

THE END OF ART REVISITED:
A RESPONSE TO KALLE PUOLAKKA

HANS MAES

KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN

In 'The End of Art: A Real Problem or Not Really a Problem?' I raised some questions about Arthur Danto's famous 'end of art' thesis. A largely polemical paper, it was intended as an invitation to further discussion, and Kalle Puolakka has now taken up this invitation in 'Playing The Game After The End of Art'. I thank him for his many insightful remarks. Critical comments are typically more interesting and helpful than simple praise, and Puolakka's comments are no exception. I would therefore like to return the favour. I will place Puolakka's remarks under critical examination and in the process hope to rephrase, refine, and defend some of my original claims. First, however, I will briefly restate my reading of Danto's ideas on the end of art.

I

In Danto's account of the history of art, the 1960s play a crucial role. During that decade, visual artists ascertained that besides paintings and statues, other objects could just as well become art. Even performances, soundscapes and smells, which are not visible objects at all, were accepted after a while with the result that, 'startling as it may seem, the concept of visibility itself was bumped from the concept of the visual arts'.¹ So what was achieved was literally a

¹ Danto (2000): 426. In *After the End of Art*, he formulates it this way: 'with the philosophical coming of age of art, visibility drops away, as little relevant to the essence of art as beauty proved to have been.' See Danto (1998): 16.

breakthrough: visual artists broke through the boundaries of painting and sculpture and went beyond the visual until all boundaries eventually disappeared. Consequently, ‘artists [...] were free to make art in whatever way they wished, for any purposes they wished, or for no purposes at all.’² ‘Everything is permitted’³ has become the artworld’s motto or, as Danto puts it in *The Abuse of Beauty*, ‘anything goes with anything, in any way at all.’⁴

The exact moment when all this became clear (at least to Danto himself) was 1964, the year Andy Warhol presented his *Brillo Boxes* in the Stable Gallery in New York. Again and again, Danto has stressed the revolutionary and revelatory aspect of this work and the general importance of Warhol in bringing to a close art’s restless quest for its own essence. On occasion, however, Danto acknowledges that Warhol’s position was not wholly unique and that similar revolutions were taking place in other art forms. In his own words: ‘Warhol is but one of a group of artists to have made this profound discovery [that anything can be art]. The distinction between music and noise, between dance and movement, between literature and mere writing, which were coeval with Warhol’s breakthrough, parallel it in every way.’⁵

In my (2004) essay I brought forward a number of objections to Danto’s account. Let me rephrase the most important ones.

(i) Up to a certain point it seems reasonable to claim that the same momentous changes took place in all artforms. After all, while Warhol was bringing ordinary Brillo Boxes into the realm of art, certain choreographers and authors were doing the same thing with ordinary movements or writing. Nevertheless, the question is whether those developments really resemble each other *in every way*, as Danto maintains. This does not seem to be the case. As pointed out, the concept of visuality itself was bumped from the concept of the visual arts, yet it is clear that a similar transformation did *not* take place in other art forms. Take the example of literature. There have been numerous literary experiments, but these were always experiments with words or parts of words or texts. The concept of the *litterae* was never bumped from the concept of literature

² Danto (1998): 15.

³ *Ibid.*: 12.

⁴ Danto (2003): 20.

⁵ Danto (1998): 35. See also Danto (1998): 113, and Danto (2000): 427.

and the alleged transcendence of the boundaries of writing or reciting never took place. A case in point is *l'écriture automatique* of surrealists like Andre Breton and Phillippe Soupault. Their automatic writing, though revolutionary, was still a form of writing. Therefore, it should not be compared to Warhol's transgression of the boundaries of painting, but rather to experiments *within* the boundaries of painting, e.g. the formal experiments of abstract expressionism.⁶

(ii) In *After the End of Art* one finds the following comparison: 'Wittgenstein talks about a chess-player who puts a paper hat on a king, which of course, whatever meaning it has for him, means nothing under the rules of chess. So you can really take it off without anything happening. In the 1960s and beyond, it was discovered how many paper hats there were in art.'⁷ Danto's suggestion here is that artists in the 1960s were creative players who did a lot of revolutionary things, *but stayed within the rules of the game*. What rules, one could ask? How can one suggest that artists in the 1960s were abiding by the rules and at the same time describe the artworld as a place without rules, where nothing is prohibited and anything goes? In chess, adding or taking away paper hats is perfectly allowed, but that does not mean that everything is allowed. There are certain rules and breaking them means that you are making a mistake and that you are not playing chess anymore. In contemporary art, that possibility does not seem to exist. So, again, Danto is drawing a parallel without taking heed of a subtle difference. This difference is important because it hints at a negative aspect of the 'cheerful pluralism' so often praised by Danto.⁸

II

Puolakka is convinced that both arguments can be refuted and that my claims should be mitigated.

⁶ Danto himself seems to acknowledge this in some of his articles for *The Nation*. In his essay on Jackson Pollock, for instance, he states that '[Motherwell and Pollock] subscribed to the Surrealist concept of "psychic automatism" which they had learned from Matta and which Motherwell often spoke of as "the original creative principle."' See Danto (2000): 345.

⁷ Danto (2000): 427.

⁸ Danto (1994): 12; see also my (2004): 65-66.

(i) Although Puolakka agrees that literature provides a good counterexample to Danto's easy generalisation, he also thinks it 'a bit of a shame' that I do not mention the case of music since 'there truly were analogous tendencies with Warhol in the musical movements of the sixties. John Cage, who tried to push the boundaries of music by creating music out of silence and other ordinary sounds, best exemplifies this. Like Warhol, he wanted to make a transfiguration of the commonplace.'⁹ So, Puolakka concludes, 'music makes Danto's generalisation much more warranted.'¹⁰

I see two ways of dealing with this objection. One could argue that a work like *4'33"* is simply not a work of music.¹¹ Music, according to Stephen Davies, essentially involves the organization of sounds. Now, whether one takes *4'33"* to consist of silence or of ambient sounds, it does not *organize* sounds and therefore, says Davies, it should be considered as a conceptual work of performance art, raising questions about the nature of music rather than being a musical composition in its own right. Hence, if Davies' definition makes sense, Puolakka's argument fails. For one cannot use Cage as an example to demonstrate that developments in music were perfectly analogous to those in the visual arts, if Cage's work does not count as music in the first place.

But what if one disagrees with Davies? In that case, I would argue, Puolakka's argument is still unconvincing. One can accept that *4'33"* is music, without accepting that there is a perfect parallel between developments in music and the visual arts. After all, Cage did not show that anything can be music, in the same way that Warhol and others showed that anything can be art. What Cage showed, was that any *configuration of sound and silence* can be music. The difference is significant. In the visual arts there is nothing one could point to and say: 'That can never become a work of art.' By contrast, there are lots of things that can never be music.¹²

An advocate of Danto might object that although the difference between the visual arts and other artforms is real, it is not as important or as fundamental as I claim it to be. Puolakka

⁹ Puolakka (2005): 14

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 14

¹¹ Davies (2003).

¹² Cf. my (2004): 64-65.

actually seems to take this line at one point. ‘I don’t find it central for Danto’s philosophical starting point whether any object can be an artwork, although he clearly does claim this.’¹³ What is central, according to Puolakka, is that we cannot separate art from non-art by perceptual means alone and in this respect, he says, there is a strong resemblance with literature after all, since ‘we cannot say by perceptual means alone, whether we are dealing with a work of literature or for example with a newspaper article or a phone book.’¹⁴

One can indeed imagine a situation in which a seemingly ordinary phonebook is really the artistic creation of some experimental *auteur*. In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* Danto discusses the example of *Metropolis Eighty*, an Absolute Novel of Abstract Narrativity which is indistinguishable from the 1980 Manhattan Telephone Directory. However, although one can imagine that a novel like this will not be recognized as a work of literature, no one who enters a bookstore today seems to worry about actually making that mistake. By contrast, visitors to a museum of contemporary art do seem genuinely puzzled, occasionally asking themselves whether they are looking at a work of art or an ordinary heating grill or pile of bricks. What is a real problem in the visual arts, is not really a problem in other art forms. Danto unwittingly admits as much when he introduces *Metropolis Eighty* in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*: ‘Although it may be thought that the methods so far used in this book have a special and unique application to what was once called the “visual arts”, it is not difficult to show that all the same problems may be forced to arise throughout the domain of art.’¹⁵ Danto observes that the same problems may be *forced* to arise in other art forms, thereby admitting that they usually do not arise of themselves. In this respect, it is also telling that Danto has to come up with the *imaginary* example of *Metropolis Eighty* to parallel the *real* example of Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*.

This is not to say that there have never been real examples of literary works that could be

¹³ Puolakka (2005): 15

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 15. Still, in many cases one *can* decide by perceptual means alone whether something is *not* a work of literature. The same does not hold for the visual arts. For example, when I see a tree, a glass of beer, a chimney, I can safely say that those are not works of literature. By contrast, there is always a chance, however small, that those items have been transfigured into works of visual art, and looking alone will not settle the issue.

¹⁵ Danto (1981): 136.

mistaken for ordinary objects, because there have. But the point is that those experiments have remained rather marginal and have had no lasting impact on current practices in literature. In the visual arts Warhol, Duchamp, Beuys, Kosuth attained world fame, but their counterparts in literature have largely remained obscure. In the visual arts, there are still artists transfiguring commonplace objects into art nowadays, but not in literature (or, if there are, no one seems to know or care about them). Danto makes an interesting observation in this respect. After having discussed *Metropolis Eighty*, he writes: ‘It is tempting to say that the fact that there should be such a novel [...] may have a certain modest philosophical interest without its following that it is an interesting novel [...]: that its sole interest lies in the fact that it could have been done.’¹⁶ My guess is that virtually all literary critics would be tempted to say something like that when confronted by a novel that is perceptually indistinguishable from a phonebook or a bus schedule. Art critics, on the other hand, would not and indeed have not reacted in similar fashion. On the contrary, works by Warhol, Duchamp, Beuys, Kosuth, all indistinguishable from ordinary objects, are extolled as great accomplishments and profoundly interesting works of art.

(ii) ‘Maes makes a mistake when he forgets that Danto is an essentialist. [...] artworks are “embodied meanings”. For something to be a work of art it has to possess meaning, so it isn’t possible for any object to be a work of art, because not every object possesses meaning.’¹⁷ At first sight this seems a powerful argument against the claim that literally anything can be art and that there are no rules in art. A closer look reveals, however, that the argument is somewhat confused. If (a) a work of art must possess meaning, and (b) not every object possesses meaning, what follows is that (c) not every object *is* a work of art. But this does not imply that (c’) not every object *can be* a work of art. Just as it makes sense to say that anyone *can be* a member, but not everyone *is* a member, it sounds reasonable to argue that any object can be a work of art, but not every object is a work of art. Thus, I have not ignored Danto’s essentialism in order to maintain that literally anything can be art. I did not have to ignore this because being an essentialist is perfectly compatible with being a radical pluralist. In fact, this is precisely

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Puolakka (2005): 16.

Danto's own position. In *The Abuse of Beauty*, for instance, he defends both that 'anything goes with anything in any way at all' and that art works are essentially 'embodied meanings'.¹⁸

III

But what about the additional claims I made? Is it really excluded that artists could make a mistake in an artworld where anything goes? And does this necessarily imply that the audience will lose its 'normative grip' on the art produced? I am still inclined to think so, though some qualification is needed. The comparison with the game of chess may again be helpful. There are essentially two sorts of mistakes one can make in chess. On the one hand, one can break one or more rules, for instance by putting three kings on the chess board. If a player makes this kind of mistake – let's call this mistake A – he is no longer playing chess. On the other hand, a player can play the game correctly, but at a certain stage of the game make a foolish move that results in defeat. He has also made a mistake, though he obeyed all the rules. At no stage did he stop playing chess. Let's call this mistake B.

Mistake A, it seems to me, has become impossible in contemporary art. I am not going to argue extensively for this. It suffices to quote Danto instead: 'it became obvious to me that the tension had eased [in the 1960s] and that one could do anything without someone telling you "That is not art."' ¹⁹ But what about mistake B? In the first paper I suggested that it was no longer possible to distinguish between good and bad art because of the artworld's radical pluralism. This claim is probably too strong. Nevertheless, I wish to propose a weaker version that still challenges Danto's rosy picture of the artworld. I want to argue that it has become much harder (but not necessarily impossible) to evaluate art and that this is partly (but not solely) because of the artworld's extreme pluralism.

In 2002, a survey conducted by the Columbia University National Arts Journalism Program found that judging art is the least popular goal among American art critics, and simply describing

¹⁸ Danto (2003): 139.

¹⁹ Schneider (1997): 774. Cf. 'It was a moment of delicious freedom when the rules of the game became part of the game and everything seemed open.' (Danto, 1987): 11.

art is the most popular.²⁰ A surprising result if one knows that making evaluative judgements has always been the ‘core business’ of traditional art criticism and still is, for that matter, the ‘core business’ of literary criticism. Moreover, comparing the actual evaluative judgements of art critics past and present, it seems uncontroversial to note that there has never been less consensus than there is today. There certainly is less consensus among contemporary art critics than among literary critics.²¹ Each of these observations seems to lend at least circumstantial evidence to the conclusion that evaluating a work of art has become more difficult than it used to be and more difficult than, say, evaluating a novel.

How can this difficulty best be explained? I am not the only one who thinks it has something to do with the current pluralistic state of the artworld. Ken Johnson of the *New York Times*, for instance, recently made the following comment: ‘Contemporary sculpture knows no boundaries. There is no material or technology, from dirt to video, that sculpture won’t pick up and exploit for its own ends. [...] The down side is, if sculpture can be anything, then maybe it is not anything in particular. [...] it becomes hard for people to care very passionately about it, much less evaluate it.’²² Though my remarks are bound by space restrictions, I will try to spell out some of the reasons why the artworld’s extreme *laissez faire*, *laissez passer* policy puts a strain on the evaluation process.

Firstly, it has become much harder to make a distinction between what Kendall Walton has called ‘standard qualities’ (those in virtue of which works in a certain category belong to that category) and ‘variable or non-standard qualities’. In the case of traditional paintings, for instance, it was clear that the flatness of the canvas and the motionlessness of the markings were standard, whereas the particular shapes and colors were variable, relative to the category of

²⁰ Elkins (2003): 12.

²¹ I am not aware of any empirical research on this issue, but I believe my impressions are not mistaken. Extreme cases provide the best examples. No one will say that V.S. Naipaul or J.M. Coetzee is a bad writer, though there may be some disagreement about how good some of their works actually are. Likewise, no one will deny that the basketball players Shaquille O’Neill and Kobe Bryant are better than average, though there may be some discussion about how they rank among other famous NBA players. By contrast, there are a number of critics who believe that top league artists like Bruce Nauman or Tracey Emin or Damien Hirst are really no better than average or even that their work is a fraud.

²² Johnson (2004)

painting. But with contemporary works of art it is often completely unclear what features are variable or standard (or even whether that distinction still applies).²³ Obviously, this presents a problem for the evaluation of those works. As Walton has shown, ‘a work’s aesthetic properties depend not only on its nonaesthetic ones, but also on which of its nonaesthetic properties are “standard”, which “variable”’.²⁴

Secondly, radical pluralism, according to Jon Elster, undermines the establishment of intersubjective standards: ‘Art, like other forms of self-realization, requires competent judges; otherwise it becomes a "private language," a morass of subjectivity. If art varied very widely in form and subject matter, quality would be hard to evaluate and appreciate. Even if each artist worked under tight self-imposed constraints, intersubjective standards would be weak if different artists chose different constraints. However, if all artists work under the same constraints, their works can be compared and standards established by the community of artists and critics.’²⁵ Painters in 16th century, for instance, were all working under more or less the same constraints, which made comparison relatively easy. Thus, it was (and still is) universally agreed that Michelangelo was a better painter than most of his contemporaries. A similar consensus in performance or installation art seems unthinkable.

Now consider the following objection. ‘Ultimate fighting’ is a sport in which there are no rules and no constraints, yet it is easy to determine who is good at it and who is not. The contestant who is not knocked out at the end of the fight has simply proven himself better than his opponent. So, one could argue, the fact that there are no rules or constraints, does not *ipso facto* imply that evaluation should be difficult, let alone impossible.

²³ What, for instance, are the standard qualities of installation art? Are there any?

²⁴ Walton (2004): 144. Walton also notes that one ‘cannot merely decide to respond appropriately to a work - to be shocked or unnerved or surprised [...] - once one knows the correct categories. Perceiving a work in a certain category is a skill that must be acquired by training, and exposure to a great many other works of the category or categories in question is ordinarily, I believe, an essential part of this training. [...] It is of no use immersing ourselves in a particular work, even with the knowledge of what categories it is correctly perceived in, for that alone will not enable us to perceive it in those categories. We must become familiar with a considerable variety of works of similar sorts.’ See Walton (2004): 155. This raises some questions about Danto’s and Puolakka’s defence of a ‘pluralistic art criticism’, which ‘takes each work up on its own terms, in terms of its causes, its meanings, its references, and how these are materially embodied and how they are to be understood.’ See Danto (1998): 150, and Puolakka (2005): 117.

²⁵ Elster (2000): 199.

One response to this argument is to point out that there *are* rules and constraints in ultimate fighting, though they are rarely made explicit.²⁶ But even apart from this observation, there is another difference between ultimate fighting and the ultimate freedom in contemporary art that is worth noting. Every ultimate fighter has the same simple goal: to bring down his opponent. And it is easy to determine who is the better contestant, precisely because it is easy to determine who is able to accomplish that one goal. The contrast with contemporary art is obvious. There is no shared purpose in art, just as there are no shared constraints. Of course, even in Michelangelo's time the goals of an artist could be manifold. Nonetheless, it seems plausible to say that Michelangelo and his colleagues, by and large, shared the same set of goals. The same does not apply to contemporary art. In Danto's own words, artists are free to make art for any purposes they wish, or for no purposes at all. This 'cheerful pluralism', as Danto calls it, might have a not-so-cheerful consequence, namely the fact that evaluation is much harder now than it used to be.

²⁶ For example, fighters cannot use firearms, nor can they leave the ring or receive help from third parties.

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