

The Philosophy of Art History: A Technical Analysis of Arthur Danto's Post-Historical Thesis

Published: January 8, 2025 | Index ID: #119

The publication of Arthur Danto's **After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History** marked a seismic shift in the field of aesthetics and art criticism. Danto, a preeminent philosopher and art critic, proposed a thesis that was often misunderstood as a literal cessation of artistic production. On the contrary, Danto's argument suggests that art has entered a "post-historical" phase—a state where the internal narrative of art history, which had been driven by a search for its own essence, has finally reached its logical conclusion. To understand this framework, one must delve into the complex intersection of Hegelian philosophy, the **Institutional Theory of Art**, and the ontological crisis precipitated by the rise of Pop Art in the 1960s.

The Theoretical Genesis: From Hegel to the Artworld

Danto's thesis is deeply rooted in the teleological philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel famously suggested that art would eventually be superseded by philosophy as the primary medium for Spirit (Geist) to achieve self-knowledge. For Danto, this transition occurred in the mid-20th century. Before this point, art history was defined by a series of successive movements—Renaissance mimesis, the Impressionist obsession with light, and the Modernist focus on the medium itself (as championed by Clement Greenberg). Each of these eras operated within what Danto calls the **"Pale of History"**—a period where art was governed by a master narrative or a specific set of exclusionary rules regarding what constituted "valid" art.

The rupture occurred when art became self-reflexive to the point of becoming philosophy. Danto identifies the pivotal moment as the 1964 exhibition of Andy Warhol's **Brillo Boxes** at the Stable Gallery. The Brillo Box posed a profound ontological question: Why is Warhol's box art while the identical box in a grocery store is merely an artifact of commerce? This **Problem of Indiscernibles** led Danto to conclude that the difference between art and non-art is not something that can be perceived by the eye; it is a matter of theory, context, and the "Artworld."

The Mechanism of Indiscernibility

The concept of indiscernibility is the technical cornerstone of Danto's philosophy. It challenges the traditional aesthetic view that art must possess unique formal qualities (beauty, harmony, craftsmanship) that distinguish it from ordinary objects. Danto's model can be summarized through the following logical progression:

- Observation: Two objects (Object A and Object B) are perceptually identical.
- Status: Object A is recognized as a masterpiece in a museum; Object B is a mass-produced utility item.
- Deduction: The "art-ness" of Object A cannot reside in its physical properties.
- Conclusion: Art-ness is a status conferred by an external framework consisting of artistic theory and historical consciousness.

The Transition of Narratives: A Comparative Matrix

To fully grasp the implications of the "End of Art," it is necessary to compare the three distinct phases of art history as defined by Danto's historical framework. The following table provides a technical breakdown of these eras based on their guiding principles, objectives, and ontological status.

Feature	Pre-Modern (The Era of Imitation)	Modern (The Era of Ideology)	Post-Historical (Contemporary Art)
Guiding Principle	Mimesis (Representation of Reality)	Medium Specificity & Manifestos	Pluralism & Philosophical Inquiry
Primary Objective	Visual Accuracy / Illusionism	Defining the Essence of the Medium	Exploration of Meanings and Context
Ontological Status	Object as Window	Object as Surface/Material	Object as Concept/Idea
Narrative Structure	Linear (Progress toward Realism)	Evolutionary (Progress toward Purity)	Non-Linear (End of Master Narratives)
Critique Basis	Skill and Likeness	Formalism and Innovation	Interpretation and Theoretical Depth

Technical Framework: The Institutional Theory of Art

Central to Danto's argument—and further developed by George Dickie—is the **Institutional Theory of Art**. This theory posits that something is art if it has been awarded that status by the institutions of the Artworld (galleries, curators, critics, and art historians). However, Danto's version is more focused on the **"Artworld"** as a conceptual space of discourse rather than just a collection of buildings and people.

The Role of Interpretation in Constituting Art

In the post-historical era, interpretation is not merely something one does to an artwork; it is what **makes** the object an artwork. Danto's technical workflow for the constitution of art follows these steps:

1. The Presence of a Work: An object or action is presented within an artistic context.
2. The Application of Theory: The object is linked to a specific artistic tradition or a reaction against one.
3. The Act of Interpretation: A meaning is assigned to the object, often through a title or an artist's statement.
4. Atmosphere of Theory: The object exists within a "web of beliefs" that allows it to be seen as "about" something.

Without this theoretical atmosphere, the object remains in the realm of **"mere real things."** This transition from the material to the conceptual is what Danto refers to as the "transfiguration of the commonplace."

The Age of Manifestos and the Greenbergian Crisis

Before the end of art, Modernism was characterized by the "Age of Manifestos." Each movement—Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism—claimed to have discovered the **true** nature of art. Clement Greenberg, the most influential critic of the Modernist era, argued that art must move toward **purity**. For him, painting should be about painting (flatness and pigment), and sculpture should be about sculpture.

Danto argues that this was the final "Master Narrative." Once art became entirely about its own definition, it had nowhere left to go but into philosophy. When art asks the question "What am I?", it has reached the end of its historical development. Post-historical art (Contemporary Art) is the state that exists after this question has been answered. In this state, there are no longer any rules about how art must look. This is the definition of **Pluralism**.

Comparison: Greenbergian Formalism vs. Dantian Pluralism

Metric	Greenbergian Formalism	Dantian Pluralism
Focus	Aesthetics and Visual Form	Meaning and Philosophy
Constraint	Strict boundaries (Flatness, Purity)	No constraints (Everything is possible)
Historical View	Exclusionary (Only 'this' is valid)	Inclusionary (The 'Pale of History' is gone)
Role of the Artist	Specialist in a medium	Philosopher using any medium

The Pale of History and the Post-Historical Condition

What does it mean to be "outside the Pale of History"? Danto uses this metaphor to describe the freedom of the contemporary artist. In the historical period, artists were "slaves" to the narrative of their time. A painter in the 14th century could not have painted like Warhol, not just because of a lack of technology, but because the **conceptual space** did not exist for such an action to be recognized as art.

In the post-historical era, the "Pale" has expanded to include everything. This creates a unique set of challenges and opportunities for practitioners and critics alike:

- The Absence of Direction: There is no longer a single "next big thing" that defines the cutting edge.
- The Burden of Meaning: Because any object can be art, the artist must provide a rigorous theoretical justification for their work.
- Global Diversity: Pluralism allows for the inclusion of non-Western narratives that were previously excluded by the Eurocentric Modernist narrative.

Practical Implementation: A Field Guide for Art Criticism

For the technical writer or art critic, Danto's framework provides a methodology for analyzing contemporary works that lack traditional aesthetic appeal. The following procedural guide assists in the evaluation of post-historical art:

Phase 1: Contextual Mapping

Identify the object's relationship to the Artworld. Is it located in a gallery? Is it referenced in critical discourse? Determine the **provenance of the idea** rather than the provenance of the material.

Phase 2: Identifying the Statement

Post-historical art is always "about" something. The critic must identify the **propositional content** of the work. This involves analyzing the title, the artist's history, and the specific socio-political climate in which the work was produced.

Phase 3: Testing for Indiscernibility

Ask: "What would this object be if it were not art?" By identifying the difference between the art-object and its real-world counterpart, the critic can isolate the specific **theoretical contribution** made by the artist.

Phase 4: Evaluating the Internal Logic

Since there are no universal aesthetic standards, the work must be judged on its own terms. Does the chosen medium effectively communicate the intended philosophical concept? This is a shift from **Universal Aesthetics** to **Local Logic**.

Case Studies in Post-Historical Art

Case Study 1: The Readymade Legacy

Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*(1917) was a premature entry into the post-historical era. It failed to end art history at the time because the Artworld was not yet ready to accept the philosophical implications. It took the 1960s Pop movement to create the necessary theoretical environment for the Readymade to be fully integrated into the historical narrative.

Case Study 2: Performance and Ephemeral Art

Contemporary performance art often leaves no physical artifact. Under a formalist (Greenbergian) view, this is difficult to categorize. Under Danto's view, the performance is a **philosophical gesture** that uses the body as a medium to explore specific meanings, fitting perfectly into the pluralistic landscape.

Challenges and Operational Risks in the Pluralistic Era

While Danto's thesis provides a liberating framework, it is not without operational challenges for the art market and educational institutions. These "failure modes" of pluralism include:

1. The Quality Crisis: If anything can be art, how do we distinguish between "good" and "bad" art? Danto suggests that quality is now tied to the depth and relevance of the interpretation rather than the skill of execution.
2. Institutional Gatekeeping: In the absence of objective standards, the power of curators and gallery owners increases. They become the primary "validators" of what enters the Artworld.
3. The Alienation of the Public: Traditional audiences often expect art to be beautiful. The shift to a philosophical definition of art can create a disconnect between the Artworld and the general public.

Synthesizing the End of Art

The "End of Art" is not a mourning of the loss of creativity, but a celebration of the attainment of **self-consciousness**. Art has achieved a state where it is no longer bound by the need to progress toward a specific goal. We live in a time of unprecedented artistic freedom, where the artist is free to utilize the entire history of art as a "toolbox" of styles and methods without being beholden to any single one of them.

Arthur Danto's contribution was to provide the map for this new territory. By identifying the transition from the historical to the post-historical, he allowed us to understand why contemporary art looks the way it does. It is no longer the task of art to look like anything in particular; it is the task of art to make us think about what it means to be human, to be social, and to be conscious. The Pale of History has been dismantled, leaving behind a vast, pluralistic horizon where the only limit is the depth of the artist's—and the viewer's—philosophical imagination.

In this post-historical landscape, the role of the critic evolves from a judge of beauty to a **translator of meaning**. The Institutional Theory of Art remains the robust framework through which we navigate this complexity, ensuring that even in an era of "anything goes," the distinction between art and the commonplace is maintained through the rigorous application of theory and context. The end of art is, in fact, the beginning of a much more profound engagement with the power of the image and the idea.

Tags: [#Arthur Danto](#) [#Contemporary Art](#) [#Philosophy of Art](#) [#Institutional Theory](#) [#Art History](#)

