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**DANTO AND I.**

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at the School of Visual Arts.  
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**A PROLOGUE.**

*“Art of the future will disport  
itself at ease in realms of genuine  
discord, wanting no armor but  
beauty, or else art is over as a  
valuable preoccupation.”*

(Peter Schjeldahl, the Village Voice, 1993.)

New York 1981. The city that never sleeps. The Big Apple. The headquarters of avant-garde art for the past thirty years or so. A new decade is just born and people around the globe are wondering what is going to happen the next ten years. One is worried, another full of optimism and yet another doesn't care. For some people, whatever changes the future will bring to the world, as long as it doesn't affect them personally, they don't care. There are various thoughts in the air. Some are interested in politics, others in science and some are into art. Is it possible to keep art history rolling? Are there still some territories in the art world yet to be conquered? Is it still possible to find tribes in some remote places, deep in the jungle of avant-garde art, hidden from the civilization of the western man? Or have we discovered everything, only to be left with the option of re-producing already existing things?

In an apartment on Grand street in Soho, is a man who has been thinking along those lines. He is fifty seven years old. Fit for his age, a short chubby man. Wolf grey beard covers half of his round face and above it, hanging on the tip of his nose, is a pair of spectacles. His hair is thin and the eyes, strangely crossed as if he is examining his very nose, suggest a witty sense of humour. The man is tired, but very pleased. On his desk lies the first copy of his latest accomplishment: a book titled *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. It is a survey into the philosophy of art, and the man is Arthur Coleman Danto, a distinguished professor of philosophy at Columbia University in New York.

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## **A PHILOSOPHY OF ART.**

He is the latest link in a long chain of philosophers who have tried to give the subject of art a philosophical treatment. By asking and trying to answer questions such as: “What is art?”, “Why is art?” and “What is the meaning of art?”, thinkers from Plato to Martin Heidegger have been eager to come to terms with this, what seems to be so vital a part of the human culture. It is Danto's belief that every

philosophy of art worth a consideration should be written in such a manner that it can be applied to art of all times, to all periods in art history, including the one it comes about in. Should it fail to do so it would not, according to him, be a philosophy but criticism and usually written in defence of some limited idea about what art should be, instead of giving a broad all embracing definition of art in general. How does a philosopher tackle this problem at the dawn of the ninth decade of the twentieth century? What has happened since this was attempted the last time? What new inventions have been brought about? One of the most radical ones, for sure, was Marcel Duchamp's introduction of *the readymade* to the art scene, and Danto seems to be using it as the springboard, from which he jumps into the swimming pool of art philosophy:

“...the greatest metaphors of art I believe to be those in which the spectator identifies himself with the attributes of the represented character: and sees his or her life in terms of the life depicted:...You are what the work is ultimately about, a commonplace person transfigured into an amazing woman.”

(The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, p. 172-173.)

And thus:

“As it happened, the events in the artworld which provoked the philosophical reflections in this book were in fact just that: transfigurations of the commonplace, banalities made art.”

(The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, p. V.)

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That is, he seems to be saying, in our banal times the art world needs banal things for the viewer to be able to reflect his own life upon them.

Art is the mirror of culture and every historical period of time has its own special reflection. For our times there are many works of art to choose from, when it comes to deciding which one best represents us. But it doesn't seem to be any doubt in Arthur Danto's mind which one he would pick. Namely, Andy Warhol's Brillo Box:

“As a work of art, the Brillo Box does more than insist that it is a brillo box under surprising metaphoric attributes. It does what works of art have always done - externalizing a way of viewing the world, expressing the interior of a cultural period, offering itself as a mirror to catch the conscience of our kings.”

(The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, p. 208.)

*The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* is definitely an important book. It is an attempt to bring the philosophy of art up to date and whatever one might think of its theories, whether they are right or wrong, one must take them into account when thinking about the art of today.

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## **AN END OF ART.**

As interesting as I think the philosophical reflections in *the Transfiguration of the Commonplace* are, there is another part of it that is more important as far as this essay is concerned. In the book Danto writes a bit about and hints at, what three years later was to culminate in an article titled *the End of Art*. And the main subject of the present paper is, surprising as it may sound, my own artworks and what they have to do with that theory.

The German philosopher G.W.Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) is Danto's role model when it comes to philosophical thinking. His theory, which I choose to call linear dialectics, states that the history of the human mind is the story of a search for an absolute truth. Historical evolution happens, according to Hegel, when opposite views meet, struggle and a new and better one is born like Phoenix from the fire. This goes on until a complete knowledge is reached and there is nothing more to learn. No more territories to investigate.

It is Danto's belief that we are in the moment of his linear model of art history where exactly this has happened. Art, at least in the sense we have known it up to date, has reached the end of the road by becoming aware of what it is. And not only

has art come to this point, so has history. So what is there to do when all we are left with is non important art and, yes, philosophy?:

“...the objects approach zero as their theory approaches infinity, so that virtually all there is at the end *is* theory, art having finally become vaporized in a dazzle of pure thought about itself, and remaining, as it were, solely as the object of its own theoretical consciousness.

If something like this view has the remotest chance of being plausible, it is possible to suggest that art has come to an end. Of course, there will go on being art-making. But art-makers, living in what I like to call the posthistorical period of art, will bring into existence works which lack the historical importance or meaning we have for a very long time come to expect. The historical stage of art is done with when it is known what art is and means. The artists have made the way

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open for philosophy, and the moment has arrived at which the task must be transferred finally into the hands of philosophers.”

(The Death of Art, p. 31)

So it is a dead end. But who is to be blamed? Or is it perhaps not a tragedy and therefore no need to blame a soul? How the hell did this happen?:

“...Philosophers of art and the artworld itself, like facing curves, touch at a single point and then swing forever in different directions. And this reinforces the hostility toward theoretical and intellectual treatment of their activity which has always, from the time of Ion the Rhapsode down to the sturdy irrationalists of Tenth Street and the Club, been congenial to artists.

And so might matters have stood and continued to stand had art not itself evolved in such a way that the philosophical question of its status has almost become the very essence of art itself, so that the philosophy of art, instead of standing outside the subject and addressing it from an alien and external perspective, became instead the articulation of the internal energies of the subject. It would today require a special kind of effort at times to distinguish art from its own philosophy.”

(The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, p. 56.)

Arthur Danto’s theory of the end of art stands like a solid rock on its own Hegelian ground. But what if we were to put forward, and I know of people out there thinking along those lines, a model that contradicts Hegel’s idea of a linear evolutionary history that ends in a total cognition of itself? What about an ever expanding spiral for example, where we come to the same point over and over again, but each time have learned something new on our way? Or say, a field of parallel lines where we have not one but many lines to follow and the task for each individual

would be to find the line that suits his or her ideas best? Wouldn't such a model be endless, at least if there is one line for each of us? Or maybe, and I for one am becoming ever more

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sympathetic to this idea, we imagine a total chaos? Everything would then be possible at all times and it wouldn't matter what you did, as long as you did it with sincerity and to your best of knowledge.

It seems to me that this idea has been around for some time now, and in all fields of human brain activity: The theory of chaos in physics, which basically says that the unpredictability of nature's behavior is due to the fact that the structure of the world is chaotic after all. The idea that history is divided into individual events, that are not linked in an uninterrupted chain. I believe they call it the theory of fragmentation. And even Danto himself has bent somewhat to this direction, by becoming ever more a spokesman for pluralism in art. In fact it seems obvious to me, that pluralism would be an inevitable result of such a model.

**AN ARTIST TO BE.**

*“Where the glacier meets the sky,  
the land ceases to be earthly,  
and the earth becomes one  
with the heavens;  
no sorrows live there anymore,  
and therefore joy is not necessary;  
beauty alone reigns there,  
beyond all demands.”*

(From the novel, *World Light*, by Halldór Kiljan Laxness, 1950)

Iceland. Land of fire and ice, notorious for literature one millennium old and lately, at least in America, alcoholic abusive children. The year is 1988 and it is autumn in Reykjavík, the capitol city. Or should I say town? The weather is amazingly good for this spot on the globe, famous for water and wind. There is nothing as beautifully romantic as a fall in Iceland. The sky is clear and the colours red, orange, yellow and golden. It is as if the trees are on fire. If you look carefully you might see a young man strolling the streets. His steps are light as he advances towards his destiny. He is about to enter for the first time the school that is to become his second home for the next four years. He has made the biggest decision of his life up to now: He wants to become an artist.

Five years ago, when I started my art education at the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts, I hardly knew a thing about art history and was particularly ignorant of the twentieth century. Names like Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, not to mention Jeff Koons or Robert Gober, were like Chinese to my ears. By attending the school I wanted, apart from gaining technical skills, to learn everything there is to know about art history. I wanted to find out what artists all over the globe were doing and to become a part of the international dialogue I was sure was going on in the art world. I wanted my voice to be heard.

But the school turned out to be somewhat a disappointment in this sense. Many of the teachers seemed to be as ignorant

about contemporary art as I was, and most of my fellow students didn't seem to share my enthusiasm for knowledge of art theories. Sure enough I was taught how to draw an anatomically correct human toe, how to weld two pieces of metal together and I was told why a green colour becomes stronger when it is put next to a red one.

I am thankful for this, but it was not enough. In order to satisfy my hunger for theoretical knowledge I went on a personal quest for the truth in art at the end of the second millennium. I read everything I could put my hands on and which I thought might help me to find my own personal path through the post modern art jungle of the late 1980's. Magazines, interviews, books on diverse theories, books by artists on their own art, everything. I went to all exhibitions in Reykjavík, comparing and criticizing, and if I happened to be abroad I sniffed up every exhibition of contemporary art I possibly could. That was my *Moveable Feast*

From all this reading I became, I think, pretty well acquainted with art history from the beginning and up to that point and had touched the surface of philosophical and general theories of art. In fact I became so involved with the subject, that before I knew art history had become the main source for ideas and inspiration of my own work.

During my last year at the school I was recycling old masterpieces, modern paintings, contemporary sculpture and in fact using every piece of artwork that I thought might help me in my search for a place in the art world of today. The starting point for all these works was a little Lego figure, a great abstraction of the common man. By choosing it decisions about scale and proportions were already made and the colours I could deduce from the original I was working with at each time. The "Legoman" functioned as the formal common denominator which enabled me to make exhibitions that looked whole and consistent despite the diversity of the pieces. In short I was doing what Danto terms *appropriation art*.

From the reading and inquiry into contemporary art I had become aware of artists working overseas that seemed to, as far

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as I could tell from reproductions of their works in the art magazines, believe that art was over with and all they could do was re-make other, older artist's works. Mike Bidlo was re-painting Picasso's women. Elaine Sturtevant re-making Frank Stella's paintings of thin white lines on a black surface. And Sherrie Levine was re-shooting Walker Evans' photographs all over again. So what? Appropriation art was nothing new. But I guess that it had never happened before in history that so many artists were basically copying others, as some kind of a stylistic strategy. We would probably have to take a look at the history of forgeries to find similarities, but that is a whole other ball park and has nothing to do with what is at stake here. Surely we have artists like William Turner who spent years copying Claude Lorraine in order to learn his techniques, but that is still an other matter. And we have a long history of artists who have dealt with the same subject matters, like the endless variations of Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, which was itself appropriated from a Renaissance

painting, show clearly. But all of a sudden we were witnessing artist's using appropriation as their main occupation, as for example the Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura and to a certain extent Cindy Sherman. So it is not surprising, that some theorists at the time, were wondering if this was not the end of art and even history as a whole. I had a feeling, even though I had no proof of it, since I had never heard names like Arthur Danto, Hans Belting or Francis Fukuyama, that these thoughts were very much in the air, among theorists.

It is shocking for a young man, who has chosen a path to follow for the rest of his life, to find out that it is a dead end. And of course I refused to believe that this might be true. Since history had already witnessed so many prophecies of various kinds of ends, which later turned out to be phonies, why should this one necessarily turn out to be true? Painting, for example, had been thought to be dead for at least a decade and a half, when *Die neue wilde* gained recognition in Germany around 1980. So it was with the novel, when authors such as Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Umberto Eco came onto the scene with full force, armed with thick epic novels. So my reaction was: 'Well, this is possibly just

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another stupid, dogmatic theory, that is more destructive than constructive.' 'But,' I said to myself, 'should this be true, and art no longer possible, there is at least one way to solve the dilemma. We can re-make art from the past, but by doing it differently, with different materials, different attitudes, we can make them relevant anew.' And so I did. It was not until about two years later, when I was reading Danto's essay, *Narratives of the End of Art*, that I found out that I was doing exactly the kind of art that he saw as a confirmation of his theories:

"...part of what I meant by art coming to an end was not so much a loss of creative energy, Though that might be true, as that art was raising from within the question of its philosophical identity - was doing philosophy, so to speak, in the medium of art, and hence was transforming itself into another mode of what Hegel would term Absolute Spirit. And the art of appropriation was a confirmation of this, almost as if mine, like Belting's, were an empirical historical thesis after all."

(Encounters and Reflections, p.333.)

I guess it confused me at first. But then I thought: 'what the heck? I still think that I had done a good job and isn't it true that many of the greatest discoveries of the human mind have had their origin in some kind of misunderstanding?'

**AN EPILOGUE.**

*"Who are you?" said the Caterpillar.*

*This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I-I hardly know, sir, just at present - at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."*

*"What do you mean by that?" said the Caterpillar sternly. "Explain yourself!"*

*"I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see."*

*"I don't see," said the Caterpillar.*

*"I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly," Alice replied very politely, "for I can't understand it myself, to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing."*

(From Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll, 1865)

I came to New York in August 1992. The city greeted me with a heat wave and I strolled the streets through fumes of urine and melting asphalt sweating like a horse waiting for the day I was to start my studies at the School of Visual Arts. Eventually, everything that until then I had only been able to experience second hand, was at my fingertips. MOMA was here, the Met and the galleries in Soho. I was standing in the temple of contemporary art and had the feeling that the city would add

significant strokes to this *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*. At least I was hoping that my decision to move to New York was a step ahead that would take my art to a new and preferably higher level.

The first few months I kept doing work similar to what I had been doing back home, but simultaneously I was starting to wonder if now wasn't the time to try to go beyond that point and see if I could do something else, see if I could extend the pictorial language I had created towards other fields of my interest.

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For the past two years I have been struggling with this. Sometimes a rewarding struggle, but often not. I have lost many a battle and I am not sure if the war is won yet. But one thing is certain though, my work *has* changed. The tall slender pedestal is gone, the scale is different and art historical references are not the primary theme anymore. "Legoman" still shows his face every now and then but also other types of toys such as Matchbox cars and stuffed animals. I have even, in some pieces, eliminated the readymade part altogether. I have minimal architectural constructions, landscapes, pieces drawn from literature, work dealing with the sublime and, because a good rhyme is never too often heard, I still make pieces based on other artist's work.

What is the meaning of these changes? What are they about? What is this work about? What is art about anyway? Is an artist's role maybe to furnish the world with cakes and bottles with labels saying "eat me," "drink me" inviting the viewer to play Alice in Wonderland, take a bite of the cake or a sip from the bottle and let the piece take him into the wonderland of art to experience new adventures? And if so is *my* art able to do it?

I must admit that I don't know if I can answer these questions, but a quote from one of my classmates, Andrew Robinson, where he is talking about one of my recent pieces, might throw some light on the matter:

"In this work there still exists the comic edge as well as art historical references to artists such as Giacometti but the interpretation has opened up inviting the viewer regardless of age, class, or art historical savvy to engage in a delightful dialogue usually set aside for a small and knowing art public."

Responses like that make the fuel that keeps my creativity engine going.

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Stefán Jónsson.

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