The Problem with Arthur

Jean-Pierre Criqui

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2287>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.2287

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2000

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Jean-Pierre Criqui, « The Problem with Arthur », *Critique d'art* [Online], 16 | Automne 2000, Online since 07 March 2012, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2287> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.2287

This text was automatically generated on 3 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

The Problem with Arthur

Jean-Pierre Cricqui

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Danto, Arthur. *L'Art contemporain et la clôture de l'histoire*, Paris : Ed. du Seuil, 2000, (Poétique)

- 1 Within the somewhat blurred French publishing subdivision encompassing art criticism, aesthetic philosophy and art history, Arthur Danto is one of those rare foreign authors whose books are translated with a well-proven consistency. *L'Art contemporain et la clôture de l'histoire* is thus his fourth book to be published by Les Editions du Seuil, whose spirit of continuity is indeed praiseworthy. Originally published in 1997 under the English title *After the End of Art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, this volume—not to be muddled with *Après la fin de l'art* (the title of the book translated by Le Seuil in 1996, and thereby signifying a certain argumental circularity or recurrence)—brings together the six “Mellon lectures on the Fine Arts” given by Danto at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC in 1995. To these lectures the volume adds, in more or less equal proportion, five other writings from a variety of sources (only the final chapter, “*Les modalités de l'Histoire: possibilité et comédie*”, having been expressly written for this compilation). In his preface, Danto sets forth as follows the explanation for bringing these writings together, as well as what now broadly underpins his work, in which art criticism seems to have overtaken philosophical speculation: “I should like to find out what critical principles might be when there are no longer any narratives, and when, in a sense requiring specification, everything is acceptable” (p.14). But once we have put the book down, it has, sadly, to be said that our disappointment is quite considerable. How can this be? The first problem here involves the idea of “major narrative” (*grand récit*), and the importance attached thereto. According to Danto, what hallmarks the art of the last three or four decades is “the awareness of no longer belonging to a major narrative” (p.29). This is his very own major narrative, if you will. He remains faithful to his “light”

Hegelianism which renders him fearless of both decrepitude and repetition ad infinitum, and links this verdict to themes dear to him— the “end of art” and the “end of (art) history”. Just as Hans Belting has referred to an “art prior to the age of art”, with regard to mediaeval christian art, we are today allegedly living *after* the end of art, the long parenthesis opened by Giotto and Masaccio having been closed once and for all with Pollock and the color field painters. There’s nothing dramatic about this. Quite to the contrary, in fact, because artists are now—apparently—evolving with total freedom, relieved of any submission to a more or less oppressive legitimizing stance (the “major narrative”, which might also be called “superego”). And Danto has this to say primarily with regard to history: “Contemporary art is defined *inter alia* by the fact that the art of the past is available to artists and they can use it as they like” (p.30). So one wonders what Picasso was doing with African masks, and Joyce with Homer, and it would be nice to be able to brake our author before he bombards us with this kind of simplification: “Before modernism, painters focused on representing the world as it was presented: they painted people, landscapes and historical events exactly as they appeared to their eyes. With modernism, the conditions of representation started to take on a pivotal importance, in such a way that art became in a way its own subject” (p.32). The first of these two sentences, which is most astonishing if we consider the reputation of the hand that penned it, is rubbish, no more no less, and would be furiously red-pencilled in any essay by any student embarking on art history. The second hints at the name of the culprit, described a few lines later on as the “great narrator of modernism”: Clement Greenberg (“But of course!”, one might very nearly add, smacking one’s left hand with one’s right fist). Here we see the facile solution Danto permits himself: rather than question the validity of Greenberg’s theme (a task already seriously broached by others than he, though by no means everything has been said), he happily just provides the most simplistic version and espouses it straight out so as to construct his own by way of contrast. The result is that Greenberg is at once the person who is right when it is a matter of describing modern art, and the person who is wrong when it comes to proclaiming the end of the great modernist narrative. This is a conjuring trick which does away with any delicate question and any remotely subtle consideration of art history (that issuing through the works as well as that written in their regard). Is it so obvious that, in 1930—to take a date at random before the “end of art”—Mondrian, Duchamp, Braque, Magritte, Klee and Dix all embarked on one and the same major narrative? Can it be seriously upheld that—and this is a distinctive feature of our “posthistorical” age —“any old work created at any old time could be created today” (p.40), and that, consequently, Mike Bidlo could, if he so wished, paint Piero della Francescas “so like Piero’s Pieros that it’s hard to tell them apart”? In this “everything’s possible” vein, which Danto turns into the crux of our contemporary condition, there’s something improbably naïve and perfunctory, to such a degree that as we proceed through his book—which is in other respects quite chatty and always ready to plough the same furrow once again—we wonder if a personal element might not be coming into play, which might tinge the motivation of the principal interested party. The patent over-definition of Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*¹, works which are, needless to add, of some moment, but promoted by Danto to the status of some theoretical fetish (and this ever since a 1964 article to which he tirelessly refers, having already laid the foundations for it in his book *La Transfiguration du banal*²), powerfully prompts the reader to look for an original scene in Pop Art. But there’s no need to play the petty analyst. In the chapter titled “*Le Pop Art et les futurs passés*”, Danto recounts a perplexing revelation. In 1962, then aged 38 and living

in Paris, while still pursuing a philosophical career, and still trying to embark on a career as a painter (under the influence, one has a hunch, of American Abstract Expressionism), he blindingly discovered a reproduction of a Lichtenstein picture in an issue of *Art News*. And he suddenly realized that “everything was possible”: “If everything was possible, nothing was necessary or inevitable any more, including my own vision of an artistic future. For me, this meant that all artists were free to do what they wanted. This also meant that making art no longer interested me, which led me to more or less put an end to any artistic activity” (pp. 185-186). This is the most illuminating moment in a book whose chief merit is thus that it helps us to grasp how one becomes Arthur Danto. For any substantial and subtle thinking about 20th century art, however, there are other books to be recommended.

NOTES

1. Brillo is the brand name of the product supposed to be contained in the models of the boxes in question, so it is a tad surprising that the translator should go for the term *Boîtes Brillo* rather than *Boîtes de Brillo*. But it's also a fact that she doesn't shrink, either, from a very surprising *Apollon Belvédère* (p.298)...
2. It should be pointed out that Danto himself regards his article as “the foundation of philosophical aesthetics in the latter half of this century” (p.187)