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Art and Trauma: Yet Another Arthur Danto Zombie

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Is it Art?

Andy Warhol's 1964 exhibit of Brillo soap boxes at the Stable Gallery in New York City signaled, at least according to Arthur Danto, the demise of a historical narrative of art. Danto codified this transition in 1984 as *The End of Art* (Danto, 1998). Though art was still obviously being produced and exhibited, Danto asserted that art had become obsolete because art and philosophy were rendered autonomous. Similar fatal edicts, Danto noted, were proclaimed for poetry and music by John Keats and John Stuart Mill, respectively.

Danto's comments are problematic for many reasons, the rigid boundaries and exclusions foremost (e.g. the Western canon, the nomothetic fallacy as applied to art, the normative constraints of art history, etc.) but perhaps more fundamental is the taxonomic conceit that a purely descriptive agreement among experts in art history or the philosophy of aesthetics is a stable foundation for the description of art. Designation is not synonymous with causation. Danto's perspective is more aligned with the construction of a field guide. If an artistic representation has certain characteristics, as in identifying a bird, for example, it is art. Ignoring, of course, the morphological and evolutionary basis for characterizing genus and species, a field guide approach to art is especially vulnerable to the prejudices and commercial incentives of critics, institutions, philosophers and historians.

An essentialist perspective to art is no less problematic because the writing of art history is itself often in flux. Finding a definition of art that is putatively inclusive (this is art), but has clear boundaries (what isn't art) is a reasonable, but invariably elusive, goal.

Is art a thing or is art a process?

Although consciousness is fundamental to human thought, William James believed that it is a process, something that emerges from the intersection of the brain, the body, and the environment. Contemporary perspectives continue to suggest that consciousness is a process, the interplay of signals from the environment, the body, and the brain, with each integrated core state succeeded by yet another differentiated neural state. If consciousness itself is a process that is experienced as a dynamic equilibrium, a tangible steady-state so to speak, why not consider art to be a process that emerges from the intersection of the artist, the viewer, and the socio-cultural world? Using severe trauma as prototypical input, it seems reasonable to consider the impact of severe trauma on how an artist conceptualizes and depicts his or her art, how a viewer might interpret these representations (particularly if they are aware of the biographical details), and how a culture perceives the severity of that traumatic event: AIDS, child sexual abuse, slavery, or war, for instance.

In this regard it's interesting to note, despite Danto's dismal proclamation, the emergence of a fully articulated pedagogic discourse on art and trauma as a late twentieth and early twenty-first century phenomenon whereby countless authors (both academic and artistic (e.g. David Wojnarowicz), performance artists (e.g. Karen Finley), and curators (e.g. The Imperial War

Museum in London (*Artists' Responses to the Holocaust*), the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam (*Vincent van Gogh: myths, madness, and a new way of painting*), etc.) have collectively heralded the inception of Art and Trauma as a means of furthering our understanding of the multiplicity of factors that underlie the creation and perception of art. These writings are of course by no means anomalous, but parallel similar developments in other art forms, such as criticism, memoir, music, and poetry, where the sequelae of trauma are fully acknowledged and carefully scrutinized.





Tania Love Abramson, *In Case of Shame* (2017), 36"x12"x6", custom fabricated red enameled safety cabinet, sledgehammer, broken glass, warning labels.

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