

## Is Danto's Aesthetic Truly General?

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“Let us suppose that the idea of art can be expanded to embrace the whole range of man-made things, including all tools and writing in addition to the useless, beautiful, and poetic things of the world. By this view the universe of man-made things simply coincides with the history of art.”

George Kubler<sup>1</sup>

Arthur Danto has always said that his aesthetic, like his account of action, history and knowledge, is absolutely general. His definition of art describes works of art in all cultures. In making that claim, he goes against the dominant ways of thinking of his fellow art critics, and also, I believe, of most art historians. But his analysis does grow out of a long philosophical tradition. The central concern of philosophical aesthetics is to define art. Until we know what art is, we cannot properly describe its history, interpret it, or explain why it is significant.

In looking at the history of these definitions of art, the questions posed by historicism, relativism, and multiculturalism, are especially pressing. Within the West the forms of art have changed dramatically over time. Some philosophers thought that art *was* representation. But then abstract art was created. Other aestheticians said that art *was* expression. But then works of art that were not expressive were created. No one in 1850 could have imagined cubism; and in 1910, who could have imagined conceptual art? This is why the older general definitions of art are no longer acceptable. Given that such radically new forms of art have been developed relatively recently, why should that process not continue? When we look to China, India and the Islamic world we find very different forms of art. Chinese use scroll paintings; Indians sculpt Hindu gods; Muslims make calligraphy and decoration. Many of these works of art look very different from

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<sup>1</sup> George Kubler, *The Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962), 1.

ours. And because the Chinese, Indians and Muslims have exotic customs, political institutions and religions, we can reasonably expect that their art will be unlike ours. And so it is natural to ask if Western-style definitions will accommodate this art.

Although Danto the art critic has very wide ranging interests, the examples of Danto the aesthetician almost always come from Western art. Were a sociologist of religion to offer a general theory based solely upon Christianity and Judaism, it would be natural to wonder whether his analysis applied also to Buddhism, Daoism and Hinduism. Danto's working procedure raises similar problems. But the philosopher, of course, is not a mere sociologist, who gathers examples and then offers a description, which may need to be revised when further examples are gathered. After describing the nature of knowledge and our relationship to the world the philosopher offers a very general account of the identity of art.

China, India and the Islamic world have histories and worldviews unlike ours. But noting these dramatic differences is compatible with a general theory of action, historiography, and knowledge. How someone acts depends upon their beliefs, and so to understand the actions of Muslims, Hindus and Chinese we need to know their beliefs. As Danto says:<sup>2</sup>

The civilizations of the East are defined through sets of factual and moral propositions pragmatically connected in the minds of their members since it is with reference to certain factual beliefs that these members would judge and act as moralists.

We understand how someone acts by putting ourselves in his shoes, temporarily, as a philosopher says, "taking on for the purpose of the exercise . . . his outlook and preconceptions."<sup>3</sup> Historians bring alive historically distant political actors.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Danto, *Mysticism and Morality*, xvi.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth & Truthfulness. An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 237.

<sup>4</sup> F.W. Mote, *Imperial China 900-1800* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999), 552.

It was the young Zhu Yuanzhang's nature to be serious; he pondered life's choices carefully and took action cautiously. At a time when a dozen upstarts like himself were claiming the title of emperor or were being pushed into it by their ambitious handlers, he began quite early on to examine the options.

This narrative presents the exotic world of fourteenth century China, assimilating it to the terms of a familiar psychology. We know people like Zhu Yuanzhang, and so are prepared to understand his actions. In his canonical account of interpretation, Donald Davidson writes:<sup>5</sup>

Kurt utters the words 'Es regnet' and under the right conditions we know that he has said that it is raining. Having identified his utterance as intentional and linguistic, we are able to go on to interpret his words: we can say what his words, on that occasion meant.

To understand Zhu Yuanzhang, we need to identify the relationship between his beliefs and actions. In that way, he is like a Western politician.

Davidson describes language, not works of art, but his analysis is suggestive for our purposes. In interpreting artifacts from exotic cultures, art history also aspires to understand what the artist intended. We understand Chinese landscapes by learning about Buddhist and Daoist theories of nature. And we comprehend Islamic decorative art studying Islamic views of God and beauty. Knowing the cultural contexts, we identify the artists' intentions. Danto's *Analytic Philosophy of History* provides a general account of historical explanation. Although the examples are drawn from Europe's history, his analysis applies to all cultures. India was colonized first by Muslims and then by Europeans. China, unlike India, always maintained its independence but was for a time ruled by native Marxists. Islam, unlike either China or India, remains at war with Europe and America, now as during the Renaissance. China, Europe, India and the Islamic world thus have very different histories. But the stories of all these cultures can be told using Danto's narrative sentences to link events, explaining what happens.

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<sup>5</sup> Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 169.

Let us back into discussion of Danto's definition of art by considering the account given by Richard Wollheim, who in the English-speaking world is Danto's only serious late twentieth-century rival as aesthetician. Because Wollheim offers an historical definition, identifying the problems with such an analysis will help highlight the way that Danto motivates his claims. Wollheim's *Art and Its Objects* begins by asking: "What is art?"<sup>6</sup> He considers a variety of arts-- architecture, dance, literature, music and also paintings. It is not easy to find their common features. Suppose, then, that we consider just visual art. What are the common features of paintings and sculptures by Giotto, Michelangelo, and Cézanne? European visual art has changed so radically that answering this answer is difficult.

Defining art, Wollheim suggests, requires an historical analysis.<sup>7</sup>

We should, first, pick out certain objects as original or primary works of art; and . . . then set up some rules which, successively applied to the original works of art, will give us . . . all subsequent or derivative works of art.

If we identify the original works of art, then we can derive from them all other later art. In his fine phrase: "Art is essentially historical."<sup>8</sup> And so in order to pick out those representations and expressive things that are works of art we need an historical analysis. We might start with a Renaissance painting, for example, and then, following the formalists, derive more recent works of art. In Velazquez' *Surrender of Breda*, Heinrich Wölfflin explains, the<sup>9</sup>

handing over of the fortress keys with the meeting of the two main figures in profile, is in principle nothing else than is contained in the handing over of ecclesiastical keys or Christ and St. Peter in (Raphael's) *Feed my Lambs*.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Wollheim, *Art and its objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980 (second edition)),1.

<sup>7</sup> Wollheim, *Art and its objects*, 143.

<sup>8</sup> Wollheim, *Art and its objects*, 151.

<sup>9</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History. The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, Trans. M. D. Hottinger (New York: Dover, nd), 80.

Once we have thus understood how Velazquez leads to Raphael, we can in further easy stages trace the history of more recent European art. We can, for example, identify the link between cubism and Abstract Expressionism.<sup>10</sup>

Pollock's 1946-1950 manner really took up Analytical Cubism from the point at which Picasso and Braque had left it when, in their collages of 1912 and 1913, they drew back from the utter abstractness for which Analytical Cubism seemed headed.

One need not be a formalist to find Clement Greenberg's genealogy extremely seductive.

*Art and its objects* defines art by using two key concepts, representation and expression. Traditional works of art, from Europe as from China and India, are expressive representations. To understand art, we need to analyze representation and expression in a suitably general way. But when Wollheim admits that his definition of art needs, rather, to focus on history, he then moves in a very different direction.<sup>11</sup> Let us start, for example, with Giotto and, with Vasari's aid, apply rules deriving the paintings of Masaccio, Piero and Raphael. Now, then, we are concerned not with the very general concepts of representation and expression, but with the developments within this single tradition. Wollheim offers what he thinks a completely general aesthetic, applicable to all cultures, only because he secularizes Western art.<sup>12</sup> Before the late eighteen-century,

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<sup>10</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture. Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 218.

<sup>11</sup> Wollheim's appeal to a grammar of language, draws on Noam Chomsky's writings. Chomsky explains how native speakers know the rules permitting them to identify grammatical sentences; the art historian seeks to understand the historical transformations of art. Synchronic analysis of language is not easy to match with the diachronic art history. Every native speaker implicitly knows the grammar, but only properly informed viewers can set the paintings in proper historical sequence. Perhaps, then, this appeal to linguistics is a false friend, a product of the prestige circa 1968 of Chomsky's theorizing.

<sup>12</sup> My argument draws on Malcolm Bull, "Philistinism and Fetishism, *Art History* 17, 1 (March 1994): 127- 31.

most of the most important European art served religious goals. In that way, Western art was like much like that of China, India and Islam. If it is detached from its roots in religious life, we may be tempted to think this painting and sculpture shares universal features. But if we focus on the differences in the religions of China, Europe, India and Islam, then we are less likely to seek a general aesthetic.

Just as we understand Europe's art historically, so too with other traditions. Knowing, for example, that Li Kung'lin (1040-1106) "imitated T'ang masters such as Wu Tao tzu, we can construct a history of Chinese elite painting.<sup>13</sup> Li Kung'lin has little to do with Giotto, Masaccio, Piero and Raphael; he belongs, rather, to a wholly parallel Chinese tradition. Indeed, the frequent concern of painters in China to rework earlier pictures makes them perfect models of Wollheim's way of defining art. Like an old master European oil painting, a tenth century ceramic plate made in Persia has figurative elements.<sup>14</sup>

The princely cycle occurs occasionally on northeastern Iranian ceramics . . . but its hunting princes or feasting personages are strongly caricaturized. . . in ways that suggest a general awareness of princely themes but little experience in treating them.

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So far as I know, Wollheim never considered this problem. In Europe, most traditional art was made to serve religious functions. But in a modern secular culture, these older works of art can be detached from their original goals and seen aesthetically. And this is also how to read the history of philosophy, which, traditionally immersed in theological concerns, can be read in a secular way. But it is important to recognize the overlap between our ways of seeing older works of art and how they were viewed in their original cultures. Otherwise we will treat this art as if it was found art, like driftwood or Chinese scholar stones.

<sup>13</sup> James Cahill, *Treasures of Asia. Chinese Painting* (Lausanne: Skira, 1960), 92.

<sup>14</sup> Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1973), 183.

And, like European Renaissance sculpture, a dancing bronze eleventh bronze from India is expressive.<sup>15</sup>

Shiva . . . dances within a flaming *mandorla*, symbolizing the energy of the sun; in the dance he tramples on the dwarf demon Muyalaka, who represents ignorance. . . . There is a reassuring serenity radiating from the countenance of this divine image that shines within the orb of the sun.

Developed in this way, Wollheim's historical procedure supplies definitions of European, Chinese, Indian and Islamic art, not a general definition of art as such. If we start with these objects, we can derive from them more recent Islamic and Indian works of art. We then have one definition of European art, and other definitions for art from China, India, the Islamic world and other cultures. This procedure, very useful for the art historians, will not satisfy the philosopher, who seeks an absolutely general definition, adequate to art in all cultures.

Danto adopts a very different procedure.<sup>16</sup> "To be a work of art is to be (I) *about* something and (ii) to *embody its meaning*."<sup>17</sup> Built into this definition is Danto's very basic idea that much recent art is visually indiscernible from physically identical things that are not works of art. *Brillo Box* looks just like a brillo box, but that ordinary object does not embody any theory of art. This definition thus makes implicit reference to the artist's intentions, which may, since Warhol was not a verbal person, be picked out by study of life in his art world, the Factory. Danto's theory also works for historical examples. Nicolas Poussin's *Orion* is about the story of giant's attack of the goddess Athena, and it embodies that meaning by showing blind Orion watched by her as he walks towards the seashore to restore his sight. Because Danto's definition does not

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<sup>15</sup> Stanislaw J. Czuma, "Nataraja: Siva as King of Dance," *Interpretations. Sixty-Five Works from the Cleveland Museum of Art* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1991), #50.

<sup>16</sup> On their differences see Wollheim's essay in *Arthur Danto and His Critics*, Mark Rollins editor, (Basil Blackwell, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 197.

allude to the representational or expressive qualities of traditional art, it is perfectly adapted to the kinds of art produced by Warhol and his contemporaries in the 1960s. But it does also include older art. Figurative paintings like *Orion*, as much as *Brillo Box*, are about the meanings they embody.

Danto's Hegelian idea is that works of art are not mere physical things because they express what speaking in suitably grand terms we might identify as a culture's worldview.<sup>18</sup>

What made Pop Art popular is that the meanings its works embodied belonged to the common culture of the time, so that it was as if the boundaries of the art world and of the common culture coincided . . . . The art redeemed the signs that meant enormously much to everyone, as defining their daily lives.

After introducing the two conditions of his definition, Danto remarks that "I was (and am) insufficiently convinced that they were jointly sufficient to have believed the job done. But I did not know where to go next, and so ended the book."<sup>19</sup> I have always been frustrated that he has not pursued this problem. Art critics and historians surely found the other topics of the Mellon lectures—the accounts of modernism, the museum, and the politics of post-historical art—more exciting. But to the philosopher, the definition of art is the central concern. And as it stands Danto's definition threatens to be much too broad.

For an Hegelian, all sorts of artifacts are *about* something and *embody their meaning*. If someone wanted to understand how our public spaces had changed recently, we could point to the importance of cell phones, computers and the web, and to the new airport security installed after 9/11. And clothing, does it not express culture? The costume historian Anne Hollander explains how,<sup>20</sup>

after the First World War women's legs were supposed to show, to complete the new stripped format of female looks, which included a new look of fashionable immodesty. Decades later, when the point had been made visually, women could

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<sup>18</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box. The Visual Arts in Post-historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992), 41.

<sup>19</sup> Danto, *After the End of Art*. 195.

<sup>20</sup> Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 339, 311.

wear long skirts again for pleasure, for ease of movement in the newest mode, or to hide their possibly less-than-perfect legs.

The development of clothing, she reveals, tells much about cultural history. But although she says, “dress is a form of visual art. . . ,” that really is hyperbole. Some museums, the Metropolitan Museum of Art for example, display fashion, but we don’t normally think of our clothes as works of art, unless we are prosperous enough to frequent famous designers.<sup>21</sup> Normal everyday clothing is about our values and embody that meaning, but it is not a work of art.

As it stands, then, it is not obvious that Danto’s definition is narrow enough to include the art in galleries and museums, and exclude all of this apparatus and these institutions which, however, are not works of art. If the disadvantage of traditional definitions of art is that they are too narrow to include post-historical art, then the apparent difficulty with Danto’s definition is that it threatens to be too broad.

Essentialists describe the timeless nature of art; historicists show how our most basic ways of thinking have changed. And so some people think that there is a conflict between these positions. But they are mistaken, for Danto is both an essentialist and, in one limited way, an historicist. Often relativism and historicism are associated, but although Danto is a historicist, he is not a relativist. What is discovered through art’s development is its essence. Thanks to Warhol and some other 1960s artists, we know the nature of art. From Plato to Hegel, earlier essentialists misidentified its essence because they did not know the right examples. Some earlier philosophers thought that works of art had to be representations. But abstract paintings were counter-examples to that definition. Other philosophers thought that works of art had to be expressive. But sculptures that were not expressive were counter-examples to that definition. Because the story of art has ended, we can identify its essence.<sup>22</sup> Unlike Wollheim, Danto has a definition of art that

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<sup>21</sup> But see my “Fashion Desire. Giorgio Armani’s Art Gallery,” *ArtUS* 14 (July-September 2006): 25-35.

<sup>22</sup> I do not here discuss this extremely important claim; see, however, my “Indiscernibles and the Essence of Art: The Hegelian Turn in Arthur Danto’s Aesthetic Theory,” forthcoming in the *Library of Living Philosophers* volume devoted to Danto.

does not require considering how later art derives historically from what comes earlier. The problem for Wollheim, so we saw, is that once we acknowledge the existence of diverse Non-Western artistic traditions, then we have not one, but many definitions of art. Danto does not face this problem, but his claim that the history of art has ended may create others.

Danto resists the suggestion that we can relativize talk of endings by allowing that one narrative has ended, but another story goes on. A realist about historiography, he believes in objective narrative structures in the way human events unfold. And so he identifies the ending of his story of art's history with the ending of the story, not just an ending of a particular narrative.<sup>23</sup> For Danto, to allow that he has told the end of art's history in one way whilst permitting other narratives to tell an ongoing story, is unacceptable. Writing as an analytic philosopher of action, he spoke of identifying the same action differently under different descriptions; but he has no tolerance for pluralistic narratology. Danto's Hegelian historicism and essentialism about the nature of art are compatible only if history has ended. Only now when nothing essentially new is possible, can we survey the field of artworks, which we can characterize completely because it cannot expand.

How does Danto identify the end of history, as opposed to the end of one era, or the end of history under a certain description? When new kinds of art are made, why are not these stories of what happens a further history? There are two kinds of unambiguous historical endings: the end of a particular tradition; endings in stasis. In art comics add the balloon to represent speech and closely connected image sequences; talking movies, 3-D movies, the recent wide screen images and the various recent computer image technologies go further. New kinds of objects are added to the artworld. And Robert Mapplethorpe, Mark Tansey, Cindy Sherman, Saul Steinberg, Sean Scully- as written about by Danto - are doing something new. Mapplethorpe's erotic images go further than Warhol's; Scully's art is very different from that of his acknowledged precursors, Mondrian and Rothko.

On Danto's characterization of their activity, "historians . . . try to make true

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<sup>23</sup> Danto, *After the End of Art*. 101.

statements, or to give true descriptions, of events in *their* past.”<sup>24</sup> This is what he does when writing as an art critic- so long as there are additional events which amount to something more than endgame moves, further history is possible. Insofar as the goal of the historian, so he taught us is to write narrative sentences, a further history can be written. Danto the art critic keeps writing whilst Danto the aesthetician asserts that the history of art has come to an end. Can the grand philosophical history of art told by Danto end, whilst we have a history for Mapplethorpe, Scully and the others? This conciliatory way of talking amounts to saying that the history of art continues under one description, but not under another. If the story of art is identified with the history of the discovery of its essential properties, the story told by Plato, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger and also Ernst Gombrich and Greenberg, then that history ended with *Brillo Box*. But why must this very interesting narrative be *the* history of art?

Danto’s ontological history ends because the field of potential art objects expands to include any kind of object; anything could be an artwork when being an artwork is not defined by a thing’s visual properties; being an artwork require being about something and embodying its meaning, as *Brillo Box* does. We may, if we want, privilege Danto’s account by calling it the philosophical history of art. But that is merely a verbal concession. *After the End of Art* carries the story of art further than Gombrich and Greenberg, building upon their intuition that what art history requires is a narrative history, but outflanking them by showing how their histories of art were demonstrated by Warhol to be incomplete. Greenberg’s master narrative about modernism, in which the self-criticality of Manet and his successors leads to cubism, and on to Pollock, leaves out Salon art, Rodin, pre-Raphaelites, most of Picasso, German expressionism, Futurism, dada and surrealism, photography, American realism, and much more. Danto urges in his posthistorical era pluralism in possible. Already in Greenberg’s era that was true. As the history of modernism is rewritten, it will become clearer that art’s situation already before Warhol was already posthistorical.

Has not Danto the historiographer taught us that a history must be selective,

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<sup>24</sup> Arthur c. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985),, 25).

setting events into a pattern as when Gombrich at the end of *Art and Illusion* can bring in abstract art only via an oddly ad hoc analysis of caricature? Danto overestimates the intrinsic strength of these developmental narratives- which accounts for some of the drama he creates by juxtaposing his own account of the end of art history. I have more problems treating Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* and Greenberg's *Art and Culture* as literally true, rather than great quasi-fictions, than he does- hence my problems with his realism. My aim in saying that is not to criticize Gombrich and Greenberg, but to praise them. How admirable is their will to interpret, which permitted them to construct lucid narratives from bewildering evidence. I praise Danto, and call him the logical successor of Gombrich and Greenberg, for the same reason. But in thus praising, I deny Danto's claim that he is describing history as it really is, and not merely offering one imaginative readings of the evidence.

What leaves me very dissatisfied is that because this argument relies on considerations known to Danto, it must fail to grapple with his concerns. What have I failed to understand? Danto's view seems counter-intuitive because it combines the historicist's concern with change with an essentialist definition.<sup>25</sup> In the twentieth century, many radically original forms of art were created. When art was changing so quickly and radically, then it was natural to think that it had no essence. Defining art seemed a matter of convention. Danto disagrees. Much recent art, he allows, could not have been seen as art by at earlier times. Rodin would not have understood *Brillo Box* and for Giacometti, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* would have been incomprehensible. But although a work of art is created within a cultural tradition, it "transcends that moment because the meaning is universal and grasped as such by audiences in all subsequent times and in all other cultures."<sup>26</sup>

When Danto discusses Chinese art, he says: "Universal works do not tell us about the Chinese, so much as they tell us about ourselves as sharing in the same humanity the

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<sup>25</sup> See my "Gombrich and Danto on Defining Art," *The J. of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 54, 3 (Summer 1996): 279-81 which is effectively critiqued in *After the End of Art*, 193-95.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur C. Danto, "Responses and Replies," *Danto and his Critics*, 201.

Chinese themselves possess.” His aesthetics, like philosophy in general, aspires to universality. “Philosophy’s task is to say something true and essentially true of artworks as a class, however stylistically they may vary.”<sup>27</sup> But unlike Wollheim, Danto does not develop an historical analysis in which later works of art are derived from earlier ones. Visual art in all cultures may, to speak in Danto’s Hegelian idiom, be *about* something and *embody their meaning*. For example, Indian and Islamic works of art could be defined by their capacity to be about and embody the doctrines of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. “The overall effect of Hindu art,” an historian of religion writes,<sup>28</sup>

is to convey in the economy of an image, gesture, or poetic phrase the often subtle, complex, and sublime truths of Hindu visionaries . . . (and the) concretization of divine models, the presentation in tangible form of ideal worlds to which Hindus strive to journey.

To understand an artistic tradition, these Hegelian accounts suggest, we need to study the supporting cultures.<sup>29</sup>

Danto is the only analytic philosopher who has developed a serious philosophy of contemporary art. Since the late twentieth century American art world is a paradise of philosophical puzzles, it is disappointing that Americans have conducted discussion of aesthetic theory in a vocabulary that mostly is obscure and jargon filled. Now, thanks to the model provided by Danto’s writings that situation begins, so I hope, to change.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Danto, “Responses and Replies,” *Danto and his Critics*, 206.

<sup>28</sup> David R. Kinsley, *Hinduism. A Cultural Perspective* (Englewood, Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993), 70.

<sup>29</sup> See, however, Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics. An Introduction* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004) which, without mentioning Danto, rejects such Hegelian theories.

<sup>30</sup> This essay incorporates materials from my “Danto’s Aesthetic, is it truly General as he claims?,” *Rivista di Estetica*, (forthcoming) and my unpublished “Ernst Gombrich, Clement Greenberg, Arthur C. Danto: Narratology and Its Politics,” given at Bielefeld author- conference on Arthur C. Danto, April 18, 1997. And some portions borrow from my *A World Art History* (Penn State University Press, forthcoming).

