

Lessons of the Brillo Box

AFTER THE END OF ART:

Contemporary Art and the Pale of History.

By Arthur C. Danto. Princeton University Press. 256 pp. \$24.95

by Roger Copeland

The publishing industry's millennial bandwagon continues to roll. In recent years Bill McKibben, Francis Fukuyama, and John Horgan have, respectively, proclaimed the End of Nature, the End of History, and the End of Science. Now Danto, professor of philosophy, emeritus, at Columbia University and art critic for the *Nation*, declares "the end of art."

In truth, Danto has been playing with the phrase (running it into the ground, a less charitable reader might say) since 1984, when he published an essay with that apocalyptic-sounding title. That same year Danto began writing art criticism for the *Nation*. While there is obviously some irony in a critic's announcing the end of art and then hurrying off to catch the latest installation in SoHo, Danto recognizes the irony and attempts to address it in the book at hand: "I had in no sense claimed that art was going to *stop being made*. A great deal of art has been made since the end of art."

This is more than playful paradox. What Danto means by "the end of art" is the end of "master narratives" about art, such as Giorgio Vasari's chronicle of the evolution of Italian Renaissance painting from Giotto to Michelangelo, or, in our own century, Clement Greenberg's no-less-influential account of modernist painting between (roughly) Edouard Manet and Jackson Pollock. Both of these "master narratives" are linear, evolutionary, and progressive. In Vasari's account, the holy grail is steadily increasing verisimilitude, made possible by the gradual mastery of the rules of single-point perspective, vanishing points, foreshortening, and chiaroscuro. In Greenberg's, the brass ring is greater "purity" of medium, defined as the painter's ability to acknowledge and reveal the under-

lying nature of the medium itself: the two-dimensional canvas, the shape of the frame, the materiality of the brushstroke. Everything else—everything extraneous—has to be gradually jettisoned. Or else.

For Danto's purposes, the most important feature of both narratives is this exclusionary tendency: their willingness—perhaps eagerness—to excommunicate artists whose work lies outside the purview of their theories. For example, Vasari's narrative must inevitably exclude brilliant oddballs such as Carlo Crivelli, arguably the most idiosyncratic of all 15th-century Venetian painters. Greenberg similarly must consign the entire surrealist movement to aesthetic Siberia: "Surrealism in plastic art is a reactionary tendency," he wrote in 1939. "The chief concern of a painter like Dali is to represent the processes and concepts of his consciousness, not the processes of his medium."

Here Danto, otherwise so eager to compare and contrast Vasari and Greenberg, misses a marvelous opportunity to explore the qualities that a neo-Gothic artist such as Crivelli has in common with a surrealist such as Salvador Dali. But alas, *The End of Art* pays scant attention to what works of art actually look like. Indeed, one of Danto's salient themes is that the visual arts have been freed from traditional demands of visual connoisseurship and formal analysis: "There is no a priori constraint on how works of art must look—they can look like anything at all." Readers familiar with Danto's study of pop art, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), will recognize the genesis of this argument and also will recall that one of the epiphanies in Danto's life (both in

philosophy and art criticism) was his 1964 encounter with Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*. "Few works," Danto writes in his new book, "have meant as much to me as Warhol's 'Brillo Box,' and I have spent a fair portion of my waking time in working out the implications of my experience of it."

It's no coincidence that Greenberg's narrative account of modernism cannot accommodate the emergence of works such as Warhol's, which not only transgress the boundaries of the medium of painting but also blur the distinction between art and "real" objects. After Warhol (indeed, one could say, after Marcel Duchamp), art can, in Danto's words, "look exactly like real things which have no claim to the status of art at all."

Is Danto gloomy about the end of art? Not in the slightest. Reminding us that "master narratives inevitably excluded certain artistic traditions and practices as 'outside the pale of history,'" he offers this sanguine assessment: "It is one of the many things which characterize the contemporary moment of art—or what I term the 'post-historical moment'—that there is no longer a pale of history. Nothing is closed off. Ours is a moment . . . of deep pluralism and total tolerance."

The term "pale of history" is of course borrowed from Hegel, as is the concept of "post-history." As adopted by Marx, "the end of history" meant the end of class conflict and the beginning of true freedom. Danto draws a parallel between Marx's utopian vision of life under communism and the sheer number of options available to the contemporary artist. First he quotes Marx (in the *German Ideology*) on communist man's ability "to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the even-

ing, criticize after dinner . . . without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic." Then he quotes a 1963 interview in which Warhol makes a similar "marvelous forecast": "You [the artist] ought to be able to be an Abstract Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist, or a realist, without feeling that you have given up something."

Danto is nothing if not cheered by the prospect of an art world in which "everything is permitted." But is this really an accurate description of the present moment? How, one wonders, can a critic who spends so much time visiting today's galleries and museums (and who is intimately familiar with phenomena such as the dreary *Dislocations* show at

New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1991, or the notorious Whitney Museum *Biennial* of 1993) assert that "No art is any longer historically mandated"? Try telling that to any artist who abstains from chanting the Great Collective Race/Class/Gender Mantra, or who works in a style that is primarily abstract or formalist. The American art world of the 1990s is held in the vise grip of an

ideological orthodoxy that is every bit as restrictive (to my mind, considerably more restrictive) than the mandates of Greenbergian modernism. Not only does the "pale of history" still exist; it is the exact inverse of everything Greenberg advocated: impurity instead of purity, representational agitprop instead of formalist abstraction, and so on.

Moreover, Danto's utterly unqualified celebration of creative "freedom" would prove dumbfounding to a great many 20th-century masters—Igor Stravinsky and George Balanchine come immediately to mind—who believed that the unlimited freedom claimed by artists in the first decades of the 20th century was part of the prob-



Brillo Box (1964) by Andy Warhol

lem, not the solution.

But Danto is determined to celebrate the here and now. His satisfaction with the present moment comes through most clearly toward the end of the book (which brings together the 1995 A. W. Mellon Lectures). He extols a work featured in a 1993 Chicago exhibition of “community-based art” called *Culture in Action*. The piece that caught his eye—or rather, his sweet tooth—was “a candy bar called ‘We Got It!’ produced by the Bakery, Confectionery, and Tobacco Workers’ International Union of Amer-

ica, Local No. 552, and described . . . as “The Candy of their Dreams.” So much for the philosopher as art critic. The medieval debate over the number of angels who can dance on the head of a pin has given way, it seems, to a more pressing, contemporary, and no doubt “post-historical” controversy: how many works of art can melt in the mouth of Arthur Danto?

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Mind Matters

THE EMOTIONAL BRAIN:

The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life.

By Joseph LeDoux. Simon & Schuster. 384 pp. \$25

GOODBYE, DESCARTES:

The End of Logic and the Search for a New Cosmology of the Mind.

By Keith Devlin. Wiley. 320 pp. \$27.95

by Paul R. Gross

Science books for the general reader, on substance rather than exploits and personalities, have never been abundant. Books on frontier science have been even rarer—with reason. Scientists in the forefront of research are too busy keeping track of the work of others to toil at writing trade books, which win few scientific honors, and professional science writers tend (sensibly) to avoid areas where the only possible conclusion is “This looks right, but it may be wrong.” Yet in recent years, perhaps due to the aura of celebrity and commerce associated with such best-sellers as Stephen Hawking’s *Brief History of Time*, every biblio-supermarket now has, near the espresso bar and the CD-ROMs, a rack of new volumes of contemporary science made comprehensible. Amid the gloom of semiliteracy and the postmodern denial of special truth-value to science, this is a bright spot.

An outstanding specimen of the accessible science book is *The Emotional Brain* by Joseph LeDoux. A neuroscientist at

New York University, LeDoux writes about new understandings of emotion—especially of fear, the object of his own researches. The account is unabashedly biological: “The proper level of analysis of a psychological function is the level at which that function is represented in the brain.” It is also unapologetically evolutionary: “Brain systems that generate emotional behaviors are highly conserved through many levels of evolutionary history. . . . And within the animal groups that have a backbone and a brain . . . the neural organization of particular emotional behavioral systems—like the systems underlying fearful, sexual, or feeding behaviors—is pretty similar across species.”

This fact, and it is a fact, drives LeDoux’s history of research on emotion, which he insists has come to proper focus in neurobiology. Technical material that would obscure the argument for lay readers is omitted. But the history is accurate and fair, an estimable achievement in light of the key roles played by neuroanatomy,