

## Philosophy in Review



# Noël Carroll, "Arthur Danto's Philosophy of Art: Essays"

Raquesl Cascales

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**Noël Carroll.** *Arthur Danto's Philosophy of Art: Essays.* Brill 2021. 240 pp. \$150.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9789004468351).

In the last thirty years, Noël Carroll has devoted fourteen articles to Arthur Danto and his philosophy of art, many of which are present in this new book. Carroll did not share Danto's vision of art; he never was interested in defining art. Nevertheless, as stated in the book's introduction, one does not need to share the same vision as a philosopher one admires who was a pioneer in all the areas he trod. Danto was a pioneer in analytical philosophy of action, with his concept of 'basic action,' and in analytical philosophy of history, with his concept of 'narration,' long before his topic of the end of art made him famous to the general public.

Even Danto's fans do not realize how important he was. Danto's archives at Columbia University keep the author's correspondence. In the archive, it is possible to see how the most prestigious publishers and professors were interested in him as early as the 1960s. Danto uses these letters to generate an authentic academic dialogue, which developed over the decades and of which Carroll is also a part. Both are part of a generation that devoted their time to reading their professional colleagues, dialogue, and writing about them—and not only against them.

In this new book, Carroll reflects on what the situation of the philosophy of art would be like if Danto had not written his theory of art. Surely it would be very different. Since the sixties, Danto confronted the neo-Wittgensteinian aesthetics in force at the time and opened the door for new, unexpected possibilities. He even dared to propose a definition of art that, albeit not definitive, stimulated philosophers of art and invigorated this field of study, especially in Anglo-Saxon philosophy. Carroll himself highlights that Danto developed a new field of study, the philosophy of the history of art, in which he brings together two of the fields in which he was an expert: the philosophy of history and the philosophy of art.

Carroll is aware that Danto's definition of art is questionable. Nevertheless, he shows how his method has assisted the philosophical approach to artworks. In chapter four, originally published in 1993, Carroll shows his particular clarity of mind for conceptual analysis by extracting some conditions of possibility for art, even before Danto did it himself: '(a) X has a subject (X is about something) (b) about which it projects a point-of-view (c) by means of rhetorical/metaphorical ellipses (d) which have or require interpretations (e) where X and interpretations thereof depend on historically situated theories.' (63). However, in *After the End of Art* (1997) Danto surprised Carroll by presenting only two conditions of possibility: to have a meaning (aboutness), and this meaning is embodiment. Moreover, leaving out the dependence of art on the historical, theoretical, and practical atmosphere (Artworld) in which we all move makes us interpret art as art.

It is possible that Danto did not include it as a necessary condition to prevent its interpretation in an institutionalist sense, in which art depends on what institutions say that art is, as George Dickie had done. However, beyond institutional theory, those two conditions are insufficient to distinguish artworks from 'real things.' This, for Danto, was crucial since it was the key to distinguishing between indiscernible objects. Thus, his explicit definition of art would fail to answer it since many design objects also possess aboutness and embodiment. Carroll points to several design examples,



but the most instructive is Danto's iconic example: the authentic Brillo Boxes, which also have a subject 'about which their carefully chosen iconography communicates something: that Brillo is clean, bright, modern, and that it is associated with freshness, dynamism, and liveliness. Perhaps its red, white and blue color scheme associates it with "American cleanliness"' (72).

Another possibility is to understand that 'artworld' falls into the second category of the definition. Embodiment is always produced in a historical context, so both the realization and interpretation of the work would be linked to the artworld. However, it is still difficult today to understand what 'real things' meant for Danto and why he did not admit that some design objects also have an embodied meaning. On the other hand, Danto may not have included it so his theory could not be seen as circumstantial, a consequence of the artworld of the time when it was intended to be definitive. However, these are all assumptions inspired by Carroll's book's various comments.

In the essays dedicated to narration and the end of art, from fourth to seventh, Carroll does not question the end of art so much as claim it was the only possible narrative that existed. In this sense, in chapter 12, he refers to Formalism and Expressionism as traditions that never aimed to capture appearances, never developed a progressive structure, and, therefore, never could end (172). Thus, these narratives would not fall within the linear progression considered by Danto as homogeneous in the history of art. Most of the examples of Danto's theory were Western, but we could expand his theory by analyzing more narratives to have a broad vision of the history of art around the world. Likewise, we could go further in Carroll's examples and allude to oriental iconography as a way of understanding art that has been in force for centuries in large parts of the world without evolution.

Carroll highlights Danto's work as a critic and tries to extract the basis of this criticism from Danto's definition and the numerous art critiques that Danto conducted over the years. In another example of analytic dexterousness, Carroll extracts the following three-step procedure: '1) identify what the work is about, its meaning, 2) characterize its mode of presentation or embodiment (a.k.a. its style or form) in a way that 3) demonstrates that its form suitably subserves or is appropriate to whatever it is about' (132). Thus, interpretation for Danto means excavating the meanings of the artworks and explaining how the works at hand succeed or not in conveying this meaning to the observer. The essentialist definition based on two conditions (aboutness and embodiment) and not in a particular style allows him to approach the most diverse kind of works. In short, judging the value of works is done by analyzing how their content is expressed in material conditions, as Hegel did in his historical explanations and as Danto showed in his numerous art critiques.

Carroll observes that Danto's art criticism is diverse, consistent with his proclamation that we live in a posthistorical and pluralistic age. However, this pluralism never made him a relativistic critic, as he attempted to judge each artwork or artist. Carroll also explains that Danto's criticism serves as an exemplar for his readership to emulate in their pursuit of the aesthetic experience of artworks. Aesthetic experience is boldly cognitive, as Carroll highlights, not only sensitive, as he explained very well in *On Criticism* (2009).

Carroll evaluates the validity of Danto's definition through its application to other artistic fields in which he is an expert and Danto is not. Firstly, he discusses dance and shows how to apply Danto's theory to distinguish Merce Cunningham's indiscernible movements from everyday movements.

Secondly, in chapter 13, Carroll discusses the moving images we commonly refer to as cinema through Danto's theories. Although it is an excellent way to expand Dantian theory to other kinds of artistic fields, Carroll does not show his theory as well as he does in *Philosophy of Moving Pictures* (2007).

Along these seventeen essays, Carroll comments on all of Danto's main books and themes: the definition of art, the end of art, and its relationship with history, beauty, and politics. In addition, he discusses his art criticism, which had not been sufficiently analyzed from a philosophical point of view, and goes further by applying his system to dance and film. Although most of the articles were written in connection with a specific publication of Danto's, Carroll has an exceptional understanding of Danto, which allows him to illustrate the continuity and coherence of the Dantian philosophical project.

Carroll's privileged perspective makes us wish he would have added some chapters in which he would develop his view of Danto's complete work, expanding on this book's brief introduction. Comprehensively examining Danto's thoughts shows a coherent and comprehensible philosophy from beginning to end. It is not a matter of assigning him an external unity but of analyzing his philosophy from the perspective of the philosophical system, as he suddenly suggests.

What is certain is that Danto continues to raise enormous interest. Just this year, two more books have been published about him: *A Companion to Arthur C. Danto* (2022), edited by Jonathan Gilmore and Lydia Goerh, with forty-five contributions, including one by Carroll, and *Art and Posthistory: Conversations on the End of Aesthetics* (2022), a book that collects numerous conversations between Danto and Demetrio Paparoni.

The particularity of Carroll's book consists of an expert's voice, cultivated over many years and questioned again and again for himself. At the same time, I think that it is valuable to highlight how it is the voice of a friend who tried to understand to the core and who said what he said to improve Danto's theory without denigrating the philosopher. In this sense, this book not only gives us a reasonable interpretation of Danto but also shows an excellent way to do philosophy.

**Raquel Cascales**, University of Navarra