

# An Illustrated Guide to Arthur Danto's "The End of Art"

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AN ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO  
ARTHUR DANTO'S  
**this is** ↗ **the end**



In an obituary for the *New York Times*, Ken Johnson described Arthur Danto (1924–2013) as “one of the most widely read art critics of the Postmodern era.” Danto, who was both a critic and a professor of philosophy, is celebrated for his accessible and affable prose. Despite this, Danto's best-known essay, “The End of Art,”

continues to be cited more than it is understood. What was Danto's argument? Is art really over? And if so, what are the implications for art history and art-making?

Danto's twin passions were art and philosophy. He initially embarked on a career as an artist (much of his work is now part of the Wayne State University art collection) before pursuing an academic career in philosophy. In 1951, Danto began teaching at Columbia University, earning his doctorate the next year. He was an art critic for *The Nation* between 1984–2009 and was a regular contributor to publications such as *Artforum*.

In 1964, Danto visited an exhibition of Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes at the Stable Gallery, New York. The show changed his life.



Arthur Danto and Andy Warhol

It wasn't Warhol's subject matter that shocked the philosopher, but its form. Whereas Warhol's paintings of coke bottles and soup cans were visual representations, the artist's Brillo box sculptures — silkscreened plywood facsimiles of actual Brillo boxes — were virtually indistinguishable from the real thing. If one placed one of Warhol's sculptures beside a real Brillo box, who could tell the difference? What made one of the boxes an artwork and the other an ordinary object? Danto outlined his conclusions in an essay entitled "The Artworld" (1964):

What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo box is a certain **theory** of art. It is theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is. [Warhol's Brillo boxes] could not have been art fifty years ago. The world has to be ready for certain things, the artworld no less than the real one. It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible.

Essentially, Warhol's Brillo boxes are art because the work has an audience which understands it via a certain *theory* (to use Danto's term) of what art can be. The artworld (comprised of critics, curators, collectors, dealers, etc.) plays a part in which theories are embraced or snubbed. As Danto surmises, "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry — an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld." This idea, later expanded upon by the philosopher George Dickie, is also popularly known as the institutional theory of art. The question lingering in the background is how and why these so-called theories change and develop over time.

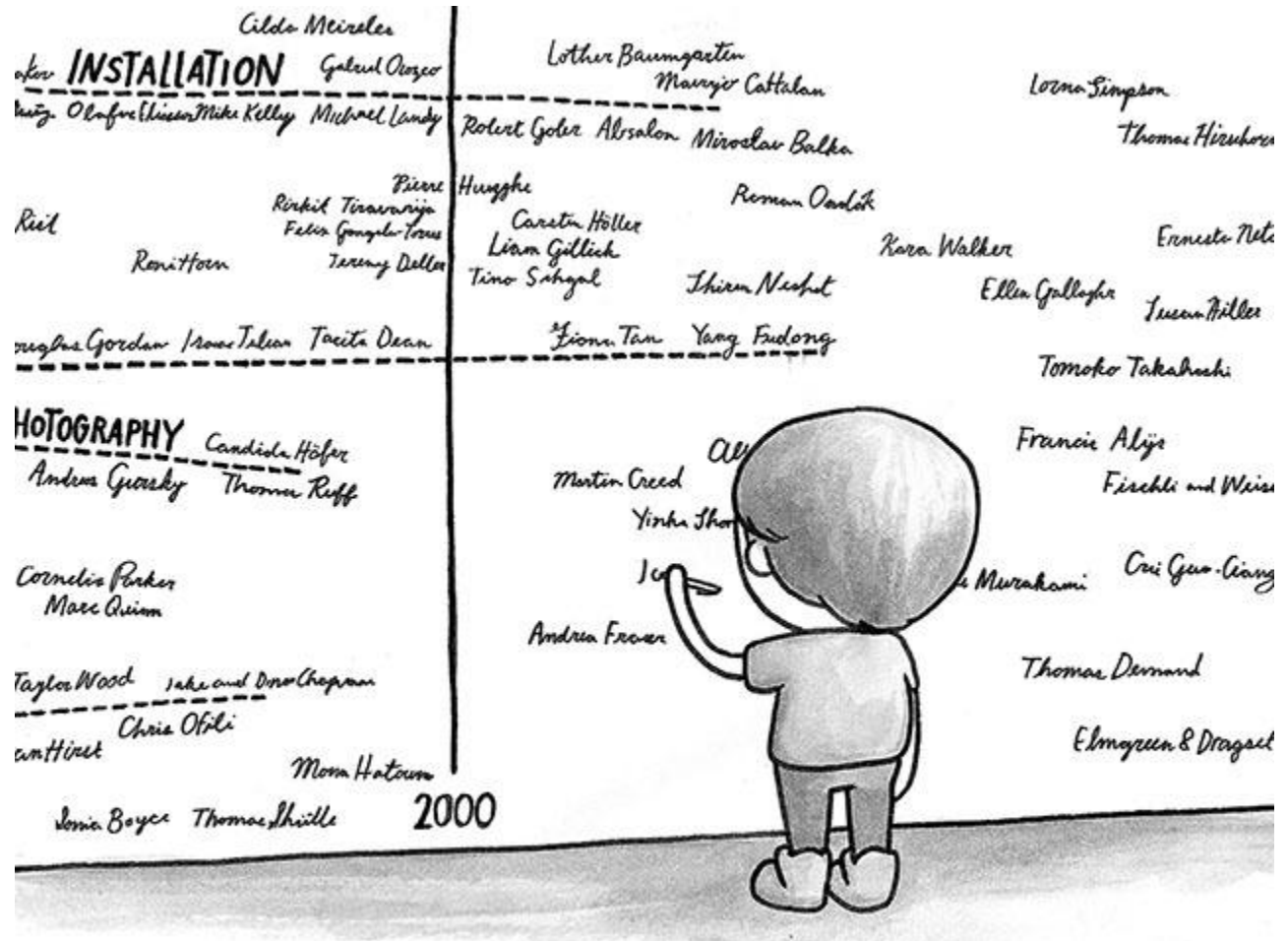
Danto was fascinated by historical change. What made Warhol's Brillo boxes acceptable as art in 1964? What would Neo-classical painter Jacques-Louis David have thought of Warhol's work? How would Leonardo da Vinci, Phidias, or a caveman react? Do the Brillo boxes represent some sort of art historical progress? Was art history heading in a discernible direction? Danto's investigations into history, progress, and art theory, coalesced into his best-known essay, "The End of Art."

Before tackling "The End of Art," we need to briefly consider how the history of art is traditionally understood.

Art history is generally thought of as a linear progression of one movement or style after another (Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, etc.), punctuated by the influence of individual geniuses (Delacroix, Courbet, Monet, Cézanne ...).

This fundamental approach is the visual basis of Sara Fanelli's 40-meter-long timeline of 20th-century art (which was formerly displayed on the Tate Modern's second floor). The timeline pinpoints the historical inception of

particular movements, while also naming key historic artists (note how Fanelli's timeline trails off after the year 2000. We'll come back to this later).



An illustration of Sara Fanelli's Tate timeline

Fanelli's timeline is part of a long tradition of attempting to visually map historic progression, a nebulous and tricky concept. The first director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr, famously designed his own timeline of 20th-century art, as did George Maciunas, the founder of Fluxus (Maciunas was *really* into diagrams; he reportedly spent five years on his incomplete 6 x 12-foot art historical timeline). These timelines often implicitly support certain ideas about what art is, what it was, and where it's headed. One such concept that appears regularly throughout the history of art (albeit, in varying forms), is *mimesis*: the imitation and representation of reality.

Art historians have long argued that the ancient Greeks sought to imitate the human body with ever greater degrees of verisimilitude, a model that was resurrected during the Renaissance. This concept holds that artists

should seek to master the imitation of reality (the story of the painting contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius typifies this ideal). A number of early art historians sought to demonstrate how various artists had progressed (and in some cases, stunted) this ultimate goal, and in doing so, engineered one of the dominant *narratives* of art history. The result is a basic (and *very* reductive) interpretation of art history. Summed up crudely, it resembles something like this: The craftsman of the so-called Dark Ages ‘forgot’ the mimetic skills and values of the ancients. Classical ideals were then resurrected during the Renaissance and were constantly reevaluated up to the late nineteenth century. By the early 20th century, art had fractured into a multitude of concurrent movements.

The story Danto tells in “The End of Art” follows on from this model. According to Danto, the commitment to mimesis began to falter during the nineteenth century due to the rise of photography and film. These new perceptual technologies led artists to abandon the imitation of nature, and as a result, 20th-century artists began to explore the question of art’s own identity. What was art? What should it do? How should art be defined? In asking such questions, art had become self-conscious. Movements such as Cubism questioned the process of visual representation, and Marcel Duchamp exhibited a urinal as an artwork. The twentieth century oversaw a rapid succession of different movements and ‘isms,’ all with their own notions of what art could be. “All there is at the end,” Danto wrote, “is theory, art having finally become vaporized in a dazzle of pure thought about itself, and remaining, as it were, solely as the object of its own theoretical consciousness.”



Marcel Duchamp

Warhol's Brillo boxes and Duchamp's readymades demonstrated to Danto that art had no discernible direction in which to progress. The grand narrative of progression — of one movement reacting to another — had ended. Art had reached a **post-historical** state. All that remains is pure theory:

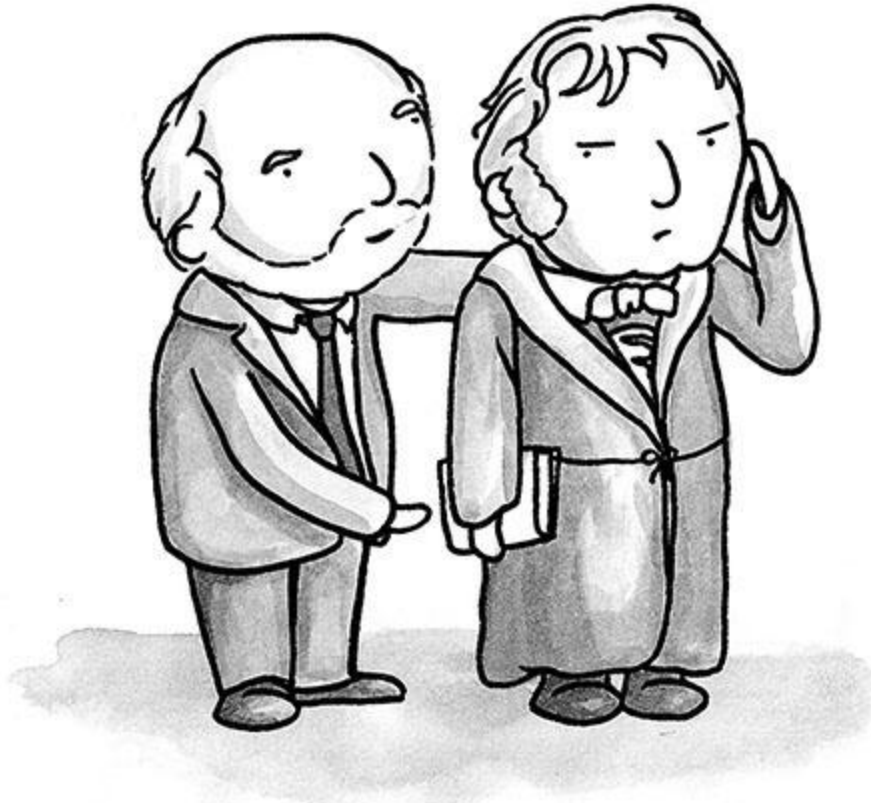
Of course, there will go on being art-making. But art-makers, living in what I like to call the post-historical period of art, will bring into existence works which lack the historical importance or meaning we have for a long time come to expect [...] The story comes to an end, but not the characters, who live on, happily ever after doing

whatever they do in their post-narrational insignificance [...] The age of pluralism is upon us...when one direction is as good as another.

In hindsight, it's easy to see how Danto began to approach this conclusion during the 1960s. Movements such as Pop art and Fluxus were actively breaking down the barriers between art and the everyday. Relativist philosophies such as poststructuralism and existentialism were in full swing, critiquing the narratives and certainties which Western academia had previously held dear. Having blown open the definition of what it could be, art had undermined its own belief in linear progression. After all, what movement or 'ism' could logically follow the dematerialization of the art object (conceptualism) or the pervasive skepticism of grand theories and ideologies (postmodernism)?

Danto believed that any subsequent movements were nonessential in that they would no longer contribute to the pursuit of art's self-definition. "We are entering a more stable, more happy period of artistic endeavor where the basic needs to which art has always been responsive may again be met," he wrote. Although Danto claimed the end of art wasn't in itself a bad thing, he nonetheless appeared to later lament its demise. In his review of the 2008 Whitney Biennial, Danto lambasted the themeless state of the artworld. "It is heading in no direction to speak of," the philosopher wrote.

Whilst devising "The End of Art," Danto was "astonished" to turn to one of the unlikeliest of sources, the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831).



Arthur Danto and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Hegel's philosophy was not in vogue during the '60s, but his teleological understanding of history served as a useful template for Danto's conclusions. Hegel understood progress as an overarching **dialectic** — a process of self-realization and understanding that culminates in pure knowledge. This state is ultimately achieved through philosophy, though it is initially preceded by an interrogation into the qualities of religion and art. As Danto summarized in a later essay entitled "The Disenfranchisement of Art" (1984):

When art internalizes its own history, when it becomes self-conscious of its history as it has come to be in our time, so that its consciousness of its history forms part of its nature, it is perhaps unavoidable that it should turn into philosophy at last. And when it does so, well, in an important sense, art comes to an end.



Danto is not the only philosopher to have adopted an Hegelian dialectic. Both Francis Fukuyama and Karl Marx utilized Hegelianism to reach their own historical conclusions. Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy and free market capitalism represented the zenith of Western civilization, whilst Marx argued that communism would replace capitalism (neither of these developments have quite panned out).

Sara Fanelli's timeline appears to validate Danto's conclusions. After the year 2000, there are no movements or -isms, only individual artists. The movements that are listed towards the end of the century aren't really movements at all. The term "YBA" (Young British Artists) is a useful catch-all for a diverse group of artists, some of whom happened to go to the same school (Goldsmiths). Likewise, "installation" is not a movement but a means of presenting art. Recent terms such as "zombie formalism" (aka zombie abstraction) appear to confirm that we are living in an age of post-historical malaise.



(Zombie) Clement Greenberg

Though widely read, Danto's theories are not wholly beloved by the art industry. Artists don't necessarily want to hear that their work has no developmental potential. Danto's work also presents a challenge for the art market which relies on perceived historic importance as a unique selling point. He predicted that the demand on the market would require the "illusion of unending novelty," later citing 1980s Neo-Expressionism as an example of the industry's need to continually recycle and repackage prior aesthetic forms and ideas, a charge that parallels the contemporary debate regarding zombie formalism.

Danto's critics typically challenge the philosopher's reliance on traditional art historical models. In *Danto and His Critics* (first published in 1993) Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins discuss the "fallacy of linear history," namely that our pre-dominant art historical narratives are largely a product of their retelling:

As a person (or a culture) gets older, the story gets solidified and embellished in the retelling; and of course, it gets longer. Early incidents and events are recast with forward-looking meaning they could not have possibly have had at the time.

If one rejects the developmental, Western art narrative that Danto describes in "The End of Art," then the structure required for Danto's Hegelian understanding of art collapses.

It's important to recognize that art history is largely built upon the biases and subjective opinions of others. Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), the so-called father of art history and author of *The Lives of the Most Excellent painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550), famously favored Florentine artists over those working in Northern Europe. Over the course of the twentieth-century, the art historical perspectives of academics such as Ernst Gombrich, Heinrich Wölfflin, and Erwin Panofsky were rigorously reassessed. Classical scholars have since problematized the mimetic interpretation of ancient Greek art. Most contemporary medieval scholars reject the term "Dark Ages" for example, since it is implicitly judgmental and ignores the fact that early Christian art had a completely different set of aesthetic priorities. The history of art becomes far more nuanced and complex when studied in microcosm. When one considers the wealth of methodologies available to art historians (iconography, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and so forth), Danto's conclusions look all the more narrow and reductive.

Danto also conveniently excludes work which challenges his art historical thesis, namely non-Western art. How do Japanese printmakers — whose perspectival and mimetic priorities differed radically from Western standards — fit into Danto's art historical narrative? Danto does mention Japanese prints in "The End of Art," although the question of how they impact his developmental interpretation of art history is completely sidestepped. "We have to decide whether [Japanese print makers] had a different pictographic culture or simply were retarded by technological slowness in achieving solidities," Danto wrote.



Despite these criticisms, Danto's supporters argue that his theories are vindicated by a perceptible lack of direction in the art world. It could be argued that Danto's conclusions hold up, even after one dispenses with his Hegelian framework. Has art merely paralyzed itself by overanalyzing the course of history? How can we ever adequately predict the future from the vantage of the present? Danto directly addresses this dilemma at the start of "The End of Art":

In 1952, the most advanced galleries were showing Pollock, De Kooning, Gottlieb, and Klein, which would have been temporally unimaginable in 1882. Nothing so much belongs to its own time as an age's glimpses into the future: Buck Rogers carries the decorative idioms of the 1930s into the twenty-first century ... the science fiction novels of the 1950s project the sexual morality of the Eisenhower era [...] The future is a kind of mirror in which we can show only ourselves, though it seems to us a window through which we may see things to come.

Or as Danto quotes Leonardo da Vinci, *ogni dipintore dipinge se* ("every painter paints himself").