

Arthur Danto and the Political Re-Enfranchisement of Art

Noël Carroll
(City University of New York, USA)

Abstract A recurring theme of Arthur Danto's philosophy of art is that of the philosophical disenfranchisement of art. This is Danto's version of the Ancient Quarrel between poetry and philosophy. In terms of cultural politics, philosophers – since Socrates met Ion – have attempted to demote the authority of poets (and, by extension, artists in general). Philosophers have sought to achieve this by means of a number of strategies – from the denial that art can provide knowledge to the idea that art is detached from the practical, including the political, life of the culture at large. Danto's own 'end of art' thesis may be the most recent variation on this motif. However, even if Danto's philosophy of art history contributes to the philosophical disenfranchisement of art, Danto's philosophy of art can be interpreted as a way of re-enfranchising art politically.

Summary 1 Disenfranchising Art. – 2 Danto and the Possibility of Political Art. – 3 Summary.

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1 Disenfranchising Art

By the time Plato recorded the adventures of Socrates, the rivalry between poetry and philosophy was spoken of as 'ancient'. The crux of the matter was this: Homer was said to be the educator of the Greeks, but Plato thought a more suitable candidate for the job was his own teacher, Socrates. Thus, Plato waged full-scale war against the poets, culminating with the recommendation that they be banished from his Republic as Socrates had been banished from Athens (in part due to the way in which he was represented by poets like Aristophanes).

Danto calls Plato's revenge-quest the "philosophical disenfranchisement of art". It began in ancient Greece and it has continued in various ways into our own time. Moreover, with the philosophical disenfranchisement of art comes political disenfranchisement and this in two ways: 1) art is disenfranchised as a serious player in the realm of cultural politics in general, and 2) in the realm of politics proper art is denied its voice.

Just as Plato rejected the idea that the sophists were fit to be the educators of the Greeks, so too did he distrust the poets and artists. In his first skirmish with the poets, Plato uses the rhapsode Ion – the singer of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – to stalk Homer. Socrates repeatedly stresses that

rhapsodes and, by extension, poets don't know anything. And if they don't know anything, then they clearly have nothing to teach. Thus the Greeks should look elsewhere for their tutors. And it is hard to resist the surmise that Plato is implicitly recommending that they look towards those who specialize in the love of knowledge, aka the philosophers.

In his *Republic*, Plato's arguments heat up. The artists cannot offer the Greeks knowledge, because, since what they describe or depict by way of imitations are particulars, they are at a third remove from genuine knowledge – i.e., knowledge of the Forms. This disenfranchises the artists philosophically in the sense that artists are said to lack access to the font of philosophical knowledge, the Platonic Ideas. But, as Danto argues, it also denies that art has political efficacy.

Danto writes:

It has been insufficiently appreciated how political the theory [of art as imitation] is, for it has the effect, if credited, of paralyzing the artist: if audiences appreciate that art is illusion, sufficiently like it to be mistaken for it but situated outside reality, so that it could have neither the causes nor the effects of reality – an idle epiphenomenon – then art is metaphysically ephemeralized. It can tell us nothing we

The present paper is meant to be a chapter of the author's upcoming publication on Arthur Danto's philosophy of art. The curators would thus like to thank the author for this exclusive preview.

do not already know, and the artist is reduced to a mere simulator, with knowledge of nothing save how to imitate. So he cannot have the authority of someone who works in reality – like a carpenter, or a navigator or a doctor – or who understands how to know reality, like the philosopher, rather than, as a mirror, someone who knows only how to render appearances. Mimesis was, then, less a theory of art than a philosophical aggression against art (one which, by the way, makes Aristophanes impossible), vaporizing art by situating it in a plane where it can do no harm because of how dangerous it was when not in that plane and interacting effectively with political reality. How deeply this theory of ephemerality has been internalized by artists themselves is testified by Auden's thought that "poetry makes nothing happen". (1992, 185)²

Here we see that Danto suspects that Plato not only disenfranchised art philosophically, but also, in effect, attempted to strip it of instrumentality altogether by consigning it to a world elsewhere – or, perhaps more accurately, to a world nowhere. Art was thus theoretically stigmatized as inconsequential. Moreover, this separation of art from the world of practical affairs (including political affairs) widened exponentially with the development of the aesthetic theory of art.

The foundation for the aesthetic theory of art was laid in the eighteenth century, when the notion of disinterested pleasure was mobilized to characterize the experience of beauty. Beauty, it was said, was a sensation of delight untainted by interest. This notion figured prominently in Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment. Furthermore, insofar as it was commonplace to associate art proper with beauty – as in the phrase the *beaux arts* – it was but a short step from correlating beauty with disinterested pleasure to characterizing art works as artifacts designed or intended to afford experiences of disinterested pleasure. Such a conception of art, of course, disenfranchised art politically, since politics is a sphere where interests compete.

Political art would be, by definition, art that is committed to the advancement of certain interests. But then political art is not really art by the lights of the aesthetic theory of art; for political art stirs up interested pleasure. The pleasure provoked by a national anthem, for example, is

mixed up with the pleasure of pride one feels for her country. That is, the music is designed to reinforce a very interested pleasure. So-called political art, it turns out, according to the aesthetic theory of art, is not actually art at all, but pseudo-art, something art-like, but alloyed with the arousal of interest.

Authentic art is putatively dedicated to stimulating disinterested pleasure, pleasure that has nothing to do with any other social interests, including political ones. The aesthetic theories of Schopenhauer and Bell explicitly proclaim that art lifts us out of or releases us from the everyday, including everyday politics. Art is autonomous which means separate from every other social practice – cognitive, moral, economic, religious, and political.

That art is autonomous intellectually repeats the theme of the 'philosophical' disenfranchisement of art. Art does not serve up knowledge; it is not in the service of cognitive interests. But the aesthetic theory of art also disenfranchises art politically by separating art conceptually from political interests, among all the rest.

To a certain extent there is something truly ironic about this consequence of the aesthetic theory art, since it was arguably motivated, at least in part, as a firebreak against the sort of censorship of art that Plato and moralists ever since have sponsored. The aesthetic theory maintains that, because art is autonomous, when it is approached properly – that is, by one possessed of an aesthetic attitude and stationed at a suitably distanced, aesthetic remove – it poses no threat to the common good. That is why otherwise morally incendiary works are given a pass, if they have artistic merit – why, indeed, artistic merit is said to be redeeming.

Art supposedly transcends worldly interests; it lifts us out of the realm of human desire; it promotes experiences that we are said to value for their own sake. Art is free in the sense that it is free from interest and it is claimed that artists should be free to explore whatever they wish. Genuine art *qua* art is separate from the rest of society. This viewpoint, Danto maintains, "allowed the artist perfect freedom, but at the cost of total and logically guaranteed harmlessness" (1992, 188).

Perhaps, to a certain degree, the aesthetic theory of art was predicated upon putting in check Plato and subsequent censor's anxieties about

2 Specifically see "Dangerous Art", 179-198.

the harmfulness of art by declaring art categorically harmless or, at least, useless (not sub-serving any interests). Yet that prophylactic was bought at the high price of marginality. Danto may exaggerate the situation when he contends that the whole of Western philosophy has been involved in a massive and systematic effort to disenfranchise art from any practical role in life (Danto 1992, 192). But, like many effective hyperboles, this one points us in the direction of truth.

Art has been insulated theoretically from the rest of social life, including politics, to the point that most of our contemporaries do not take art (or, at least, high art) very seriously; it does not, quite evidently, shape political thinking significantly. Art has freed itself from servitude to church and country, but that freedom in large measure is a matter of neglect or, if attention is paid to it, the art work is framed in terms of an almost willful diminution of its efficacy – as when Robert Mapplethorpe’s sexual politics were explicated-away by his defenders (!) in terms of mere formal designs.

Perhaps the most recent disenfranchisement of art has been served up by Danto, himself. He has argued that art has come to an end (cf. “The End of Art”, 1986, 81-116). What he means by his end-of-art thesis is that a certain progressive, developmental process has come to a resting point and can proceed no further. The historical process that Danto has in mind is the project – often referred to as Modernism – of the self-definition of art by means of art. That is, artists – or ambitious artists – since the time of Manet have, so it is argued, been engaged in trying to discover and acknowledge the essence of their art forms by means of works in the very art forms they sought to define. Painters, for instance, were gradually homing-in on the nature of painting, which many of them thought was involved in, among other things, its two-dimensionality. This program, of course, was philosophical inasmuch as it was concerned with the ontology of painting, its conditions of possibility.

The Modernist project with respect to painting presumed that whatever property or properties defined paintings as such, they would be perceptible properties – properties one could eyeball. Danto, however, argues that the Modernist endeavor was up-ended by works like Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box*. Why? Because *Brillo Box* ostensibly revealed that whatever defined art, it could not be something perceptible. Why? Because *Brillo Box* by Warhol is an art work, but none of the hundreds of thousands of *Brillo Boxes* by Proctor and Gam-

ble are art works. Therefore, whatever it is that is constitutory of art status cannot be discerned by the naked eye. It must be indiscernible.

This marks the end not only of the Modernist movement, but of the project of the self-definition of art by means of art. Why? Because artists, such as painters, work by means of appearances and, if that which defines art is indiscernible, then the artist can’t foreground it by means of paint. An artist, like Warhol, advanced the question of the nature of art as far along as he could working within the resources of appearances; Warhol, Danto likes to say, got the problem of the definition of art into its proper philosophical form by framing it as a issue of indiscernibilia. But now the question of the nature of art belongs to philosophers, folks, who in the tradition of Plato, can penetrate through appearances to essences.

Just as Homer’s team had to be replaced by Socrates’s guys, so the Modernists have to give way to Danto and his crew. The philosophical project of the definition of art can no longer be entrusted to artists, because it has left the realm of the senses. Art, with respect to the project of self-definition, comes to a halt, blocked by a conceptual impasse it cannot surmount. And thus art is disenfranchised philosophically once again.

However, even if Danto’s end-of-art thesis disenfranchises art philosophically, it does not disenfranchise art politically. In fact, political engagement is one of the things that art can pursue now that the attempt to define art by means of art has come to a halt. Moreover, Danto’s philosophy of art also makes political art possible, because of the way in which Danto’s approach vehemently rejects the sorts of aesthetic theories of art that reduce the status of art to that of something separate but harmless (or ineffectual) politically and otherwise.

2 Danto and the Possibility of Political Art

By taking the task of defining art out of the hands of artists and appropriating it for himself and his guild, Danto disenfranchises art philosophically. And undoubtedly, in terms of cultural politics, this might be read as scoring a point for philosophy and against art with respect to their ancient rivalry. Yet, at the same time, both Danto’s philosophy of art history and his philosophy of art are theoretical contributions to the rehabilitation of the possibility of political

art after Modernism.

An evolutionary and programmatic conception of the history of art – like the reflexive Modernist project of self-definition – while freeing the artist from the hurly-burly interests of everyday affairs, nevertheless, at the same time, enslaved the artist to an agenda. Once the two dimensionality of painting was disclosed and acknowledged, other questions followed, such as questions about the nature of the painting's edge, and so forth. A next step would always be mandated, until the project of self-definition was complete.

In conversation, Danto once described to me the way in which he imagined the Modernist program of interrogating the essence of painting. He envisioned the artists like pharaoh's slaves, chained to great, rectangular slabs of stone and hectoring onward by critics liberally administering tongue-lashings. And so it would continue, until the pyramid of Modernism was finished. But, by subverting the intellectual sustainability of Modernism through his articulation of the significance of Warhol's work, Danto freed the slaves. Construction of the pyramid could be abandoned in good conscience and artists were once again free.

Free to do what? Free to return to serving largely human ends; free to play a role in the enhancement of human life (cf. "Approaching the End of Art", Danto 1987, 217-218). Free to express sadness and joy; free to console, heal, and outrage. Free to warn or inspire. And this, of course, includes the freedom to produce political art, divorced from any pressure to acknowledge the essence of art. In liberating itself from the philosophical project of self-definition, art is philosophically disenfranchised, but in a way that opens up the possibility of being politically re-enfranchised.

Several other elements of Danto's philosophy are also extremely congenial to the re-enfranchisement of political art-making. Danto's philosophy of art, for example, is adamantly opposed to the aesthetic theory of art, one of the most influential philosophical devices for disenfranchising art. Danto is opposed to formalist versions of the aesthetic theory as found in authors like Clive Bell insofar as Danto maintains that the properties that make something an artwork are indiscernible, whereas significant form, Bell's favourite criterion for art status, is the sort of thing that the eye can track.

Furthermore, Danto rejects any theory of art that maintains that the elicitation of an aesthetic experience is the hallmark of art status. He argues that this cannot be the case, since, in crucial

instances, we would not know whether or not we should react aesthetically to a candidate, unless we already knew it to be a work of art (cf. 1981, 94-95). In order to respond to the aesthetic properties of a Pollock drip painting, one must already regard it as a work of art, rather than as a canvas paint-rag.

Therefore, undergoing an aesthetic experience cannot be taken as criterial for art status. Hence, the aesthetic theory of art is compromised and, with its downfall, the mixing of art with mundane, other-than-art-world interests, including political ones, can once again be embraced as legitimate.

In many of the most influential versions of the aesthetic theory of art, aesthetic experience is supposed to be different from and standing in contrast to cognitive experience. Relatedly, we are said to value an aesthetic experience for its own sake, not because of some interest it serves, like the acquisition of knowledge. The knowledge to be garnered from a work of art is not germane to its art status because it is not a suitable focus for aesthetic experience.

On one very important view of the matter, cognition and aesthetic experience are twain. Thus, the communication of knowledge is, strictly speaking, beside the point with respect to art and aesthetic experience. Even though for millennia, people from Aristotle to Hegel, along with many ordinary folks in between, thought of the communication of knowledge as part of art's function, under the aesthetic theory of art, catering to the interests of cognition is at best irrelevant to aesthetic experience and, in many cases, a downright aesthetic distraction. Because of the hard line that the aesthetic theory of art erects between aesthetic experience and cognition, art is shoved out of the knowledge game and, thereby, philosophically disenfranchised, once again.

But Danto rejects not only the aesthetic theory of art, but also the notion of aesthetic experience or appreciation that it appears to presuppose. For Danto, art must have content – it needs to be about something. In order to respond appropriately to an art work, on Danto's account, cognition must be engaged. The viewer, reader, or listener must figure out what the work is about – must interpret it – in order to appreciate it. Interpretation and appreciation are so closely related in Danto's view that they fade into each other. Knowing what the work is about – and in many cases applying it to one's own life – is part and parcel of our normal commerce with art works and not some alien excrescence, as many of the leading versions of the aesthetic theory of

art would have it.

The pertinence of Danto's willingness to countenance the cognition/interpretation of the art work as a large part of aesthetic appreciation – in lieu of the art work's possession of content – is a boon to the political re-enfranchisement of art. Art works have content – they are not simply significant forms – and that content may be political content. Furthermore, attending to that content is part of what it is to appreciate the art work appropriately. Thus, where the content of the work is political, taking in its point is precisely what we ought to do aesthetically. Interpreting and coming to see *Three Penny Opera* in terms of the ways in which it shows that the social conditions of capitalism abet exaggerated egoism (“What keeps a man alive?”) is part of what it is to appreciate Brecht's work correctly.

In addition to holding that ‘aboutness’ (i.e., being about something) is a necessary condition for art, Danto also believes that art works are essentially rhetorical (1981, specifically see Ch. 7). The aim of rhetoric, of course, is to move audiences to see things a certain way, to have certain feelings towards them, and to prompt definite attitudes in viewers, listeners and/or readers. Rhetoric employs tropes like metaphor, ellipses, and enthymemes in order to draw the audience into its web of beliefs and feelings. Likewise art works are rhetorical. They are meant to transform the world by transforming the ways in which audiences view circumstances and feel about them.

Art works cannot be isolated from the world outside of the art world. For, the artist depends upon our beliefs and emotions regarding the world we inhabit in order to prompt the perspectives and arouse the feelings the artist intends us to take toward the circumstances her art works are about. And, as well, the artist typically intends that we take those perspectives and feelings and use them as a model or a metaphor for our own lives.

With regard to the rhetorical dimension of art, Danto says:

it is not all that difficult to find rhetorical aspects in the most exalted art, and it may just be one of the main offices of art less to represent the world than to represent it in such a way as to cause us to view it with certain attitudes

and with a special vision. This had been the explicit aim in the period of the High Baroque in Italy, where artists were mandated to cause feelings in viewers in order to heighten and confirm faith; and it remains the clear aim of Socialist Realist and generally political art in the world today. But it is difficult to imagine art that does not aim at some effect and insofar as some transformation in or some affirmation of the way the world is by those who experience it fully. (1981, 167)

Danto's view that a rhetorical dimension is analytical to the concept of art obviously clears the way for the possibility of political art making. Of course, it does not require that art be political (i.e., be about political subject matter)³ as certain Politicized Post Modern Art Theorists prescribe.⁴ But it does make political content a permissible terrain for artistic exploration, one that had been declared out-of-bounds for so long by the concerted efforts of Modernist critics, on the one hand, and aesthetic theorists of art, on the other. Danto's philosophy of the nature of art reverses the political disenfranchisement of art secured by the aesthetic theory of art, just as his philosophy of art history repeals the political disenfranchisement of art imposed by Modernism.

Of course, although politically re-enfranchised, not all artists choose to vote. Some artists will pursue political aims, others, not. Some like Roy Lichtenstein may be preoccupied with debates internal to the art world, while others, like Judy Chicago, are committed to mixing it up politically. Danto's end-of-art-thesis predicts and approves of pluralism. But under that umbrella, political artists need not worry that they will be derided as pseudo-artists. For, on Danto's account of art, political art making as an instantiation of the rhetorical aspiration to move audiences to adopt certain beliefs about, perspectives upon, and attitudes and feelings toward the circumstances the art works are about is a function that belongs to the essence of art, properly so-called.

And, for Danto, the role of the critic in response to political art is finally to interpret what the art work is about and then to explain how whatever it is about is embodied or expressed. This, of course, is precisely what Danto does with respect to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

³ Sometimes Danto tends to elide the rhetorical and the political in a way that suggests that all art is political insofar as it is rhetorical. However, I think that this dilutes the concept of the political more than is useful.

⁴ Politicized Post Modernism will be discussed in the another chapter of the upcoming publication.

in Washington, D.C. He identifies Maya Ying Lin's edifice in terms of it discharging of the public function of commemoration by creating, in effect, a monumental book of the dead, a political project - of which Danto's rhetoric encourages our approval - which promotes solace and reconciliation over a great national tragedy (cf. "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial", 1987, 116). Whereas Modernist criticism ill-suits art that performs social services, Danto's art criticism is open to it. And that too is part of Danto's contribution to the political re-enfranchisement of art.

3 Summary

The theme of the philosophical disenfranchisement of art is one that Danto has traced from the time of the Greeks into the present. It arrogates the domain of knowledge to philosophy, and, in one way or another, denies that art has anything worthwhile to teach. But, also, with the attempt to disenfranchise art philosophically, there is also an attempt to disenfranchise art politically. Sometimes this is connected to the idea that art has no claims on knowledge, including political knowledge. But at other times, it is connected to the theory that art is completely divorced from the realm of practical affairs, including political ones.

Danto, while rehearsing, in his own terms, the philosophical disenfranchisement of art, interestingly enough, facilitates the political re-enfranchisement of art. His philosophy of art history

sounds the death knell of the purist project of Modernist reflexivity, thereby freeing artists to create as they will, including, should they so desire, political works of art.

However, Danto's philosophy of art also allows for political art because 1) it dethrones a major theoretical impediment to political art, viz., the aesthetic theory of art, and 2) it connects art essentially to cognition and rhetoric, thereby making room for art works that engage cognition politically and address audiences rhetorically.

And lastly, Danto's art criticism is nicely suited to handling political art, since political art will be about something - some political message or sentiment, often one that is progressive in nature - whose embodiment Danto can explain while also, in many cases, endorse.

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