

INDIVIDUAL STYLE AFTER THE END OF ART

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In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981)¹ Arthur Danto construes individual style as something “given” that belongs to the artist “essentially” and “inseparably.” By contrast, his theory of the end of art, set forth in *After the End of Art* (1997) and elsewhere,² suggests the liberation of artists from any stylistic commitments. How do these two theories go together? Can there be individual styles after the end of art? Examining the compatibility between Danto’s end of art thesis and his essentialist conception of individual style, this paper tries to approach an answer to these questions. Ultimately, the problem not only concerns the internal coherence of Danto’s philosophy of art; clarifying the relation between Danto’s two theses may also contribute to a more general discussion about the role of artistic individuality within a postmodern art world.

Before discussing in detail the question of individual style after the end of art, I would like to outline the two conceptions in turn.

I “STYLE AS THE MAN HIMSELF” AND STYLISTIC PLURALISM

In *Transfiguration* Danto proposes a rather romantic, essentialist conception of individual style (cf. 1981, esp. 198 ff.). Drawing freely on Buffon’s well known dictum “le style, c’est l’homme

¹ See in particular chaps. 6, 7. For a similar view cf. Danto 1992c. – All references, unless otherwise indicated, are to texts by Danto.

² See also 1990c, 1992b; for an earlier formulation of the thesis, see 1986, chap. 5; for modifications and clarifications, see esp. 1993, 1998, 2000.

même,” he holds the view that the properties referred to as an artist’s style are “essentially his,” and that style is something constant, in contrast to a merely “transient” or “ephemeral” fashion or manner. In their style, artists express their way of seeing the world, and they do so “spontaneously and immediately.” This immediate relation between artists and their style comprises two aspects: first, style is something given, not acquired or learned; secondly, their own style is something to which artists are in some sense blind or of which they are unconscious. “Mere manner,” by contrast, is “separated from the man himself” by being based on an intentionally acquired *techné*, and hence presupposes that the artist is aware of it. However, style can transform into manner insofar as becoming conscious of one’s style destroys the immediate relation to this style. Danto describes this loss of style as a form of externalization, alienation, or objectification. Artists come to see their own style from an external third person perspective; their relation to their own style becomes similar to a historian’s relation to a remote period style, or a copist’s relation to an adopted or imitated foreign style. Danto’s favorite example is Chagall, ‘who perhaps had a style but now has a manner, and whom we often accuse of self-plagiarization, at best of repeating himself’ (1981, 204).³

Danto’s end of art theory, by contrast, suggests a different prospect for individual style. Its cheerfully postmodern vision of a pluralistic art world that arises after the end of art invokes the idea of flexible artistic Selves that are not committed to anything. Instead, they are free to choose among whatever styles and genres art history has to offer to form their own styles.⁴ That this vision has become reality is something for which Danto’s theory of the end of art is intended to account (cf. 1986, 81). Let me sketch his line of reasoning. Following Hegel, Danto construes a close connection between coming to self-knowledge, the end of (art) history, and freedom (cf. 1990c, 343). Assuming that ‘its own philosophy is what art aims at’ (1986, 81), he

³ Cf. also the analogy he draws to the structure of consciousness itself, conceived of as ‘being a structure that is not an object for itself in the way in which the things of the world are objects for it. ... I do not, as a consciousness, view myself from without. I am an object for others but not for myself, and when I am an object for myself, I have already gone beyond that; when it is made visible it is no longer me, at least from within.’ (1981, 206)

⁴ However, Danto has not always been that optimistic. In earlier articles he took that post-historical pluralism, rather gloomily, as a symptom of the “dismal state” of the contemporary art world (1986, 81) and regarded it ‘an immense privilege to have lived in history’ (1986, 115).

takes art to have achieved this developmental end by its ‘ascent to philosophical self-consciousness’ (1997, 66) – an accomplishment paradigmatically marked, in Danto’s view, by Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* in 1964. Outwardly indistinguishable from their ordinary counterparts in the supermarket stacks, the *Brillo Boxes* pose the question why they are a work of art while their counterparts are not. According to Danto, within art itself the question of art’s essential nature could not have been advanced further; hence the question has to be handed over to philosophy. Having reached this point, art enters what Danto terms a post-historical or post-narrative stage: no further progressive development, constituting a new historical narrative, is to be expected. Artistic activity will go on, but will be historically insignificant (cf. 1986, 111 f.). All that remains are ‘just the individual styles and the lives of the artists as a plural biography’ (Danto 1992c, 248). At the same time, this amounts to artistic liberation: artists no longer have to contribute to any overarching art historical mission. In particular, they no longer have to contribute to the project of inquiring art’s essence. Liberated from the ‘tyrannies of history’ (1992b, 229), they are free to do whatever they feel like and ‘to go their diverse ways’ (Danto 1997, 147). Thus, the mark of the post-historical stage is an unprecedented pluralism in which, with few qualifications, anything goes. This pluralism not only entails that anything can in principle be a work of art, and that different artists follow different stylistic directions. It also means a pluralism of media, styles, and genres in the sense that all of them are in whatever eclectic combinations equally respectable. Last but not least, it means that artists may switch between them as they please. What this suggests is, that artists are freed not only from the burden of history but also from being bound to one particular artistic identity, manifested in one particular style.

Maybe in the end this postmodern picture proves to be reconcilable with the *Transfiguration* conception of style. But in any case the end of art theory offers a different terminology and a different evaluation of a phenomenon that might equally be described as the absence of style and the reign of “mere manner,” with all its negative implications.

In the following I am not going to discuss the plausibility of any of Danto’s central claims, neither of his version of the end of art nor of the thesis that having style is incompatible with being conscious of that style. Both claims are highly disputable and would have to be examined

separately. What interests me instead is their relation to each other: how, if at all, do the two conceptions of artistic individuality fit together? Is Danto's account of a pluralistic art world capable of integrating his conception of "style as the man himself," and hence the distinction between style and manner entailed by it?

Ultimately I do not think that the question can be decided in favor of one clearcut answer. In the first place this is due to the fact that Danto's claims about the end of art and about individual style – or these phenomena themselves – are too ambiguous for the question to be resolved. In order to show these ambiguities, I would like to take a closer look at three aspects that are particularly relevant in this context: the question of arbitrariness, the question of originality, and the question of unity of style.

II ARBITRARINESS

The ambiguity becomes particularly evident in connection with Danto's reference to Warhol's claim that '[y]ou ought to be able to be an Abstract Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist, or a realist, *without feeling you've given up something*' (cit. in 1990b, 288, emphasis added). It is a claim, Danto points out, that bears a striking similarity to what Marx envisages in his 'vision of history after the end of history, under which one can farm, hunt, fish, or write literary criticism, without *being* a farmer, a hunter, a fisherman, or a literary critic' (1997, 127, emphasis added; cf. 1990b, 288). Analogously, in a post-historical, pluralistic art world artists can virtually do what they please – 'be an abstractionist in the morning, a photorealist in the afternoon, a minimal minimalist in the evening' or whatever. (1986, 114 f.) Even more, 'it would hardly have been consistent with the liberating spirit of pop art that its artists should have allowed themselves to become victims of their own style. One mark, it seems to me, of artists after the end of art is that they adhere to no single avenue of creativity ...' (1997, 127).

On the one hand, and in particular in the light of *Transfiguration*, this kind of arbitrariness and lack of commitment could easily be re-described in terms of "mere manner," lack of style, or a loss of Self. The stylistic means are not only freely available but are also arbitrarily replaceable. Thus, they seem incapable of constituting something like an artistic identity.

In the context of his end of art theory, however, Danto celebrates this arbitrariness, invoking Sartre and Hegel, as the mark of ‘being truly human’ (1997, 127) and the return to ‘genuine truth and life’ (1997, 148). He refers to Marx’s passage as an illustration of the very state of *nonalienation* (cf. 1986, 112), and he reads Warhol’s and Marx’s statements as implying a Sartrean refusal ‘to be any particular thing’ or to regard oneself ‘as an object, and hence as having an identity as a waiter if a waiter, or a woman if a woman’ (1997, 127). Seen from this angle, becoming a “victim of one’s own style” might well mean nothing else than employing one’s own style as a mere external manner.

It seems, then, that Danto’s picture of the postmodern artist does not altogether dismiss those vague romantic ideals of “genuineness,” or “authenticity,” or “being true to one’s art” that are evoked by the style-manner distinction in *Transfiguration*. What differs is not so much the ideals, but their conditions of realization. One might conclude from this that artistic genuineness does not necessarily require a constant artist Self or a given individual style. Artists might as well create their own Selves by making the chosen styles their own. Or, one might assume that choosing among virtually unlimited options without getting fragmented presupposes a particularly robust artistic Self. The noncommittal employment of stylistic means might then be taken as betraying artistic sovereignty rather than lack of style. Or, one might argue that the question of being true to oneself only becomes relevant if one rejects the *Transfiguration* idea of individual style as something given. For how can artists meaningfully be said to be true to their style if they cannot help but just have a particular style and are not even conscious of it?

In any case, even if individual style is thought of, not as something given and stable, but as something freely chosen and flexible, this does not imply that *from the point of view of the artist* anything goes. In short, arbitrariness need not imply indifference on the artist’s part. Though artists are no longer committed to any collective art historical projects, nor to any particular style, their artistic activity might still be guided by personal convictions – as long as the lack of historical commitments is not experienced as depriving their activity of any meaningfulness at all. Thus, the observation that artists could make art ‘in whatever way they care to’ (1997, 173) might well be taken in the most substantial sense of the word “care.” Accordingly, the element of non-arbitrariness that is involved in Danto’s account of individual

style in *Transfiguration* could be retained. How a pluralist attitude might combine with a sense of “artistic necessity” can be illustrated by the case of the artist Jennifer Bartlett. Danto characterizes her as an outspoken Pluralist who “‘liked a lot of different work’” (cit. in 1992b, 224). Yet at the same time she avowed e.g. that she ‘could not live with [being a minimalist],’ or that she felt ‘a need for green’ (1992c, 244 f.).

III ORIGINALITY

As regards the question of originality, the end of art thesis proves to be similarly ambiguous. According to one reading, since art has come to its end, there cannot arise anything novel anymore. For if the developmental history of art is closed, one might ask, how can artists avoid returning to ‘outworn styles’ (1997, 148) and how can art production evade ending up in ‘cycle upon cycle of repetitions of much the same options’ (1990c, 331)?⁵ Danto himself used to characterize the end of art as a stage ‘where the engines of artistic production can only combine and recombine known forms.’ In this sense, he concludes, ‘the Age of Art is internally worn out’ (1986, 85). And further, if one assumes that individual style involves aspects of originality, invention, creativity, how can one avoid the conclusion that in a post-historical art world there is no room left for individual style?

Again, the conclusion that the end of art implies the end of individual style is not compelling. First, to assume that the closure of art history sets an end to artistic individuality would overstate the case, as Danto reassures in a more recent article: it ‘would be like worrying that human character is finite, that all the characters and personal styles would all be used up. Since no two individuals have the same character, this is a needless fear’ (1998, 138). Hence, even after the end of art artists’ idiosyncrasies do not disappear. Moreover, Danto’s conception of individual style as something “‘given” suggests that an artist’s individual style can be strictly isolated from the general styles the artist might adopt. Thus, however mannered the *general* style might be

⁵ As long as art production does not *stop*, which, of course, was not what Danto meant by the “end of art”.

that an artist's work exemplifies, this would not affect the genuineness of the artist's own *individual* style. In other words: artists may choose randomly from a closed set of pre-given general styles, as the above Warhol quote suggests; but this would not defeat a notion of individual style substantial enough to be contrasted with "mere manner."

Secondly, the end of art thesis does not even exclude individual inventions and novelty in a more robust sense. For the claim that art has come to its end is a qualified one. The "end" only refers to the end of historically significant, progressive developments. Thus, the thesis only maintains, first, that art's ascent to self-knowledge has reached its limit, and second, that the continuing artistic activities do not establish a new progressive development informing another "master narrative". In particular, they are no longer guided by the assumption that there is a 'historically *correct* direction' (1992b, 229, emphasis added). Neither does this exclude the possibility of change and unprecedented variations nor of individual inventions. In other words, the end of art thesis is not a thesis about the *exhaustion* of possible artistic means.

Thus, juxtaposed to Danto's scenario of ever the same repetitions are passages in which he is enthusiastic about the flourishing of art after its end. He observes an 'unlimited lateral diversity of art,' as if 'each artists had evolved a new genre' (1992b, 225), and 'marvel[s] at the imaginativeness of artists in finding ways to convey meanings by the most untraditional means' (2000, 431). From this latter point of view, it also would no longer be paradoxical that the quest for originality and individual style seems to prevail in the postmodern art world more than ever.

IV UNITY OF STYLE

At the outset, the blatant stylistic variety within the oeuvre of post-historical artists seems to be at odds with the constancy of style that is demanded in *Transfiguration*. However, Danto himself draws two implicit distinctions that allow one to reconcile a pluralistic and an essentialist conception of individual style in that respect. First, he uses "style" to refer, not only to the manifest stylistic features in works of art, but also to something mental, something that has, as Richard Wollheim calls it, 'psychological reality' (cf. 1992c, 245; Wollheim 1986, 26). This "mental style" – whatever that may be – accounts then for the manifest stylistic characteristics in

works of art.⁶ Secondly, as regards those manifest stylistic qualities, Danto sometimes refers to the particular style of single works, sometimes to the overall style of an artist's oeuvre. These distinctions offer two – maybe somewhat ad hoc – ways of solving the apparent tension mentioned above. First, style as something mental may be fixed while manifesting itself in manifold ways in works of art. Secondly, though the manifest stylistic characteristics may diverge considerably within an artist's oeuvre, they may retrospectively become visible as manifestations of one unified style. Again the case of Jennifer Bartlett might serve as an example. While her '[stylistic] intentions vary from work to work' (1992c, 246; cf. 1992b, 224), Danto attributes to her 'an artistic style which is essentially her, which emerges through her work as the work develops ... the style itself remains constant or, if you like, it is the same artistic personality throughout' (1992c, 246). In short, a pluralism of appearances – and Danto's "anything goes" thesis refers, after all, in the first place to the *appearance* of works of art – would be compatible with unity and stability of style.⁷

V THE END OF A DISTINCTION

In particular the question of arbitrariness and the question of originality suggest yet another possible conclusion: that after the end of art, the dichotomy between style and manner loses its significance. For if anything goes and nothing matters, and if art is a mere 'play of possibilities, and the possibilities are all more or less known' (1993, 212), there seems to be no point in judging the stylistic qualities of works of art under categories such as originality, authenticity, or genuineness. Moreover, the distinction between style and manner becomes obsolete for logical reasons as well: In a post-historical art world, stylistic means figure as commonly available options, as methods or techniques everyone is entitled to make use of. In this respect, they have

⁶ In *Transfiguration*, "style" refers to the way of *mental* representation as well as to the corresponding way of representation in works of art. In 1992c, "style" appears as a kind of mental disposition that explains why an artist e.g. paints in the way he does. For a similar distinction cf. Wollheim 1986, 26: 'The style itself is distinct from the characteristics associated with it, and it is it that causes them to be as they are. Individual style is in the artist who has it ...' (Wollheim 1986, 26).

⁷ Cf. the efforts, e.g. by Schapiro (2000), to explain Picasso's notorious stylistic shifts as manifestations or developments of one single style, rather than as a succession of different styles.

obtained the status of something like a public type. And as such, they can only be repeatedly instantiated or applied, but strictly speaking cannot be repeated, or plagiarized, or imitated. Thus, it would amount to a category mistake to raise questions of genuineness or firstness. In particular, an artist who employs those stylistic means cannot be *blamed* for adopting a mere manner.

The difference between mere manner and genuine style also vanishes in another respect. According to Danto, 'it is exactly the mark of the post-historical moment that the quest for identity is undertaken by those who are after all distant from their target – who, in a kind of Sartrean way of putting things, are not what they are and are what they are not' (1997, 127 f.). What this, in turn, suggests is that those who have style are not concerned with it. This throws some further light on the relation between the *Transfiguration* conception of individual style and the end of art conception of individual style: it is not so much a difference between something given and not conscious to the artist on the one hand, and something consciously searched for on the other hand. Rather, the two conceptions suggest two different forms of not being aware of style, both contrasting with a self-consciously pursued project of self-discovery. Thus, if one wishes, one could interpret the end of art, not as the beginning of ever the same mannerisms, but as an invitation to careless playfulness.⁸ Also under this perspective the question of style vs. manner becomes obsolete.

VI CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let me come back to the initial question to what extent Danto's end of art theory and his essentialist conception of individual style are compatible. What conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing discussion? First and foremost it shows, I think, that whatever answer one arrives at depends on several preliminary decisions: how one interprets the end of art thesis; in which terms one construes the assumed unity of individual style; and how one generally conceives of

⁸ This aspect of art's liberation to joyfulness and playfulness is also emphasized by Solomon/Higgins 1993, 119, and Herwitz 1993, 147.

the relation between individual style on the one hand, and general style or the on-goings in the art world, on the other hand. For example, one might hold the following two views: first, that any individual style is to an important degree constituted by the general styles the work in question exemplifies; and, second, that after the end of art those general styles end up as repetitious mannerisms. Under these assumptions, the prospects for individual style, as opposed to mere manner, seem rather limited. But, as the discussion has shown, interpreting the problem in this way is by no means cogent.

Instead of drawing any further morals from the above discussion, I would like to conclude by raising another question. Taking for granted *Transfiguration's* essentialist conception of style, one might draw into question the possibility of style in a post-historical pluralistic art world. But one could likewise use the picture of such an art world in order to challenge the conclusions of *Transfiguration*. Thus, one remaining question is why becoming conscious of one's own style shall not have the same liberating effect as in the case of *art* becoming conscious of itself. Why should it not be regarded as resulting in a higher degree of artistic sovereignty rather than in mere manner? Again, the distinction is a fragile one. Probably it is less one in substance than in rhetoric. And how one interprets a given case – whether as demonstrating mere manner or rather artistic sovereignty – may partly depend on what one wishes to think about the work or the artist in question. The varying estimations of Picasso's diverse adaptations might be an instructive case in point.⁹

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