
Book Review

DANTO, ARTHUR C. *What Art Is*. Yale University Press 2013, 192 pp., \$24 hardcover.

Reviewed by Daniel Wilson

With Danto's passing, this book recapitulates his classic definition of art as embodied meaning and further augments this view with the claim that artworks from all cultures and time periods are wakeful dreams. Danto's method is to describe the progressive innovations in the history of modern art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the implications of these developments for the understanding of the conditions necessary for art. In the course of various philosophical explorations, Danto takes the reader on a lively tour through the history of modern art, art theory, and philosophy of art that culminates in the revelation of the essential characteristics of art, so far as we may know, in Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*.

In chapter one, Danto's extends his characterization of art as embodied meaning by adding the further condition that art be "dreamlike." By this he means to capture the skill of the artist in producing something akin to a shared dream. For example, in the case of imitative works a large portion of the audience recognizes what is being represented even though the work is not actually the represented thing. Art, like dreams, stands at a distance from reality, Danto claims. It is in this sense that Danto defines a work of art as a "wakeful dream."

In subsequent chapters, Danto illustrates the centrality of recognizing the different ways that artists "dream-ify" in order to arrive at a sound understanding of any work. In chapter two, Danto takes his definition and examines the following question: did the cleaning of dirt from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel give us access to the proper meaning of Michelangelo's work while the previous uncleaned yet sublime presentation prompted numerous mistaken interpretations? Danto argues that the answer to this question relies on art criticism and interpretation, thus rejecting the position that it might be decided by scientific means alone. In chapter three, Danto defends the claim that the embodied mind of human beings is essential for an understanding of the feelings and emotions represented in art throughout the centuries. Again, science alone is inadequate to identifying these important elements in artworks.

The distinction between scientific knowledge and humanistic understanding arises again in chapter four, where a distinction is drawn between optical truth—the image as captured by photographs—and visual truth, as is depicted in paintings. This arises in a nineteenth-century

debate about the comparative merits of painting and photography as art forms, a debate that Danto argues was the last of its kind.

In chapter five, Danto provides an interpretation of Kant's theory of fine art that identifies similarities between Kant's notion of spirit and Danto's prior definition of art as embodied meaning. Here, he criticizes traditional accounts of Kant's theory of fine art, for example, that of Clement Greenberg, for referring only to Kant's theory of taste. Kant has two notions of art in the third *Critique*, Danto claims, and it is the second—that of art as the product of spirit—that is most applicable to the proper appreciation of contemporary art.

The importance of aesthetics to the disciplines of philosophy of art and art history is considered in chapter six. Danto describes his use of the term "aesthetics" as "the way in which things show themselves, together with the reasons for preferring one way of showing itself to another" (136). He identifies Duchamp's readymades as the art-historical moment where the aesthetic was recognized as not being essential to art. Further, the point of most contemporary works is also not aesthetic. And even when a work does have aesthetic goals, the aesthetic is used as a means with respect to the point of the work. Danto reiterates that it is work meaning and interpretation, not aesthetics, that are essential for art.

The philosophical argument used by Danto to introduce the idea of wakeful dreams draws upon Descartes' consideration of whether what he perceives to be reality is in fact a dream. Similarly, in Plato's description of art as mimesis, art shares the same characteristic as dreams of being a step removed from reality. Art and dreams are similar in the sense that they both represent things, though what they represent may not be real. But Danto's preliminary characterization of art as being one step away from reality might classify much ideological propaganda and commercial advertising as art. In these cases, an audience may be participating by means of deception in a shared experience that does not reflect what is real. While Danto's proposal of wakeful dreams is intended to accommodate non-Western art ideals, it risks blurring the lines between art, ideology, and religious ritual. Religious spiritual experiences, for example, are sometimes perceived as being one step away from reality. Whether this blurring is intentional or not is difficult to assess, as Danto is aiming to account for a broader range of art than that of Western high art. Danto offers the characterization of wakeful dreams as necessary for art but says there is no guarantee of sufficiency: "I quite realize that there may be more conditions for a definition of art" (40). A more developed account of what wakeful dreams consist in would assist in clarifying the relationships and boundaries between art and closely related practices.

What Art Is focuses on defending and developing Danto's influential theoretical framework. This makes the volume essential reading for anyone wanting to familiarize themselves with Danto's later thought. The historical narratives he presents expose in an engaging way the various issues that any successful definition of art must overcome.

This book is accessible to a general audience. It is strong on historical narrative regarding the development of art. Philosophical arguments are frequently made explicit at the end of each chapter. The art-historical narrative is very readable and interesting for its own sake, even as it forms an essential part of Danto's Hegel-inspired philosophical approach to the historical revelation of the essence of art.

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