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.
We’ll do this *sympathetically* by assuming Danto is
• *reasonable*,
• *intelligent*, and
• *well-informed*, and
• *sincere* in his attempt to understand *what* Warhol did in 1964 and *why* it is important *as art*.

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

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

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*Grant Wood, American Gothic, 1930*

*20 years*

*Barnett Newman, *Eve*, 1950*
Danto’s Argument

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.
Questions
What did Arthur Danto actually see in the Warhol exhibition in the Stable Gallery in 1964?
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.
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...
Warhol’s installation also included stacks of boxes labeled Del Monte Peaches, Heinz Ketchup, Mott’s Apple Juice, and Kellogg’s Corn Flakes.
But why did these objects, and the Brillo boxes in particular, capture Danto’s attention?
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.
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.]
According to Danto,

[...] all philosophical questions...have that form: two **outwardly indiscernible** things can belong to different, indeed to momentously 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.]
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.
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.
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!
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.