
After the End of Art

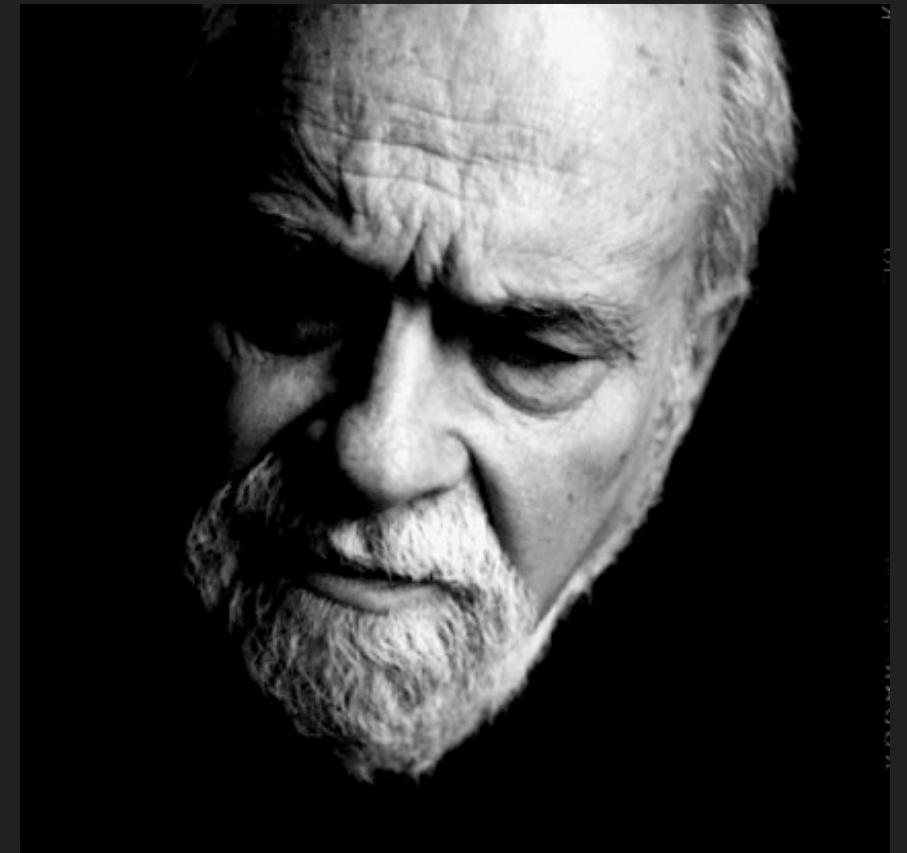
Arthur Danto

Summary of the Argument

The name of this course is **The End of Art**.

The first half takes the form of a **story**.

And the story begins with an **epiphany** — an experience in the life of a philosopher by the name of **Arthur Danto**.



Danto's epiphany occurred in **two stages** and over the course of **twenty years**.

The first stage began in **1964** when he encountered the exhibition of a young artist by the name of Andy Warhol at the **Stable Gallery** in New York.

What Danto **saw** in the gallery were what appeared to be **cardboard boxes** made for packaging a common commercial cleaning product — **Brillo Soap Pads**.



As a **philosopher** interested in **contemporary art**, and a former aspiring **artist**, Danto didn't quite know what to make of Warhol's Brillo boxes.

“Are they **works of art**?”

He couldn't **say**, for sure.



They were both **surprising** and **banal** — common, ordinary, everyday boxes of the sort Danto would have seen in **grocery** and **hardware stores**.

But why were they in an **art gallery**? What was the **point**?

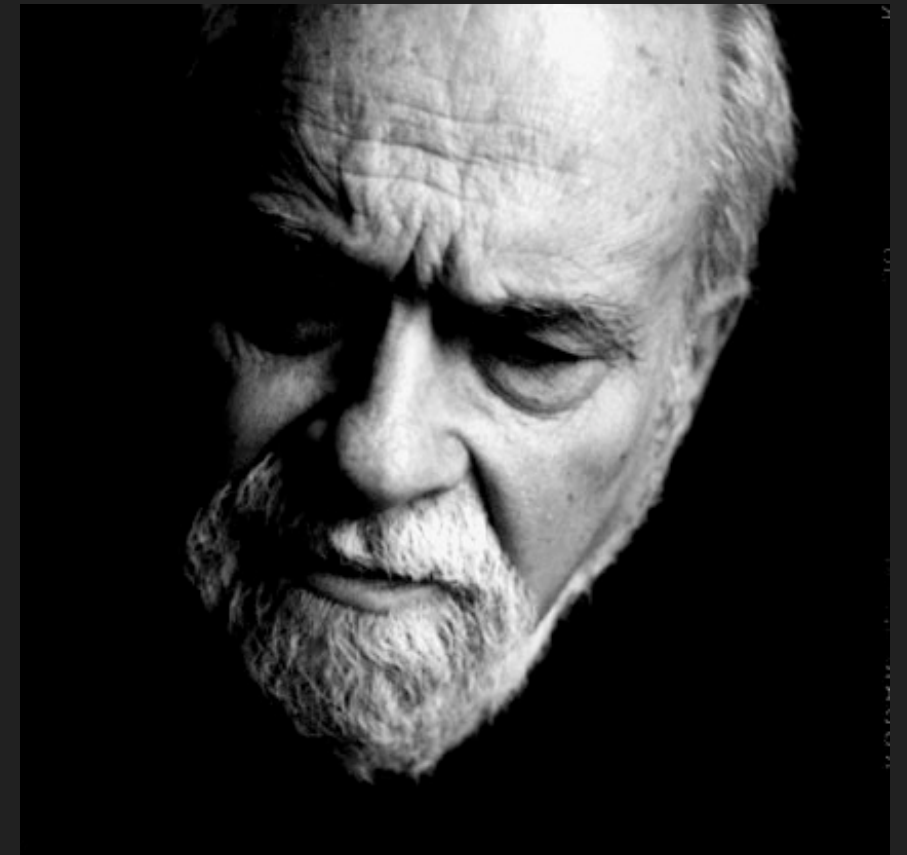


It wasn't until **1984** that Danto felt he had a respectable, **philosophical answer** to the questions raised by Warhol's exhibition.

His **answer** took the form of an **equally radical gesture** — an **extravagant philosophical thesis**.

With the **exhibition** of Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes in **1964** we reached, Danto claimed, "**The End of Art**".

What does that **mean**?

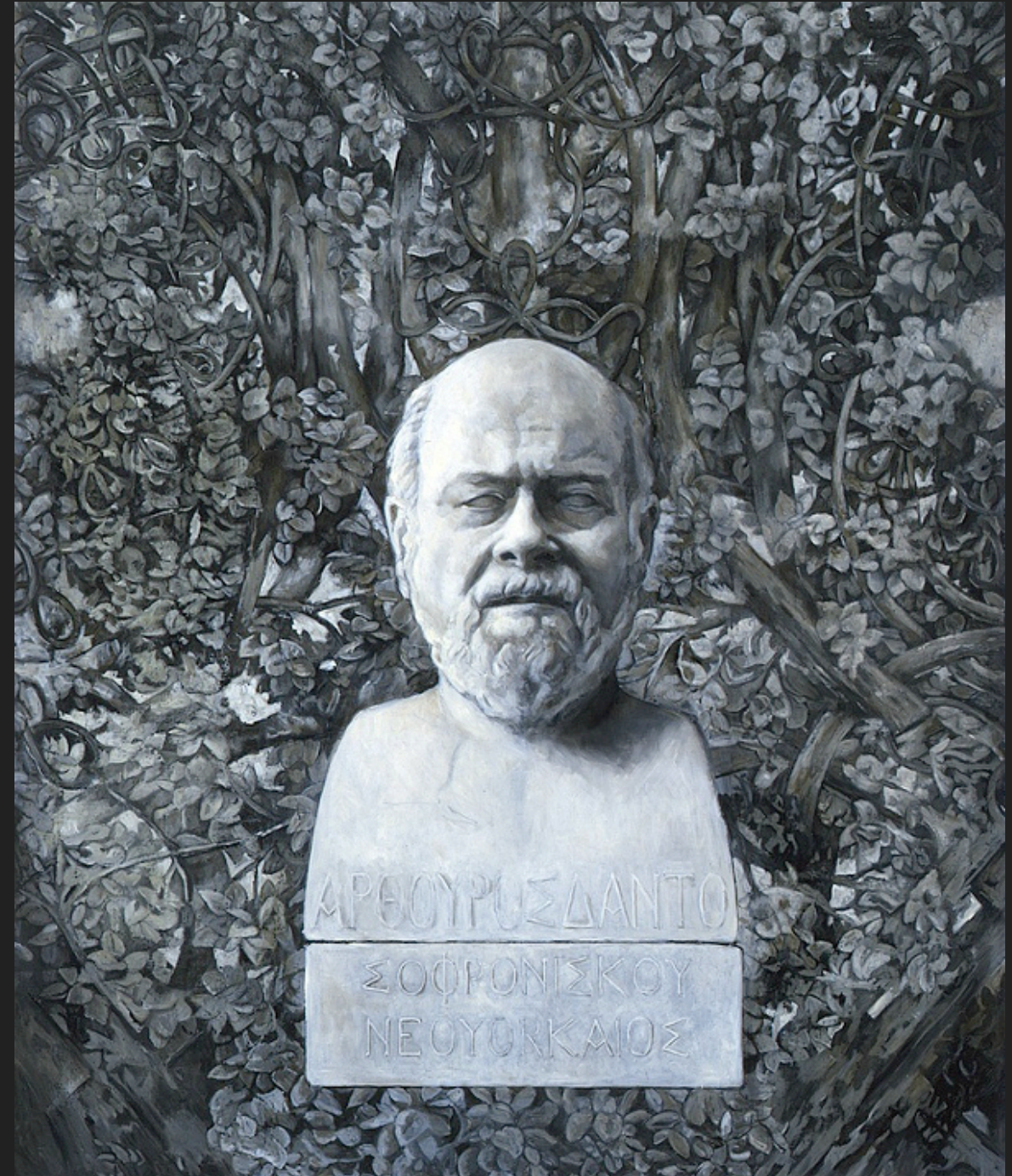


That's what we'll spend the next **several weeks** trying to **figure out**.

Our **approach** will draw on both **philosophy** and **art**.

Our **goal** will be to understand

- why he **made** the claim, and
- why he, or anyone, would **believe** it.

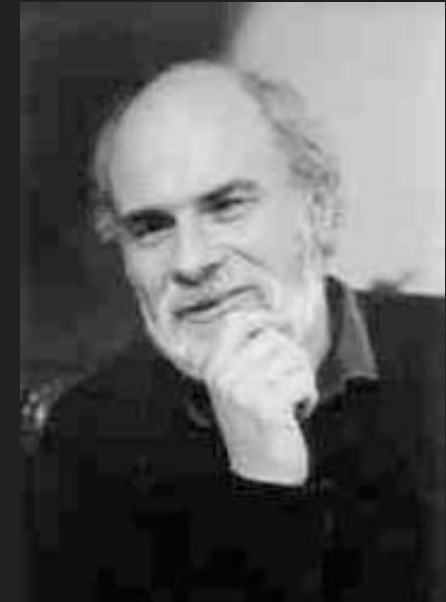


Kathleen Gilje, Portrait of Arthur Danto as the Bust of Socrates, 2005

We'll do this **sympathetically** by assuming Danto is

- **reasonable**,
- **intelligent**,
- **well-informed**, and
- **sincere** in his attempt to understand **what** Warhol did in 1964 and **why** it is important **as art**.

Assumptions About Danto



Then we'll be in the best possible **position** to

- **interpret** Danto's claim about the end of art, and
- **judge** for ourselves whether it stands up to close **scrutiny** and **critique**.

INTERPRETATION



CRITIQUE

Philosophical Analysis

We'll start by looking at Danto's **argument** for the end of art:

- How does he make a **case** for his **conclusion**?
- What **reasons** does he give to **support** his claims?

Historical Context

Then, we need to put **both** what **Warhol** did, and what **Danto** did in **historical** context — the New York School in the late-1950s.

Questions of Truth and Relevance

1. Are we living in an age or epic **after the end of art**?
2. If so, how would it affect what we do **with** art
 - how we **understand** it and
 - what we **expect** to get out of it?
3. Is it **true**, as Danto claims, that from now on, in art, "**anything goes**"?

Danto's Argument

Ambiguity

Does “the end of art” refer to the

- **goal** (final destination or **purpose**) of art, or to the
- **death** of art.

The “**end**” of art was **never** intended to suggest that art ceased to **exist** after **1964** — that Warhol’s *Brillo Soap Pad Box* was **the last work of art**.

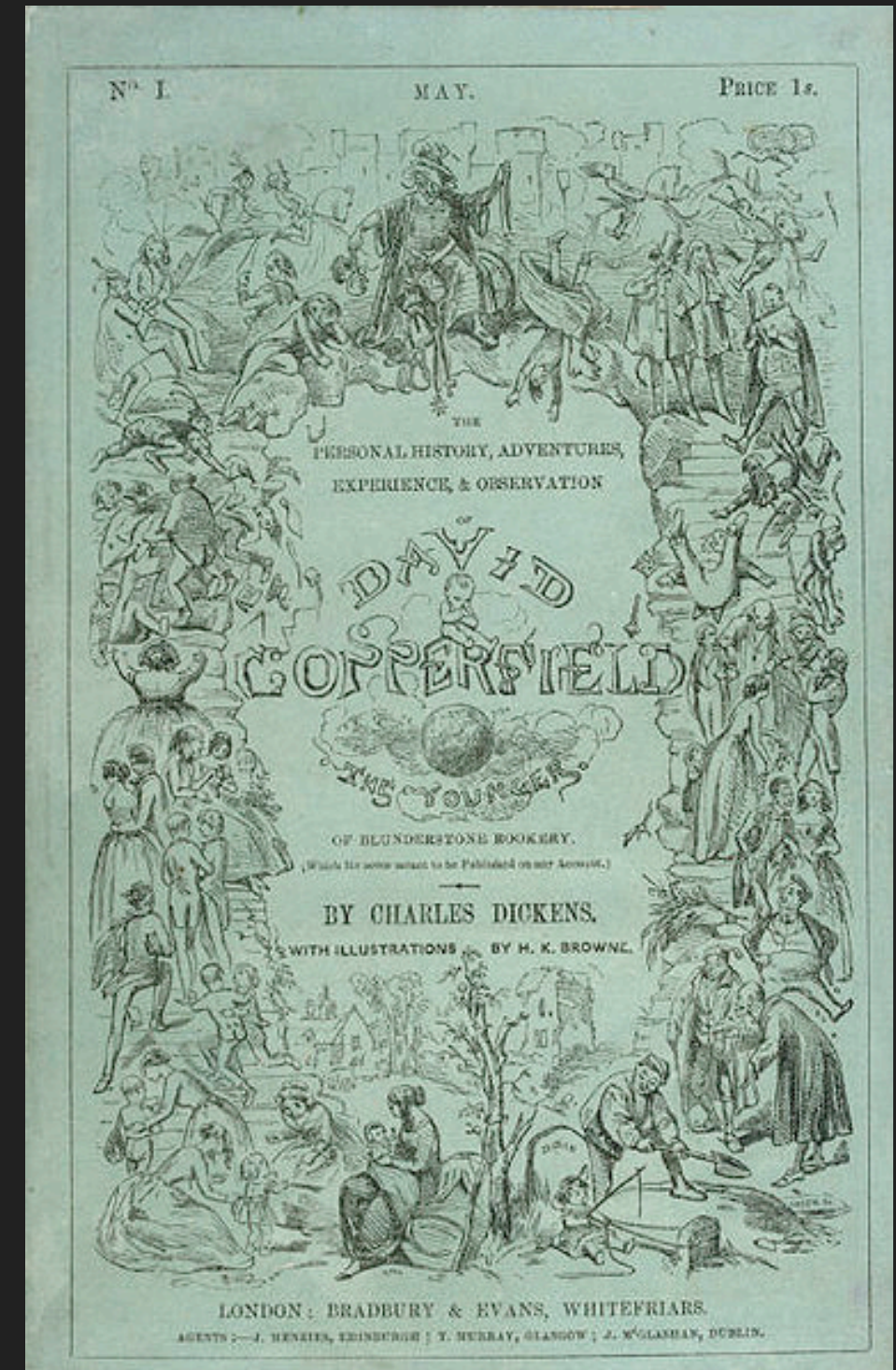
Danto’s claim is that the overarching **historical narrative** of art in the **West** has come to an end.

Art history — the “story of art” — is over, even though the **production** and **exhibition** of **art objects** continues.

But what does **that** mean?

Bildungsroman — a coming-of-age [“education”] novel

The end of art is the **culmination** of a **progressive, developmental history** in which art realizes its true **purpose** and “lives happily ever after”.



Danto's Argument

In fact, Danto's narrative includes **two** stories:

The first is the story of artists achieving ever greater **accuracy** in **representing** the **visible world**.

This took place roughly from the 15th to the mid-19th century.

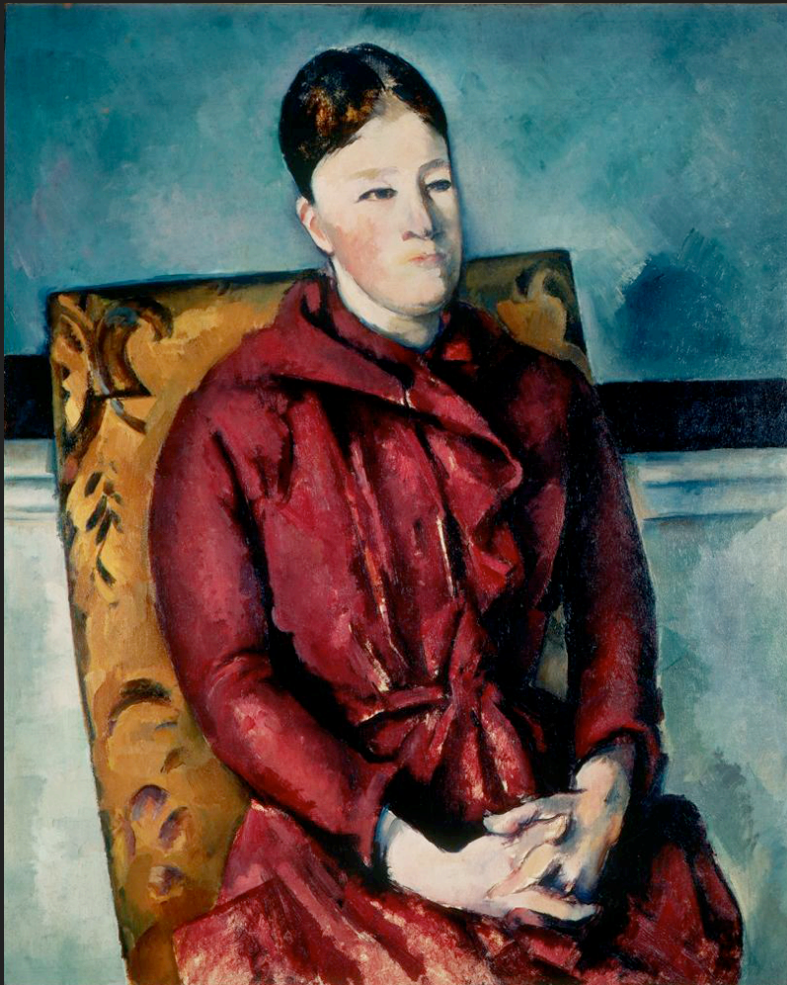


Fra Filippo Lippi, Portrait of a Man and Woman at a Casement, c. 1440, Metropolitan Museum of Art



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Louis-François Bertin, 1833

The second story is the narrative of art's **self-understanding** — the story of artists trying to **define** art and come to an understanding of its **nature** and **limits**.



Paul Cézanne, Portrait of Madame Cézanne, 1890



Pablo Picasso, Girl before a Mirror, March 1932



Willem de Kooning, Woman, 1944

Type and Structure of the Narratives

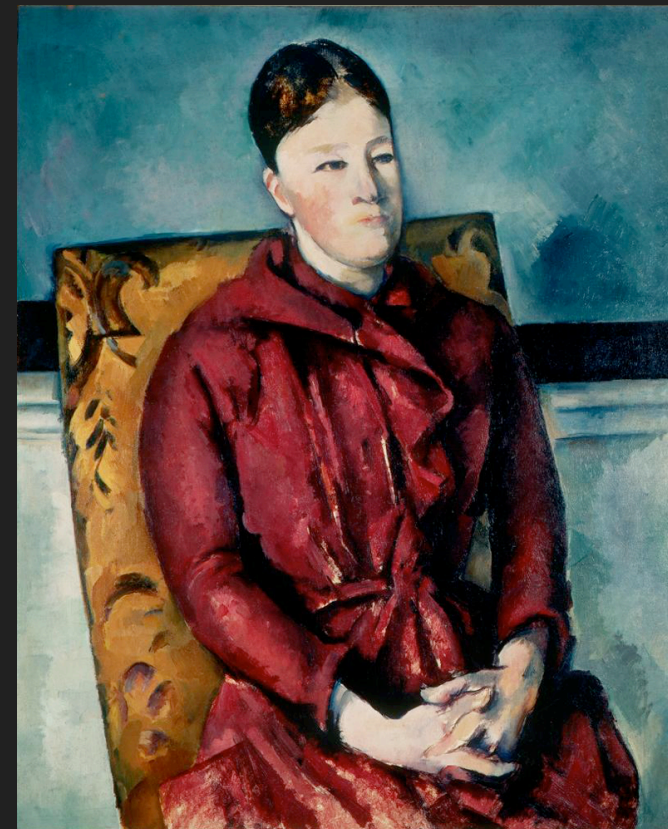
Both stories are **teleological** — they characterize a process which is driven by a **goal**.

The goal in the **first** narrative is **mimesis** — the accurate **representation** of the way things appear to us.

The goal in the **second** narrative is the **self-definition** and **self-understanding** of art.



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Louis-François Bertin, 1833



Paul Cézanne, Portrait of Madame Cézanne, 1890

Type and Structure of the Narratives

When **both** goals have been reached, there are **no further goals, purposes, or ends** that artists are **compelled** to pursue.

Art is **free** to be whatever anyone wants it to be.



Andy Warhol, *Brillo Boxes*, 1969



Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present*, May 2010

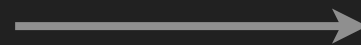
Type and Structure of the Narratives

It's the **teleological** or goal-driven nature of the stories Danto tells that make them **progressive developmental histories**.

They progress toward an **end**.



Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930



20 years



Barnett Newman, *Eve*, 1950

Type and Structure of the Narratives

According to Danto, these are the **only** two stories to **tell** about art.

After the quest for self-definition, there are no **over-arching narratives** that account for **artistic practice** — no way art **must** be.

We are then and forever more, to use Danto's language, in the realm of the "**post-historical**".

Philosophical Questions

As we'll see, there is still more to learn and to achieve in the **post-historical** attempt to define "**art**" and to answer the question "**What is art?**"

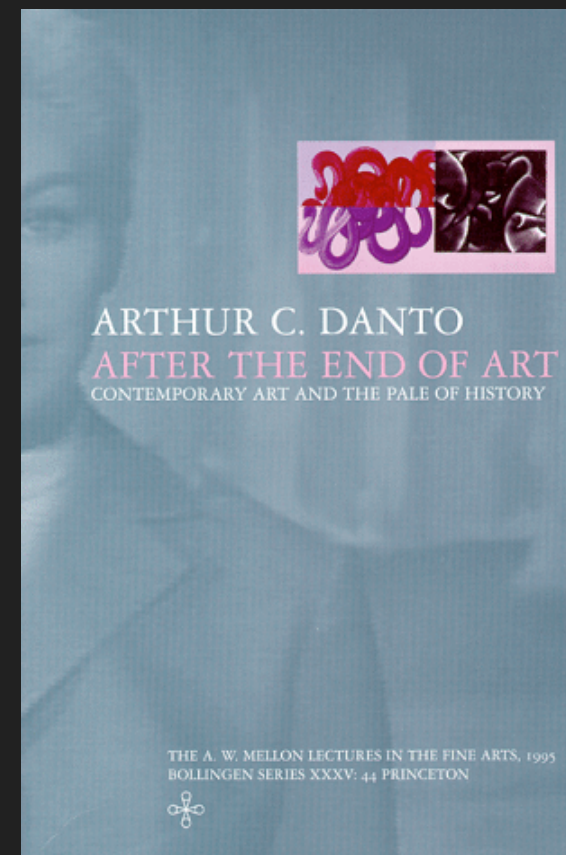
But those are **philosophical**, not artistic, questions.

They cannot be answered by making more **paintings** (or more *Brillo Boxes*).

What is required is **philosophical analysis**, and that takes place in the medium of **ordinary language**.



Andy Warhol, *Brillo Soap Pads Box*, 1964
silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on wood; 17 x 17 x 14 in.; The
Andy Warhol Museum; Pittsburgh Founding Collection.; Contribution
The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; Inc.



Questions

Back to the Epiphany

What did Arthur Danto actually **see** in the **Warhol** exhibition in the Stable Gallery in 1964?



Danto's Argument

It was **not** a single Brillo Soap Pad Box mounted on a pedestal, in the way Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* is typically displayed in art museums.



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917



Andy Warhol, *Brillo Soap Pads Box*, 1964

The room was actually **filled** with Brillo boxes, stacked on the floor as they would have been in a warehouse.

But it was not **these** Brillo boxes...



Mike Bidlo, Not Warhol (Brillo Boxes, 1964), 1991

Warhol's installation also included stacks of boxes labeled Del Monte Peaches, Heinz Ketchup, Mott's Apple Juice, and Kellogg's Corn Flakes.



Andy Warhol, Assorted Boxes, 1964

But why did these objects, and the **Brillo boxes** in particular, capture Danto's attention?



Andy Warhol, Brillo Boxes, 1964 (Installation shot, Stable Gallery)



Andy Warhol, *Brillo Soap Pads Box*, 1964
silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on wood; 17 x 17
x 14 in.; The Andy Warhol Museum; Pittsburgh Founding
Collection.; Contribution The Andy Warhol Foundation for
the Visual Arts; Inc.

They were **visually indiscernible** from the “real thing”.

And **contrary** to the protests of others, who claimed Warhol's sculptures were **not really art**, Danto was **convinced** they were.



Andy Warhol, Brillo Boxes, 1964 (Installation shot, Stable Gallery)



Charlie Finch, A Real Brillo Box, 2010

The Philosophical Question

“What makes the **difference** between a work of art and something **not** a work of art when there is **no interesting perceptual difference between them?**” [Danto, AEA, 35.]



The Philosophical Question

According to Danto,

[a]ll philosophical questions...have that form: two **outwardly indiscernible** things can belong to different, indeed to momentarily different, **philosophical categories**....

Until the twentieth century it was tacitly believed that works of art were **always** identifiable as such. The philosophical problem now is to explain **why** they are works of art.

With Warhol it becomes clear that there is no special way a work of art **must** be — it can look like a Brillo box, or it can look like a soup can....

Warhol is but one of a group of artists to have made this profound discovery. The **distinction** between **music** and **noise**, between **dance** and **movement**, between **literature** and **mere writing**...parallel it in every way. [Danto, AEA, 35, emphases added.]

The Philosophical Question

On Danto's **interpretation**, artists in the early 1960s — Warhol and others — were, through their practices as artists, raising a **philosophical** question.



The Philosophical Question

A question with roughly the same **structure** shows up in Europe in 1641 in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* by the French philosopher **René Descartes**.



After Frans Hals, Portrait of the Philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650), n.d.



Raphael, Pope Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de' Medici and Luigi de' Rossi, 1518-19

In the *Meditations*, Descartes sets out to defend the two central tenets of the Christian faith:

1. **God exists.**
2. The **soul**, which is **separate** and **distinct** from the **body**, is **immortal**.

Problem

How do you convert those who don't already believe?

Assumption

Non-believers can be converted only if you appeal to their sense of **reason**.

Solution

Establish a **rational foundation** of **self-evident truths** that would serve as the basis for his theological **arguments** and for **all human knowledge**.



Descartes' Principle of Doubt

You cannot claim to **know** something if it is possible, without contradiction, to **imagine** that it's false.

The one thing that we know for sure is that **whenever** we are **thinking**, we **must exist**.



Descartes

Whatever a “thinking thing” is, you know **at a minimum** that,

- it **must exist** in order to doubt that it does, and
- you are the “thing” that **doubts**.

Thus, whenever you **think** you exist (or that you don't exist), at that moment you **must exist**.

This is a **fact** about which you **cannot be mistaken**.



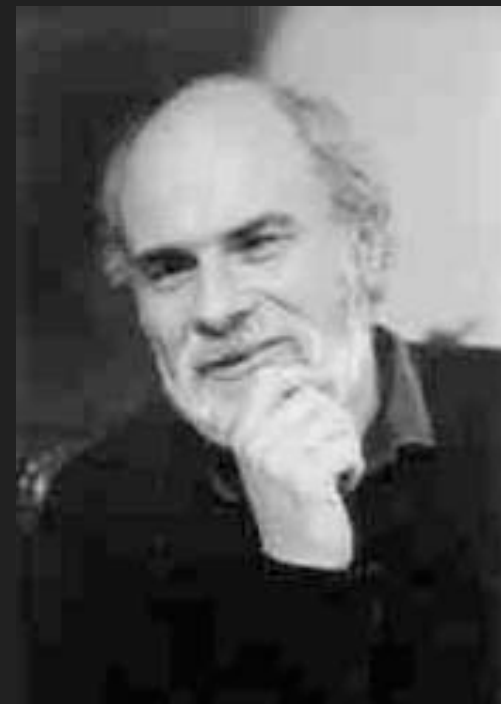
Descartes' problem parallels the one raised by **Danto** looking at Warhol.

In both cases, the problem is to identify the **true nature** of things that are different in **kind** but **perceptually indistinguishable**.

The **phenomena** in question are

- **dream** states and **waking** states (Descartes), or
- **works of art** and **mere things** (Danto).

Note: The key term is “**perceptually** indiscernible”. Danto's argument **turns** on this observation.



Summary

Danto's point is that you can't always tell **what is** a work of art and **what is not** a work of art, **just by looking**.

Something else is needed.

According to Danto, what's needed is a **context**, an **intention**, and a **theory of art**.



What's needed in **Descartes'** case is God,

but as I said.....that's another story!



After Frans Hals, Portrait of the Philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650), n.d.



Raphael, Pope Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de' Medici and Luigi de' Rossi, 1518-19

Summary

Danto claims to learn two things from **Warhol**:

1. There is no **particular** way a work of art **has** to **look**, and there are no distinguishing **visible** features.
2. This marks an important **moment** in the **history of western art**, when “art no longer bears the responsibility for its own philosophical definition”. [Danto, 36]

And these insights gleaned from **contemporary art** lead to a **philosophical** question:

If there are no interesting **perceptual** features that distinguish works of art from all the other things in the world that are **not** works of art, then what **are** the **defining characteristics** of art?

Summary

The **answer** to the **philosophical** question is **not** one that **art** can provide. The **question** — and **answer** — are **philosophical**, not **artistic**.

Thus, “having brought itself to this level of consciousness, art no longer bears the **responsibility** for its own **philosophical definition**.” [Danto, AEA, 36.]

Artists will continue to make **artworks**. But they will no longer bear the burden of **questioning** the **nature and limits of art**.

From now on, the task will be taken over by **philosophers** and artists will be **free** to make art **in any way they like**.

Timothy Quigley, 2012