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varia

Raquel Cascales

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SENSE OF 'THE END OF ART' IN ARTHUR DANTO

Abstract

The striking title *The End of Art* managed to draw attention to the philosophical work of Arthur Danto. However, the lack of a systematic development which could support this thesis made him face harsh criticism. However, strong foundations for his statements can be deduced from his writings. In this paper, I analyse how to understand the thesis of the 'end of art'. It should be approached not as a monolithic notion but as a complex concept that combines three different senses: 1) the 'end of art' in the Hegelian sense: the conversion of art into philosophy, 2) the 'end of art' in the historiographical sense: as the end to the narratives of the history of art, and 3) the 'end of art' as the beginning of a new period in history, where Danto's philosophy of art would be fully valid.

Without a doubt, Arthur C. Danto's most famous theory is what is referred to as 'the end of art'. Nevertheless it is also considered the least understood. The principal difficulty in its analysis is that Danto did not present it in a single work, rather he developed it in different works over the course of twenty years, from his first article dedicated to it, *The End of Art* (1984), to his final book published the same year as his death, *What Art is* (2013). The latter does not only carry out the transmission of his ideas but also makes a progressive elaboration of its content, although he does not explicitly explain it in this way. This development and reformulation have been interpreted by some as a change in his opinion and, in others, a direct contradiction.¹ Some points of controversy are his initial rejection of Hegelianism and then its subsequent acceptance, the pairing of essentialism and historicism, his defense of post-history and relativ-

¹ Carroll 1993: 79-106; Davis 2001: 191-201; Sobrevilla 2003: 379-396; García Leal 2005: 441-461; Lafferty 2006: 60; Vilar 2009: 191-211; Bacharach 2013: 1-12.

ism, and especially changes in his explanation of the 'end of art'. As his work became more famous, many authors analyzed the 'end of art', though usually they only refer to one of his books. For this reason, they exclusively base their understanding in the sense developed in that book, either the Hegelian, historiographical or postmodern sense.²

In line with the work carried out by Lavagnino (2013; 2015) and Thomas-Fogiel (2016), I believe that these apparent contradictions are much less than they appear. The former has clarified the different levels of language used by Danto and the second has tried to clarify the contradictions of Danto, distinguishing between the ontological level and the historical one. Nowadays that he is no longer able to further develop his theory, I believe that there is sufficient historical distance to allow for a systematic explanation of his different works and to demonstrate that there is no contradiction in his theory about the 'end of art'; only an expansion and gradual development.

To demonstrate this development, it is useful to make a classification of three parts relating to the three different layers of meaning of the 'end of art': 1) the 'end of art' in the Hegelian sense: the conversion of art into philosophy, 2) the 'end of art' in the historiographical sense: as the end to the narratives of the history of art, and 3) the 'end of art' as a beginning of a new period in history, where Danto's philosophy of art would be fully valid. These are three perspectives about the same phenomenon which can be distinguished and studied separately, without contradicting Danto's theory. Moreover, in this article I intend to defend these different reformulations as an expansion of the thesis of the 'end of art', and give a greater coherence to its philosophy as well as illustrate how the evolution of his theories coincides with the progress of his written work.

1. The End in the Hegelian sense

In *Analytical Philosophy of History* in 1965, Danto develops a perspective opposite to Hegel's understanding of history. However, years later, when he confronts the need to explain the story as the way of narrating history, he rectifies his thinking. While it is true that Danto's research on art led him to history, it can also be said that his research on history led him to art and Hegel, resulting in what has been referred to as the 'Hegelian turn'. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (1993) used the term for the first time to explain the change in Danto's methodological perspective.

²In the Hegelian sense it can be seen: Carter (1993), Carrier (1998), Hilmer (1998). In the historiographical sense: Tozzi (2007), Parselis (2009) and Bacharach (2013). And in the post-modern sense: Crowther (1990), Herwitz (1993), Wenninger (2005), Ortiz (2015).

This change of opinion, expressed in later works, lies in Danto's acceptance of Hegel's narrative realism (that is, history has objective narrative structures) and, consequently, of a progressive conception of the history of art. It is precisely the fact of making a philosophical analysis of the history of art what allows him to apply the thesis of the narrative character of history and, thus, proclaim its end. Among the many analyses about the 'end of art' there are very few which take into account this Hegelian consideration which is crucial for an adequate understanding of Danto's thesis (Carter 1993, Camargo 2007).

Danto examines the history of art for the first time in his article *The End of Art* (1984).³ There, he already presents the history of art as the intertwining of a succession of philosophical theories that have been determining what the essence of art ought to be. This reading of art history develops gradually toward greater awareness and reflexivity, as Hegel had said in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Lectures of Philosophy of History*.⁴ Here, the development of self-consciousness is linked to the consciousness of freedom, therefore the reflexivity found in artistic practice must also be associated with an increase of freedom. Following this reasoning, if art finds its essence, it stops being subordinate to philosophy. Danto believes that this has happened in his time because art has turned into philosophy. In this sense it can be affirmed that the 'end of art' has taken place as Hegel predicted.

While Danto adopts this conception of the history of art which agrees with the artistic reality of his time, he does not assume the entire Hegelian dialectic system. In fact, he does not consider that the progress of which he speaks has to do with the absolute spirit, but simply with the progress of art. Danto's reading of Hegel is limited to the artistic sphere, leaving aside (although respectfully taking into account) the rest of the system.⁵ Danto did not wish to become a Hegelian interpreter or hermeneutist. He found Hegel's work useful to explain what was happening in contemporary art.

³ It was the first time that he proposed his thesis of the 'end of art'. Once published, the editor B. Lang sent the text to several academics provoking a response that had as a result a collaborative volume. Its title, *The Death of Art*, drove to the first misunderstandings on the meaning of the expression 'end of art'. However, Danto felt an obligation to clarify that neither this title was his nor it had any relationship whatsoever with what he wanted to transmit.

⁴ The interpretation that Danto makes of Hegel is doubted by Kojève, who makes a reading of the *Phenomenology* as a *Bildungsroman*, like a novel of learning that ends in self-knowledge (Danto 1986: 110-112).

⁵ This fact can be criticized and in many cases has served to underestimate the theses of Danto, but it can also be considered reasonable: 'Danto liberates the visual arts from this hierarchy by their inherent historical goal. [This approach] opens up the possibility of analyzing the partial logic of art without being burdened with constantly accommodating a whole encyclopedic system. Not only does this make the philosophical procedure more manageable, but it also seems a legitimate expansion of the ultimate purpose of Hegel's philosophy' (Hilmer 1998: 74).

In 1986 Danto published *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, where he republished *The End of Art* along with other texts that provide a more adequate context to understand the implications of the 'end' in his philosophy in the Hegelian sense. In this work, the history of art is perceived as an internal, rational, and progressive development. The interpretation of the history of art in the Hegelian style is thus shown as a way in which art gains in knowledge and consciousness about its very essence until it reaches full self-consciousness. Art is one of these stages –indeed, nearing the final stages of the spirit's return to spirit through spirit. But this is a stage which must be gone through in the painful ascent toward the final redeeming cognition.⁶ This awareness conceives of a cognitive development of art itself: art begins to look for its own possibilities, it becomes an object in and of itself. Danto places special emphasis on how this self-consciousness was acquired throughout the course of the twentieth century, during which there is an increasingly reflective and conceptual artistic development.

Within the view of the history of art as a progressive process, Danto considered that before art was transformed into philosophy it had suffered a strong subjugation by philosophy. Since *The Artworld* (1964) Danto insists that artistic practice always involves an idea of what art is and that this theory influences the production of the work. For centuries, these theories were philosophical proposals that dominated it until art was able to take itself as object and reflect on the question of what art is. At this point, Danto distances himself from the way Hegel interprets consciousness since he makes his own description of the domination of the history of art was.

Danto understands that in the history of art this philosophical subjugation was influenced mainly by Plato, whose theories led to a conception of art as mimesis. He focuses on how Plato doubly condemns art: for considering it merely a copy of real objects (and therefore, for having a degraded ontological rank) and because as mimesis it could not present the truth. After Plato, art was thus banished to the realm of the imaginative and sentimental, its cognitive role disappeared and was associated with the irrational. Danto considers this proposal as a strategy by which philosophy wanted to guarantee the exclusivity of truth.⁷

However, after many centuries of submission, art came to acquire a reflexivity that led it to become independent of philosophy and to develop a philosophy of art. As Hegel pointed out, this transformation of art into philosophy carried with it the consequence that art came to its end. The culmination of this process can be said to be twofold: first, the emergence of photography, and especially

⁶ Danto 1986: 110.

⁷ *Ibidem*: 96. This consideration could have been motivated, at this point, by the reading of Nietzsche and his criticism of the Platonic tradition, especially the exegesis of the birth of the tragedy. In order to go in depth on the exegesis that Danto makes of art in Nietzsche, consult the second chapter of his *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (2005: 36-67) and the articles of Andina (2013) and Syrjämäki (2009).

cinematography, demonstrated that traditional pictorial or sculptural media had reached their limit in the mimetic representation in art.⁸ From then on progress would be carried out with completely new means. In second place, the work of Warhol, *Brillo Box*, represented for Danto the great milestone in the history of art. Firstly, because being indiscernible of its commercial counterpart overrides the mimetic conception of art. But above all, because it adequately states the question of art. The *Brillo Box* leads art to its self-consciousness by posing questions about the nature of art.⁹ The question raised by the *Brillo Box* is not why this box is a work of art but why this box is a work of art and the one in the supermarket is not. The very way of posing the question opens the answer: the essence of art lies in being different from the reality. The discovery of the essence caused an important change in the art: the works of art can now have any appearance while continue to maintain the same essence.

None of the previous theories about art (from Platonic to Neo-Wittgensteinian, who argued that perception was enough to distinguish what was art) could explain why Warhol's boxes are art while the supermarket's boxes are not. When the essence of art was governed by mimesis, the visual, perceptive criterion might have been sufficient to determine what art was. But Danto realized that this criterion had been exhausted. Warhol's work, in which there was no perceptual difference with respect to the object represented, showed that the essence of art could not be discovered at the perceptual level, but at the intellectual. The *Brillo Box*, therefore, meant the transformation of art into philosophy, and thus implied a complete liberation for art: 'And in turning into philosophy, one might say that art had come to a certain natural end'.¹⁰

It should be pointed out that there was a close relationship between the fact that art became reflexive and claimed the possibility of having any appearance, and the fact that philosophy could reflect on art. As Danto himself says, 'only when it became clear that anything could be a work of art could one think, philosophically, about art. Only then did the possibility arise of a true general philosophy of art'.¹¹ That is, the formulation of the philosophical question concerning the nature of art could not be formulated until art acquired a form of elevated consciousness. In this way, it also stimulated a new level of philosophical awareness. This implies a Hegelian a new interdependence between philosophy of art and history of art. The emergence of the philosophy of art was only possible once art found its essence. At this point, art stop to asking about what it consider and began to consider itself on the level of philosophy.

⁸ Danto 1986: 85-87.

⁹ Danto 1987: 208.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*: 209.

¹¹ Danto 2014: 14.

This is the reason why Danto thought he was then able to offer a definition of art valid for all time and place. It would be a philosophical definition that would not correspond to any particular movement or poetics, but take over the deep essence of art. However, although he never rejected that it was possible, Danto soon abandoned the task of proposing a complete essential definition.¹² There are researchers who have tried to complete this definition underlining the role of beauty, as Costello (2004: 424-439) or of style, as Alcaraz (2015: 161). For his part, Danto focused on the two necessary conditions of possibility for there to be art: 'To be a work of art is to be (i) about something and (ii) to embody its meaning'.¹³ These conditions are very similar to those of Hegel. There are Hegelian traces in his conception of the work of art as an embodied meaning or in the conjunction of a timeless essentialism coupled with a contextual historicism.¹⁴ Although he did not reach the essential definition, he proposed valid conditions for all time and place. The timelessness of these conditions was guaranteed by the very 'end of art'.

After this, Danto was not trying to say that no more works of art were going to be produced. Neither did he claim that those made could no longer be good works of art, nor that the historical context would not affect art. He referred to the fact that its production would no longer be determined by a single narrative or way of understanding art. Supported by the Hegelian point of view, he considered that once a clarification of the concept had been reached and once art had been emancipated from philosophy, it could not return to a new subjection. In this sense, only within a narrative understanding of history, with beginning and end, the end could be proclaimed. Danto not only affirmed that an art narrative had ended, but the history of art as such.¹⁵ This is what we will go on to analyze in the second meaning of the 'end of art'.

2. End in the historiographical sense

In his book *After the End of Art* (1997) Danto offered an explanation of the 'end of art' from another perspective, with greater emphasis on the end of the story of art history. If, in 1984, this story started from the mimetic definition of

¹² "By 'essentialist' I mean that it set out to be a definition through necessary and sufficient conditions, in the canonical philosophical manner" (Danto 1996: 284).

¹³ Danto 2015: 130.

¹⁴ Hegel 1975: 11. In Danto, by Hegel's influence, the historical context is presented as a necessary condition for both the existence of the works of art as well as for the possibility of generating an interpretation about them. The relation between essentialism and historicism has been discussed in depth in Kelly (1998: 30-43).

¹⁵ The relation between philosophy and history and the philosophy of art has been discussed in depth in Cascales (2016: 213-216).

Platonic philosophy, he then narrates the progressive concept of art created in modernity. I don't understand this as a contradiction but as a development that deserves an independent treatment.

In this book Danto tries to demonstrate how the theories of art have been changing and directing artistic practice in different directions for many centuries. He explains that the history of art, because of a mimetic conception, has been understood as a progression towards artistic perfection. On the other hand, the Platonic philosophy mainly influenced what is referred to as the classical age. This vision was revived in the Renaissance, where it became the legitimizing narrative of a whole culture and of the history of its art. At this point, it is worth pointing out that the aspiration is to effectively grasp the reality which constitutes the foundation of the 'fine arts' and grant greater autonomy and prestige to art. On the other hand, the scientific study of the history of art, based on this mimetic conception, established different stages according to the characteristics and technical advances that made up different styles over time. Once it was possible to establish a history of art according to this concept, it also introduced the possibility of foreseeing the end of this stage.

At this point it is important to note the interest of Danto in the studies of H. Belting on ancient religious images (1994). The German historian showed that these sacred images, although they had artistic value, were revered but not aesthetically admired. It was not until around 1400 that they were given a new appraisal.¹⁶ Danto deduced that if an examination of the images before the present era of art could be made to demonstrate the transformation that the concept of art had undergone, it would also be a legitimate way to make an analysis of the meaning of art after this stage had come to an end. Danto also dialogues with another work by Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* (1987), which underlines the role that narratives, especially that of Vasari, has had on the history of art. He also signals their exhaustion, pointing to the end of the history of art. In his development of this idea, Danto considers that in the evolution of the narratives of art there are three fundamental milestones: Vasari, Greenberg and the manifestos of the artistic avant-garde.

In his *Life of the Best Italian Architects, Painters and Sculptors*, Vasari made a historical study in which he tried to give account of the advances that had occurred in art through the biographical analysis of several artists. He understood each of these contributions as an 'improvement' that had only been possible at that precise time. After this Renaissance author, it has been very common to understand historical developments in ascending terms or, as it was later called,

¹⁶This change is also associated with the idea of the autonomous artist and the discussion about the artistic character of his invention: 'After the Middle Ages, however, art took on a different meaning and became acknowledged for its own sake – art as invented by famous artist and defined by a proper theory' (Belting 1994: xxi).

in 'indefinite progress'.¹⁷ The stage that begins with Vasari has a novelty with respect to Antiquity: a progressive idea, which understands that as technique is improved a more perfect art is achieved, making it possible to foresee an end for art.

The second key moment in the development of the history of modern art is modernism. To analyze this current, Danto carries out an interesting reflection on the modern as something distinct from the old and the contemporary. The 'modern' went beyond the style, becoming in a concept since that made a difference between what had been done before and what was being done 'now'. It implied a historical structure marked by 'an ascent to a new level of consciousness'.¹⁸ After that, he presented the possibility that not all the art of that time was modern. It was Greenberg who defined modernism by constructing an exposition of the concept of purity in the Kantian sense: an application of art to itself. According to his account, modernism initiated with the painters who began to wonder about the conditions of possibility of artistic representation. From there on, the history of modernism would be a search for the essential and a generic purification of everything that was not strictly essential to art, as well as a reflection on what can be represented and the means to carry it out: 'The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself'.¹⁹ Following this reasoning, Danto points out that this moment supposes a heightened awareness and a considerable increase in reflexivity. But modernism continues with the same perceptual definition of Renaissance. That is why he states that modernism came to an end when the 'works of art and mere real objects could no longer be articulated in visual terms, and when it became imperative to quit a materialist aesthetics in favor of an aesthetics of meaning'.²⁰

The third decisive moment in this story of the history of art is the historical avant-gardes. According to Danto, in each of their manifestos the desire for purism is also present. The experiments of the avant-garde question the Vasarian narrative and try to end it. In this sense, the boom of abstractionism and anti-representationalism of all types is expected, since the representation was considered like one of the 'tools' of power used to subjugate art. Moreover, what Danto called the 'intractable avant-garde'²¹ showed by their works, which were deliberately neither beautiful nor unsightly, that the notion of classical beauty

¹⁷ Vasari in Belting 1987: 258.

¹⁸ Danto 2014: 8.

¹⁹ Greenberg 1995: 86.

²⁰ Danto 2014: 77.

²¹ 'I see Dada by contrast as the paradigm of what I am terming The Intractable Avant-Garde, the products of which are misperceived if perceived as beautiful. That is not its point or ambition' (Danto 2003: 49).

was no longer an essential element for art. Danto points out that the manifestos were the last attempt to identify the essence of art with a particular style:

The deep truth of the historical present, it seems to me, lies in the Age of Manifestos [...]. A manifesto singles out the art it justifies as the true and only art as if the movement it expresses had made the philosophical discovery of what art essentially is. But the true philosophical discovery, I think, is that there really is no art more true than any other, and that there is no one way art has to be: all art is equally and indifferently art.²²

In fact, in spite of their disruptive, vindictive and sometimes violent character, the manifestos of each '-ism' represented a new attempt to define and legitimize art. But in this case, no longer on the part of philosophy or criticism, but of art itself. Therefore, in this last stage, the self-consciousness of art becomes a reflexivity that leads art to get rid of heteronomous theories. In this sense, it could be said that art becomes independent, not only of philosophy, as we saw in the first Section, but also of the history of art. And what this means here is not that the history ends as such, but the history in terms of narrative. That is, the concept of the 'end of art' cannot be understood 'as a critical judgment, but as an objective historical judgment. The structure of beginnings and endings, which almost defines the historical representation constructed narratively, is difficult to apply even in retrospect'.²³

In this sense, Danto's thesis of the 'end of art' could be understood as a historiographical thesis, as also pointed out by Tozzi (2007), Parselis (2009) and Bacharach (2013). It is worth mentioning Veronica Tozzi's position regarding the comprehension of 'the end' in a historiographical context. In her own words, 'the end of art is not an aesthetic evaluation of art, nor an empirical assertion about the disappearance of works of art or artists; it is, instead, a historiographical thesis in a narrow sense'.²⁴ According to this assertion, Tozzi insists on the double sense of historicity contained in the thesis because 'the end of art' arises in a specific historical moment and it should be possible to explain it as such. Moreover, it also refers to an event from the past; hence, it must be evaluated in terms of truth or falseness.

Along these lines, it should also be underlined that the 'the end of art' proposition is a narrative sentence since an end can only be proclaimed within a narrative comprehension of history, with a beginning and an end. In another sense, it is also a fundamental sentence, since it refers not only to a past, but also to a present that expects to be valid in the future as well.²⁵ That is, the

²² Danto 2014: 34.

²³ *Ibidem*: 24.

²⁴ Tozzi 2007: 120.

²⁵ Frank Kermode has highlighted how establishing beginnings and ends is a crucial element to a narrative (2000).

narrative of art that had become hegemonic came to an end. It is not just the recognition that it was a narrative that would not rise again, but it means that no other narrative will rise above the others.

That is to say, what is ended with the 'end of art' is not simply a narration of art among others. When we realize its narrative, constructive component, it ends the possibility that any other narrative will be presented as hegemonic. There could be no longer a narrative that determines how works of art should be, and for that reason 'the history of art, structured narratively, had come to an end'.²⁶ Or to put it more explicitly: 'All that one can predict is that there will be no narrative direction. And that is what I mean by the end of art'.²⁷ Now, as Carrier points out, how is it possible that history ends as a narrative but we should accept the thesis of the end of art as a narrative statement? Danto responds to this criticism saying that more than ever there will be narratives, but not meta-narratives: 'There will not be a part because the previous metanarratives excluded so much in order to get themselves told'.²⁸ It is precisely the rise of consciousness, in Hegelian sense, that entails that you cannot take a step back. For this reason, although this supposes a different way of interpreting the 'end of art', it is not contradictory with the first. On the other hand, as a consequence, Danto began to speak later about the post-historic era. However, if there is no history of art, how is it possible to judge works of art? Does Danto fall into relativism?

3. End as the beginning of the post-historic period

The idea that the 'end of art' meant the beginning of a 'new era' had already appeared in *The End of Art*. At the conclusion of that article, Danto exemplified in two ways what the end of 'the age of art' could mean. In the first place, to clarify the succession of ends, he evoked the theology of Joachim of Fiore, who explained that although the Father's Age ended with the birth of the Son, and the Age of the Son with the Age of the Holy Spirit, none of the previous epochs disappeared historically.²⁹ Secondly, he resorted to Hegelian philosophy to justify how, although the energies of history had coincided for a time with those of art, both paths had been dissociated. Art was no longer to be moved and directed by history as it had been in the past. Then, since art would continue, Danto was interested in seeing how art could be understood in this post-historical era.

However, the idea of post-historical art is extensively developed in *After the End of Art* (1997), as well as in later writings. In this work, Danto is ambigu-

²⁶ Danto 2014: 126.

²⁷ Danto 2001: 430.

²⁸ Danto 1998: 140.

²⁹ Danto 1986: 84; Castro 2017.

ous because he not only speaks of the end of a narrative, but rather points to a new awareness of art that cannot be turned back. With the liberation of art from any alien subjugation, a clarification has been reached about the concept of art that can no longer be reversed. He reveals the conditions of an art that is no longer subject to historical or philosophical laws. One of the characteristics that derive from the lack of a master narrative is that there can no longer be events that are outside the narrative, that remain in the 'border' of the history. With this Hegelian expression, he recalls that in the great narratives of the art there were facts, movements, painters or works that happened but that were not considered significant within the historical narration. Said with his words, 'it happened, but it was not, significantly, part of progress'.³⁰ The fact that art was circumscribed by a historical narrative implied taking into account only the most significant elements. However, in the post-historic period it is worth attending to all the elements that remain in the borders. In this respect, Danto points out that, until now, painting had been the genre that had most contributed to the narrative of art history, but now it has ceased to occupy a privileged place:

That painting, since no longer the chief vehicle of historical development, was now but one medium in the open disjunction of media and practices that defined the art world, which included installation, performance, video, computer, and various modalities of mixed media, not to mention earthworks, body art, what I call 'object art', and a great deal of art that had earlier been invidiously stigmatized as craft.³¹

Therefore, it can be affirmed that today all the artistic options are valid, and that there are no more coercions to the artist than those that he wants to impose on himself. For this reason, 'to say that the story of art ended is to say that there is no longer a corner of history for works of art to be left out of it. Everything is possible. Everything can be art'.³² Needless to say, this does not imply that painting will disappear,³³ as neither will the realistic nor the hyper realistic style. They do in fact live peacefully together with abstract photography, performances and audiovisual installations. One same artist performs works of various kinds. In this way, the transformation, elaboration, and democratization that the concept of art has experienced have been made manifest.

The elaboration and transformation of the concept of art also leads to a modification of the concept of artist. There is today a strong rejection of the romantic conception of the artist, in which only those trained in technique and

³⁰ Danto 2014: 9.

³¹ *Ibidem*: 136.

³² *Ibidem*: 127.

³³ Danto responds to this criticism of Carroll in *The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense* (Danto 1998).

knowledge have legitimacy to carry out the work of art. Furthermore, the fact that art is no longer subject to a single style allows a wider view of the styles of all ages. The rejection of a master narrative opens the possibility of revising former categorizations of epochs and styles, allowing then to introduce forgotten artists or to redefine the stylistic categories that defined who should be considered better. In addition, since styles are no longer subject to a historical linearity, it is possible to describe the work of El Greco, Brancusi or Modigliani as Mannerists or Uccello and Seurat as surrealists. Thus, in wondering how art should be understood in the post-historical period, Danto affirms that post-historical art is that art which is no longer limited to the style of an epoch, but which is characterized by freedom and plurality, by the peaceful coexistence of all currents and without hierarchies of any kind.³⁴

Today we live in the era of plurality. As a matter of fact, Danto does not propose pluralism, considered one of the defining features of the post-historical era, as a theoretical question to be imposed, he rather picks up an attitude already present in the artistic practice.³⁵ Pluralism is also important in the development of the philosophy of art, since this one, according to Danto, in order to advance properly 'must be worked out at a level of abstraction so general that you cannot deduce from it the form of any specific style of art'.³⁶ Theories should neither justify any specific type of practice, nor should works of art attempt to adjust to theories to seek some kind of legitimacy.

For this defense of pluralism, Danto's notion of 'post-history' has often been misunderstood and its proposal has been considered as a cry to the relativism of postmodernity.³⁷ Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that he does not call this period merely 'postmodern', as if it were one age that followed another; rather he uses the term 'post-historic'. At the same time, it should also be emphasized that although Danto defends a great artistic plurality, in the philosophical field he directly separates himself from the deconstructivist projects.³⁸ It might seem that his vision defends relativism and he has been subsequently criticized for it, but Danto tries by all means to evade it.

First, Thomas-Fogiel has insisted that there is an essence of the art of timeless validity:

[Danto] proposes a definition valid for every place and every time. In fact, the work of art is about something, it always refers to a theory or idea (conceptual space), and it is sent back to it through certain means that are its own. What is eternal is that art is

³⁴ Danto 2014: 45.

³⁵ Danto 2001: 481.

³⁶ Danto 1992: 230.

³⁷ Ortiz 2015.

³⁸ Danto 2013: 141.

about an 'ideality'; what is changing is the content of each particular theory. The consideration of history does not mean here the renunciation of an essence or a definition.³⁹

Indeed, if Danto's essentialist definition were complete, we could rely on it to distinguish all types of art. But as we said, we only have two necessary conditions. Although we do not have a definition, I believe that these conditions allow for great clarifications. Could be excluded pieces that have no content, that are not about anything or do not have intentionality. For example, were an animal or robot to make a piece, it could capture colors, but it would have no meaning. At the same time, meaning it not enough, it needs material expressions. This supposes a limit in the field of conceptual art or performance art.

Secondly, Danto also moves away from relativism by pointing out that the fact that we are in a post-historical phase does not mean that everything is worth the same:

However, the fact that everything can be art does not imply that everything is art: 'It is still true that works of art constitute a restricted set of objects. What has changed is that these cannot easily be identified as such, since anything one can think of might be a work of art, and what accounts for this status cannot be a matter of simple recognition. It is by now well understood that something can resemble a work of art and yet itself not be a work of art at all'.⁴⁰

At this point we can try to examine how Danto carried out a plural critique of art, but not relativist. In an interview in 2005 Danto claimed that he wanted to separate himself from both modernist and postmodernist critics. That is to say, he rejects the formalism for basing criticism on closed formal criteria, previously established. There should not be a prior theory of what the work of art should be in order to judge it. At the same time, he rejects the absolute relativism of postmodernists. Both theories forget about the work of art in particular: for having previous criteria or for having renounced to have them. Danto is anti-relativist, but defends pluralism.⁴¹ He defends that art can be produced in any material and be organized in its own way.

Danto is aware that it is not enough to open his eyes in front of a work of art. To understand it, you have to delve into its meaning. For this reason, the first element that must be extracted when judging a work of art is its meaning. The second element is how that meaning is embodied in the work. It is judged by whether the meaning and its incarnation are adequate or inadequate with respect to each other. 'The critic must recover what effect the art is to have upon the viewer-what

³⁹Thomas-Fogiel 2016: 51.

⁴⁰Danto 2003: 18.

⁴¹Guasch 2008: 138.

the artist meant to convey-and then how this meaning is to be read in the object in which is embodied'.⁴² The incarnation is not only the material elements with which the work is made, but also the historical context in which it is found. The two conditions of his definition of art allow judging not only current works but of any time and place, just as he did: Giotto, Leonardo, Chardin or Jeff Koons.

It is no longer enough just to look at works of art to understand them, but that does not imply that they are incomprehensible. The more knowledge we have of the artist's biography, its artistic and historical context, the more we can understand and appreciate. Therefore Danto tried to understand each concrete work until the end and tried to explain to the general public the meanings of the works rather than measuring the visual delight it produced. In this sense, as Bordonaba says, 'criticism merges with the discourse of reasons that justifies the admission of a work in the art world, discourse on principle itself open to discussion'.⁴³

Therefore, the proclamation of a new epoch for art depends on the fulfillment of the previous meanings. But it has such particular consequences that it can be distinguished as an independent meaning. This new time is no longer governed by the internal and teleological necessity of history, nor by the great narratives that tried to explain everything according to a single point of view. This era, on an artistic level, is characterized by freedom and plurality. The artistic possibilities increase and creativity nourishes the international panorama. As we have seen, in this context, the concept of art may run the risk of falling into relativism but Danto opposes it with the necessary conditions of art, not subject to historical ups and downs, and with the reflection on the historical context in which it appears. Thanks to them, Danto was able to carry out a critique of plural and serious art for twenty years.

Thus, Danto's considerations on the 'end of art' and the beginning of the period of post-historical art not only help us to understand the art of the last decades. They open a way to reevaluate the art of the past and allow us to establish bridges of understanding with the new art, be it the most contemporary or the art that will be created in the near future.

Conclusions: contradiction or development?

The scandalous title of the 'end of art' managed to draw attention to the philosophical work of Arthur Danto. However, the lack of a systematic development on which to support this thesis made him suffer harsh criticism. For years Danto tried to broaden the arguments to support his proposal. Having analyzed this development, I consider that the thesis of the 'end of art' should

⁴² Danto 2005: 18.

⁴³ Bordonaba 2016: 99.

not be understood exclusively in one sense but as a complex concept that combines three different senses without there being any contradiction between them.

First, the history of art understood in terms of domination ends, according to Danto, when art takes itself as its object and reflects on the question of what art is. This reflexivity acquired in the artistic field grants freedom to art and at the same time opens a field for philosophy to reflect on the essence of art. Danto never rejected the possibility that a definition of art could be given, though he did not provide it. He focused on the two necessary and universal conditions of possibility for there to be art. These possibilities only exist if no more narratives of art are going to be given. For this reason, there is an intrinsic relationship between the fact of establishing a condition of possibility of art and the fact that the narratives are finished. However, even if they have finished we still do not completely know what art is. In this sense, Danto seems to go too far in presenting himself as the only one capable of explaining all the changes. Philosophical research on what art is should continue to take steps in this direction.

Secondly, we must take into account how he found support for his thesis in the Hegelian philosophy and how he made his own reading of what had happened in the history of art. I consider that this did not mean a change in his premises but an elaboration. The importance of this influence is shown in the weight that he placed on the development of history and the history of art that allows us to read *The End of Art* as a historiographical thesis.

Lastly, the particular historiographical feature that can be derived from the second meaning can be separated from it and hence define the 'end' also as the beginning of a new epoch. Granting an emphasis on this feature helps to see the originality of Danto's thought (since at this point he does not rely on any other author) and to give some truly valuable guidelines to approach the art of the present day. Faced with a widespread misunderstanding about art, Danto has left us a strong foundation on which to support the studies on philosophy of art. Now it is necessary to continue to develop it.

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