceptual" at that time, and his views on what defined this type of art. In his article, LeWitt states, "conceptual art doesn't really have much to do with mathematics, philosophy or any other mental discipline," and then goes on to add that while some conceptual art may contain elements of philosophy, logic or mathematics, "the philosophy of the work is implicit in the work and is not an illustration of any system of philosophy."⁵²

This statement seems to squarely contradict any notion that the movement towards concept over object in art had anything to do with the artist trying to discover the nature of art itself. Rather any philosophy, LeWitt asserts, that was part of an art piece was exclusive to that piece alone and did not represent any overarching philosophical system that was being explored in the art of that time.

Joseph Kosuth, also a prominent conceptual artist, sheds more light on the purpose of the artist's abandonment of the object in a discussion that at first seems just as disappointing to the seeker of a unifying theory as is LeWitt's firm pronouncement that conceptual art has nothing to do with philosophical systems. Kosuth, in an essay simply entitled "Intentions,"⁵³ explains that the reason artists abandoned art based on formal qualities, (i.e. art based in media such as paint or sculpture), in favor of art based on

⁵¹ See footnote number 40.

⁵² LeWitt, 14.

⁵³ Joseph Kosuth, "Intention(s)," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 460-468. Originally published in *Art Bulletin*, 78: 3 (September 1996) 407-412.

concepts was so that artists could retain more control over the meaning assigned to their work. His argument is based in a critique of abstract expressionist artists such as Jackson Pollock, who he claims merely created objects which were then shipped off to critics such as Clement Greenberg⁵⁴ who then assigned meaning to those objects. Conceptual artists, he explains, by abandoning formal qualities and making the “idea” the work of art itself, are able to retain more control over the meaning of their artwork since the artwork is the idea for the artwork and therefore leaves little room for interpretation.

This recognition by artists of the importance of the meaning in a work of art, above other qualities such as shape or color, does seem to support Danto’s claim that art (and therefore artists) gained a greater self-consciousness of the philosophical/abstract properties of art during the second half of the twentieth century. When in his essay, “Art after Philosophy”⁵⁵ Joseph Kosuth writes, “being an artist now [in 1969] means to question the nature of art,”⁵⁶ he seems to be affirming Danto’s statement that the “whole main point of art in our century [the twentieth century] was to pursue the question of its own identity.”⁵⁷ Thus it seems both Kosuth and Danto are in agreement that “what we see [when we look at twentieth century art] is something which depends more and more upon theory for its existence as art...”⁵⁸

Danto sees this reliance on theory resulting in, “the objects approach[ing] zero as their theory approaches infinity...art having finally become vaporized in a dazzle of pure thought about itself, and remaining, as it were, solely as the object of its own theoretical

⁵⁴It is interesting to note that Greenberg was also a critic for The Nation.

⁵⁵ Joseph Kosuth, “Art after Philosophy,” in Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999) 158-177. Originally published in three parts in Studio International, 178:915-917(October, November, December 1969), 134-137, 160-161, 212-213. The version in Conceptual Art includes the first two parts of the three part series.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 163.

⁵⁷ Danto, “The End of Art,” 30.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 31.

consciousness.” From this Danto goes on to conclude, in a Hegelian context, that, “If something like this has the remotest chance of being plausible, it is possible to suggest that art has come to an end.”⁵⁹

This final summation of Danto’s however does not agree with Joseph Kosuth’s view of the consequences of conceptual art however. This is made apparent in “Art after Philosophy” when, using the same observations about conceptual art Kosuth proposes a very different conclusion than Danto. Indeed Kosuth declares, in a statement which is bound to catch the attention of anyone familiar with Danto’s theory, “The twentieth century brought in a time that could be called the ‘end of philosophy and the beginning of art.’”⁶⁰

This statement of Kosuth’s, that philosophy has ended and art has begun, seems diametrically opposed to Danto’s theory that art ended by becoming philosophy. Because of this, I believe that it is important to spend some time examining what Kosuth means when he makes this claim. First of all, Kosuth follows this statement directly with the qualifier, “I do not mean this, of course, strictly speaking, but rather as the ‘tendency’ of the situation.”⁶¹ In this way Kosuth has already made his claim less final than Danto’s. Secondly, Kosuth goes on to say that he does not believe there is a “mechanistic connection” between the end of philosophy and the beginning of art but neither does he believe these two occurrences are coincidental. Kosuth chooses to stress his own connection between the end of philosophy and the beginning of art, what he goes on to explain is not that the end of philosophy caused art to begin, but rather it allowed for a

⁵⁹ Ibid, 31.

⁶⁰ Kosuth, “Art after Philosophy,” 160.

⁶¹ Ibid, 160.

cultural environment that was more conducive to the beginning of art than had previously existed.

More important than why Kosuth believed philosophy had ended is *how* Kosuth perceived the “end” of philosophy to have impacted the beginning of art. As far as the impact of the end of philosophy on art, Kosuth seems to be thinking mainly in terms of aesthetics. In Kosuth’s thinking, the release of art from aesthetics allowed the focus to shift away from art’s formal properties, and, therefore, traditional thinking about art, and moved onto the true nature of art.⁶² So what was true art to Kosuth? “A work of art,” Kosuth states, “is a kind of *proposition* presented within the context of art as a comment on art...”⁶³ In short, he is saying that a particular work of art is itself a *definition* of art as proposed by the artist. That is, every time an artist creates a work of art, they are in a sense creating a definition of what art is.

This idea is a lot to swallow all at once, but in essence what Kosuth is saying is that art is not philosophy, it is not science, it is not an expression of feeling; all art is merely a conjecture by an artist about what art is. Thus, Kosuth would concede that Danto was right in believing art to be consumed with the thought of itself, but rather than that being a condition which caused the end of art in Kosuth’s opinion, it is the very condition essential to art’s existence. Therefore Kosuth and Danto saw the same occurrence, the preoccupation of art with itself, but from this observation they reached completely opposite conclusions.

It is at this point that the question of who is correct becomes a tempting one. Obviously, the right answer is not readily derivable from the facts presented since Danto

⁶² Ibid, 162-163.

⁶³ Ibid, 165.

and Kosuth, both using the same evidence, reached such different conclusions about the state of philosophy and art. Perhaps one of them is right, perhaps they are both right, perhaps they are both wrong. I am ready to concede that the truly important thing is not whether Kosuth or Danto have expressed any universal truths, but merely to recognize that such disparate, indeed contradictory, views are held.⁶⁴

The Influence of “The End of Art” on the Art of Today

I find this discrepancy between Danto and Kosuth to be particularly telling of the status of art today. Emerging (arguably) from a period of post-modernism, it is the fashion in art, as in many other subjects, to not be concerned with universal truths, but rather to recognize that many truths may be possible depending on the viewer’s perspective. It is this thinking that has leveled the playing field of art. In many ways, it is considered just as valid today to paint hyper-realistically or to take a purely abstract approach. The snapshot is often treated as on par with fine art photography (think Nan Goldin), and subject matter is open to the choice of the artist, all subjects being treated as more or less equally valid.

This post-modernist approach, in which all is permissible in art, could be the embodiment of the post-historical period Danto believes to have followed the end of art. In this post-historical period, he states, “It does not matter any longer what you do...When one direction is as good as any other direction, there is no concept of direction any longer to apply.”⁶⁵ This statement certainly seems to embody the disparate elements of the art world today, but so too did the idea of the sun moving around the Earth seem to

⁶⁴ I will go into more detail on the importance of this at the end of the paper.

⁶⁵Danto, “The End of Art,” 34-35.

explain sunrise and sunset. What I mean is, Danto may be correct, but without the privilege of a future vantage point, looking back on our present day, we cannot tell whether or not the art created now will have any historical significance, as Danto claims it will not.

This problem of vantage point, of being in the present and therefore very close to the situation we are attempting to theorize about, is also a problem Danto faces. Danto himself admits that, “nothing so much belongs to its own time as an age’s glimpses into the future.”⁶⁶ This is a sound statement as is when he states that in 1882 there is no plausible way people could have imagined a Pollock or a DeKooning.⁶⁷ Although Danto, when making concessions about the limits of our ability to comprehend the future, is speaking mainly about our ability to imagine, specifically, the art of the future, his astute statements, I think, are just as applicable when considering our ability to predict the historical status our present day art will have when looked back upon by the future.

Danto claims that post-historical art will no longer progress in a way that will have any historical significance from a future vantage point. I would say that this is a statement that oversteps the bounds of certainty, and definitely exists as no more than conjecture. It may seem, to us, that art has no where left to go, but I feel this discounts the ingenuity of artists and their ability to continue to create art that is relevant. What’s more, if we recall the academic criticisms made against Danto’s “end of art” theory, we will recollect that those academics felt Danto’s view was severely limited, as it treated art as somehow disconnected from the cultural and social dialogue. If we accept the idea that art is intrinsic to society, as Brodsky, especially, asserts, then we cannot possibly

⁶⁶ Ibid, 6.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 6.

hypothesize about the future of art without making assertions about the future of society as a whole.

My main point here is that Danto is dealing with a severe handicap. He is trying to predict the significance of art not merely in our current time, but also the significance of our art as it will be viewed in an historical context by future generations. Perhaps in fifty, one hundred, or a thousand years it will be possible to see whether there was any truth in Danto's claim that art has dropped out of the historical dialogue. Until then, we are subject to the limitations of our present view of art and cannot say whether Danto has hit upon the truth or not.

One might wonder at this point what all this discussion of Danto's theory has accomplished. It seems, after examining the academic criticisms posed against Danto's claim of the "end of art" as well as how his theory relates to the understanding of art by the practicing artists during the "last days of art," that Danto's thesis is subject to several weaknesses, but no fatal flaw. While it may be true that Danto may have adopted an over-simplified view of art history, so as to fit it more neatly into his theory, and it may also be true that Danto draws disparate conclusions than those reached by working artists, neither of these points are reasons to completely discredit Danto. Nor, I would say, does it matter in our present context whether Danto is ever discredited, or whether he is eventually found to be legitimate after all. The only way to prove or disprove Danto's end of art theory is by having the ability to view the present day in an historical context. Moreover, the lack of direct response from the art community to Danto's theory, as well as the existence of theories by others within the art community, such as Kosuth, that

differ so greatly from Danto's, all create a context in which Danto's theorizing becomes only one thread in a tapestry of possible conjectures about the status of art today.

Within such a variegated web of assertions and theories about the nature of art, none of which can be ultimately proved, an artist is free to pick and choose what he or she believes and to make art under any pretenses that he or she chooses. That is not to say that all the theories in the art world are equally valid. I feel, however, that through the discussion in this paper, it has become clear that Danto's theory and the theories of the conceptual artists I have discussed, are all well-founded, intelligent conjectures about the nature of art. Therefore, with such a wide array of plausible theories to choose from, it remains unclear whether it is Danto, or the artists, who harbor illusions about the nature of art, or whether one of them is truly correct. They have all presented strong cases, and as such, none are easily discredited. It remains for time to tell what trajectory art is truly on, and it remains the task of artists, academics, and critics alike, to continue to make intelligent assertions about the nature of art. Since art is a process of discovery and dialogue, one thing is certain however: that as long as the debate continues, art will thrive, being propelled forward by the very theories that seek to question its validity and vitality.

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