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Arthur Danto, the End of Art, and the Philosophical View of History

Chiel van den Akker

Abstract

This essay takes Arthur Danto’s end-of-art thesis as a case in point of a substantive philosophy of history. Such philosophy explains the direction that art has taken and why that direction could not have been different. Danto never scrutinized the philosophy of history that his end-of-art thesis presumes. I aim to do that by drawing a distinction between what I refer to as the common view of history and the philosophical view of history, and argue that we need the latter if we want to properly assess the plausibility of the end-of-art thesis.

Key words

Arthur Danto, end of art, philosophical view of history, art history, substantive philosophy of history, aesthetics

That the chair should in recent days have entered art as a medium or a form, rather than as subject; that the chair should have become art (...) strikes me as a sign that a certain barrier has been made visible by being broken.

Arthur Danto, Philosophizing Art.¹

1. Introduction

Maarten Baas’ Made in China (2008), also known as Plastic Chair in Wood, is an exact wooden copy of the plastic lawn chair we all know so well. The object looks like a lawn chair: there can be no

misunderstanding about that, but is it “merely” a lawn chair in wood? If we were to come across it in a garden centre on a Saturday afternoon, would we take *Made in China* to be an object to sit on? Perhaps we would think it was a rather peculiar-looking lawn chair because of its wood pattern, and even if closer inspection revealed that the chair is actually made of wood, we would have no reason to doubt our belief that it was a lawn chair that we had before us. On the other hand, perhaps we would think that it was a work of art. But why is a lawn chair in wood a work of art while its plastic equivalent is not? It appears that this requires “something the eye cannot de[s]cry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld”, as Arthur Danto had it in 1964.²

The question why, of two perceptually indiscernible objects, one is a work of art and the other is not, is central to Danto’s philosophy of art, which is mostly concerned with sculpture and painting. Pondering this question eventually resulted in the end-of-art thesis which he proposed in the early 1980s. Art had ended in 1964, more precisely at the Stable Gallery on East 74th Street in New York, when Andy Warhol exhibited his now famous *Brillo Box*—a carefully crafted replica of the packaging of soap pads. *Brillo Box* is Danto’s favourite example of both the problem of two perceptually indiscernible objects, one of which is a work of art, and his end-of-art thesis.³ This article argues that Danto’s end-of-art thesis presupposes a substantive philosophy of history. Such philosophy explains the direction that art has taken, why that direction could not have been different, and why art had run its course in 1964. Danto makes several somewhat scattered remarks about this philosophy of history, most of which have to do with Hegel’s view

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³ One could argue that, on close inspection, the eye could reveal a distinction between them, and therefore, the artwork is not perceptually indiscernible from its ordinary counterpart. However, even if someone is able to make a distinction between the two on the basis of stimuli hitting the retina alone, such distinction would be insufficient to establish that one is a work of art and the other is not.
on art and history, but he never scrutinizes this philosophy to assess its credibility. This is what I aim to do in this article (without saying much about Hegel). I must ask the reader for patience for the detour I make before arriving at this philosophy of history. We cannot too hastily accept that the actual course of events has a direction which could not have been different and which has come to an end.4

This article starts with some Dantonian considerations to provide a context for the problem of perceptually indiscernible objects, of which one is a work of art. This will bring the historical dimension of art to the fore: art is made and interpreted in specific times and places, by specific artists for specific audiences, with specific technologies of art production at their disposal. We often acknowledge the historical dimension of what human beings do and bring forth, and without this dimension there would be nothing for historians to do. However, such acknowledgment seldom implies a substantive philosophy of history and commits us to hold that the course of events has a direction which could not have been different. Neither does the historical dimension of art imply a substantive philosophy of history. The end-of-art thesis, on the other hand, does. It is important to determine why this is so. Also, because the historical dimension of art appears to be at odds with Danto’s more recent strategy of answering the question of why of two perceptually indiscernible objects one is a work of art and the other is not by formulating the necessary conditions for something to be a work of art. These conditions imply that the criteria for something’s being a work of art are everywhere and always the same.

4 The term substantive philosophy of history may surprise some readers because it refers to an outdated form of philosophy of history that is typically associated with Hegel, and because Danto developed his own analytical philosophy of history in the 1960s in opposition to substantive philosophies of histories. Throughout this article I will be clear about what I mean by these terms and their usefulness. For now, it suffices to say that Danto’s end-of-art thesis presumes a substantive philosophy of history which purports to explain why art developed as it did, why the direction into which it developed could not have been different, and why art came to an end.
We will find that this (apparent) contradiction between the historical dimension of art and the conditions for something to be art turns out to be no contradiction at all given Danto’s end-of-art thesis. Danto is, as he himself proclaims, both a historicist and an essentialist about art. The substantive philosophy of history, which Danto only tacitly accepts, helps us understand why this is so. Baas’ Made in China was made after the end of art. If Danto’s end-of-art thesis is correct, it should be able to explain the work’s existence “on the other side of history”.

2. The Historical Dimension of the Artworld
To answer the question of why a lawn chair in wood is a work of art while its plastic equivalent is not, we may start by noting that the wooden chair is not simply a wooden version of the plastic lawn chair, for if that were the case, it would not be a work of art. The chair would then only be a non-artistic imitation of the lawn chair. However, a work of art is not a version of what it imitates, and we are not supposed to take and treat Baas’ chair as an ordinary chair to sit on. This is why most of us would presumably prefer to come across Baas’ chair in a museum or gallery rather than in a garden centre, for then the institutional setting and means of display would provide the right sort of “atmosphere” to identify the object as a work of art (Aside: has a museum visitor ever taken a warden’s chair for a work of art?). This is also how Baas would presumably prefer it, for he made the chair for the artworld rather than the gardenworld. Even so, the question remains: why is a wooden lawn chair a work of art, while its plastic equivalent is not?

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6 The artist plays with the fact that a work of art is not supposed to be a version of what it imitates when he creates a trompe l’oeil effect. Curiously, often a work meant to provide a trompe l’oeil effect is exhibited in such a way that the effect is not created, and a label next to the work is needed to tell the visitor of the intended effect.

7 Because this question remains, the institutional setting in which the artwork is exhibited does not explain why of two perceptually indiscernible objects, one is a work of art and the other is not. Danto, Transfiguration of the
Perhaps, rather than a non-artistic imitation, we should say that the chair is an artistic imitation of the plastic lawn chair, the sort of imitation we only find in the artworld. A moment’s thought makes us realize why this would be of no help. I do not doubt that Baas’ chair can be taken for an ordinary chair. I would, however, not dare to inform the person who believes that it is an ordinary chair that the chair is actually a work of art with an appeal to the theory that works of art are a mimesis; because if I did, I would have to indicate on what basis I believe that the wooden chair is an artistic imitation rather than a non-artistic one, and I do not know wherein lies the difference between an artistic and a non-artistic imitation of a plastic lawn chair. In any case, the difference is not a perceptual difference, for Baas’ *Made in China* looks exactly like a plastic lawn chair, albeit one made of wood. Still, there has to be a difference, for *Made in China* is a work of art and not a mere lawn chair to sit on. The theory that works of art are a mimesis does not help us with the problem of two perceptually indiscernible objects, of which one is a work of art and the other not.

Rather than a wooden version or an imitation, *Made in China* is a work of art that is appropriated. Baas did not design the chair himself; the designer of the plastic lawn chair has done that. Baas also did not carry out the manual work to reproduce the plastic chair in wood; a Chinese craftsman did that for him. Baas did, however, make the work, whereas the designer of the plastic chair and the Chinese craftsmen did not. The craftsman he hired only made a chair in wood, faithfully copying the plastic model; and the designer of the plastic chair only created an ordinary chair to sit on. To be sure, it has always been the case that the artist does not have to

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*Commonplace*, 5, 99. It should be noted that his essay “The Artworld” is not to be taken as a defence of the so called Institutional Theory of Art.

* In book X of his *Republic*, Plato notoriously dismisses mimetic art. Interestingly, although he does not explicitly distinguish between artistic and non-artistic imitation, his main problem with art seems to be that the ordinary person is not able to distinguish between these two types of imitation and takes what is imitated to be what reality is or should be like, rather than as something which contrasts with reality, as is the case with artistic imitations. It reads as a warning on the corrupting influence of popular media on the youth and morality.
make the art object himself to be its author (think for instance of architecture, much of the performance arts, and large mural paintings), and copying designs has been a common practice of art-making since ancient times. New in the twentieth century, however, is that ordinary objects are appropriated to be works of art, and therefore only in twentieth-century philosophy of art does the question emerge as to why of two objects that are perceptually indiscernible, one is a work of art while the other is not. Danto’s problem is, in other words, historically indexed, for it stems from particular developments in art. If the problem were raised before the early twentieth century, before, let us say, Marcel Duchamp’s *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915), it would not have made any sense, for there simply were no indiscernible objects of which one was art and the other was not. One may at times have mistaken an ordinary object for a work of art and vice versa, but there was no philosophical problem before Duchamp “made” his appropriated sculpture, indiscernible from a snow shovel, which it, apart from being a work of art, also happens to be.

The appropriation of consumer goods is, apparently, an *artistically relevant predicate*, for it allows us, at least in these instances, to distinguish *In Advance of the Broken Arm* from a snow shovel and *Made in China* from a lawn chair, even though they are respectively a snow shovel and a lawn chair and there are presumably more important artistically relevant predicates that allow us to identify these objects as works of art. If at some moment in time it is decided that $p$ is artistically relevant for some work, $p$ becomes relevant for all works—some or most of which will lack $p$. Such “retroactive enrichment of the entities in the artworld” makes it possible to discuss different artists together, even if some artist could have had no knowledge of the future artists and the predicates they would introduce by which they are retroactively related. This is Danto’s theory. He writes: “The greater the variety of artistically relevant predicates, the more complex the individual members of the artworld become; and the more one knows of the entire population of the artworld, the richer one’s experience with any of its members.”9 His theory of the retroactive enrichment of the artworld with artistically relevant predicates emphasizes the

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historical dimension of the artworld, which becomes richer over time and allows re-descriptions of earlier works based on new ones. Incidentally, here one sees how Danto’s analytical philosophy of history, presented in his *Analytical Philosophy of History* and in which sentences that describe an earlier event in terms of a later event are central, importantly influences his views on art in his 1964 essay, “The Artworld”. Danto’s theory of retroactive enrichment of the artworld also provides an answer to the question of why of two perceptually indiscernible objects one is a work of art while the other is not, in that at some particular moment some artwork introduces an artistically relevant predicate into the artworld hitherto unknown to it which allows distinguishing between this artwork and its ordinary counterpart. Given our example, this predicate is “being perceptually indistinguishable from real things”, which not only enables us to consider In Advance of the Broken Arm one of the artworld’s members, but also introduced the philosophical problem central to Danto’s philosophy of art. To be sure, not all philosophy is historically indexed in this way, for not all philosophical problems arise from actual developments.

3. Art and Interpretation

Danto’s theory of the retroactive enrichment of the artworld with artistically relevant predicates is not fully satisfactory in that it leaves open the question of whether there are necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a work of art. Such conditions would enable us to unambiguously distinguish between two perceptually indiscernible objects one of which is a work of art, independent of our knowledge of the history of art and the artistically relevant predicates that are introduced at specific times. Danto turns his attention to these conditions in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, and later realised that they were already formulated by Hegel in

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his 1820s lectures on fine art. The conditions for something to be a work of art are these: (i) works of art are about something, they have a certain content or meaning; and (ii) works of art embody the meaning they express, that is, their means of presentation is appropriate for the meaning they express. These two conditions mark the difference between ordinary objects and artworks. Let us take Baas’ *Made in China* as an example. The plastic chair in wood is a work of art because, on the one hand, it is about “mass production and the making of products as cheap as possible”. The title of the work, *Made in China*, already points in this direction. “On the other hand, China is known for its refined handwork in china and painting”. These extremes of production in China are what Baas’ work is all about. His work is a comment on consumer

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12 Danto, *After the End of Art*, 194–195. A central claim of Danto’s *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* is that art is expression. On the conditions, see also Danto, “Art and Meaning,” in Noël Carroll ed., *Theories of Art Today* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 130–140, at 132. In this essay, Danto addresses several objections to the two conditions. Hegel writes in his *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox, Volume I, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 11. “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 of both to one another”. Hegel further elaborates on his definition in several sections, see in particular 70–73 and 95. I identify what Hegel refers to as the appropriateness of the means of presentation with what Danto refers to as embodying.

13 Noël Carroll objects that the two conditions may also apply to ordinary objects and argues that a sports car is about “speed” and embodies that, and a sword may be about “being feared” and embody that. See Carroll, “Danto’s New Definition of Art and The Problem of Art Theories,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 37(4) (1997), 386–392, at 387. However, if the sports car is about “speed” and embodies that, then it is an artwork and not an ordinary object. If the conditions apply, we are dealing with a work of art. The conditions, in other words, are necessary and jointly sufficient.

14 These are Baas’ own words in an interview by Homme Siebenga in *Museum Tijdschrift* 2 (2010), 24.
society in a globalized world. The wooden lawn chair suits this purpose very well: the work embodies its meaning.

It is crucial to note that Baas’ chair asks for an interpretation. Without such interpretation, the chair would simply be a chair, an object to sit on. All artworks require interpretation according to Danto, otherwise they would not express anything about their subject matter. The interpretation thus constitutes the object as a work of art in that only in relationship to an interpretation is the material object a work of art. Not all interpretations are equally satisfying. Danto’s view is that the correct interpretation coincides with the interpretation that the artist of the work had in mind when creating the work.15 He could have been a bit more precise, and state that an interpretation of a work of art is correct if the meaning expressed by the work is embodied by it, that is, if the means of presentation is appropriate relative to the work’s content and vice versa. A different, although related, interpretation of a work of art concerns its possible historical significance. We turn to this below. The distinction between the artistic and the historical interpretation of a work of art is important because the end-of-art thesis concerns the second type of interpretation in that art is still being made after the end of art and still needs to be interpreted, but, as we will see, art no longer carries any historical significance, and therefore the (historical) interpretation of the historical significance of art is ruled out.16

Both Duchamp and Baas could not have made their works in any other time than they did. This is not only because of the practical reason that there must be mass-produced snow shovels and plastic lawn chairs before they can be appropriated as works of art, but also because those works are to be interpreted in such a way that they embody the meaning they express. If someone had made Made in China two hundred years ago, it would not have been a work of art


16 A third type of interpretation in this context is critical, as in literary criticism or art criticism. This type of interpretation is not our concern here.
but a rather poor-looking chair, and we might even agree with that judgment, for there are better looking chairs in the world than this plastic chair in wood. We found that interpretation constitutes works as works of art in that without an interpretation objects cannot be works of art. Now we see that interpretation is historically indexed. Interpretation depends, in part, on the available or newly introduced artistically relevant predicates. It also depends on the world in relation to which the artwork is interpreted—a world with garden lawn chairs, consumerist society, china, bulk production in China, and so on. Only in our society can Made in China mean what it does. This is the historical dimension of art. The two conditions for something to be a work of art do not contradict the view that interpretation is historically indexed. If the conditions are satisfied, then the art object is interpreted as a work, and correctly inasmuch as the interpretation coincides with the interpretation that the artist had in mind. If the conditions are not satisfied because we do not know how to interpret the object or because we do not know that the object should be interpreted in the first place, then the object is not a work, and in case of Baas’ Made in China, the object would be a somewhat peculiar-looking lawn chair. If the conditions are satisfied but the artwork is not interpreted in accordance with how the artist would have interpreted it—and this is Danto’s criterion for correct interpretation—then the object has turned into a new work, meaning something different than envisioned by the artist. Baas’ 2008 Made in China was made after art ended in 1964. One would expect this to factor into its interpretation.

The historical dimension of art in terms of the techniques of producing art and interpreting art is, as far as I know, non-controversial. Art is made and interpreted at specific times and places using specific technologies and symbols. Danto’s thesis that art has developed in a certain direction and has run its course, on the other hand, is controversial and presumes a

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substantive philosophy of history which the historical dimension of art in said terms does not. I turn to this now.

4. The End of Art

Danto claims that art “ends with the advent of its philosophy”, that is, the “historical stage of art is done with when it is known what art is and means”. This happened in modernist art—the period stretching from Impressionism to Pop art. Modernist artists started to question what art is with their works: painting and sculpture became objects for themselves, and that is how art found out what art is and means.18 Duchamp’s *In Advance of the Broken Arm* is a case in point. The conditions for something to be a work of art help us understand why. The work questions what art is by questioning the art-historical concept of art in his time. It is about how ordinary objects can be works of art, in contrast to what art history up until then was teaching. Duchamp’s appropriation, therefore, is part of the meaning of the work. Art history, the work tells us, was taking itself far too seriously. If you want to comment on art history and its dominant concept of art, then the introduction of a snow shovel in a museum is a good way to do so. The snow shovel then embodies its meaning. *In Advance of the Broken Arm* is a work of art, for the conditions for something to be a work of art are satisfied in the artistic interpretation given. Another clear example illustrating the end-of-art thesis is Malevich’s *Black Square*, also from 1915. This work tells us that the religious experience is not dependent on Christian iconography but on art itself—the painting was to be hung at the same place where iconographic paintings in houses were hung. This is what the painting is about and how it embodies its meaning. Duchamp’s sculpture is an example of new realism: nothing is as real as reality itself, and it would be impossible to find a more realistic visualization of a snow shovel than his work. Malevich’s painting, by contrast, is an example of abstraction. What connects these works is that they both question what art is, and

whether the idea of art that the history of art presents is the correct one. The whole concept of mimesis is put aside by them and deemed irrelevant. In the analysis of Karsten Harries, who, in retrospect, anticipated Danto’s end-of-art thesis, there had always been a certain balance between mimesis and abstraction in the visual arts until 1915: the moment Duchamp made his work, which is the opposite of abstraction, and Malevich made his work, which is the opposite of mimesis. The balance between mimesis and abstraction was disturbed for good and there was no coming back. Abstraction and mimesis would go their own separate ways.¹⁹ Duchamp and Malevich shook up the artistically relevant predicates of the artworld, and the viewers of the works not only had to ponder what their works meant, but were also forced to ponder art and its history in general, for that was part of the meaning of those works.

Danto’s astonishing thesis is that by questioning what art is, the conditions for something to be a work of art were brought to consciousness in the domain of art itself, which happened in modernist art. Art as a historical phenomenon ended the moment it was known what art is. Danto is very precise about this end given his favourite example of the end of art. Art ended with Warhol’s exhibition of his Brillo Box at the Stable Gallery on East 74th Street in Manhattan in April 1964.²⁰ Like Duchamp’s In Advance of the Broken Arm and Malevich’s Black Square, Warhol’s Brillo Box is about art, but his work says that anything can be a work of art: that is what his work means. Brillo Box, perceptually indiscernible from its ordinary counterpart, although the former is painted and made of wood whereas the latter is made of printed paperboard, suits the meaning it expresses very well: it embodies its meaning, and it can only do that for the first time at that particular moment in time. In 1964, so Danto tells us, it became clear that there was no longer any way that art was supposed to be, and no artwork was truer than any other. Now that anything could be a work of art, future developments were ruled out. There is art after the end of the art, but, Danto claims, “its existence carries no historical significance”. There is, in other words, no


²⁰ Danto, Transfiguration of the Commonplace, vii and 208; and Danto, After the End of Art, 35–36.
historical interpretation of art possible after the end of art. In 1964 a point was reached “where there can be change without development, where the engines of artistic production can only combine and recombine known forms”.

Again, Duchamp’s *In Advance of the Broken Arm* is a case in point. The work could not have been made after the end of art, since after the end of art, the question what art is has been answered. To be sure, the art object could still be made (and bought), but it could never mean what it did in 1915 as a work. One difference between the sculptures of Duchamp and Baas which we did not mention earlier is instructive here. Duchamp appropriated an existing object without physically altering it, whereas Baas appropriated an existing design by having it manually reproduced. Duchamp made his work before the end of art, whereas Baas made his work after the end of art—on the other side of history, so to speak. After the end of art, it no longer makes sense to appropriate an object from a warehouse and turn it into a work of art in the manner in that Duchamp did, for the question what art is has been answered. One can, however, appropriate a design, as Baas did, but for the very different reason of expressing something about our present-day consumerist society.

On the one hand, Danto’s thesis that the conditions for something to be art were brought to consciousness in the domain of art entails a substantive philosophy of history in that it explains why art has developed as it did and why it has run its course. On the other hand, it can be argued that Danto’s thesis is a historical thesis in the sense in which all historical narratives present a thesis on the past: as a means to provide narrative coherence, Zusammenhang, to the manifold of events. His thesis gives coherence to what we refer to as “modernist art” and allows us to discuss a wide range of artists and their works in relation to one another. The end-of-art is an artistically relevant predicate which retroactively enriches the entities in the artworld. If, however, the end-of-art thesis presumes a substantive philosophy of history, as I think it does, then the end of art does much more than provide coherence to the manifold events that we associate with modernist art, for the thesis also explains how and why modernist art was destined

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21 Danto, “The End of Art,” respectively 84 and 85.
to come into existence and end. I will now discuss the question of how and in what sense the end-of-art thesis presumes a philosophy of history. This will enable me to determine how to assess the credibility of the end-of-art thesis, and with that, the credibility of the philosophy of history that supports it. But first, there is one final hurdle to overcome.

5. Analytical and Substantive Philosophy of History

How can it be, one wonders, that Danto, a well-known philosopher of history, does not scrutinize the substantive philosophy of history that he presupposes with his end-of-art thesis? One reason may be that substantive philosophy of history is not ‘proper’ philosophy, since it is concerned with the past itself. It is a form of history writing rather than a form of philosophy. Danto meant his end-of-art thesis to be a contribution to the philosophy of art rather than a contribution to art history. Therefore, he had no reason to scrutinize the substantive philosophy of history presupposed by the end-of-art thesis. He knew, of course, that his end-of-art thesis was a thesis about art and its development in the past, but if we want to assess the credibility of his thesis as a thesis on the history of art, we should turn to analytical philosophy of history rather than to substantive philosophy of history, for analytical philosophy of history is, in contrast to substantive philosophy of history, philosophy proper and concerned with the nature of historical knowledge. Any historical assessment of the end-of-art thesis is up to art historians.

These are, to be sure, mere speculations about the reasons Danto might have had. What should, however, be clear is that in this view, the end-of-art thesis presents us with knowledge about art, its development and coming to an end in the past, and the substantive philosophy of history it presupposes is left unanalyzed. What may make Danto reluctant to scrutinize the

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22 Danto is well known as a philosopher of history for his *Analytical Philosophy of History*. The book was republished in 1985 with three additional chapters as *Narration and Knowledge*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), a year after Danto presented his end-of-art thesis. The book starts with a chapter criticizing substantive philosophies of histories in the manner detailed in this section.
substantive philosophy of history that he appears to accept is that he criticized the substantive philosophies of history in his *Analytical Philosophy of History*. This is what Danto has to say about this issue:

Art history must have an internal structure and even a kind of necessity. This was the conviction that motivated my essay “The End of Art,” and the other writings which undertake to articulate a philosophy of the history of art in exactly the grand manner I had learned from Hegel, and which it astonished me that I was accepting, since my first book, the *Analytical Philosophy of History* of 1965, had pretty much taken a stand against its possibility in principle. Right or wrong, my view now was that the artworld was not demanding only a philosophy of art. It was demanding a philosophy of its own history.23

We already discussed one criticism of substantive philosophies. Not only are substantive philosophies of history *histories* rather than *philosophies*, they are deeply mistaken about the nature of historical knowledge. Substantive philosophies of history, Danto argues, presume to give an account of “the whole of history”. They are not only concerned with the past, as all histories are, but also with the “historical future”, that is, with events and their historical meaning as they will unfold in the future. Substantive philosophies of history are therefore prophetic. This betrays a deeply mistaken conception of history. One cannot write the history of events before they have taken place and determine their historical meaning in advance, for, as Danto argues—and this is the central claim of his analytical philosophy of history—the historical meaning of future events cannot be known before those events have come to pass and can be understood in relation to later events which give earlier events their historical meaning. Historical knowledge, he argues, is essentially retrospective, describing earlier events in terms of later events, both of which are

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known to the historian. We already saw that this central claim concerning historical knowledge importantly influenced his essay “The Artworld”.

Two conclusions follow from this. First, Danto’s criticism of substantive philosophies of history, which we may accept, is not concerned with the direction of a particular course of events and how that course may come to an end for as long as that end lies in the past. His end-of-art thesis and the substantive philosophy of history it presupposes therefore do not contradict his earlier criticism of substantive philosophies of history. It should also be noted that Danto never renounced his criticism of substantive philosophies of history. Second, because the end-of-art thesis is a thesis about art and its history, it is a form of historical knowledge and therefore the thesis might well be in agreement with Danto’s analytical philosophy of history. Such agreement is not ruled out given that Danto’s criticism of substantive philosophies of histories does not apply to the substantive philosophy of history presupposed by his end-of-art thesis. These two conclusions assume that the distinction between analytical and substantive philosophy of history is helpful with regards to the issue sub judice here. However, the distinction is helpful only up to the point we have just reached: the philosophical domain of the nature of historical knowledge is to be distinguished from the historical domain of the past and there is no such a thing as the historical meaning of future events. The central issue remains: Danto has not scrutinized the substantive philosophy of history that his end-of-art thesis presumes beyond what he says in his “The End of Art” essay and some scattered references to the work of Hegel. This, then, is the task I set for myself.

6. The Common and the Philosophical View of History

My argument is that what I refer to as the standard or common view of history cannot account for Danto’s end-of-art thesis and the philosophy of history which supports it. I take it that the common view of history consists of two levels and the question of how they are related. On the one hand, there is 1) the level of the past and its remains. This is the level of past reality, the level
of the actual course of events and its remains which are still present in our day. On this level, we find the artists and their works, attitudes, desires, and beliefs, the circumstances in which they worked and lived, and all that affected them during their careers. In the common or standard view of history, this is what the past consists of and what historians try to understand, explain, and represent. On the other hand, there is 2) the level of our knowledge of the past and its remains, which includes the methods, techniques and approaches used to attain this knowledge and the way this knowledge is structured and presented. The common view of history is well equipped to account for the historical dimension of art as we discussed it. It locates the practices and technologies of art production, its appreciation, the associated attitudes, beliefs and desires, and the context in which this all happened, in the past; and we acquire knowledge of the past by means of the appropriate methods of studying its remains.\(^{24}\) When we say that something is historically indexed, it is the common view of history that we have in mind. This two-level view of history is, in my opinion, uncontroversial.

Also part of the common view of history is the question of how the past is related to our knowledge of the past, as for example in the questions of how to arrive at a truthful and sincere account of the past,\(^{25}\) and if and how the coherence of the narrative reflects the coherence of the past. These are just two examples of the many questions that the common view of history gives rise to. Danto’s *Analytical Philosophy of History* provides other questions stemming from the common view of history. There is much to be said about how 1) the level of the actual course of past events and 2) our knowledge of it are related, and the debates about that relation, but that is not my concern here. I merely want to establish that there is such a thing as the “common view of history”, with the purpose of bringing to the fore that this view does not make room for the

\(^{24}\) Carroll’s “historical or narrative approach to the cultural practice of art” as presented in his “Art, Practice, and Narrative”, is a good example of thinking about art and history using the common view of history.

\(^{25}\) This is one of the questions Bernard Williams has in mind in his *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
end-of-art thesis and its supporting philosophy of history, and that is why we should not assess the credibility of Danto’s end-of-art thesis in terms of the common view of history.

Perhaps the reader is surprised by this strategy and objects that the common view of history does make room for Danto’s end-of-art thesis and its associated philosophy of history, for surely, so the objection goes, the philosophy of history that Danto tacitly adheres to should be located on 1) the level of the past and the end-of-art thesis as something he proposed and thought of should be located on 2) the level of our knowledge of the past. After all, Danto’s thesis is that the conditions for something to be a work of art were brought to consciousness in the domain of art itself, and clearly, this happened in the past itself. This neither Danto nor anyone else can deny. To name just one obvious example, how else could he be so precise about the moment when art fully knew what it was? As we saw, according to Danto, art ended in 1964 at the Stable Gallery in New York with Warhol’s *Brillo Box*. No reasonable person can deny that *Brillo Box* was exhibited at that time and place in the past and that Danto was one of its witnesses. The way art developed, the direction it took, and the moment it ended, are all in the past, so the objector argues. Therefore, the common view of history provides all the room that a philosophy of history supporting the end-of-art thesis needs. The thesis, as expressed in Danto’s “End of Art” and other essays, is a form of knowledge and should therefore be located at the second level of our knowledge of the past. It follows, so the objector continues, that any assessment of the credibility of Danto’s thesis depends on the common view of history and the way we (ought to) think about the relation between 1) the past and its remains and 2) our knowledge of it and the way this knowledge is attained and presented. There are criteria associated with the common view of history for evaluating the credibility of our knowledge of the past, and these criteria are to be used if we want to assess the credibility of Danto’s end-of-art thesis.

This sensible objector is, however, mistaken. First we should observe that assessing the credibility of the end-of-art thesis in the mind of the objector depends on i) a relation of confirmation and disconfirmation between the levels 1) and 2): our 2) knowledge of the past is
confirmed or disconfirmed by the 1) evidence we find on the level of the past and its remains. The credibility of the thesis also depends on ii) the criteria with which we evaluate our knowledge of the past and the form it has, such as consistency, scope, fruitfulness, accuracy, adequacy, and coherence, or any other such criteria with which we evaluate theses on the past. But both do not apply to Danto’s thesis, or at least not in the way that our objector assumes they do, and that is why he is mistaken. Against i) I will hold that there is no evidence for Danto’s thesis whatsoever. Therefore, his end-of-art thesis cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed, and that is why the common view of history cannot account for its credibility. His thesis is, however, supported by a philosophy of history. With regards to ii), I admit that we may evaluate Danto’s thesis in terms of the criteria mentioned, but that is not all that there is to it, for in Danto’s view, art did become an object for itself in modernist art and that is why art reflected on itself, gained self-knowledge, and ended as a result of that, and this did happen in the past, but not in the sense allowed by the common view of history. Against ii) I hold that we are only able to evaluate the end-of-art thesis if we take the philosophy of history which it supports seriously. My task now is to substantiate the claim that Danto’s thesis cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed and to take its supporting philosophy of history seriously. I will do so as part of presenting what I refer to as the non-standard or philosophical view of history, which does not so much contradict the common view of history as add two more levels to it.

The argument is that although the end-of-art thesis cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed—there is no evidence for or against it— the thesis is supported by a philosophy of history. To bring this to the fore we need, in addition to the levels of 1) the past and its remains and 2) our knowledge of it and the way we present that knowledge, two more levels. Our first

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26 Inasmuch as those criteria suggest a relation between the thesis and the past which it is about, we are back at objection i). Criteria such as adequacy and accuracy may suggest a relation of confirmation and disconfirmation between the levels of 1) the past and its remains and 2) our knowledge of it. These criteria may however also stand for norms of scholarly behavior and therefore only apply to the level of 2) our knowledge of the past.
extra level is the level of necessary conditions of what actually exists. This is level 0) and here we should locate the conditions for something to be a work of art. These conditions manifest themselves on the level of 1) the past and its remains. Level 1) is thus, according to the philosophical view of history, a manifestation or realization of level 0). Put differently, level 0) becomes concrete on level 1), in the actual course of past events. For a proper understanding of the philosophical view of history we have to realize that we only become aware of 0) the necessary conditions that become manifest 1) in the actual course of past events if we take another, fourth level into account. This fourth level is level 3), the level of exposition, and this is the appropriate level of the end-of-art thesis. This four-level model and its relations constitute what I call the philosophical view of history. It allows us to conceive of Danto’s end-of-art thesis as follows. The 3) thesis that the conditions for something to be art were brought to consciousness in the domain of art makes us aware of how 0) the necessary conditions of art become manifest in 1) art that we associate with 2) modernist art. Put differently, the 3) end-of-art thesis is only properly understood on the basis of 1) artworks illustrating or exemplifying that 3) thesis. Duchamp’s *In Advance of the Broken Arm* and Malevich’s *Black Square* are not evidence of modernist art and the conditions for something to be art to come to consciousness in the domain of art itself; rather, these works illustrate that thesis. The relation between the 1) past and its remains and the 3) end-of-art thesis is therefore not a relation of confirmation and disconfirmation.27 There is no evidence to be found on level 1) of the past and its remains that either confirms or disconfirms the 3) thesis. The philosophical view of history holds that the credibility of 3) the thesis depends on how well it is able to make us aware of the 0) necessary conditions of what exists and how they become manifest in 1) the actual course of events and all we 2) know about it. The philosophical view of history does not claim that it is able to predict the 1) actual course of events. It does claim that the 1) actual course of past events is determinate in

27 The philosophical view of history accepts that the relation between levels 1) and 2) is a relation of confirmation and disconfirmation, as the common view of history holds.
retrospect inasmuch as the 3) thesis on the past exposes the 0) necessary conditions of 1) what actually exists.

Now we may understand why *Brillo Box* ended art. From the point of view of the common view of history, it is rather curious that art ends with this specific work at the specific time and place of its exhibition at the Stable Gallery in 1964. Not because it seems implausible that it was Warhol’s intention to end art, for the common view of history can account for all of Warhol’s intentions, even the eccentric ones, and determine whether there is evidence for the intention or not. But why of all the artworks made is this specific work at this specific moment the work to end all art? Why was it not, for instance, Richard Hamilton’s collage *Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Houses So Different, So Appealing?* at the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition in 1956? This is argued by the German art historian Hans Belting. According to him, the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition was a “farewell to art history”, for “It was no longer the intention to guide art history into a yet unknown future but to give up the notion that art history still was to go on altogether”.28 We may doubt whether this was indeed the intention of the exhibition, but here the point is that the common view of history would have to say that art either ended twice (in 1956 or 1964) and Danto and Belting are both right, or art ended once and one of them is mistaken. (Another option in the common view of history is that art did not end and therefore both Danto and Belting are wrong. Here the end of art is interpreted as meaning that there is no art after the end of art, but that is not what Danto claims. Needless to say, there is an abundance of evidence of art after the end of art. Yet another option is that Danto’s and Belting’s theses are different and only share the same name, but this option would leave the issue at hand intact: why does *Brillo Box* end all art?) The philosophical view of history has a better way to deal with this. Since neither *Brillo Box* nor *Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Houses So Different, So Appealing?* are evidence of the end of art theses, it is not that art ended twice or that Danto or Belting is

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mistaken. *Brillo Box* illustrates the end of art, and it does so inasmuch as it allows us to see in it how art ends. The same holds for Hamilton’s collage, and it may well be that only after reading Danto’s “End of Art” essay one sees how this collage ends art. In that case, Danto’s end-of-art thesis would have become concrete in that work.

When Danto visited the Stable Gallery in 1964, the artwork prompted him to reconsider all he knew about art. Rather than “merely” describing and re-describing it as adequately as possible in the historical context of its existence, providing an adequate and accurate account of the past in agreement with the common view of history, *Brillo Box* prompted Danto to ponder how art and its development could have culminated in *Brillo Box*, and this eventually led to his end-of-art thesis. He wondered, we might say, what state of mind art was in, and how that state of mind came into existence, given the actual course of events. This is the question that requires the philosophical view of history if it is to be answered.

7. After the End of Art

Modernist art was a thing of art history. Not because modernist art referred to earlier works of art—that would have been nothing new, for such reference can be found in works of art throughout time—but because art from Impressionism to Pop art comments on the history of art and the concept of art presented by that history. Modernist art questioned what art according to its own standards and history was and should be, and it is precisely by such commenting that modernist art reflected on itself and became an object for itself and thus gained self-knowledge. Art ended the moment it was realized that, as far as appearances go, anything can be a work of art. A good example of such self-knowledge is Rob Scholte’s 1986 painting *Utopia*. The painting’s composition is an appropriation of a postcard which Scholte found in London, probably at the Cabaret Mechanical Theatre, depicting the mechanical sculpture *Manet’s Olympia* by automata-maker Paul Spooner, who used a drawing doll model in his automata of Édouart Manet’s famous painting. Scholte painted the drawing doll model lying on a sofa, with a black cat beside her, and
a black servant in wood bringing her something to drink. His painting refers to Manet’s *Olympia*, which is often thought to be the first modernist painting, via the postcard of Spooner’s mechanical sculpture, and in virtue of that it refers to the *Venus of Urbino* of Titian to which *Olympia* refers, and these references are part of the meaning of Scholte’s painting, but not in the sense in which in modernist art the history of art and its concept of art was commented upon. The reference to Manet in *Utopia* is not a rehearsal of motif or theme, which is a common artistic practice which can be found throughout time, nor does the painting question the concept of art of its time, which is typical of modernist art, for Scholte knows all too well that anything can be a work of art. The latter is precisely what *Utopia* is about and the painting tells us that if anything can be a work of art, then so can art. This is, I think, what Scholte’s painting means, and why the work is such a fine example of art’s self-knowledge.

Earlier I made a distinction between the artistic and historical interpretation of art. The artistic interpretation I gave of Scholte’s *Utopia* is concerned with what the painting is about and what meaning it embodies. These are the conditions for something to be a work of art. Interpretation, Danto argued, constitutes a work as a work of art in that all art requires interpretation. Any artistic interpretation is historically indexed in that it depends on the available artistically relevant predicates and the world in relation to which the artwork is interpreted. The historical interpretation of a work of art on the other hand concerns its historical significance, that is, its contribution to some historical development, as for instance in the contribution that Manet’s *Olympia* made to modernism in art. In the words of the art historian Timothy Clark, the “peculiar freedom with the usual forms of representation was later held to be the essence of *Olympia* (...) and made it the founding monument of modern art.”29 Put differently, *mimesis* was destined to become an artistically irrelevant predicate, which, retroactively, would become irrelevant for all artworks.

Not only is the artistic interpretation historically indexed in the sense just described, so too is the historical interpretation, which depends not only on artistically relevant predicates but also on what we might call “historically relevant predicates” and the world in relation to which the artwork is interpreted, such as “Renaissance”, “pre-Raphaelite”, “impressionist”, and “modernist”. There is, however, no possible historical interpretation of Scholte’s Utopia, for the work is made after the end of art. Art ended in 1964, and even though there was and is a future for art in that art will keep on being made and appreciated, the historical future of art to come was closed the moment art ended. There were no longer any contributions to the history of art to be made. The common view of history can perfectly account for the fact that the artistic and historical interpretation of art are historically indexed. If, on the other hand, we want to grasp why art developed in the direction in which it developed, and why art after the end of art is no longer historically significant, we need the philosophical view of history.

8. Conclusion

Danto quotes in his “The End of Art” essay Hegel’s famous remark from his lectures on the fine arts that “Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again but for knowing philosophically what art is”. 30 This is what Danto, prompted by Warhol’s Brillo Box, aimed to do, first in his “Artworld” essay, then in his The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, and finally in his “End of Art” essay. He not only defined the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a work of art, which, as we saw, were already formulated by Hegel; he made clear that these conditions were brought to consciousness in the domain of art itself. 31 Hegel did not anticipate that not how art would become an object for itself,


31 Art being an object for itself is central to a Hegelian understanding of the development of art. In this context, Robert Pippin arrives at the same conclusion as Danto in his “What Was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel)”, Critical Inquiry 2002(3), 1–24, as he writes: “Hegel’s narrative of an expanding critical self-consciousness thus
and he would only have been confused by and unable to interpret the works we discussed in this article. Hegel also did not claim to know the actual course of art and history beforehand, nor did Danto. The actual course of events and its direction are only determinate in retrospect. Danto’s criticism of substantive philosophies of history, which, in his view, purport to write the history of events before they have happened, thus has no bearing on his end-of-art thesis. Nevertheless, his end-of-art thesis presumes a philosophy of the history of art.

Although Hegel and Danto did not claim to know the actual course of events beforehand, they did claim to have identified the general state of mind that art was in in their day and how that state of mind had come into existence.\(^\text{32}\) Such identification, we saw, presumes a philosophy of history which can only be accounted for by the philosophical view of history.\(^\text{33}\) I find support for this view in William Dray, who, by sheer coincidence in 1964, the year Warhol

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\(^{32}\) Danto’s thesis is very different from Hegel’s. Hegel claimed that “art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past \(\text{ein Vergangenes}\)”, for art no longer satisfied the spiritual needs of man. “We have got beyond venerating works of art as divine and worshipping them. (...) Thought and reflection have spread their wings above fine art”. Hegel, \textit{Aesthetics}, 10–11. Later Hegel writes: “[N]o matter how we see (...) Mary so estimably and perfectly portrayed: it is no help; we bow the knee no longer”. Hegel, \textit{Aesthetics}, 103. Cf. the many different interpretations of Hegel’s thesis, among which Danto’s, by Martin Donougho in his “Art and History: Hegel on the End, the Beginning, and the Future of Art,” in Stephan Houlgate ed., \textit{Hegel and the Arts} (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 179–215.

\(^{33}\) Not allowing for the philosophical view of history as distinct from the common view of history explains a certain shortcoming in the interesting essays that deal with Danto’s end-of-art thesis in volumes such as the one edited by Mark Rollins, \textit{Danto and his Critics. Second Edition}, (Malden, Oxford, and Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), and the previously mentioned theme issue of \textit{History and Theory} edited by David Carrier.
exhibited his *Brillo Box*, contended that “the Hegelian philosopher cannot say anything about history’s *actual* course unless he knows first what stage of spirituality has been reached.” And this does not “entail the predictability of history. What it entails is the *retrodictability* of the necessary conditions of what has actually been found to exist.” In this sense, Danto is a Hegelian philosopher. Warhol’s *Brillo Box* prompted Danto to determine the “stage of spirituality” that art had reached in his days, and that eventually resulted in his end-of-art thesis. Hegel would add that here philosophy is as it should be: its own time expressed in thought.

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