

*Action, Art, History: Engagements with Arthur C. Danto.* Edited by DANIEL HERWITZ and MICHAEL KELLY. Series: Columbia Themes in Philosophy. Columbia U.P. £29.00 (hbk).

This is an excellent book. It contains profound, sophisticated, and challenging engagements with Danto's philosophy, each followed with a response by Danto. It is directed at readers well conversed with his philosophy. Danto is an essentialist often wrongly conceived as a historicist. Expounding on this controversy, the papers in this volume expose this mistake, and this exposition serves as a unifying theme.

This is a particularly well-edited book, as evident already from the bold move of opening with Donald Davidson's paper on Danto's action theory. Aestheticians might find action

theories a bit dry, or at least unserviceable for accounts of art. However, Danto's action theory, formulated early in his career, though minimalist and sharp, encapsulates his *systematic* rationalist philosophy—philosophy of art included. In his biographical introduction Akeel Bilgrami calls Danto's later theoretical shift to aesthetics 'defection'. But what this collection demonstrates is that Danto is indeed a systematic philosopher, and the addressed questions in his action theory are readdressed in his aesthetics, in his historical works, as well as in his reviews, which, as Bilgrami notes 'are unmistakably the writings of a philosopher' (p. 2).

Davidson's juxtaposition of his definition of action with Danto's sheds a light on Danto's basic and central philosophical idea: essence comprises its concept. For Davidson, action that takes on different descriptions does not change its identity. Actions 'merely collect history as time go by, just as people to' (p. 13). Danto, in contrast, categorically distinguishes between basic action and further action. Although perceptually indiscernible, the further action is actually a basic action plus intention. This is the distinction that will later define Danto's aesthetics: the artwork distinguishes itself from its indiscernible counterpart with its aboutness. For Danto, intentions and concepts determine the identity of things. Moreover, they are *ontological* parts of the structures of things.

While Danto is after the invisible essences, the starting point of his enquiries is always the visible-material. His philosophy does not strive at the transcendental but at reality. It is no wonder, therefore, that most of the contributors attempt to insert visible-material dimensions into Danto's philosophy. Lydia Goehr does it with social or political forces; Daniel Herwitz suggests sensuous embodiments of ideas and ideologies; Stanley Cavell offers pragmatist-phenomenological dimensions of our ordinary lives; Gregg Horowitz and Michael Kelly turn to local contemporary phenomena. Furthermore, Frank Ankersmit and Hans Belting question the superiority of philosophy over history; and Philip Kitcher

and Daniel Immrwahr conclude with an instructive paper analysing the nature of history of sciences, which applies to any kind of philosophical history.

The illuminating and lively conflict embedded in Danto's minimalist definition of art is thus revealed throughout the book. Most of the contributors return with praise to Danto's unique synthesis of minimalist essentialism and Hegelian material idealism: the combination of the position that the subject matters of philosophy are thin and rigid essences with the claim that these essences reveal themselves through history. Herwitz and Horowitz capture a common thread in the volume by commending Danto's historicist ability to 'philosophize his own time' (p. 144). However, most of the contributors push for deeper historicism, at the expense of Danto's essentialism, which turns the volume into a fascinating debate.

Stanley Cavell points out the analytic origin of both his philosophy and Danto's. He emphasizes the comparison Danto makes between the end of modernism in art and the end of purism in philosophy, especially in the philosophy of language. Both ends were, as a matter of fact, elevations of the ordinary to a legitimate, even central, starting point of philosophical enquiries. This, for Cavell, is an invitation to shift Danto's ontological focus on the object to what he calls 'life with the object' (p. 36).

Goehr reveals Danto's essentialism, or philosophical commitment, through two most illuminating comparative analyses. The first is between Cage and Danto: Cage tries to erase the line between art and life, thus erases essences, and renders philosophy redundant. Contrarily, Danto insists on an ontological difference, which is to be found by philosophical rational means. The second comparison is between Adorno's and Danto's concepts of the end of art: pessimist versus optimist. Danto's optimism emanates from his analytic, essentialist general philosophy. Or maybe it is the other way around: essentialism enables optimism. Art ends but does not stop. Its essential core enables it to celebrate pluralism. This stance is possible, the paper suggests,

because Danto's concept of *end* is based on the relationship between art and philosophy, and is not socially or politically charged.

Still, as Horowitz points out, Danto *methodically* engages with contemporary visual phenomena that compel themselves on philosophy, such as authoritative works that 'haunt us'. Moreover, he gives up the poetic anxiety that philosophy sometimes feels when facing persuasive artworks. Horowitz himself applies this method to Andreas Gursky's *oeuvre*—a paradigmatic example of the modernist breakage photography underwent due to the creation of Photoshop. This technique, enabling an artificial recomposition of the photo, breaks what Horowitz calls photography's 'counterfactual dependency on the world', thus bringing mimetic photography to an end. According to Horowitz this creates a suspicious beholding—which we can clearly see as parallel to what Cavell calls 'skepticism' and Goehr a feeling of 'deception'. Horowitz's analysis of digitized photography, supports Danto's attempt to conceptualize beyond the visual, this time technique. Technique does not determine identity, thus changes in technique force philosophy to find the invisible essence of each media. Danto's response, though, challenges Horowitz's characterization of photography, and interestingly reinforces his own possible portrayal as an essentialist-conceptualist. For him, Photoshop is less crucial to the history of photography. Photography's dependence on the counterfactual depends in its turn on the meaning or the concept of the work (like beauty).

Herwitz, who praises Danto for finding the very work that demonstrates the 'essence of art for all times and places' (p. 103), emphasizes Danto's essentialism by analysing the relationship between Warhol's *Brillo Box* and its mere counterpart. It is not only similar to the counterpart, 'it impersonates it, tries it on (as in a garment), plays with it, enjoys doubling it' (p. 134). What is needed here, Herwitz claims, is a philosophical (not sensual) listening—as the artwork voices its meaning, it 'says and implies things'. 'Voice' is Herwitz's

richer substitution to Danto's 'aboutness'. It is still the essence of the artwork, however, containing the sensuous embodiment of the aboutness, including institutional references. Thus Herwitz challenges Danto's minimalism, but does not refute his essentialism. Danto disagrees with the enhancement of the essence of art to contain sensuality. He does so by interpreting perceptual repetitions of the Brillo box, not only by Warhol, but also Mike Bidlo's *Not Andy Warhol*. This stresses Danto's Cartesian point, the essence of the essence is beyond the material.

I will conclude by noting that Kelly makes the core of the debate of this volume most explicit. He claims that though Danto's philosophy of art has emerged from a contemporary artistic phenomenon, 'his professional commitment as a philosopher has not always been compatible with the art world' (p. 151). He overlooks the 'function of the historical context' of embodied meanings, and considers them universal. Universality contradicts the concept of embodiment. Therefore, Kelly calls this move, exemplified here by Danto's critique of Mark Tansey, 'iconoclasm'. It is a disinterest in art that derives from an interest in art, but results in distrust in art.

However, returning to the first essay of the book, one can conclude that had Danto's first commitment been to art, he might have trusted art's modernist naïve project to define itself. Consequently he would not have suggested a redivision of labour: let philosophy be in charge of essences, let art be art. And here we go again...

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