DANTO’S NARRATIVE NOTION OF HISTORY AND THE FUTURE OF ART

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I. Narrative and Evolution

As part of the 1993 exhibition “Culture in Action: New Public Art in Chicago”, a local confectionery union was asked to get involved by making a contribution. They were to create what in their eyes was a work of art, and their achievement was the perfect candy bar. They called the work *We Got It!* In *After the End of Art*, Arthur Danto uses *We Got It!* as an example of participatory community-based art that was “allowed” to be art because of the pluralistic nature of art in the era of post-history. In Danto’s estimation, it is not the “art world”, the body of theory that “determines” what art is or will be, that creates community-based projects like *We Got It!*; but it is the post-historical “art world” that makes it possible for community-based projects to be art. Danto’s theory of art centres on his essentialist definition of art. According to this theory, artworks embody, in some material form, the meaningful intention of the artist. The meanings of the artworks are connected through a historically indexed notion of style, which can be interpreted through the diachronic unfolding of art-world concepts. Danto’s portrayal of contemporary art, or post-historical art, as he coins the term, is that of an infinitely pluralistic style of making styles, in which no style is better than any other. Danto claims that the era of art is over because its story has closed. Though all styles are available to artists, none can be inhabited as it was by the artists of history. This paper looks at the example of *We Got It!* in order to show that, although Danto’s theory of art is helpful in explaining the art of our time, perhaps he is in error in believing that the final narrative interpretation had been made, and is unable to see the value in those artistic expressions that further the dialogue of art. I will focus on Habermas’s discussion of narrative statements arguing that, in the right context, some “future historical” statements can serve as a hermeneutical guide for practically oriented action. Applying this theoretical perspective to the creation and interpretation of art, my understanding of the exhibition that gave us

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1 Danto describes the “artworld” as “an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art...the theory that takes [the artwork] up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is” (Danto 1964, 580-1).
We Got It! supports the claim that in the pluralistic world of contemporary art, artistic expression is not arbitrary, but is part of a process of cultural self-understanding.

Danto’s essentialist definition of art, and the status he allocates for post-historical art in the “era after art”, is based on a Hegelian model, but the roots of his theory are not found in a philosophy of universal history. Rather, they are in a narrative notion of history, a topic which he pioneers in his early work *Analytical Philosophy of History*. According to Danto’s narrative notion of history, a consistent narrative identity is maintained through the telling of historical events. This identity cannot be known fully until the narrative episode is complete. Take, for example, The Thirty Years’ War, which started in 1618. In 1618, however, no one could have known that the Thirty Years’ War would actually last thirty years. Thus, the past is referenced within the narrative structure of later events. For Danto, the narrative identity of the era of art ends with art’s philosophical self-understanding, and this is when the history of art ends. This narrative identity, though, is also affected by the social interests of history, the meaning—style perhaps—that is indexed to the times. The theories of Habermas and Danto overlap at this point, for Habermas suggests that Danto’s analysis of narrative statements would be a useful tool in understanding the cognitive structure, used by rational actors in coordinating life’s activities, embedded within the lifeworld. “In adopting the narrative form, we are choosing a perspective that ‘grammatically’ forces us to base our descriptions on an everyday concept of the lifeworld as a *cognitive reference system*” (Habermas 1987b, 136). Through understanding, in narrative form, lifeworld traditions as a cognitive reference system, Habermas argues we can make sense of how mutual understanding, within the system of communicative action, transmits and renews cultural knowledge. The communicative process, in the sense of Habermas’ theory of communicative action, consists of an internal process through which the “cognitive reference system” of the lifeworld both conditions the possibility of what can be communicated and how it is transferred. Habermas secures a place for the aesthetic dimensions of discourse within the rational infrastructure of the lifeworld’s communicative schema and recognizes the critical capacity of world-disclosive discourse in art (Habermas 1990, 149, 319, 339–40). Understood within this framework, the artistic process, which develops the communicative infrastructure of artistic possibility, acts both as a means of critique and of extending what can be manifest as art (Habermas 1983, 12–13).

Danto would certainly agree that the artist creates art within an understandable framework. But the self-understanding and awareness enmeshed in the set of cultural pre-understandings utilized to communicate to the audience are truncated in Danto’s non-critical account of artistic creation. The significance is “mined” from history, and the philosopher interprets what the artist receives in an unmediated fashion. Danto views art’s development and end as a narrative, a story
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that he can describe conclusively because it has ended. However, Danto’s narrative account, making conclusive statements about the end of the era of art, can be applied only to *historical* narratives. If the artistic practice is not viewed as a historical narrative but as a developmental process in which capacities emerge such that higher level competencies can explain the flaws of the lower level, the narrative finality does not apply, for the story is not of events but of a capability (Habermas 1979). I present the reciprocal interaction of artistic creation and interpretation, which I see occurring in the *Culture in Action* exhibit, as a process, rather than events to be descriptively interpreted. Through this example, I aim to show that the wide array of styles available to the artists and exhibitors of the contemporary art scene may not be attributed solely to complete freedom of choice. The artistic interventions that occur today are due in part to countermovements. For example, the aims of the political sphere are articulated in the aesthetic sphere as part of a process that mediates a fragmented artistic practice, a practice that is readjusting after the erosion of what Danto calls the “narrative structures of traditional representational art” (Danto 1997, 48).

Danto’s own theory of art’s end comes, he admits, very close to contradicting the claim of his earlier work, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, in which he held that the philosopher of history can make no privileged claims regarding a historical future that, even if universal, is incomplete. Danto asserts that his end-of-art thesis is not about any future; the end he sees is in the historical present. Thus, it does not fall prey to this criticism. He does, however, suggest that he has gained an appreciation for the “objective historical structures” that he once renounced. He has come to understand this term in the sense that certain works of art, having been inconceivable in the era of art, have now earned a place in the era of post-history (ibid., 43). In Danto’s thinking, one historical era has closed and another has opened, each having different objective historical structures. In the era of art, the objective historical structures were driven by a single style through which art attempted to define itself. The narrative of art is completed once the internal drive of art is made explicit. In its completion, this historical narrative is no longer useful in looking forward, for the continuity between the narratives is severed. In post-history, art is not mandated to be any particular style, with anything possible; art is the actualization of an objective historical structure of immanent pluralism (ibid., 44). In Danto’s words, the narrative structures of modernism are “eroded” in “the sense that they have no longer an active role to play in the production of contemporary art” (ibid., 48). Though no master narrative drives the creation of post-historical art, artists live with the knowledge of the narratives that came before them. Danto is critical of the theories of thinkers like Popper and Gombrich, who, in his words, are concerned with “the ‘growth’ of knowledge, and hence with an historical process representable via a narrative” (ibid., 50). Though the history of art and the history of science can be presented as a narrative, as Danto notes,
they are also concerned with the “‘growth’ of knowledge”, a practical learning process to which, to borrow an argument from Habermas, narrative historical knowledge does not always apply; when a phenomenon, like technological innovation or an era in history, is completed, it can be written about as history. But evolutionary processes, processes that are either still in play or are emerging capacities, cannot have a history as such (Habermas 1979, 16–18, 40–44). An evolutionary process can be rationally reconstructed, but it is not clear that reconstructed narrative events can be placed in a specific historical sequence. If a narrative account of an evolutionary process is made, though the historical narrative structure is collapsed, it is nonetheless possible that continuity with the past is maintained. Following this logic, continuity can be found if the shift of art from modernism to that of post-history is explained in terms of artists’ reactions within the practice of art to the erosion of the narrative structures discussed by Danto. These reactions could be viewed as “the articulation of an action-orienting self-understanding” brought about by shifts in the correspondence of the lifeworld’s system of cognitive reference to the changing social and cultural demands of the twentieth century (Habermas 1977, 351). From this perspective, the shift away from the mimetic format of art would not be an end point. Rather, if I may apply a term Habermas uses, it is a critical moment of “hermeneutic anticipation”.

This “hermeneutic point of departure” is not determined through the reproduction of existing traditions, “but by a discursive further development of tradition” (Habermas 1979, 10, 44). It is at this point that the world-disclosive functions of art, as Habermas and others would describe them, play a critical role in redressing the orientation of the lifeworld’s system of reference.

In Danto’s view, there can be no final analysis of a historical era until it is over. Before that time, any predictions of future possibilities are arbitrary, subject to the whims of individual “prophecy”. But if the anticipation is not arbitrary, as Habermas has made the case for hermeneutical statements used within the appropriate context, the array of variant styles may constitute a progressive

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2 Regarding Danto’s account of narrative statements, Habermas argues, “if we examine the validity of hermeneutic statements in the framework proper to them, the framework of knowledge that has consequences for practice, then what Danto has to regard as a defect proves to be a transcendental condition of possible knowledge. Only because we project the provisional end-state of a system of reference out of the horizon of life-practice can the interpretation of events (which can be organized into a story from the point of view of the projected end) as well as the interpretation of the parts (which can be described as fragments from the point of view of the anticipated totality) have any information content at all for that life-practice” (Habermas 1977, 351).

3 In this essay, Habermas refers to the theoretical anticipation based on a historical narrative twice as a “hermeneutic point of departure.”
development, despite “appearances” to the contrary. Danto’s claim—that philosophy and art, reason and history, are separated only insofar as philosophy serves to explain the history of art and the narrative of the past—neglects the way reason is enmeshed with what is learned through history. As Habermas argues, the realm of reason is shifted from that of the unchangeable to a process that is fallible and once thought to be incapable of manifesting conceptual clarity.

Reason is valid neither as something ready-made, as an objective teleology that is manifested in nature or history, nor as a mere subjective faculty. Instead the patterns looked for in historical events yield encoded indications of unfinished, interrupted, and misguided processes of self-formation that transcend the subjective consciousness of the individual (Habermas 1990, 392–93).4

If history is intermeshed with a form of rationality that entails a process of “learning and unlearning”, then interpretations of possible future understandings, though prone to false starts, are not meaningless.

II. Non-aesthetic art as a force for social change

After the First World War, artists who attempted to break with the bourgeoisie and the elites of the academy had a strong inclination to establish an audience within the non-elite. As they rebelled against art as a plaything of the rich and powerful, they attempted to use the institutions of the arts as a locus for social change (Cahan 2004).5 If the traditional media and places of art were not the

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4 Habermas continues, “As subjects relate to internal and external nature, the social and cultural life-context in which they exist is reproduced through them. The reproduction of life forms and life histories leaves behind impressions in the soft medium of history which, under the strained cage of those seeking clues, solidify into indicators or structures. This specifically modern gaze […] snatches nonetheless at configurations and structures from which it deciphers formative processes in which both learning and mislearning are entwined […] Through drawing on false theoretical models, this risky undertaking was at first derailed into the dogmatism of philosophy of history and thus called for the reaction of historicism. But those who conduct the discourse in a serious fashion know that it must steer between Scylla and Charybdis.” Habermas 1990, 392–93; see also pages 51–55.

5 Interventions employing the medium of art and the institutions of the museum have not always yielded the desired result. Cahan investigates how, during the civil rights era, some curators attempted to bring members of the minority community into the museum. Examining three exhibitions that took place during the civil rights era, Cahan shows that, despite the best intentions of the curatorial faculty, the way that the art of minorities was chosen and exhibited underscored cultural hierarchies rather than ameliorated them.
temples of the spirit’s expression, to use a Hegelian phrase, then where were the artists to turn? Many artists felt that they were being squeezed into a corner by commercialism and economic forces that could not quantify the value of art.\(^6\) Some chose to represent a force in the modern world that was anti-commercial, anti-capitalist, and in general a voice from outside the system. This perspective, from outside the totality, is where Hegel saw the Pöbel, the rabble who fell through the cracks.\(^7\) Marcuse postulated that if there were a way to break the totality of the military-industrial complex’s grip on society, it would come from those who could not be co-opted by the system. Artists today, in many ways, do see themselves as reflecting the voices of those who are outside the system. But Schopenhauer and the Romantics had said something very similar about two centuries before. Even if the message comes from “without”, the artist still needs to communicate to the audience. In order to present to the viewer an image providing a reflective distance from the lived world—or even the “system” that represents the dominant form of social reality—the artist must nonetheless remain conversant in the language and metaphor of art. Rejecting their place and their medium, artists had no option but to search for a new language that could reach what they would hope to be a new audience.

According to Greenberg, “the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to ‘experiment’ but to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence” (Greenberg 1995, 8). Though art has changed drastically since 1939, this modern drive to “keep culture moving” appears often in the art of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Though many artists perceived the symbolic medium itself to be an obstacle, their aim to keep culture moving was complicated without it. Arguably, the reason they abandoned their artistic language is the same reason that they sought a new audience. At the height of modernism, the language of art appeared to many artists, correctly or incorrectly, as the language of the oppressor, incapable of mediating their expression or not able to provide a vision articulating the future of the “new era”. Consequently, artists sought forms of expression that had previously been far from art. With the exhaustion of modernity’s aesthetic schemata, artists in the late twentieth century borrowed from politics, philosophy, or wherever they thought they could gain traction with a new audience of the non-elite, an audience who they believed needed their transfiguring message. Danto was correct in his assessment that the aesthetic was no longer an artistic value; thus, Greenberg—and

\(^6\) Greenberg notes in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939): “Capitalism in decline finds that whatever of quality it is still capable of producing becomes invariably a threat to its own existence” (Greenberg 1995, 22).

\(^7\) According to Hegel, society has an obligation to prevent a Pöbel from forming, but its emergence may be unavoidable (Hegel 1991, 264).
most likely Greenberg’s taste—could not appreciate the turn that art had taken after modernism. The voice of art after the turning-point, as Danto claimed, was a “Babel of unconverging artistic conversations”.

Habermas suggests that two opposing directions emerged within the development of modern art due to the diverging perspectives of the nonprofessional and the expert. The expectation that a lay audience should strive to gain expert knowledge of the arts is incompatible with the presumption that they remain consumers who use art to relate to their own lives. Thus, the aspect of artistic creation relating most to the lives of the lay audience was lessened precisely because of their striving for expertise (Habermas 1983, 12). The gap in the understanding of art by the critic or the professional and the “everyday expert” could not be maintained in practice. Arguably, many community-based art projects appear to have adopted direct participation as a means of removing critical mediators from the experience of art with the aim of broadening the contemporary audience. This brings us to Danto’s discussion of We Got It!, the local confectionery union’s contribution to Culture in Action. In Danto’s eyes, the artistic experience has a transforming property that should be denied to no one. By means of public art, this experience is brought to the community so that they too can feel its transformative effect. It is Danto’s claim that the post-historical art world does not include a concept for community-based projects like We Got It!, but the openness of its concepts make it possible for community-based projects to be art (Danto 1997, 188–9). Projects of community-based art are usually temporary engagements, frequently geared towards the direct participation of neighbourhood residents who are not part of the arts community. Though these events are often documented and the results are presented in the museum context or in publications, if the artistic import of these engagements lies in the act of participation, then the artistic moment does not carry over to the documentation. The art of community participation, which often seeks to overcome social ills by empowering the participants, has laudable goals. But community-based art, such as Culture in Action, has two distinct purposes. On the one hand the curators appear to be casting a broad net, attempting to create a new audience for art regardless of whether the activity falls within the previously known scope of art. On the other hand they attempt to use art as a tool directly to confront the societal problems faced by the community of participants. Regarding the latter, it should be noted that in general, art, though of benefit to society, is rarely successful with direct interventions aiming to bring about the sort of changes as claim to be the goals of such public projects. Regarding the former, though agreeing with Danto that anything can be art in the post-historical art world, in order to generate a new audience the curators encourage the participants to engage in activities that do not refer to any of the schematic structures of the art world, new or old. These projects often have no point of reference outside the activity itself or their practical goals.
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*Culture in Action*, Mary Jane Jacob, asserts that one of the project’s goals was to take the focus away from Western self-expression and emphasize collective interaction (Heartney 1995). But much of *Culture in Action*’s draw was due to its large budget for both the community projects and invitations to critics who, after having been “re-educated” in the ideal function of community-based art, were urged to recognize the artistic merit of the project after the fact.

Habermas has argued that the emergence of “countermovements” in the aesthetic sphere, such as artistic movements committed to political change, indicates the attempt to “mitigate” a compartmentalized rational practice by adopting cultural forms that belong to other spheres in an attempt to bring unity to them (Habermas 1987a, 312–13). In reality, such projects entail political goals that are to be achieved by means of artistic expression; this overburdens the task of art. The critic Harriet Senie, discussing the wave of public art, of which the *Culture in Action* project was a part, argues:

> public art is not a substitute for urban renewal or social work, although projects may address or include such functions. Public art ideally creates better places and provides enjoyment, insight, and maybe even hope to its participants, viewers, and users. But it cannot correct deeper problems stemming from widespread unemployment and poverty, the neglect of public education and healthcare, and all the other social ills so glaringly ignored at the moment. Yet these unreasonable expectations are often implicit or imbedded in the commissioning of public art (Senie 2003).

In the situations described above, the claims of the moral sphere are ineffectively applied in the aesthetic sphere. If art is to provide the beneficial insights of world-disclosure, the specialized rationality of art cannot be applied effectively if employed explicitly as practical political claims. The change of context from the political to the aesthetic sphere, though providing cues that the form of usage has been altered, in itself is not adequate. Nonetheless, the wide spectrum of contrasting artistic practices that compete in the art world point not to a freedom found in finality (as Danto, taking the seat of the last historian of art, claims), but to an art world critically struggling to reengage the broader community within an evolving artistic medium that stands in need of an interpreter.

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8 If countermovements attempt to collapse the contents of just one of the independent spheres of rationality into the lifeworld, without at the same time infusing the sublimated rationalities of the other two, then the result is a “false negation” which will be incapable of achieving the aims of the countermovement. Habermas argues that the Surrealist revolt was an example of a false negation (Habermas 1983).
III. Alternative forms of mediation

The project of community art indicates that the split between the artist and the public may not, contrary to Danto’s assertion, be attributable to the independence of art from philosophy. While Danto suggests that the mediation of the art critic and the philosopher should ameliorate this gap, others propose that the museum should change its role from a repository of artworks to a locus of artistic creation. Implicit in the notion of using the museum as a point of activity that strives to bring the artist and the public back together is the realization that there is a gap, agreeing with Danto, but it is a gap that can be bridged. This is made evident insofar as museum curators are now seeking to aid in the rebuilding of an “artistic language” that can bring the audience back to art (Cahan, forthcoming). Within the world of artists, beholders, and professional curators and critics, a process of discovery is occurring, which is oriented towards a broadened vocabulary capable of reaching a more inclusive audience than it is currently able to do. The choice of which medium best communicates the artists’ sentiments presents a problem that artists seek to resolve while generating a schematic for the art of the post-historical age.\footnote{The works of the artist collective Simparch aim to overcome the split between audience and artist by crafting works of art with the permanence of sculptures that are also participatory, evoking art as an activity. Though there is room for conceptual interpretation, there is also an immediate participatory channel that allows for a transforming moment. These works, free-standing architectural sculptures that invite the audience inside, can be part of a museum or can be exhibited independently.}

We find in the balanced interplay among the artists and the beholders a process that exhibits the self-regulating adjustments implicit in artistic communication (Gombrich 1960, 327, 357). The interaction between the audience and the artists, a progression of adapting and adjusting, is at the core of a process of communicative rationality. Confirming Danto’s interpretation, art of the new age demands a dimension of mind, or system of reference, that works of the “era of art” did not require. But I disagree with his claims that art as a historical narrative has ended and the plurality of styles available to those who create and curate art is due to freedom from the constraints of the past. The aim of this discussion of Culture in Action is to suggest how art, by its nature, can be viewed as a process seeking to reach a broader audience. An implicit result of this process would be the emergence of a self-understanding that can, as Greenberg suggests, “keep culture moving”. The movements and countermovements of the art world are not the product of an art world in which “anything goes”. Rather, the plurality of styles results from a process aiming to mitigate a fragmentary state in which communication may have broken down. This process is neither reducible to a
historical event, such as the era of art, which has ended, nor can it be called free because of its lack of obligation to any broader cultural aim.

References


