

What is 'post-historical art'?

To understand this question, and to answer it by explaining the notion of post-historical art, it is first necessary to outline the notion of history and that of art. This essay will attempt to lay clear my tendency to agree with the Hegelian view of history as put forth by Arthur Danto, though more correspondingly by Francis Fukuyama. It will then ambitiously continue to expound my own interpretation of why Danto is incorrect to assume that the boundaries on art have evaporated. This argument primarily concerns the theory which has been explicated by Danto in his book *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* and subsequently defended in his essay *The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense*.

History is referred to by Francis Fukuyama “as a single, coherent, evolutionary process, when taking into account the experiences of all peoples in all times”¹. This evolutionary process view of history is one that Danto uses as the core to his argument. He says that the process has ceased to be a process because “there is no longer a direction toward which a narrative can point”². Danto maintains that all boundaries have been abolished and that art ended when the narrative of art as art culminated in the “indiscernibles”, exemplified by Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box* (1964). Warhol, it is said, has “demonstrated that there is nothing more that artists can further do, and hence that there is no future point in time in which art will develop further, art is, in this sense, over”³. Effectively, the view is that this development meant that one “could no longer teach the meaning of art by example... you had to turn from sense experience to thought. You had, in brief, to turn to philosophy”⁴. Danto

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1992), p. xii.

² Arthur Danto, *The End of Art: A Philosophical Defence* (somewhere, 1998), p. 128.

³ David Carrier: *Danto and His Critics: After the End of Art and Art History* (somewhere, 1998), p. 14.

⁴ Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) p. 13.

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says that this “ascent to a new level of consciousness”⁵, where we are today, is effectively a state of ultimate plurality where there can be no more provocation or progress in the name of art, a world where all the pressing questions have been answered.

However, this is where I arrive at my first criticism. Danto says that this progression to a new era is not like the one experienced from the progression from pre-Renaissance “miraculous provenance”⁶ to the subsequent era of art as art. He says that “Modernism does not follow romanticism in this way”⁷. He says that the narrative had come to an end but the subject of the narrative, art, had not⁸.

The idea that because there are different directions which are contradictory and/or separate from one another, in my view, does not immediately discredit the idea of an overall narrative. Surely, there has been many contradictory and seemingly different directions in the past, and that even though they seem to be increasing exponentially or more numerous than ever does not mean that the narrative has ceased. Also, the fact that the progression from one era to another era does not mirror a previous such progression does not implicitly point to the end of art.

I am reminded of a line from Seán O’Casey’s play *Juno and the Paycock*:

“Th’ whole worl’s in a terrible state o’ chassis”⁹

In a way, this is a good metaphor for how I feel about Danto’s theory. Although this quote from O’Casey’s character Captain Boyle doesn’t make any syntactic sense, Captain Boyle is trying to explain his feeling about something that he doesn’t have the ability to express. The word chassis in this instance is nonsensical. However, he is trying to explain a notion of change and crisis in the world, though he is not learned enough to find the right

⁵ Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art...*, p. 8.

⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art...*, p. 3.

⁷ Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art...*, p. 8.

⁸ Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art...*, p. 4.

⁹ Seán O’Casey, *Three Dublin Plays: The Shadow of a Gunman, Juno and the Paycock, The Plough and the Stars* (Macmillan London Ltd., 1998), Act I, p.83.

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word to express this. Similarly, although I am by no means suggesting that Danto suffers from a lack of education, rather, I mean to say that the words for the concept which Danto is trying to explain, have not yet been invented. Much like if we were to go back in time and tell Søren Kierkegaard that he is an existentialist, I expect that he would look rather bemused, as the term was only applied retrospectively. Therefore, I don't think that the narrative is over. Rather, it will continue in a new vein. Future historiographers, philosophers and artists will refer to the current state of affairs under a new rubric and attribute it to a new chapter in the narrative of art. Perhaps, as I like to prognosticate, it may be called *pre-Destructivist Pluralism*. But, who knows? That is for future generations to decide. However, it is important to note that I am also not refuting Hegel's or Fukuyama's fundamental view of a history and that it may come to an end eventually, rather I am maintaining that the diagnosis of its demise is premature.

The diagnosis is premature on a number of accounts. Firstly, Danto asserts that art has torn down all the boundaries it can and therefore, no longer can an artwork go *beyond the Pale*. I say it is premature because I believe boundaries still remain for art. Whether these boundaries should be removed, I will not hereof discuss. However, challenges to these boundaries have already begun to materialize in such works as Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974) and *Bodies: The Exhibition* (2005) which, contrary to what Danto would have us believe, provoked a collective response from the public in a post-1964 world. Combining my own conjectural interpretations from both of these works, we could consider, for a moment, if I were to commit suicide in order to submit my corpse to a museum of art and entitle it *Cathal Kerins* by Cathal Kerins. Would this be acceptable today as a work of art? If not, then this is a boundary, likely to provoke a collective reaction, perhaps similar to that which was provoked by *Bodies: The Exhibition*.

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Furthermore, flying in the face of Danto's theory, there are still constraints and unexplored territory for the post-modern or contemporary artist just as there were for the modern artist or the romanticist. One of these constraints which I have identified, is art as a mode of creation. Whether that be creating an artwork as a physical piece or as a concept. Damien Hirst is not far from the mark when he says, "You start thinking, there's enough bloody objects in the world, why are you making more of this shit"¹⁰.

Surely the fact that an artist of today, can, if he wishes, imitate any artwork he likes, use it, distort it, forge it, brings with it a disrespect to any past artist. It is effectively demonstrating that their art has become obsolete, or that it is so easy to reproduce that we may even be able to get a 3-D printer to reproduce it. Surely this is an insult to the artist. Furthermore, the fact that they are showcased in museums is more out of pity than necessity, as any individual in the world may turn to the internet to admire almost any artwork of consequence ever produced allowing for what Ellen Ullman refers to as the *Museum of Me*. Therefore, if the internet can store the aesthetic and symbolic value of an artwork indefinitely, and if they can be perfectly recreated, and if everyone has their own *Museum of Me*, what is the logic in hoarding every piece of art that is made? Or at least there should be no moral hazard in destroying a piece of art.

Another boundary I envisage is one challenged by the far seeing artistic vision of Mike Bidlo and Pierre Ménard who have given us fantastic works such as *Not Andy Warhol (Brillo Box)*(1995) and Pierre Ménard's *Quixote*, respectively. These artists I believe have foreseen the obsession of the post-modernist with ownership and individuality. These great works of art from Bidlo and Ménard take away the ownership of the idea from the artist and destroy the concept of originality. Therefore, I think that the history of the future will contain artistic statements that currently would be appalling for many of us to imagine. I think that

¹⁰ Sean O'Hagan, *The Art of Selling Out* (TheGuardian.com, 2009), Damien Hirst.

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we have already begun to see the early signs of this direction in this, as yet, unfinished narrative in the statements of Pierre Pinoncelli who has already attacked two of the eight Duchampian Fountains. Danto himself noted that verisimilitude was originally enough to drive art forward¹¹ when he refers to Hans Belting's *The Image before the Era of Art*¹², so even if art's self-definition has become old news, how can he possibly affirm that no other project may take up the reins?¹³

In conclusion, post-historical art is the name attributed by Danto to art that is produced today for which we have yet to appropriate both traits and a name. However, we are aware that a large shift has taken place in the history of art. What this is and what it will be called is something that can only be applied retrospectively. My vote is for pre-Destructivist Pluralism. However, as Noël Carroll quite rightly points out, this would be predicting the future¹⁴, something we cannot definitively do.

¹¹ Noël Carroll, *The End of Art* (1998), p. 27.

¹² Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art...*, p. 3.

¹³ Noël Carroll, p. 27.

¹⁴ Noël Carroll, p. 20.

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