

The Long Happy Death of Art

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IN HIS AESTHETICS, HEGEL FAMOUSLY WROTE ART'S OBITUARY: "art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby, it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place."¹ He goes on to hedge the obituary by recognizing the obvious, that artworks still get produced, but says that art can now only be a leisure activity, with the purposes of entertaining or ornamenting. The claim is more striking when we realize, as I have argued elsewhere, that Hegel declares the end of art at a moment near where we might declare the beginning of our understanding of it, with the recognition of what art was and the devotion of intellectual activity to the interpretation of its significance, roughly in the hundred years or so previous to his statement of its end.² In other words, when art served its highest vocation, when it was the means for us to express our understanding of reality, we did not know it to be art.³ Once we understood what it was, it could no longer have a purpose for us other than as leisure activity. Although this claim that art is a thing of the past is both Hegel's most notorious claim and the one most art theorists take least seriously, nevertheless Arthur Danto has revised it recently in self-consciously Hegelian form.⁴

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. paginated consecutively (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 11. Hereafter, page numbers will be given in parentheses in the text.

² Jonathan Loesberg, "Aesthetic Formalism, the Form of Artworks, and Formalist Criticism," in *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 419.

³ This statement receives some confirmation from Hans Belting's theory, which dates the presentation of images as art as beginning in the Renaissance. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 15.

⁴ Hegel and Danto are not really alone in their theories. Vasari's justification of art in terms of accurate imitation always implied that when this end was reached, it would leave nowhere further for art to go and, indeed, according to Hans Belting, Vasari thought that art had reached this point. Hans Belting, *The End of the History*



There are, I think, two things to note about these theories: first, while they both posit an end to art, they locate that end at two pointedly different moments in time—the end of German Romanticism, for Hegel, and 1964 and Warhol’s exhibit of *Brillo Box*, for Danto. While this wild disagreement about when the end occurred can only increase our skepticism about such lapidary declarations, the second thing to note is that these two theories also offer the most vibrant claims about what art has to say to us and why it is important. To see how declaring art’s death makes it matter, one may note that critics like Hegel and Danto who consider art to be a meaning-bearing discourse—I will also discuss Schopenhauer and Heidegger—and who then take art as positing a truth special to it for all time, wind up attributing to art only one kind of meaning again and again, a meaning that is notably impervious to all the specificity of artworks and their differing material forms. It is this contradiction, between declaring art to be dead, at least as a central cultural discourse, and taking it seriously as a central cultural discourse that will be the topic of this essay. I hope to show how declaring art dead, even in its imperviousness to the reasons we cannot take such declarations seriously, always manages to take art more seriously as having something to say to us than do theories that take art as timelessly significant and why that contradiction is more than a historical accident: although art may die again and again, it will always mean most in its dying.

To explain the contradiction, we must start with Plato and his condemnation of art, which was actually not primarily, as critics usually assume, about art as a tertiary imitation but about it as deceptive in what it claims and needing replacement by a discourse of reason. This condemnation, what Danto calls the philosophical disenfranchisement of art, faults art not for being meaningless appearance but for being deceptive appearance. The long tradition of justifying art in terms of its offering a form that induces pleasure in effect answers Plato by claiming that art has nothing to say to us, which, as Danto says, is also a form of disenfranchising art. Plotinus’s famous answer to Plato, as we will see, though it gives art a significance, does so at the cost of draining its actual appearance, its materiality, of much significance, a weakness that I will argue affects the theories of Plotinian heirs like Schopenhauer and Heidegger. The historical theories of Hegel and Danto answer this weakness by making the meaning of art more urgent and more historically specific but justify it by making the mode of its discourse—embodiment rather than reference—also distinctive and, because distinctive, it must end once it has served its purpose. Because, I will argue, giving art an end date is necessary if one is to make it significant in historically specific ways, I want here to articulate a way to accept that necessity while recognizing that the claim that one can see an actual end will never hold up.

The part of Plato’s attack on art in book 10 of the *Republic* that critics usually cite is the one that argues that since material reality only imitates the one true Form of things and since paintings only imitate material reality (a bed being an imitation of the Form of the bed and a painting of a bed being an imitation of the material bed) and since, further, the painting doesn’t even really imitate the material bed but only its appearance, showing, say, only the one dimension of it the painter sees to imitate, paintings are really only a tertiary imitation of reality:

of Art?, trans. Christopher S. Wood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 81. And Nietzsche argued that Socrates and Euripides effectively murdered tragedy (which in that book stands in for art) around 400 BCE. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 76–89.

Then the mimetic art is far removed from truth, and this, it seems, is the reason why it can produce everything, because it touches or lays hold of only a small part of the object and that a phantom, as, for example, a painter, we say, will paint us a cobbler, a carpenter, and other craftsmen, though he himself has no expertness in any of these arts, but nevertheless if he were a good painter, by exhibiting at a distance his picture of a carpenter he would deceive children and foolish men, and make them believe it to be a real carpenter.⁵

If one thinks about it, though, Plato's criticism of a painting of a bed as at three removes from reality is an odd one. No one really thinks that the purpose of a painting is the same as the purpose of a bed and that the fact that one cannot use a painting of a bed as if it were a bed is a criticism of painting. Nor is the painting in any sense deceptive. Few people confuse paintings of beds with beds, nor, despite Socrates's odd slippage between paintings of beds and paintings of carpenters, do they confuse paintings of carpenters with carpenters. Moreover, since Socrates's stated aim at the opening of book 10 is to exclude poetry from the state and not painting or sculpture, the reference to painting's limitations as accurate imitation are not precisely to the point (819).⁶ And indeed, the transition from claiming that the imitation of a bed is tertiary to claiming that a tragedy's imitation of human action is also suspect is an awkward one: "Then, said I, have we not to scrutinize tragedy and its leader Homer, since some people tell us that those poets know all the arts and all things human pertaining to virtue and vice, and all things divine?" (823). A poet's claim to know about virtue, vice, and things divine, at least, would be no different from a philosopher's, and his discourse about them would be neither more nor less an imitation than would a philosopher's discourse. Nor can Plato conceivably be distinguishing between, say, narrative and propositional discourse since he regularly in the *Republic*, including at the end of this book, only a few pages later, has recourse to explanatory or illustrative narratives.

Plato's claim that painting is deceptive, though an awkward one with regard to painting, is his key point about poetry. For him, poetry claims a knowledge it does not have and is thus deceptive. And his logic here follows his logic in *Ion*, as well, where he asks the rhapsode why, if he does not claim to know medicine as well as a doctor, or how to manage horses as well as a charioteer, he should claim to know what "a man would say, and a woman would say, and a slave and a free man, a subject and a ruler—the suitable thing for each" (226). Although Socrates confuses Ion by asking why he knows what a slave speaking about herding or a general about military strategy would say better than the slave or the general, his real point is to question why, if a poet has no knowledge of charioteering or medicine or military strategy, he should claim any special knowledge of virtue or vice or how human beings would act. This argument is much clearer in book 10 of the *Republic*, though, again, its twists show that Plato does not think he can make his case quite straightforwardly. There he notes that appearances can be deceptive, as when we see a straight stick in water appearing to be bent, even though our reason tells us it is not (827), and then

⁵ Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 823. Hereafter, page numbers to Plato's *Dialogues* will be given in parentheses in the text.

⁶ Danto claims that Plato's argument here, by separating art from reality, enacts the first philosophical disenfranchisement of art, making it have no effect on reality. Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 7. It would be more true to say that separating art from reality and from any attempt to imitate it has been a common defense against Plato, who, even here, already accuses painting of deception rather than uselessness.

argues that the part of the soul that trusts to reason is therefore better than the one that trusts to perception. Likewise, poetry, which depends on depicting “faction and strife” (828), appeals to a lower part of the soul than that which tells us that “it is best to keep quiet as far as possible in calamity and not to chafe and repine” (829).

Plato may thus conclude: “This, then, was what I wished to have agreed upon when I said that poetry, and in general mimetic art, produces a product that is far removed from truth in the accomplishment of its task, and associates with the part in us that is remote from intelligence, and is its companion and friend for no sound and true purpose” (828). Again, Plato refers generally to mimetic art but noticeably does not at any point ban more than poetry from participation in the state. Poetry’s problem is not merely that it is mimetic but that it encourages bad actions, and we know that they are bad not because its reasons for so inciting them can be undermined but because, as bad mimesis, it does so with a faulty discourse appealing to a lower part of our intelligence. In effect, to get us to distrust poetry, Plato must get us not merely to distrust what it proposes—since alternative philosophies might mistakenly do the same—but to distrust its discourse, not merely as less than accurate but as positively deceptive. One might, of course, as an answer to Plato, defend poetry as, like all art, not proposing any truths but rather affording a certain kind of unworldly beauty. But if one wants to defend it—and all art—as a form of knowledge discourse, one will have to justify the mode of discourse itself. The two ways of doing this have been either to give the discourse special powers of reference that transcend reason or to find it to serve or have served a historically specific purpose. The first mode, we will see, drains art of its material specificity, and the second must always declare it to have an end.

We may see the problems of the first response in the first version of it: Plotinus famously answered Plato’s claim that art was a tertiary form of imitation by arguing that art did not imitate nature but represented the eternal Forms:

But if anyone despises the arts because they produce their works by imitating nature, we must tell him, first, that natural things are imitations too. Then he must know that the arts do not simply imitate what they see, but they run back up to the forming principles from which nature derives; then also that they do a great deal by themselves, and, since they possess beauty, they make up what is defective in things. For Pheidias too did not make his Zeus from any model perceived by the senses, but understood what Zeus would look like if he wanted to make himself visible. (5.8)⁷

Although Plotinus here means to explain “intellectual beauty,” he explains it by claiming that the arts make Forms visible, showing us, for example, what Zeus would look like if he wanted to make himself visible. But if we assume that the statue of Zeus makes the form of Zeus visible in the way its material form looks like Zeus, there is an obvious problem. Plato argued that there could be only one Form of a thing since, if there were two, those two would be two different examples, creating the need for a Form that stood behind them as the essential form of the thing (822). And if a Form is an essence, his position seems unexceptionable. But if an artwork shows us, in its appearance, the image of a Form (assuming such a thing is not a contradiction in terms), then it will have doubled the Form and created the need for a new one standing behind the artistic image and the real one. Plotinus veils this problem by referencing a statue of a god rather than,

⁷ Plotinus, *Ennead*, V, trans. T. H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 239–41.

say, a painting of a chair, but it remains the same as long as we assume Zeus had human form. Of course, Plotinus might have meant that the image of the artwork doesn't imitate anything at all but somehow makes the Form show forth. Thus, the statue of the human form would show us what the Form of Zeus was and not the form of some Zeus-looking human body. Even if he did mean this, though, as we will see when I discuss Heidegger, the status of the actual image of the artwork remains problematic.

Although Plotinus does not use the word explicitly, his theory also introduces the concept of embodiment into art as the definition of how its discourse works as a nonrepresentational form of communicating meaning.⁸ By contrasting the artwork's exhibition of a human body with a representation of a human body, claiming that the artwork showed what "Zeus would look like," he claims that art effects what Hegel will later call the expression of the divine, thus embodying forth meaning. As we will see, theories of art that think of art as meaning bearing (as opposed to creating pleasure through formal harmony) regularly distinguish it from other discourses by noting that it embodies its meanings rather than referring to them. Danto states the definition most clearly and baldly: "To be a work of art is to be (i) *about* something and (ii) to *embody its meaning*."⁹ This definition will be the common one among the aesthetic theorists I discuss. It answers Plato's critique of deception either by defining a special way that art works to communicate and thus, like Plotinus, a special field of meaning—art communicates essence, not information—or by defining special historical constraints that give it value at specific historical moments, as we will see Hegel and Danto doing. As I said above, the problem with the first mode of answer is that ultimately, it makes all art mean the same thing, as we can see in both Schopenhauer and, because of the criticism he has evoked, more pointedly in Heidegger.

Schopenhauer's theory of art offers the clearest restatement of Plotinus extant in the aesthetic theories that began with Alexander Baumgarten's inauguration of the word "aesthetic" to theorize about art in 1735. Schopenhauer virtually restates Plotinus's claim that art reveals the Platonic Forms: "The truth which lies at the foundation of all the remarks we have so far made on art is that the object of art...is an *Idea* in Plato's sense, and absolutely nothing else; not the particular thing, the object of common apprehension, and not the concept, the object of rational thought and science."¹⁰ Now, Plato posited many more than one Form or Idea, so one might think that art that expressed an Idea rather than imitating a particular object might have numbers of different subject matters. But, oddly, no one thinks that a painting of a chair has as its subject the Form of the chair (this is true, as we will see, also of the painting of a pair of shoes). And, in

⁸ In *Phaedrus*, Plato defined beauty in terms of an object's embodiment of the Form of Beauty (250b–252b; Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, 496–98). But Plato was speaking here only of our experience of beautiful people. He has no concept of art as being related to beauty.

⁹ Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 195. Danto's definition has been criticized both for the claim of "aboutness" (Robert Kelly, *Iconoclasm in Art* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 171–79) and for the claim of embodiment (Robert Kudielka, "According to What: Art and the Philosophy of the 'End of Art,'" *History and Theory* 37, no. 4 [December 1998]: 89; and Noël Carroll, "Danto's New Definition of Art and the Problem of Art Theories," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 37, no. 4 [October 1997]: 386–92). With regard to embodiment, it is unclear whether those who criticize Danto realize how unoriginal his idea is and also realize how rigorous its requirements: Kudielka, for instance, takes Hegel's claim that for artistic embodiment to be successful, its matter must be entirely adequate to its meaning to be a demand for aesthetic quality rather than a definition of what embodiment is.

¹⁰ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), 233. Hereafter, page numbers will be given in parentheses in the text.

Schopenhauer, there is only one essential truth of the world, which is that its essence is the Will, and the only consequence of this truth is that achieving will-lessness is both a moral imperative and the only proper human goal. His argument starts, as Plotinus's does, by asserting that art exhibits Forms (he calls them Ideas) rather than material reality but soon specifies that it exhibits not any Ideas but the Idea behind all reality:

But now, what kind of knowledge is it that considers what continues to exist outside and independently of all relations, but which alone is really essential to the world, the true content of its phenomena, that which is subject to no change, and is therefore known with equal truth for all time, in a word, the *Ideas* that are the immediate and adequate objectivity of the thing-in-itself, of the will? It is *art*, the work of genius. (184)

Since the passage prior to this describes history, natural science, mathematics, indeed science *tout court*, as the knowledge of changing phenomena and their relations, it is clear that art, for Schopenhauer, has a knowledge that contrasts in kind with all the various forms of knowledge we usually consider under that word. His response to Plato would be that art offers knowledge, in the only way that the knowledge it has to offer can be offered, because its knowledge is different in kind from all others.

And it is always the same knowledge, that the world is will and that our task is to exit from that will. We can see this singular truth in Schopenhauer's notorious description of tragedy, which he calls "the summit of poetic art" (252):

It then reaches the point where the phenomenon, the veil of Maya, no longer deceives it. It sees through the form of the phenomenon, the *principium individuationis*; the egoism resting on this expires with it. The *motives* that were previously so powerful now lose their force, and instead of them, the complete knowledge of the real nature of the world, acting as a *quieter* of the will, produces resignation, the giving up not merely of life, but of the whole will-to-live itself. (253)

Since the lifting of the veil of Maya has always as a consequence the quieting of the will, and since all art lifts the veil of Maya, one way or the other, all art partakes of the role of tragedy: it shows us the will, as a result of the artist's transcendence of the will, and thus leads us to the same transcendence of it.

Schopenhauer's philosophy is notoriously single-minded, so the fact that his theory of the timeless value of art produces art that always says the same thing, to the point at which all particularity fades away, might be taken as more a particularity of his thinking, if we did not find it repeated in Heidegger in striking fashion. Obviously, Heidegger's larger metaphysics is nothing like Schopenhauer's. Even about art, he differs entirely with regard to the role and meaning of disinterest.¹¹ But in "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger identifies the truth in art as the becoming visible of what truth itself is: "Thus in the work it is truth, not only something true, that is at work. The picture that shows the peasant shoes, the poem that says the Roman fountain, do not just make manifest what this isolated being as such is—if indeed they manifest anything at all; rather, they make unconcealedness as such happen in regard to what is as a whole."¹²

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volumes One and Two*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 107–40.

¹² Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 56. Hereafter, page numbers will be given in parentheses in the text.

Art's embodiment of essence is entirely a process here, rather than a disembodied meditation of an embodiment of bodiless truth, as it is in Schopenhauer. But, on the other hand, Heidegger explicitly leaves the artwork behind, once he is done with it, to get to its truth, which is its revelation of the way truth works as the action of uncovering.¹³

To do justice to the strangeness with which Heidegger's theory evades the artwork as nearly as it tries to elucidate it, and then to show how that evasion and the aesthetic sameness it produces inhere in the very concept of art timelessly embodying essence, we must first attend to the strange discursive path that leads to the theory of what the artwork does via a rather hilarious and ongoing philosophical dispute over Van Gogh's shoes. The strangeness begins with the way in which a posited Van Gogh painting of shoes comes into the discussion. Heidegger starts out by distinguishing natural things in the world from what he calls equipment in terms of equipment's "usefulness" ("Origin," 28), which results from its being produced by human beings. Artworks, he says, are, like equipment, produced by human beings, but they have a self-sufficiency akin to "mere things" (29).¹⁴ As part of distinguishing artworks from these other kinds of things, then, Heidegger proposes to elucidate the "equipmental quality of equipment" (32). To do this:

We choose as example a common sort of equipment—a pair of peasant shoes. We do not even need to exhibit actual pieces of this sort of useful article in order to describe them. Everyone is acquainted with them. But since it is a matter here of direct description, it may be well to facilitate the visual realization of them. For this purpose a pictorial representation suffices. We shall choose a well-known painting by Van Gogh, who painted such shoes several times. (32–33)

Derrida rightly stresses that Heidegger does not introduce the Van Gogh painting in the first instance as an artwork. He merely uses it to enable his discussion of the equipmentality of peasant shoes.¹⁵ But Derrida really doesn't go far enough. At this point, Heidegger does not really introduce any Van Gogh picture at all in any meaningful way. He says that to "facilitate the visual representation" of the peasant shoes, we don't need actual peasant shoes as an example (though they would, one assumes, be just as good). Any "pictorial representation" will do, as, for example, one of Van Gogh's many paintings of them. In other words, the Van Gogh painting at issue isn't brought up as a painting at all. We are interested in it, not as an artwork, but merely as a picture, which, despite Plato's objections to pictures of things, will work well enough here. But which Van Gogh? Heidegger does not tell us, because evidently, we don't even need to know that. We

¹³ Michael Kelly accuses Heidegger of iconoclasm, by which he means being interested in art only to get to some other issue rather than being interested in art for itself, because Heidegger is more interested in the question "what is truth such that it comes to pass as art?" rather than in the question "what is art such that truth discloses itself in it?" My point here is similar to his. Michael Kelly, *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 32.

¹⁴ The discussion of the meaning of "mere things" that leads to this very banal three-part distinction is quite complex. Derrida rebukes Meyer Schapiro for eliding it in Schapiro's first discussion of Heidegger's essay. See Meyer Schapiro, "The Still Life as a Personal Object—a Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh," in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York: Braziller, 1994), 135–42; and Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 285. I am more guilty of that elision here. But it will be part of my point that Heidegger's argument pointedly departs from this discussion in odd ways, and Derrida nowhere makes the case that to understand Heidegger's claims about artworks (for which Derrida also seems to hold no particular brief), we need to understand the discussion of mere things.

¹⁵ Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, 295–96.

don't see a Van Gogh picture. We have merely Heidegger's account of it.¹⁶ Despite the fact that we are told that a pictorial representation will help and that Van Gogh's painting will serve as such a representation, at this point we are given neither Van Gogh's painting nor any pictorial representation, much less a pair of actual shoes.

Heidegger then moves on to a series of discoveries about the shoes, discoveries that are, it seems at first, only glancingly brought about by the painting or, at any rate, Heidegger's description of some notional Van Gogh painting. At first he concludes: "As long as we only imagine a pair of shoes in general, or simply look at the empty unused shoes as they merely stand there in the picture, we shall never discover what the equipmental being of the equipment in truth is. From Van Gogh's painting we cannot even tell where the shoes stand" ("Origin," 33). But this failure must be only a failure to see the picture properly because, at this point, Heidegger adds, "And yet—" (33) and follows first by telling us how the peasant woman uses the shoes in her work in the earth and then how the picture brings to our consciousness the element of "reliability" in the shoes that the peasant woman takes for granted without knowing and that is essential to the equipmentality of the shoes (34). As far as we know, at this point, the picture of the shoes has, in its quality as pictorial description, given Heidegger this knowledge. He does not say that explicitly when he follows the "and yet" with his discovery, but he does not say otherwise, and the context of looking at a mere visual representation of the shoes seems still to control this paragraph.

But Heidegger has another unexpected turn in his argument to make. Having established the importance of reliability to equipment, he states, "we know nothing at all of what we really and solely seek: the workly character of the work in the sense of a work of art" (35). One would not think that we would be surprised that we do not yet know this. Its knowledge was not yet on our agenda. We were first, we thought, establishing what equipment is so we could see how an artwork differed from that, since they had in common that they were both human productions. But now we find, almost out of nowhere, that we have in fact learned everything we need to know about the "work-being" of the artwork:

The equipmental quality of equipment was discovered. But how? Not by a description and explanation of a pair of shoes actually present; not by a report about the process of making shoes; and also not by the observation of the actual use of shoes occurring here and there; but only by bringing ourselves before Van Gogh's painting.... But above all, the work did not, as it might seem at first, serve merely for a better visualizing of what a piece of equipment is. Rather, the equipmentality of equipment first genuinely arrives at its appearance through the work and only the work.... Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth. This entity emerges into the unconcealedness of being. (35–36)

We should take the odd course of the argument as significant, I think. The way we learn that an artwork has opened a truth to us while we thought we were looking at a mere pictorial representation reproduces the sudden opening of realization, the coming into being of truth that has

¹⁶ I will avoid the discussion of what shoes Van Gogh actually painted, raised by Meyer Schapiro in two essays and addressed famously by Derrida and, as a result of that, by, among others, Kelly and Silverman. Derrida is quite right that Heidegger does not clearly enough identify any painting of any shoes for the question of what kind of shoes Van Gogh painted to be even meaningful. This, I will argue, is part of the problem of Heidegger's theory of art. See Schapiro, "The Still Life as a Personal Object"; Meyer Schapiro, "Further Notes on Heidegger and Van Gogh," in *Theory and Philosophy of Art*, 143–51; Kelly, *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics*; and Hugh J. Silverman, *Textualities: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

nothing to do with learning by observing what things look like. Thinking that we were learning about equipment by looking at a pictorial representation, then, we suddenly discover that we were actually learning about the emergence of truth by its sudden disclosure in an artwork.

This emergence into clarity is so without explanation that it is not clear it occurs even via embodiment. Certainly, what shoes Van Gogh depicts cannot be relevant, since we do not learn what we learn by observing the shoes in the painting. This is enough to make Meyer Schapiro's assertion that the painting Heidegger referenced was of Van Gogh's shoes when he was a city dweller and not a painting of a peasant woman's shoes irrelevant.¹⁷ But if it doesn't matter what specific shoes Van Gogh painted for the painting to embody the equipmentality of peasant shoes, why should it matter that the painting was even of shoes at all? Since we do not observe it as a visual representation, to learn what we learn, why might we not learn it from a painting of just about anything? In effect, by the time Heidegger has moved from the pictorial representation to the truth unveiled in the artwork, the artwork as artwork has disappeared. Thus, in the quotation from "Origin" with which I started this discussion, the artwork's real work is not even to tell us the truth of shoes but rather to unconceal the truth about unconcealing. And this is what all artworks do, regardless of their particularity, just as all artworks for Schopenhauer show us the essence of the will behind the world's phenomena.

Hegel and Danto both define art in terms of its embodiment of meaning, and Hegel, like Plotinus, Schopenhauer, and Heidegger, insists on the embodiment being, if not of the essence of reality, of the highest human understanding of Spirit. In a certain way, they also both follow the same logic toward this definition, first showing that art must be, as Danto would say, about something and then distinguishing it as art by the manner in which it is about things, which is embodiment. Both of them produce their theories at moments that might have seemed or do seem to give some empirical justification for the claim that art has reached its limit and that they are there to produce its lapidary inscription: For Hegel, who did not live to see Impressionism or the development of European literature that started some years after his death, the end of the period of German Romanticism in the 1820s would have seemed a kind of culmination. And Danto's subject, of course, was Pop Art's undoing of abstraction's sense of mission, in the wake of which art seemed to have lost a certain energy and cultural centrality, which it has still not regained, if we are to take the symptom of that centrality as the existence of a central artistic movement driving artistic practice, critical response, and aesthetic thinking. Ultimately, we will have to consider how the very similarities of the two theories undoes the claim of each to have described the end of art—and not merely because artworks have been produced after both of

¹⁷ Derrida shows fairly handily that Schapiro's evidence in his first article, "The Still Life as a Personal Object," falls considerably short of establishing what Schapiro thinks it does. Oddly, when Schapiro returns to the subject with further evidence, he doesn't seem to realize that the new evidence makes his claim much less certain. He quotes a letter from one of Van Gogh's fellow students saying that to paint the painting (always assuming that we have identified the painting Heidegger seems more or less to have in mind), Van Gogh bought a pair of cart-drivers' shoes at a flea market and then wore them one afternoon to make them look used. The student describes the shoes as *croquenots riches*, which Schapiro unaccountably translates as "fancy shoes" ("Further Notes," 145), when a nearer rendering would be "real clodhoppers." The shoes that Schapiro specifies as the ones to which Heidegger referred don't seem necessarily to be a woman's or fancy city shoes but were more likely awkward work shoes—real clodhoppers—and they are not really Van Gogh's either since he bought them merely to paint them. And, of course, none of this entails that Van Gogh didn't take them, after he was done with them, as good appearances of either a peasant woman's shoes or his own well-worn city shoes or indeed any other kind of shoes. Even knowing what the shoes are, we don't really know what they are in the painting except as a result of what they appear to be in the painting.

them. But I want to start by showing how Hegel, in particular, presents the rigorous logic that leads from the definition of art as embodied meaning to the conclusion that it must become historically surpassed, not because it excuses the outrageousness of the claim but because it elucidates why the historically melodramatic claim produces much more varied and artistically attuned interpretations of artworks. It may not be an accident that Hegel's *Aesthetics* stands out from the other major nineteenth-century philosophies of art in terms of its omnivorous discussion of artworks, both ancient and modern, and that Danto served as the art critic for the *Nation* from 1984 through 2009.

The logic that leads to Hegel's definition of art as the sensuous embodiment of the Idea is worth following in some detail—first, because it exhibits fairly clearly how the concept of embodiment responds to Plato's critique and, second, because it strikingly predicts the logic by which Danto's problem of indiscernibles leads him to the same definition, and it also shows us how Danto's aesthetic interests drove him from his original, anti-Hegelian stance with regard to history toward his Hegelian aesthetics. In his section “The Aim of Art” (41–55), Hegel goes through a number of standard reasons for valuing art, in order to dismiss them. He first dismisses the idea that the point of art is to imitate nature, essentially reproducing Plato's critiques of art as objections to the idea that imitation can be its point: (1) nature is already there, so even if art isn't tertiary, imitation of nature is still superfluous; (2) nature will always be better than the imitation, and even when it isn't, as in the notorious grapes of Zeuxis that fooled birds into pecking at them, the imitation amounts to merely a trick good enough to fool birds; and, most centrally, (3) if the aim of art is imitation, the point can only be the production of pleasure as a kind of parlor trick (42–43). Thus reproducing Plato's objection to the pointlessness of artistic imitation, he says simply that therefore, that cannot be art's aim.¹⁸ The rest of the section, considering claims that art leads to emotional betterment or moral instruction, objects that these ends are not themselves aesthetic ends but turn art into some means to another end, which, as a consequence, makes the value of art dependent on producing ends even as the same techniques could be used to produce other ends, though he allows that art ought not to be so used (51–52). This account, again, takes Plato's argument against art as either an uninformed or a deceptive espousal of certain values, not as an objection to art, but as an obvious disqualification of these values as art's aim.

Although Hegel defines the role of art as sensuous embodiment of thought prior to discussing these objections, they lead back to that definition. The issue of moral betterment leads Hegel to outlining a contradiction between our spiritual need to act morally out of our free commitment to moral ends and our experience of ourselves as driven by sensuous impulses (53; this passage is entirely Kantian). Though philosophy, for Hegel, finally resolves this opposition, art mediates it by bodying truth “in the form of sensuous artistic configuration” (55). Thus, art, neither ornamental imitation nor espouser of some end outside itself, serves the end of the intellect in its own discursive manner, embodiment. Hegel's earlier definition, which was then assertive, now is justified as art's end, and we may see the logic behind its working.

Opening his discussion of the concept of art by distinguishing artworks from objects of nature in terms of their being human productions, Hegel asks, “what is man's *need* to produce

¹⁸ It is an idea common to art history that imitation ceased to be the aim of art with photography and/or with the Impressionists. One must say that it ceased to be the end proposed for art by aesthetic theorists at least a century prior to that or, if one takes all theories that think of art as making essence visible as effectively nonmimetic, much earlier.

works of art?" (30). Although his answer here is mere assertion, since he, as we saw, eliminated the other alternatives—pleasure in imitation, emotional or moral betterment, mere ornament—he is left with the claim that art is a meaning-bearing discourse: "The universal need for art, that is to say, is man's rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self. The need for this spiritual freedom he satisfies, on the one hand, within by making what is within him explicit to himself, but correspondingly by giving outward reality to his explicit self" (31–32). Although this claim is close to the Romantic concept that art is self-expression, by claiming that human beings express their spiritual freedom in art Hegel ties art's meaning to an expression of our understanding of what it means to be human in the world. Thus, he says, shortly before he says that art is a thing of the past, that art "liberates the true content of phenomena from the pure appearance and deception of this bad, transitory world, and gives them a higher actuality, born of the spirit" (9). Since it expresses our sense of ourselves as beings in the world in terms of sensuous appearance, however, its mode of discourse must be defined by that sensuous appearance: "the work of art, as a sensuous object, is not merely for *sensuous* apprehension; its standing is of such a kind that, though sensuous, it is essentially at the same time for *spiritual* apprehension" (35). So art presents meaning sensuously, embodying it. We will see Danto reach the same idea through his thought experiments about artworks indistinguishable in terms of their appearance from mere things or other types of discourse, but it is worth noting here that Hegel reaches it by asking merely what art does and how it works.

It is important that, unlike Plotinus, Schopenhauer, and Heidegger, all of whom also see art as bodying forth essence, Hegel identifies the meaning of art with human understanding of itself in the world. Such an understanding will of necessity be historically changing. This claim gives Hegel's art criticism the ability to engage with and comment on different artworks with reference to their existence as artworks in their historical contexts rather than making them all mean the same thing. Given that the two volumes of Hegel's *Aesthetics* address much of Western art from the Bible through Goethe (with some discussion of Eastern and Indian literature as far as it was known by a nineteenth-century European), and from Greek sculpture through at least sixteenth-century Flemish art, it would be impossible in this brief space to give a real sense of how much critical flexibility his theory gives him. Certainly, the criticism is driven by the theory, producing many claims that critics would find mistaken and no reading of a specific work that would likely surprise specialists. Still, for instance, his argument that tragedy embodies a collision of values, but with Greek tragedy seeing the collision in terms of unresolved, equally worthy ethical values, and tragedy since the Renaissance understanding it in terms of subjective conflict, allows him to distinguish pointedly between, for example, *Hamlet* and the plays of the Greek tragedians (1225). If his readings don't seem surprising, that may be because, after Aristotle, his theory of tragedy has been an influential one and so the readings are now familiar. And, more importantly, Hegel's theory has far more to say about tragedy than Schopenhauer, for whom all tragedies show the same moral resignation before the world's will.

Hegel's definition of art, first, as a sensuous embodiment of human understanding of itself in the world and, second, as taking different forms according to its different historical contexts, taken together, virtually necessitates the claim that art must become a surpassed discourse, if it has not already done so. From the claim about what it expresses will come an internal necessity for its reaching its limit, and from its claim that it does so through sensuous embodiment will

come the claim that it will be superseded by another form of discourse. Because art expresses our understanding of ourselves, it will also follow, since our understanding of ourselves will be historically changing, that the forms in which one understanding of itself finds expression will not work for another until we reach the point at which the matter of our understanding cannot be expressed by any form of embodiment. Thus, Hegel describes the downfall of the Classical form of art (the one period in which perfect embodiment occurs) as an internally driven one: “The downfall of these beautiful gods of art is therefore necessitated purely by their own nature, since in the end the mind cannot any longer find rest in them and therefore turns back from them into itself” (504). Once the mind moves beyond a certain level of belief, once its beliefs are no longer perfectly embodiable, artworks will no longer work to express them.

But it is not just the idea that some ideas cannot be expressed in terms of embodiment (if our highest understanding of ourselves were to be to see ourselves as material forces in the world, explained by physics and chemistry, art would have a very limited ability to express such an understanding). Embodiment is also an implicitly limited discourse. Plato found it deceptive because it appeals to a lower part of the soul. While Hegel does not quite think that, he does think that the mind will finally seek a different kind of understanding. Hegel distinguishes between a theoretical understanding, which abstracts itself from individual entities to understand them under universal laws, which he calls “the work of science” (37), and art, which expresses its meaning purely in terms of the sensuous. But the theoretical understanding ultimately satisfies our thought more fully, even with regard to art: “What is now aroused in us by works of art is not just immediate enjoyment but our judgement also.... The *philosophy* of art is therefore a greater need in our day than it was in days when art by itself as art yielded full satisfaction” (11). In other words, art will exhaust itself not only because its mode of expression won’t work for our thinking at a certain point but also because we will inevitably turn our abstract thinking upon art.

The usual defense against the obvious error of Hegel’s claim that art is a thing of the past is that Hegel meant, not that there would be no new artworks, but that art’s historical role was over. Even in this claim, he was as wrong about art as he was about history: an art history that accounts for art from the Impressionists through the moderns to the avant-garde as mere events beyond the meaningful end of art history has some fairly obvious narrative limitations. But one could make a claim that the narrative Hegel had to tell about art was over by the time he told it. Although his story was more capacious than Vasari’s, for instance, both of them were dealing with the art that the Renaissance had given to them and that had given rise to aesthetics less than one hundred years before Hegel. And, in a real sense, the artistic movements that followed Hegel were a different form of art, even if our post-Hegelian literary and art histories allow us to read that earlier art in their later terms. By moving forward to Danto, whose theory of history showed him why Hegel’s claim to see the end of art could never be valid except by accident, and should have shown him the same about his own identical claim, we will see, I think, why any historical narrative about art will have to pose the same kind of end and that only such narratives will give art meanings that are not mere philosophical truisms, thus creating new art by creating new ends, giving art new meaning by declaring it dead.

In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Arthur Danto takes what might seem a different route from Hegel to wind up at the same place. But, in a certain way, he reproduces Hegel’s logic in arriving at a definition of art as embodied meaning by implicitly answering the same objections to art raised first by Plato and to which Hegel implicitly responded. To argue that art

is about something, Danto proposes examples of objects whose differences are indiscernible to the senses. His models are Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*, indiscernible from actual Brillo boxes, and Marcel Duchamp's readymades, objects such as snow shovels and urinals, indiscernible from actual snow shovels and urinals, but presented as art. Even more pointedly, the opening two pages of *Transfiguration* proposes as a thought experiment a series of red canvases, all exactly alike, most of which are different artworks, a couple of which are merely canvases primed with red paint and thus not artworks, and one of which is a red canvas, presented as it is by a fictional artist as an artwork.¹⁹ To solve the problem of distinguishing all these objects that look exactly alike as the artworks they are or are not, Danto invokes, in the first instance, "aboutness."²⁰ Artworks are different from non-artworks that look just like them (Duchamp's *Fountain*, from a urinal) because they are about something.

To then distinguish artworks from other discourses that have meanings, what he calls "mere representations," Danto uses the example of a diagram of a Cezanne painting of his wife in a book of art history and a painting by Roy Lichtenstein that reproduces that diagram exactly, arguing that the diagram represents a comment about how the painting works, while the Lichtenstein painting is an implicit rhetorical comment on Cezanne's attitude toward his wife.²¹ Danto does not get explicitly to the concept of embodiment here, but he later comes to believe that that is what he meant and invokes the discussion in *Transfiguration* in the definition I quoted earlier from *After the End of Art*: "To be a work of art is to be (i) *about* something and (ii) to *embody its meaning*."²² Thus, the problem of indiscernibles leads us to the two parts of Hegel's definition.

And indeed, the logic of the two arguments works much the same way. Danto's method of indiscernibles eliminates the possibility of defining art in terms of its formal features, just as Hegel did by arguing against defining art in terms of either being mimetic or being formally pleasing, leaving "aboutness" as a necessary part of the definition. And although Hegel starts his distinction between embodiment and abstract thought by declaring that since artworks are sensuous appearance, that must therefore be the mode by which art expresses itself, thus giving a definition in terms of the material appearance of the artwork in a way that Danto might contest, in fact Danto's contrast between the mere representation of a diagram intended as a diagram and the mode of expression in the appearance of a diagram presented as a painting also reproduces the same logic. The diagram represents an abstract formal analysis while the Lichtenstein painting embodies a meaning. The one important difference between the two theories is that Danto does not specify any particular content for art to embody. Since it can embody any meaning, and not solely the "highest vocation" of embodying our sense of place in the world, there is no particular reason for some other discourse to supersede it as the more appropriate mode of expressing a different and more abstract understanding, nor would a philosophical understanding of art necessarily complete some project art had set for itself. Understanding why Danto moves forward to the fully Hegelian claim that his definition of art also shows that art had come to an end will also show how theories of ends, even as they cannot work, always do work to give art an interpretive edge that their absence would not.

¹⁹ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1–2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 142–43.

²² Danto, *After the End of Art*, 195.

In *Transfiguration*, an indiscernible such as Duchamp's urinal was interesting because it allowed Danto to raise the question of what was art. In his later books, Danto traces an art history whereby, in the wake of the failure of mimetic theory to explain art in the nineteenth century, modernist theory, exemplified in the figure of Clement Greenberg, gave art the project of being about its own artness, making its aesthetic features the content it embodied. But Duchamp prior to Greenberg's theory, and Warhol after it and in awareness of it, produced artworks that, so far from bodying forth aesthetic qualities, could not be discerned from non-artworks at all in terms of their appearance. These artworks didn't just happen to raise a philosophical question; because they meant to raise it, they effectively embodied it. And at that point, as Danto explains in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, art had reached the limit at which philosophy could take over from it:

Hegel's stupendous philosophical vision of history gets, or almost gets, an astounding confirmation in Duchamp's work, which raises the question of the philosophical nature of art from *within* art, implying that art already is philosophy in a vivid form, and has now discharged its spiritual mission by revealing the philosophical essence at its heart. The task may now be handed over to philosophy proper, which is equipped to cope with its own nature directly and definitively. So what art finally will have achieved as its fulfillment and fruition is the philosophy of art.²³

This passage, declaring art's philosophical disenfranchisement, comes in the title essay of the book, which, somewhat astonishingly, means to argue precisely against that disenfranchisement. We will see in a moment how Danto proposes to argue against that disenfranchisement by proposing an art after the end of art, but in seeing why Danto's proposal is unappealing, we will also see why we need these historical theories to give art teeth. It is also worth noting here that just as his definition tracked Hegelian logic, this argument also tracks it, clearly meaning to, in proposing art's end. It's not merely that art is ended from the outside by philosophy taking its task over, as it is in Hegel. It also reaches this end internally by having gone as far as it can go within its own discourse in the project it has given itself so that that discourse gives way on its own to the external one that completes it.

Danto's claim that art has come to an end is really, of course, a claim that art history has come to an end. He, no more than Hegel, thinks that people will cease to produce artworks. But he does think that art will no longer have a coherent project that it will give to itself now that it has succeeded in raising the question of its own definition. And that project was what gave its history its coherence. In other words, as long as art can embody anything—or if, as in Schopenhauer and Heidegger, it kept embodying the same eternally true thing—it could go on embodying either any old thing or that one thing forever. But if its project is to embody human self-understanding or to embody the question of its own definition, once it has reached the point at which embodiment as a discourse has said either all it has to say or all it is able to say about the content it embodies, its role will be over. But Danto himself has argued in *Narration and Knowledge* that the project of writing the kind of history with a narrative direction determined by an ultimate end is an impossible one, effectively an attempt to know the future.²⁴ With regard to art history, while one could perceive that art had carried a certain project as far as it could go, in order to

²³ Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, 16.

²⁴ Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 12–15.

know that that project was the definitive one for art, one would have to know that no other future project would come to seem definitive.

It's not merely that Danto's theory gives him this abstract position from which to doubt his own claim. His own art history, without the substantive claim, could have shown him this. That history was not a straight line. Its direction was in fact redefined twice. First, the mimetic project came to an end when artworks appeared that it could not explain and then when critics formulated a theory that explained all artworks, including the newer ones, in a better way. This process occurred for a second time when that second formalist theory came to grief upon the indiscernibles upon which Danto constructed his theory. Each of these shifts in the definition of the aim of art could have been seen as an ending, and each was seen as an ending from the perspective of the older theory, even as they were narratively reexplained by the theory that superseded them as part of art's history.²⁵ Thus, both Hegel's and Danto's theories of what art is and how art comes to an end are logically similar, even as they identify different ends. For each of them, the theories their art explained had reached their explanatory limit, and so from their perspective art had come to an end. But for each, art's project was different and thus so were the ends they proposed.

Danto proposes this end of art as a positive thing, just as Hegel does. But it is not clear that it is positive for art. For Hegel, the end of art is a positive moment because it shows an advance in human understanding of itself and the world, an advance that could be accommodated only by a different form of thinking, which he called philosophy. For Danto, the end of art is a positive moment because the purposes that art history give to art are constraining, and once art is freed from the constraints that particular theoretical histories impose on it, it will be free to do anything. One sees a picture of this freedom in Andy Warhol's wonderful reproduction of Marx's idea of freedom after the end of history: "How can you say one style is better than another? You ought to be able to be an Abstract Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist or a realist, without feeling that you have given up something."²⁶ But this is the freedom of purposelessness. One cannot really be an Abstract Expressionist without believing, as they did, that their painting was both redefining painting and discovering what it actually was. Danto also realizes this in saying, "It is not possible to relate to [past] works as those did in whose form of life those works played the role they played: we are not cavemen, nor are we medievalists, baroque princelings, Parisian bohemians on the frontiers of a new style, or Chinese literati."²⁷

But, of course, this means one cannot be an Abstract Expressionist one week and a Pop Artist the next without really being neither. One will merely be playing at those styles (unless one has a metastyle that captures those styles within it and that one takes seriously as, in a sense, Warhol did in saying what he did). And one can see the sense that loss of purpose would give an artist in Danto's own description of the end of his career as an artist, which occurred when he first saw Lichtenstein's *The Kiss* and decided that if that, too, was art, then everything was possible: "And, though it did not immediately occur to me, if everything was possible, nothing was necessary or inevitable including my own vision of an artistic future. For me, that meant that it

²⁵ The feeling of someone within the old theory that something was passing is precisely the feeling that Danto uses to justify his own sense of an end to art (*After the End of Art*, 43–44), when, in fact, all it justifies is that his own art-historical narrative has reached its limit for explaining art.

²⁶ Ibid., 37. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels proposed that in the society after the end of class struggles, one would be able to do whatever one wanted, "to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind" (quoted in Danto, *After the End of Art*, 37).

²⁷ Danto, *After the End of Art*, 198.

was all right, as an artist, to do whatever one wanted. It also meant that I lost interest in doing art and pretty much stopped.”²⁸ The reason Danto stopped is the same reason one will not be an Abstract Expressionist one week and a Pop Artist the next: art means to express something in a necessary way (the justification for embodying rather than explaining is that the embodiment is the only way to explain adequately), but if all modes of expression are equal, there is no reason for using any particular one of them and art ceases to have a *raison d'être*.

One could, of course, continue to function as an artist by suffering under what, from the perspective of Danto's art history, is the delusion that one was discovering the next art that was both necessary and inevitable. Danto thinks this is a delusion because he thinks that the definition of art he has generated cannot be made inoperable by some counterexample. But Hegel, with the same definition, thought the same thing. Danto's art history could also seem to need to be superseded when the aim he gave art, to arrive at its own self-definition, no longer seemed to be the only one or even the most vital one and some other aim superseded it, demanding an art-historical narrative that both captured and superseded his. But, just as from a meta-artistic, art-historical perspective that posited a theoretically necessary end to art history, one could posit that all notions artists might have of their necessity and inevitability were delusions, from what I shall call a metahistorical, aesthetic historiographical perspective, one could know that each claim to have discovered the proper history of art, which will, by its nature, always posit an end to art as part of verifying its own narrative as the one right one, will be superseded.

Prior to ending with this artificial metaposition, however, I want to recall why end-of-art theories produced better art criticism than those narratively free, timeless views of art. In questioning Danto's theory of embodiment as too exclusive, one critic has noted that if all it takes to be a work of art is to be about something and to embody its meaning, then actual Brillo boxes are also art: they after all embody in their packaging the message that Brillo pads clean effectively and efficiently.²⁹ But, of course, Brillo boxes are a kind of artwork, as Danto has allowed, though he invokes a new, Kantian, criterion, by noting that commercial art it is not free art.³⁰ He does not make the next step, explicitly at least, which is to note that Warhol's *Brillo Box* does not really question the difference between artworks and non-artworks (Duchamp more clearly does that) but rather the difference between fine art and commercial art. And whether or not Danto would accept this reading, he has responded to it by showing the value of Warhol's artwork:

Pop redeemed the world in an intoxicating way. I have the most vivid recollection of standing at an intersection in some American city, waiting to be picked up. There were used-car lots on two corners, with swags of plastic pennants fluttering in the breeze and brash signs proclaiming unbeatable deals, crazy prices, insane bargains.... I was educated to hate all this. I would have found it intolerably crass and tacky when I was growing up an aesthete.... I think it still is for someone like Clement Greenberg or Hilton Kramer. But I thought, Good heavens. This is just remarkable!³¹

²⁸ Ibid., 123.

²⁹ Carroll, “Danto's New Definition of Art,” 387.

³⁰ Arthur C. Danto, “The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense,” *History and Theory* 37, no. 4 (December 1998): 141.

³¹ Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992), 141–42.

There is little doubt that Hegel would have found the commercialism tacky too. And if one must say that Danto's criticism frequently lacks much of Hegel's sensitivity to form, it nevertheless more than compensates for that lack with its interpretive acuity. But the larger point is that this moment of seeing art redeem the world in a very special and a very unlikely way can occur for Danto only because of his theory of embodiment made significant by its philosophical project, and that theory, like all theories, necessitates positing that when art reaches this moment, its project is over. And if that project is *the aesthetic project* (and what project for art worth having mustn't, to protect art from becoming mere ornamentalism, become *the project*), then its end is also the end of art.

I have characterized the happy death of art in my title as a long one. I might more aptly have titled it as a regularly recurring one. I would have titled it deathless, but that too would be the kind of judgment of substantive philosophy of which Danto has taught us to be suspicious. After all, proclaiming that art will not end is as much a statement about what we cannot know as is proclaiming that it will come to an end at such and such a moment or that it has come to an end. But giving art a project will be to give it an end. And understanding art as having a project turns out to be vital for hearing what it may have to say to us. Perhaps in this sense there is also a similarity to deathbed statements. We give the statements of the dying, even in law, an attention we do not to all the quotidian statements they make in their lives. There is an urgency to endedness that neither eternal truth nor activities unconstrained by purpose may have. Kant's phrase about beauty that we attribute to it "purposiveness without purpose" has been translated (badly) as "finality without end." Perhaps in that translational vagary the theories of Hegel and Danto may come together with that of Kant's seemingly more formal, antihistorical aesthetic. □