

Autonomy, pluralism, play: Danto, Greenberg, Kant, and the philosophy of art history

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Abstract

Arthur Danto's celebrated declaration of "the end of art" might seem to accommodate well the apparently open-ended aesthetic diversity of contemporary art. However, in his philosophy of art history, Danto treats the pursuit of autonomy as a misdirected philosophical concern, and denigrates the aesthetic pluralism of contemporary art as a matter of empty indifference. As a result, Danto not only fails to do justice to the explosion of artistic forms in recent decades, he contributes to their misconstrual. Accordingly, this paper revisits the opposition between autonomy and pluralism on which Danto's philosophy of art history rests, arguing that artistic self-definition ought to be conceived, not as a misplaced conceptual problem, but rather as a distinctly aesthetic concern, integral to art practice and criticism. So understood, autonomy and pluralism do not stand opposed but rather mutually implicate one another, and the historical responsibility for artists to define the terms of their own work, rather than having been exhausted, persists amidst the broad field of formal possibilities presented by contemporary art's complication with everyday life.



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In apparent opposition to the modernist pursuit of autonomy, contemporary artists often no longer define their practices in terms of specific media, and artworks frequently are not easily distinguished from industrial projects, commercial advertising, social gatherings, and other aspects of everyday life. Accordingly, Arthur Danto famously concludes that art history has come to an end.¹ While some might mistake Danto's declaration to be cynical, in fact, it is celebratory. According to Danto, the modernist pursuit of self-definition was misguided: the displacement of an essentially philosophical problem, provoked by a crisis in,

what he takes to be, the conventional role of art to represent the world. By contrast, he argues that the exhaustion of this pursuit in the pluralism of contemporary art made possible the proper, philosophical formulation of the problem of art's definition, and emancipated artists to pursue their work without concerning themselves with defining their practices.

Danto's philosophy of art history serves as a necessary supplement to his ontology of art, and stakes a claim within philosophical aesthetics for best accommodating the seemingly open-ended diversity of contemporary art. However, because

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Danto elevates art's definition to a point of philosophical principle, and denigrates the aesthetic properties of artworks to a matter of empty indifference, his declaration of the end of art not only fails to do justice to the lavish formal diversity of art in recent decades, but also contributes to its misconstrual: as either the rhetorical vehicle for pre-conceived notions, or mere entertainment.

Accordingly, this essay revisits the opposition between autonomy and pluralism central to Danto's philosophy of art history. Because Danto misconstrues the problem of self-definition in art as philosophical—which is to say, as conceptual—he presupposes autonomy and pluralism to be antithetical as determinate and indeterminate. On this basis, he assumes the modernist pursuit of self-definition to be dogmatic, and juxtaposes it to the pluralism of contemporary art as, not only open-ended, but ultimately inconsequential. However, when understood as a distinctly aesthetic problem, autonomy does not oppose pluralism. Instead, the two implicate one another. So understood, the pursuit of self-definition in the history of modern art is not therefore dogmatic, but rather pluralistic, and the pluralism of contemporary art marks not an eschatological break with modern art history, but rather deepens and extends its fundamental problems, amidst the aesthetics of the commonplace.²

THE ILLUSION OF THE END

The end of art is, for Danto, “the end of a certain story.”³ It is the end of modernism, which he explains as art's pursuit of *philosophical* self-definition, and in a postmodernist vein, he positions his theory of contemporary art's pluralism in distinction from Clement Greenberg's now classical defense of modern art's autonomy. He writes:

Greenberg and I see self-definition as the central historical truth of modernist art. But his narrative differs in every other respect from mine. He sees self-definition in terms of purity, and hence the history of Modernism as the pursuit of painting in its purest possible state: a kind of genre cleansing, as one might put it, a program easily politicized as aesthetic Serbianism.⁴

In contrast to Greenberg's modernist defense of art's autonomy, Danto describes his own view as

“altogether anti-purist” and he explains contemporary art as “objectively pluralistic.”⁵

The struggle for philosophical self-definition was, for Danto, art's history. It oriented the direction of art's development, and gave stylistic unity to its distinct epochs. However, according to Danto, this struggle exhausted itself in the 1960s with the complication of art and everyday life, paradigmatically marked for him by the advent of Pop Art. Because Pop Art was indistinguishable to the naked eye from everyday objects, Danto contends, it proved that art could not be defined aesthetically, and therefore could not be defined by artists. The burden of art's definition was relinquished to philosophy. In fact, he contends, it was first properly presented to it—to him—as a matter of what he calls, “the non-identity of indiscernibles,” in 1964, in the Stable Gallery, when he first confronted Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*.

Since the appearance of Warhol's *Brillo Box* provides no clear way to distinguish it from commonplace objects, Danto argues that what constitutes the piece as a work of art is its situation in “the art world.” As a result, Danto frequently is credited with contributing to the development of, what has come to be known as, the institutional theory of art. However, Danto does not therefore understand artworks merely sociologically, as objects sanctioned by the artists, critics, dealers, and curators, who comprise the art world. To the contrary, he proffers an essentialist theory of art as “semantic vehicles,” which are not only part of the world, but also about it. Artworks, he contends, are distinguished from everyday objects by an act of “artistic identification” through which artists designate their works as art and invest them with meanings. He writes: “Interpretation is . . . constitutive, for an object is an artwork at all only in relation to an interpretation.”⁶ And he explains the art world, accordingly, as the historical matrix of art theories.

Danto's philosophy of art history provides a necessary supplement to his ontology of art by accounting for, what he takes to be, the development of the proper problem of art's definition, and by explaining the aesthetic diversity of contemporary art—which he calls “art after the end of art”—as evidence of art's fundamentally conceptual nature.⁷ But Danto does not therefore conclude that the work of contemporary artists is philosophical. To the contrary he contends

that art has been freed of, what he calls, its “philosophical disenfranchisement” and so now continues independently from any demand for self-determination. In the wake of Warhol, he argues:

Artists no longer needed to be philosophers. They were liberated, having handed over the problem of the nature of art to philosophy, to do what they wanted to, and at this precise historical moment, pluralism became the objective historical truth.⁸

While initially, he despaired of this post-historical condition as a “dismal” state of “vanished vitality” Danto subsequently has come to relish in it.⁹ Freed from the burden of philosophical self-definition, he argues, contemporary artists now work in a “spirit of absolute *free play*.”¹⁰ And, rather than required to stake his claim as a critic, he contends, “I have no grounds for excluding anything . . . I can like it all.”¹¹

In the introduction to their edited collection of Danto’s essays, philosophers Gregg Horowitz and Thomas Huhn summarize as follows: “Art has been freed of its hidden agendas, . . . and so, too, has criticism been liberated by leaving behind its hunt for the truth in art . . . The space of taste’s freedom becomes a reiterated space of pure self-determination, which it remains to critics to claim.”¹² However, because Danto’s “emancipation” of art from philosophy is purchased at the expense of the value of aesthetic judgment in its estimation, Danto compromises what he purportedly accomplishes. Rather than liberated from the strictures of philosophy, the “space of taste’s freedom” is *closed* as a condition of Danto’s ontology of art.¹³ “The age of pluralism is upon us,” writes Danto, “It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means.”¹⁴

As a result, Danto’s philosophy of art history fails to do justice in particular to contemporary art, which has exhibited a flowering of richly formalist artwork in the 25 years since he first drafted his philosophy of art history.¹⁵ Registering this development, art historian Johanna Drucker writes:

A renewed studio culture is flourishing. Making objects with evident appreciation of process has pushed traditional techniques into a highly charged exchange with new media capabilities. Materials and structures

have never been more varied. Nor has the license to use them ever been so broad.¹⁶

Of course, Danto is not blind to these changes. To the contrary, they are integral to the shift in his attitude towards contemporary art. However, insofar as Danto takes the explosion of new artistic forms to be symptomatic of art’s liberation from the purportedly philosophical demand for self-definition, he only can accommodate the aesthetic diversity of contemporary artworks, by simultaneously denigrating the significance of their particular aesthetic qualities.

Beyond failing to account properly for the resurgent formalism of contemporary art, Danto’s denial of the persistent problem of aesthetic autonomy furthermore contributes its misconstrual. On the one hand, while he maintains that artists no longer need to be philosophers, by arguing that artworks are defined by their theoretical interpretation, Danto reduces them to rhetorical vehicles for heteronomous concepts, reinforcing the tendency to treat art as not only as misplaced philosophy but still more often—in essentially historicist terms—as pseudo-sociology. He writes: “We cannot be deeply wrong if we suppose that the correct interpretation of object-as-artwork is the one which coincides most closely with the artist’s own interpretation.”¹⁷ On the other hand, since Danto displaces the value and significance of artworks onto concepts he also reduces the qualities of their appearance to nothing more than distraction or sophistry, reinforcing the tendency to treat art as a poor cousin of the entertainment industry. At best, he contends, art is reduced to rhetoric or remains to serve the “abiding human needs” for “decoration, self-expression, [and] entertainment.”¹⁸ What Danto celebrates as the liberation of art from its philosophical disenfranchisement thus amounts rather to its highest expression, insofar as it requires first affirming the confusion of art and philosophy as the truth of art’s history, in order then to “resolve” it—and so assert their disjunction—by displacing the value and significance of art onto philosophy.

The failure of Danto’s declaration of “the end of art” to address the complexities of contemporary art thus requires revisiting the philosophy of art history on which it is based. If the distinction that he draws between the modernist pursuit of self-definition and the pluralism of contemporary

art does not hold, how might their relationship otherwise be conceived?

THE PLURALISM OF AUTONOMOUS AESTHETIC JUDGMENT

As the crux of what he addresses as the antinomy of taste, Kant observes that the autonomy of aesthetic judgments is distinguished by its pluralism. Judgments of beauty are singular judgments based upon sensuous experiences that nevertheless lay claim to universal agreement. Directly opposing Danto's equation of modernism's art for art sake with the pursuit of philosophical self-definition, Kant thus distinguishes aesthetic judgments from both cognitive and moral judgments, on the basis of their lack of conceptual foundations. Rather than determinate, he contends, the autonomy of aesthetic judgments is defined precisely by its reflexive underdetermination. In its disinterested, contemplative quality aesthetic judgments do not entail the same investment in their object as either cognitive or moral judgments. Instead their normativity lies in the subjective states they engender. However, because this subjectivity is—for the same reason—not rooted in the eccentricities of merely empirical contingencies, it nevertheless lays claim to universal assent.

As characteristic of their pluralism, Kant observes that aesthetic judgments remain rooted in time, always to be determined again in the singularity of the sensual encounter, as what he paradoxically calls, contingently necessary. Accordingly, he notes that aesthetic ideals do not therefore admit of perfection. While no less binding in the normativity of the standard they present, aesthetic ideals do not instantiate general types. To the contrary, they frequently—perhaps even always—entail aberrations that defy the expectations of established standards: Cleopatra's nose or Kirk Douglas' chin, the asymmetry in the smile on the Mona Lisa, or the touch of yellow that interrupts the fiery red of a sunset. Despite evoking a normative ideal, each remains singular in its eccentricity, and so ought not to be confused with a model of perfection—which, again, implies the instantiation of a concept—but rather must be understood as exemplary.

As a potential stumbling block in the logic of his analysis, Kant notes that, contrary to objects of natural beauty, artworks are created as realiza-

tions of artistic intentions. Are they not therefore incarnations of antecedent concepts drawn from the minds of their creators? Kant argues, no. Were there some such determining concept in artistic creation, art would be either merely a matter of eccentrically subjective, sensual gratification, explicable by recourse to the cognitive principles of empirical science, or it would be an objectively normative moral concern, explicable by recourse to ethical principles. Accordingly, Kant concludes, we rather attribute to artists a natural gift, which drives their creative practices and distinguishes the ideas that inform their projects from the determinate concepts of the understanding: namely, genius. And, in his theory of genius, Kant again postulates the pluralism of the normative standards in artworks.

Despite the critical judgment undoubtedly entailed in their production, artworks do not realize pre-conceived generalities, and ought not to be misunderstood as instantiating mutually exclusive *theories* of art. At the same time, however, despite this lack of conceptual determination, they are not merely random nonsense. Indeed, Kant contends, the products of genius “give the rule to art,” but in and through their sensuous particularities—like he says of ideal beauties—as exemplars. To slavishly copy an artist's work as a model of perfection—which is, of course, not only common but the essence of “academicism”—would be to compromise, rather than realize the principle of his or her genius. Instead, Kant contends, genius begets genius, as an exemplary ideal, which inspires students to respond in kind, producing singularly universal works of their own. Rather than dogmatically exclusive, the rule that genius sets for art thus inspires the proliferation of other similarly exemplary works: paradoxically mandating diversity.

Finally, as the decisive point of contrast between his aesthetic theory and Danto's philosophy of art history, Kant explains the normativity of aesthetic judgments as the pleasurable, “free play” of the faculties that they engender. While objects of aesthetic reflection neither satisfy needs, nor realize moral norms, he contends, they nevertheless exhibit a “purposeless purposiveness,” evidenced by their power to enthrall, and manifested in the form of finality: the sense that something appears just as it should, expressed in the proclamation “that's beautiful.” Registered in

this purposeless purposiveness is, according to Kant, not the empirical qualities of objects themselves, but rather the reflexive quickening of one's own faculties. Nevertheless, he is careful to note, in aesthetic reflection, the mind does not simply wander aimlessly. Instead, the free play of the faculties entails a sense of harmony—an imagined order in experience that sustains and stimulates their play—in spite of the absence of any determining cognitive or moral concept. Aesthetic judgments register the enjoyment of one's very capacity to find order in experience, to imagine possible orders. Although it fulfills no determinate concept, the harmonies of aesthetic form thus affectively satisfy cognition in general, by presenting a sensible order, which instills a sense of wonder and enlivens one's engagement with the world.

Whereas Danto juxtaposes aesthetic autonomy, as dogmatic determination, to aesthetic pluralism, as an indifferent free play, for Kant, the autonomy of aesthetic judgments is thus itself defined—precisely in opposition to the kind of conceptual determination with which Danto conflates it—*by free play*, and the undetermined free play of the faculties is itself the basis of their normative definition. But how then is this pluralism of aesthetic judgments manifested in the history of modern art's pursuit of self-definition?

THE PLURALISM OF AUTONOMOUS ART

Danto's theory of contemporary art rests upon three intersecting histories of the relationship between art and ideas in the West. Most broadly he argues that, since Plato banished poets from his imagined republic, philosophy has seen art as an enemy and worked to neutralize its force, either by "ephemeraliz[ing]" it as divorced from reality, or by "taking it over" as "doing what philosophy itself does, only uncouthly."¹⁹ For Danto, this thesis concerns the history of philosophy perhaps more than the history of art—until the rise of modernist art, and, what he explains as, the emergence of the problem of art's self-definition. From the Renaissance until the end of the 19th century, he contends, art history conformed to the model provided by Giorgio Vasari, and concerned itself only with the success or failure of artists' mimetic representations of the world. However, he argues, with the invention of film, this conventional role for artists was usurped, and the arts

were thrown into uncertainty. Whereas sculptors and painters could only infer movement, film could present it directly.²⁰ Danto writes; "The issue was what was painting now to be, and this in the end could only be answered with a philosophical theory."²¹ Art suffered an identity crisis, which compelled it for the first time to address the problem of its self-definition. In the process, Danto contends, art was infected with its age-old enemy, philosophy; and he reads the history of art after 1880 as a series of attempts to provide a philosophical answer to the problem of art's definition, until the pursuit exhausted itself in the 1960s, giving rise to the objective pluralism of contemporary art. When carried to its limit, Danto contends, the excessive nature of the demand it entailed became clear, and artwork was purged of its philosophical confusion. The problem of art's definition was left to philosophers, and artists were liberated to pursue their work without concerning themselves about the definition of their practices.

The first striking feature about Danto's speculative art history is his assertion that modern art remained fundamentally unproblematic from its inception in the High Middle Ages and Renaissance through to the late 19th century, securely and uniformly defined by the principle of naturalist *representation* until challenged on those same terms by the rise of moving-image technologies. In the formulation of his philosophy of art history, Danto thus excludes the problem of self-definition from representational practices themselves, framing definition instead as a strictly theoretical problem that properly belongs to another domain and only secondarily infects art, which he posits as originally an uncomplicated given. However, as art historian Arnold Hauser famously argues in his study of Mannerism, problems concerning art's definition emerged concomitantly with the earliest developments of modern art.

Mannerism presents a crisis in art that paradoxically results from the extraordinary accomplishments of the High Renaissance. In the wake of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael, what were artists to do? The elevation of painting and sculpture from crafts to liberal arts, and the correlative appreciation of the artist as an intellectual who contributes to the understanding of the world, placed a newfound burden on the subsequent generation. At the same time, the talents of

Renaissance masters threatened to overwhelm and stifle their successors' creativity. The force of their accomplishments turned the attention of subsequent generations to the study of their art rather than the careful attention to nature on which it was based, reducing renaissance naturalism to—or even revealing it to be—a set of technological contrivances. At the same time, the remarkable accomplishments of the Renaissance masters left little room for novelty, compelling artists to systematically complicate and even distort the representations of figures and space in their works. In the immediate wake of the High Renaissance, Mannerist artists such as Parmigianino, Tintoretto, and Giambologna thus produced the first self-consciously non-representational art in the history of the West—four-and-a-half centuries before the formal experiments of post-Impressionism.

Beyond their departure from Renaissance conventions, the anti-classical distortions of Mannerist art furthermore reflect a deep-seated skepticism about the very veracity of naturalist representation. To the contrary, Mannerists evidence a fascination with art's capacity to suspend the apparent objectivity of experience and to supplant its purported laws with rules of its own. Hauser writes: "The age had lost confidence in the unambiguity of facts, had lost the sense of actuality altogether."²² What Danto posits as the unproblematic definition of art, until challenged by the development of film, is thus subject to profound skepticism as soon as it is asserted. Hauser continues: "In every mannerist work, the artist seems to be trying to demonstrate that artistic values do not have to be, or actually cannot be, simple."²³

Radicalizing the problem still further, Mannerist tendencies already are evident in the work of the High Renaissance masters. Mannerism's challenge to the standard of naturalist representation cannot be therefore simply dismissed, as symptomatic of the Renaissance's decline. Instead, it must be recognized as an anxious self-criticism intrinsic to the very project of Renaissance humanism. Rather than established standards, the principles of Renaissance art are utopian aspirations whose value, authority, and ability to sustain themselves across generations are uncertain from the very moment of their inception. Instead of instituting a definition of art that goes unchallenged until the late 19th century, the naturalism of the Italian Renaissance thus initiates a problematic struggle

between artists, and within their respective practice, about the value and aim of their work. This struggle—as evidenced already in Mannerism and the complexities of Renaissance art—drives the development of the diverse artistic styles that constitutes the history of early modern art.

Other crises requiring artists to reflect on the value and end of their work can be traced throughout the history of modern European art.²⁴ However, the period of the late 18th and early 19th centuries most clearly brings to light both how the problem of self-definition is integral to art rather than infecting it from without, and how the problem of art's autonomy does not oppose but rather entails aesthetic pluralism. During this period of profound social change, art finally shed its moorings in religious ritual and feudal social conventions. It emerged for the first time fully in its autonomy as a distinct field of practice, whose value and significance did not depend upon external institutions or ideologies and, while this accomplishment of art's autonomy might be celebrated as a triumph, it simultaneously—and for the very same reasons—was suffered as a crisis concerning art's definition. At this moment, art historian T.J. Clark writes with particular regard to Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat*,

Contingency enters the process of picturing. It invades it. There is no other substance out of which paintings can now be made—no givens, no matters and subject matters, no forms, no usable pasts. Or none that a possible public could be taken to agree on anymore.²⁵

With the breakdown of the social institutions in which art previously had been produced and had found its meaning, artists were saddled with a still greater burden to define their own projects, resulting in an explosion of diverse new forms and contents in art.

In the late 18th century, painting in particular ceased to be organized as a profession among others in the feudal guild system. Knowledge of the trade was no longer passed down from masters to apprentices, who grinded their colors and assisted them in their practices. Instead, as emblematic of its newfound modernity, painting was now taught like philosophy, on the basis of abstract principles derived from a whole canon of past masters. This abstraction presented an intrinsic problem concerning the transmission of inherited knowledge,

for which Sir Joshua Reynolds's anxious insistence on the careful study of classical models provides a vivid example. But the broader ramifications of these changes ultimately manifested themselves in the marketplace. Artists no longer painted for individual patrons whose express wishes they knew, or even for the general public whose mood they could try to gauge. Instead they found themselves competing for success in academic exhibitions in which melodrama and spectacle might easily win out over work that requires more thoughtful attention. And many artists indeed rebelled against the standards established by the academies and their annual exhibitions, resulting in a general crisis concerning the definition of art.²⁶

The most immediate and visible effect of this newfound autonomy of art, and the crisis it entailed, was a pluralistic proliferation of novel subject matters. Previously, paintings primarily presented religious subjects from the Bible and lives of the saints. Even secular subjects remained largely limited to Classical mythology. However, in the late 18th century, artists began to produce works depicting anything from Shakespearean dramas, to recent historical events, to personal flights of the imagination. Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe*, for instance, famously scandalized the academy by depicting historical figures in contemporary dress rather than classical costumes. In their etchings and prints, artists such as Francisco de Goya and William Blake depicted private, fantastic visions, which previously had been found only in poetry. And John Turner and John Constable contributed to the elevation of landscape from its status as above only still life in the established hierarchy of painting to an art form rivaling history painting.

Along with this pluralistic diversity of subject matters in the newly autonomous art of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the work of the period also exhibits a heightened uncertainty about art's appropriate form and a correlative proliferation of formal experiments. In his study of David's *Marat*, Clark draws upon Max Weber's theory of modernity as marked by "the disenchantment of the world," to argue that the force of the painting hinges on "the impossibility of transcendence and shows us politics as the form of a world."²⁷ He situates it historically in light of the cult that developed around Marat after his

death and interprets it as part of the Jacobin struggle to lay claim to representing the people of the new French republic. He writes: "the Jacobins found themselves negotiating with too many things—too many interests and energies—calling themselves Marat."²⁸ What was Marat's legacy to mean—and how? If West's *Death of General Wolfe* presents a newfound attention to historical details, Clark contends the need to develop a properly historical form of representation riddles David's *Marat* with uncertainties about the practice of painting itself. In this light, the 18th century transformations in historical painting provide evidence of artists not only searching for new subject matters, but also working to develop new forms of representation appropriate to the modern world.²⁹

Finally, rather than exhausting the problem of self-definition in modern art, the complication of art and everyday life lies at its very center. Of course, in the history of modernism, this complication develops along many distinct, even contrasting lines, from the socially charged sculptural installations of the Russian constructivists to the elaboration of John Cage's insight into the temporality of musical form in Fluxus' performance; and, when reflecting on the precursors to Warhol, Danto pays particular attention to Dadaism, whose repudiation of aesthetic conventions appears to support his own arguments (despite their categorical differences). However, the complication of art and everyday life develops equally—in fact, one might say, essentially—as an integral component of modernism's pursuit of aesthetic autonomy, in the synthetic cubism of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso.

In their radicalization of the problem of art's autonomy, post-Impressionist artists challenged the paradigm of painting in particular as a window onto the world, asserting the work of art instead as an object in its own right, defined by the terms of its construction. As commonly understood, art thus established a new independence, setting itself off against its surroundings in its radical self-definition. However, as evident already in Manet's use of collage as a compositional tool, rather than transcending its context, the work of art thus came to be more profoundly complicated with its surroundings. As an object of its own, the painting stands alongside other objects. If the work of art indeed articulates a point of opposition to its

surroundings, it does so from within their midst. And, in the synthetic cubism of Braque and Picasso, this implication of modernism's reflexivity is brought to fruition. As H. H. Arnason contends, by combining the oil cloth of his 1912 painting *Still Life with Chair Caning*, with an actual rope, Picasso "encourages a reading of the painted surface itself as a horizontal tabletop," and complicates the painting with "the presence of still-life objects."³⁰ In his collage, *Fruit Dish and Glass*, Braque's use of commercial lettering and faux-bois paper, similarly plays "multiple roles, both literal and descriptive."³¹ And, in a manner that anticipates both the dissolution of medium-specificity, and complication of art and everyday life—which Danto takes to be definitive of the distinction between modern and contemporary art—Picasso's three-dimensional construction, *Maquette for Guitar*, "closed the breach that separated painting and sculpture, uniting the pictorial realm with the space of the external world."³²

If art since the late 18th century is pluralistic in its autonomy from traditional social and religious institutions, why then does Danto feel justified in opposing it so categorically to art since the 1960s?

AUTONOMY AGAINST PLURALISM

As Danto contends, in the history of modern art, many artists and critics indeed respond dogmatically to the crisis in art's autonomy, as if the problem it presents could be resolved once and for all like an empirical or moral dilemma, and their art or the art they champion could provide the final word on art's definition. For Danto, the paradigm of this tendency is Clement Greenberg, who provides him an excellent foil because he both articulates a strong defense of modern art's aesthetic reflexivity and compromises his own formalism by elevating it to a determinate principle. However, Danto is mistaken to take Greenberg's dogmatism at face value, to overlook the ambivalence in his critical theory, and to treat his tendency to collapse considerations of aesthetic form into points of principle as the fundamental horizon for problems in modern art history.

In "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," for instance, Greenberg famously explains modernism as a response to the problem of art's definition. He writes:

A society, as it becomes less and less able, in the course of its development, to justify the inevitability of its particular forms, breaks up the accepted notions upon which artists and writers must depend in large part for communication with their audiences. It becomes difficult to assume anything. All the verities involved by religion, authority, tradition, style, are thrown into question, and the writer or artist is no longer able to estimate the response of his audience to the symbols and references with which he works.³³

Typically, he contends, such a breakdown of cultural conventions provokes a reactionary defense of the jeopardized standards—an "Alexandrianism," which upholds the precedents set by past masters as determinate and dwindles in creative output as it limits itself to mere academicism. By contrast, however, modernism concedes the underdetermination of aesthetic standards and works to "find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence."³⁴

Instead of denying the breakdown of accepted standards, Greenberg contends that modernists address art's underdetermination by systematically reflecting on the conditions of their own practices. That is, they make this underdetermination their own, integrating it as the substance of their work, by critiquing the hackneyed conventions of academic art in order to unearth that which in it still carries compelling force. In this way, Greenberg explains modernism as a kind of "transcendental turn" in art, through which artists come to examine the conditions of the possibility of their artwork. He writes: "I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost exacerbation of th[e] self critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant."³⁵ However, for Greenberg, modernism's self-reflection does not—in principle—take the form of philosophy but rather practical investigation. "The essence of modernism," he continues, "lies . . . in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself."³⁶ Modernist artworks practically interrupt the illusions they depict—and other conventional effects—by bringing to the fore the conditions that make them possible. Famously, Greenberg explains: "Whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before one sees the picture itself, one sees a Modernist picture as a

picture first.”³⁷ And he defines artistic modernism as “the imitation of imitation as process.”³⁸

In this vein, Greenberg’s critical theory might be read as elaborating and further defending the arguments articulated in Kant’s “Analytic of the Beautiful.” The modernist painters he champions resist the reduction of their work’s meaning to the determination of established conventions. Instead they recognize and affirm the instability of these conventions and thematize the formal conditions of their art as the locus of its meaning. In their pursuit of self-definition, modernist painters ought to be understood, accordingly, as sustaining the “free play” in aesthetic form. But Greenberg’s appeal to Kant is not well grounded in his aesthetics. He speaks of Kant almost metaphorically—as representative of critical reflection generally—and, though his writings intimate a properly formalist defense of modernist painting, Greenberg ultimately compromises his theory by equating aesthetic form with medium-specificity and so giving it a determinate content. As Dean Curtin writes: “Often in reading Greenberg’s work, one gets the impression that his analysis of taste owes more to the First Critique than to the Third.”³⁹

For Greenberg modernist reflection on the conditions of art making specifically concerns distinguishing and refining the qualities particular to each of the classical artistic media. “Each art,” he writes, “had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself.”⁴⁰ He presupposes that distinct media have qualities proper to them, and that clarification of these qualities will exhaust the formal conditions of the various arts. Greenberg conceives self-criticism in art as a matter of eliminating from each medium any effects that better belong to another. Accordingly, he sees the self-definition in modernist painting as a matter specifically of purging from painting the three-dimensionality that, he contends, properly belongs to the province of sculpture. And in this regard, as Danto explains, he indeed treats self-definition as a form of purification. While championing aesthetic formalism and, in principle, resisting the confusion of modernism’s self-consciousness with theory, Greenberg thus nevertheless provides support for treating the history of modernist art, as Danto does, as a series of philosophical answers to the question: what is art? Most concisely he responds: medium-

specificity. That is, to say, he reformulates the question in terms of the qualities of distinct media, asking for example: what is painting? Which he deems is two-dimensional pictorality. What begins as a formalist refusal of art’s reduction to determinate contents, in the end, amounts to an alternative determinate content. Despite articulating a formalist defense of the underdetermination of aesthetic judgments, by explaining modernism as a self-critical reaction against the identification of art with any specific set of Alexandrian effects, Greenberg thus formulates an alternative set of effects, which could not but suffer the same fate of entrenching itself as dogma and withering to mere academicism.

As a result of this contradiction in his self-proclaimed aesthetic formalism, Greenberg thus remains unable to recognize or appreciate how artistic movements besides and beyond the Abstract Expressionism he champions—including specifically Minimalism, Performance, and Pop—pursue the same self-critical investigation of art’s formal conditions beyond the limits of medium-specificity. These movements demonstrate that the formal conditions of art’s production and reception can be neither neatly apportioned between distinct art forms nor exhausted by the materiality of art objects. As famously registered in art critic Michael Fried’s denunciation of its theatricality, Minimalism’s distillation of the art object’s aesthetic properties activates the phenomenological dynamics of the audiences’ movement through the space of the gallery, and embodied engagement with the work over time.⁴¹ Performance art similarly brings to the fore art’s corporeal and temporal dimensions, not simply as a departure from, but also as a critical exposition of the contemplative enjoyment of art—anticipated specifically by Greenberg’s hero, Jackson Pollock, when he lay his canvases on the ground and began to dance in and on them while—or rather, *as*—painting. And Pop Art specifically challenged the ideological division between high and low culture—Greenberg’s own “avant-garde and kitsch”—expanding the visual field available to fine artist to include the brash aesthetics of consumer culture.

Registering their dissonance with Greenberg’s misguided dogmatism, these art historical developments inspire Danto’s declaration of the end of art history. However, just as Greenberg is mistaken to presume that the aesthetic conditions of

art's production and reception might be reduced to the determination of medium-specificity, Danto is mistaken to presume that the problem of art's definition is not artistic, but rather philosophical.⁴² In the art of the 1960s, not even conceptual art achieves the degree of theoretical sublimation implied by Danto's philosophy of art history. In his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," Sol Lewitt explicitly distinguishes conceptual art from "mathematics, philosophy, or any other mental discipline."⁴³ And, even Joseph Kosuth—who works in an overtly philosophical mode, drawing upon Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, and producing artworks that explore propositional responses to the question: what is art?—does not realize his apparently theoretical intentions. Rather than rendering explicit art's philosophical foundations, Kosuth enacts, what Peter Osborne vividly describes as, "an aestheticization of logical positivism."⁴⁴ And, later in his career, Kosuth himself renounces his philosophical approach to the problem of art's definition, conceiving artwork instead as a form of anthropology, in which the artist internalizes and works upon established cultural conventions.

AUTONOMY, PLURALISM, PLAY

When one accordingly suspends Greenberg's and Danto's common confusion of art's definition with a determinate judgment—implicitly or explicitly akin to one based on a cognitive or moral concept—the complication of art and everyday life, elaborated by artists of the 1960s and 1970s, thus presents neither a compromise of the project of self-definition (reduced to medium-specificity) nor its exhaustion (understood as a philosophical problem, misplaced in art). Instead, it presents the extension of the aesthetic underdetermination, characteristic of the crisis in modern art, to everyday experience, as a register of the reciprocal complication of the two. In a critical analysis of Rachel Whiteread's sculptural *Water Tower* (1998), which sits atop a Manhattan building, Drucker makes this point in terms that could be extended to contemporary artworks in general. She writes:

By making an aesthetic addition to territory, placing itself in a context in a way that it cannot help but invoke the diachronic quality of its meaning as an image/icon, the piece literally inserts itself within the contemporary

geography that is simultaneously a lived, material world and one in which an aesthetic gesture can register.⁴⁵

Contemporary art is neither simply aesthetically opposed to ordinary life nor simply dissolved into it as aesthetically indifferent. Instead, contemporary artists bear the burden of defining their work amidst the aesthetics of the everyday. In this regard, rather than exhausted, the problem of art's autonomy persists, as directly correlative to the pluralism of contemporary art's complication with the commonplace.

While Danto's declaration of the end of art history might appear to be scandalous, to the contrary, it avoids the critical and creative problems presented by this complication of art and everyday life, by abstracting art's integrity to a point of philosophical principle. The apparent cynicism of Danto's philosophy of art history is only the necessary compliment to his idealistic, ontological guarantee of art's inherent value. At the same time, while defending the persistent relevance of aesthetic judgment to contemporary art might appear to be reactionary, to the contrary, it holds open the difficulties presented by art's complication with everyday life, by refusing any ontological guarantee of the value of artworks, as categorically distinct for everyday objects. Insofar as they draw upon, and so remain integrally embroiled with, the aesthetics of extra-artistic phenomena, the significance of artworks remains fundamentally contingent, always to be articulated again by artists and critics alike in the concrete particularities of discrete works.

At the same time, while refusing the declaration of its end, defending the persistent importance of aesthetic judgment to contemporary art retroactively complicates art history itself, by calling for consideration of art's relationship to, what in fact has emerged as, the broader field of "visual culture." Art's development as an autonomous field does not depend upon its categorical distinction from other pursuits. Instead, it registers the fact that considerations of aesthetic form have been rendered fundamentally problematic. If artistic practices are thus irreducible to religious, and other social conventions, they are not therefore altogether divorced from them. Instead, the internal complexities that define art as a field reflect the complexities of its relationship to other fields of thought and practice, and if artists and

critics previously failed to appreciate fully—or even denied—this complication, contemporary art has rendered it unavoidable.

While the history of modern art does not therefore present a uniform narrative of successively supplanting styles, contemporary art does not, in fact, present an open-ended field of possibilities. Of course, Danto's contention is incontrovertible, that now, in principle, anything is possible. However, as this essay has aimed to reinforce, art history is not defined by principles, but rather by artistic practices. In the decades since Danto first formulated his philosophy, art has thus developed along concrete lines, defined, among other ways, by the very specific strategies that artists, like Whiteread, have adopted to engage and draw upon the aesthetics of everyday life. Regardless of principles, the field of contemporary art thus remains very precisely delimited by the accomplishments, and failures of these generations; and the question concerning how art history subsequently will develop, through the work of artists working in their wake, still remains to be seen.

Notes

1. Arthur Danto, 'The End of Art,' in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 81.
2. Of course, by reformulating the problem of self-definition in art history as a distinctly aesthetic concern, this paper does not therefore proffer, or otherwise entail, an alternative ontology of art. To the contrary, it first and foremost opposes the subordination of art's history to philosophical ontology.
3. Arthur Danto, 'Art After the End of Art,' in *The Wake of Art*, ed. Gregg M. Horowitz and Tom Huhn (Amsterdam: G and B Arts International, 1998), 119.
4. Arthur Danto, "Art After the End of Art," in *The Wake of Art*, ed. by Gregg M. Horowitz and Tom Huhn, G and B Arts International, Amsterdam, 1998, p. 121. Referring to the New York art scene of the 1950's, so heavily influenced by Greenberg, he continues: "I think it impossible to convey to an audience of today the atmosphere of dogma which defined discourse in the art world of those years. The censoriousness of critical discourse would be captured in such phrases as 'You can't do that!' or in the phrase which continues to play a role in conservative critical writing: 'That is not art!' – said of something which could not in any obvious sense be anything but art." (AAEA, 123) Of course, this

expression did not deny the status of works as art, as if to suggest that they were no different than everyday objects. Instead, it contested their seriousness as works of art, for relying on tired conventions that had become so hackneyed as to be kitch; and, while the question of what constitutes the "most advanced" forms of art has indeed ceased to be central to contemporary art, there still is a great deal of art – in fact most of it – that relies on outmoded conventions and so isn't taken seriously at all, by informed professionals.

5. *Ibid.*, 119.
6. Arthur Danto, 'Appreciation and Interpretation,' in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 44.
7. Arthur Danto, 'Art After the End of Art,' in *The Wake of Art*, ed. Gregg M. Horowitz and Tom Huhn (Amsterdam: G and B Arts International, 1998), 115–128. Of course, in Danto's own terms, characterizing contemporary art as "after the end of the end of art" is something of a misnomer. For, directly correlative to his declaration of the end of art history, Danto claims to establish the ontological definition of art's essence. In his work, the end of art history is thus its philosophical apotheosis: theoretically guaranteeing its metaphysical autonomy for all time.
8. Arthur Danto, 'Learning to Live with Pluralism,' in *The Wake of Art*, ed. Gregg M. Horowitz and Tom Huhn (Amsterdam: G and B Arts International, 1998), 89.
9. Arthur Danto, 'The End of Art,' in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 81.
10. Arthur Danto, 'Art After the End of Art,' in *The Wake of Art*, ed. Gregg M. Horowitz and Tom Huhn (Amsterdam: G and B Arts International, 1998), 128; and 'The End of Art,' in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 114.
11. Arthur Danto, 'Learning to Live with Pluralism,' in *The Wake of Art*, ed. Gregg M. Horowitz and Tom Huhn (Amsterdam: G and B Arts International, 1998), 95.
12. Gregg M. Horowitz and Tom Huhn, 'The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste,' in *The Wake of Art*, ed. Gregg M. Horowitz and Tom Huhn (Amsterdam: G and B Arts International, 1998), 6.
13. Somewhat surprisingly, Horowitz and Huhn accordingly couple their endorsement of Danto's philosophy of art history with a critique of its implications for contemporary art's critical reception.
14. Arthur Danto, 'The End of Art,' in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 115.
15. Furthermore, despite the utter formlessness of his philosophy of contemporary art, in the decades since Danto formulated his philosophy of art

- history, the aesthetic complexity of extra-artistic phenomena has infiltrated the world of fine art in ways that his ontology of art cannot accommodate. Not only do artists today frequently traffic in everyday objects, as Danto explains with his theory of the “transfiguration of the commonplace,” through the nomination of “artistic identification,” so do curators and art historians. While including these extra-artistic phenomena squarely within the artworld, however, they do not therefore elevate them to artworks, as Danto’s essentialist theory suggests; instead, they put them into productive tension with artworks within the broader field of, what has come to be called, “visual culture.”
16. Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xii.
 17. Arthur Danto, ‘Appreciation and Interpretation,’ in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 44.
 18. Arthur Danto, ‘The End of Art,’ in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 115.
 19. Danto, ‘The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art,’ in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 7.
 20. Arthur Danto, ‘The End of Art,’ in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 89. Danto’s claims concerning film’s impact on art are dubious. Rather than capturing objective experience with a newfound veracity, film challenged the very sense of objectivity that dominated the positivist ideology of the 19th-Century. See Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).
 21. Arthur Danto, ‘Art After the End of Art,’ in *The Wake of Art*, ed. Gregg M. Horowitz and Tom Huhn (Amsterdam: G and B Arts International, 1998), 119.
 22. Arnold Hauser, *The Crisis of Mannerism and the Origin of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 29—my emphasis.
 23. *Ibid.*, 25.
 24. The Protestant Reformation and the outcome of the 30 Years War, for instance, famously compelled artists to compensate for the loss of the clergy’s and the aristocracy’s patronage by appealing to the taste of the largely anonymous public of protestant merchants in the burgeoning popular art market. While, unlike the crisis of Mannerism, these changes did not motivate artists to defy the conventions of naturalism, they did effect fundamental changes in the definition of art by contributing to the advancement of previously minor art forms and, through the shift to more secular and otherwise mundane subject matter, contributing to the development of aesthetic appreciation as an end in itself.
 25. Clark, T. J., *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 18.
 26. Gombrich, E. H., ‘The Break in Tradition,’ Chap. 24 in *The Story of Art*. (London: Phaidon, 1997), 475–99.
 27. Clark, T. J., *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 23.
 28. *Ibid.*, 27.
 29. In this vein, Renato Poggioli similarly describes “romantic aesthetic experimentation” as “the anxious search for new and virgin forms, with the aim not only of destroying the barbed wire of rules... but also of creating a new morphology of art, a new spiritual language.” Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 57.
 30. Arnason, H. H., *History of Modern Art* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2004), 173.
 31. *Ibid.*, 174.
 32. *Ibid.*, 177.
 33. Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch,’ in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 6.
 34. *Ibid.*, 8.
 35. Clement Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting,’ in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 85.
 36. *Ibid.*, 85.
 37. *Ibid.*, 87.
 38. *Ibid.*, 17.
 39. Deane W. Curtin, ‘Varieties of Aesthetic Formalism,’ *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40, no. 3 (1982): 323.
 40. Clement Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting,’ in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 86.
 41. Michael Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood,’ in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148–73.
 42. In the art of the sixties, not even conceptual art achieves the degree of theoretical abstraction implied by Danto’s philosophy of art history. In his “Paragraphs on conceptual art,” for example, Sol Lewitt is careful to note: “conceptual art doesn’t really have much to do with mathematics, philosophy, or any other mental discipline.” Sol Lewitt, ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,’ in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 14. And despite its focus on ideas, the degree of aesthetic diversity in conceptual art is undeniable. Even Joseph Kosuth, who works in an overtly philosophical mode, does not accomplish the degree of philosophical abstraction, that is, the cornerstone of Danto’s philosophy of art history. Drawing directly from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, Kosuth produced artworks that explore propositional responses

to the question: what is art? But the result is an ironic, dialectical reversal of his intentions. Rather than rendering explicit the theoretical foundations of artwork, Kosuth enacts, what Peter Osborne describes as, “an aestheticization of logical positivism.” Peter Osborne, ‘*Philosophy And/As Conceptual Art*,’ in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, ed. John Bird and Michael Newman (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 6. Later in his career, Kosuth himself abandoned this purportedly philosophical approach to artwork, declaring it to be too overdetermined by “the ideology of scientism and its logic of neutrality.” Instead he came to think of artwork as a form of anthropology, in which the individual artist internalizes cultural conventions and works on them.

43. Sol Lewitt, ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,’ in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 14.
44. Peter Osborne, ‘Philosophy And/As Conceptual Art,’ in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, ed. John Bird and Michael Newman (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 6.
45. Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 66.