



## Art! In What Sense?

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is a critique of the conception of art which is mainly based on Arthur Danto's definition of art via Hegelian aesthetics. In 1964, when Danto encountered with Andy Warhol's Brillo Box a renewed era for the definition of art has come. For Hegel one of the most crucial criteria for artwork is its indispensable adequacy between content and presentation. Although Danto as a philosopher is so much Hegelian by the time of modern art there emerges a historical shift within art and this article tries to reveal how Danto departs from Hegel through the philosophical question of what makes any work an art-work. When there renders no 'bodily' distinction between content and presentation, there emerges an essential question: According to what one of the Brillo boxes inside a grocery store is just an ordinary box while the other one is such a precious artwork in Soho Gallery.

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By the mid of the 1960's when Pop-Art has been released in New York, an art philosopher Arthur Danto has proclaimed a paradigmatic shift in our conception of art. When Andy Warhol has exhibited his *Brillo Boxes* in Soho Gallery, there has been left no more bodily distinction between the artwork and the reality. Therefore, in his most provocative study *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Arthur Danto announced that quality is no more an essential factor in art.

Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our ideas instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place. What is now aroused in us by works of art is not just immediate enjoyment, but our judgment also, since we subject to our intellectual consideration (i) the content of art, and (ii) the work of art's means of presentation, and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of both to one another. The philosophy of art is therefore a greater need in our day than it was in the days when art by itself yielded full satisfaction. Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but knowing philosophically what art is. (Hegel, 1975:376)

“In transferring this proposition to the world of contemporary art as it has evolved since the mid-1960s, Danto fully subscribes to Hegel's view. Moreover, he claims that aesthetics should be replaced by art criticism, though with a significant omission: “Hegel speaks of intellectual judgement of the content of art and the work of art's means of presentation. Criticism needs nothing further. It needs to identify both meaning and mode of presentation, or what I term ‘embodiment’ on the thesis that artworks are embodied meanings.” (Danto, 1997:98) Danto emphasizes that “to be a work of art is to be *about* something and to *embody its meaning*.”” (Danto, 1997:195)

There are many things which obviously manifest their content without ever being treated as works of art. These are of course, first and foremost, the objects of everyday use which present their meaning through their function, in clearly distinguishable degrees of appropriateness. But there are also meaningful things that are less obvious because they do not

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fulfill a need or serve a purpose. A bunch of flowers for instance, conveys a broadly recognizable message: namely an appreciation of our being in the world. And yet such a thing lacks the quality of a work of art, however aesthetically satisfying it may be.

The concept of art which Danto puts forward thus begs some critical questions: Is the term "embodiment of meaning" really specific enough to distinguish between works of art and other meaningful 'manifestations'? Does the omission of Hegel's criterion of adequacy imply that after the end of art we are left with an indiscriminate range of presentations of meaning which owe their reason of presence solely to the continuing veneration of a past form of human self-assertion? Or is the subjection of works of art to an intellectual judgement assessing their content and their form of presentation altogether a questionable way of relating to their presence?

The most astonishing aspect of Danto's involvement with Hegel is his re-instatement of the difference between the objective and the absolute spirit. Spirit is as known all the social, psychological, religious, economic or any other conditions of their time. These considerations are of course not entirely wrong or irrelevant. Every conscious statement somehow reflects the needs, obstacles, and intentions under which it came into being. But Hegel saw that, apart from representing the objective concerns of the human mind, works of art also reveal "in their highest vocation" – something of the intrinsic identity, the active nature of the spirit itself; and it is in this capacity that he regarded art, together with religion and philosophy, as one of the expressions of the absolute spirit.

Danto acknowledges this difference in his treatment of art as equal to philosophy and sympathizes with the idea of it being "a fount rather than merely an object of knowledge." (Danto, 1997:188). But this awareness does not seem to have entered into his definition of art as "embodiment of meaning." Although Danto frequently refers to Hegel's phrase of art's "highest vocation", he goes to great lengths to avoid any admission that the essence of art is concerned with some sort of excellence, probably because of the obvious clichés and resentments associated with this attribute. Hegel's claim for a certain superiority of art, placing it above other meaningful representations, is however fairly clear and objective: he distinguishes between subject matter and content.

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A portrait for instance may be completely successful in objectively rendering a likeness of the sitter to anyone who knows her. The content is then seen as identical with the subject matter. But this does not the achievement of a work of art in its highest vocation. In a portrait by Titian or Rembrandt the identity of the sitter may be unknown and the physical appearance in any case not verifiable at all; and yet the lack of this information does not impinge on our recognition. One might even go so far as to say that it actually enhances it, because what we recognize as the content of the painting is the presence of a spirit which, although it may be remote in time, nevertheless communicates directly with us.

Time obviously plays an important role in bringing out this essential quality in works of art by freeing them from the web of interests and ambitions that surrounded their inception. "One wonders how Warhol's *Brillo Box* will present itself once Danto's "indiscernibility problem" has disappeared and only specialists versed in twentieth century American consumer culture will know what 'the real thing' was." (Carroll, 1997:29). But this does not mean that the immediate spiritual presence of a work of art is a phantom brought about by the distance of time. On the contrary this quality is very much at stake in the actual making of art.

For instance, "Titian painted the portrait of Francis I, on the basis of Pietro Aretino's descriptions and other artists' renderings of the Emperor. Without ever having seen his subject Titian managed to present the most vivid and memorable image of royalty that any king of France could possibly wish for." (Greenberg, 1959:42) Subject matter on this level is clearly part of the "means of presentation", to use Hegel's term: something without which the spiritual essence of the work could not have been realized. However, Titian's gesture may also be slightly misleading in suggesting that content is something that can be freely commanded by a great artist. Content, in Hegel's sense, is the one thing that an artist cannot attain consciously, that is to say, as an object of intention.

It is one of Hegel's great insights into the working of the human mind that *not knowing* is an essential prerequisite to the manifestation of the spirit in art. "The spirit only works itself around in things so long as there is something secret, not revealed, in them." (Hegel, 1975:604) Hegel draws the evidence for this concept from Greek art. In classical sculpture in particular he sees the complete 'interpenetration of spirit and its shape in nature' as opposed to earlier

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‘symbolic forms of art which render their meaning through the overt inadequacy between content and presentation.’ (Hegel, 1975:431). Greek sculptures manifest the ideal relationship between content and body: “an existent embodiment which is perfectly adequate to the true content.” (Hegel, 1975:438).

All Hegel’s descriptions emphasize that “embodiment” is more than just a mere representation. Classical art became conceptually adequate representation of the Ideal, the consummation of the realm of beauty. Nothing can be or become more beautiful. But at this point in his lectures, when introducing the romantic approach to art, Hegel takes a decisive step and switches the basis of the argument: “Yet there is something higher than the beautiful appearance of spirit in its immediate sensuous shape, even if this shape be created by spirit as adequate to itself.” (Hegel, 1975:517) If art as an expression of spirit cannot provide more than its perfect embodiment, the spirit itself seems nevertheless to strive further.

Following Hegel, Danto also announces that art has reached the end by means of similar reasons. For Danto, art, since it has left no distinction between body and content has reached its perfect fulfillment. Since the exact response for his illustrious question; ‘what makes an ordinary brillo box within any grocery store, into a provocative artwork in an art gallery’ can only be given by philosophy, Danto eliminated art for the sake of art theories. By rephrasing Hegel, he proposes a new objective: modern art, far from simply continuing art, was primarily concerned with “creating art explicitly for the purpose of knowing philosophically what art is.” (Danto, 1997:31) From Plato to Hegel all the philosophers generally inclined to answer the artistic question “according to what?” by judging art as adequate or inadequate according to a measure they themselves have established. Danto is no exception:

“In my own version of the idea of ‘what art wants,’ the end and the fulfillment of the history of art is the philosophical understanding of what art is, an understanding that is achieved in the way that understanding in each of our lives is achieved, namely, from the mistakes we make, the false paths we follow, the false images we come to abandon until we learn wherein our limits consist, and then how to live within those limits.” (Danto, 1997:107)

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There is nothing much to be added except that this concern with self-possession is at odds with what has hitherto been called art. What art wants is certainly not an end, but to keep desire and aspiration alive. Nevertheless, modern art responded to a situation which indeed called art's existence into question, and the answer it found has been anything but philosophical self-effacement.

In the 1820s when Hegel proclaimed the end of art's historical mission, the contemporary evidence must have seemed fairly conclusive. Art was going through a severe crisis, although this did not seem to apply to all arts equally. Apart from Viennese classical music, Hegel, like most philosophers after Plato, keeps close to the visual arts as his aesthetic paradigm. Despite the peripheral position of Berlin in relation to European art centers, Hegel was well informed and cultivated enough to recognize the significant features of the art of his

time: the decline standards, the eclectic disposition, the tendency to retreat into an idealized past, and, most importantly, the disengaged masquerade of feelings, forms, and subject-matter which was called romantic irony in Germany. (Lamarque and Olsen, 2004 :143-145) All this supported his view that the spirit has no longer "working itself around in things" but had emancipated itself from any outward dependence and become conscious of its autonomous reflective powers.

"What through art or thinking we have so completely as an object before our physical or spiritual eye that its content has exhausted, that everything is revealed and nothing obscure or inward remains any longer, this then has lost all absolute interest for us." (Hegel, 1975:604) Danto sees this is virtually a description of the postmodernist attitude, but contrary to Hegel, he regards this situation such affirmative, this is because with the loss of our artistic desire and ambition, philosophical aesthetic theories emerge.

## **Conclusion**

It is hard to agree with Danto's assertion that by the arrival of pop art, art reached to its goal and fulfillment. Modern art's vital relationship to that which is not art does not allow for



the kind of perfectibility which is indispensable for a progressive development. Danto unfortunately tends to equate aesthetics with an emphasis on appearance, however, in a work of art, as opposed to a natural object, the aesthetic quality is not just surface but the embodiment of that which is uncertain: that which is dangerous, problematic, tempting and provocative. Far from being ready to our hands, artworks are thankfully beyond us. One might even say that art of the highest order only begins where philosophical knowledge ends.



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