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ARTHUR DANTO (1924-2013)

As Remembered by Curtis L. Carter

My reflections on the man Arthur Danto, and the importance of his contributions to aesthetics and other areas of philosophy are not those of a close associate or friend. Our first direct contact came as he served as President of the American Society for Aesthetics (ASA) in 1996 at the beginning of my term as Secretary/Treasurer/Executive Director of the ASA. He was very gracious and helpful during this experience. It was as if he wore the office gracefully treating this role with efficient, thoughtful decisions as needed. Conversations at various American Philosophical Association meetings or ASA meetings took place with Danto over the years, as well as at lectures that he gave at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. Each encounter, though brief, brought insight into his unique perspective on aesthetics and art.

A chance meeting in the Galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York proved to be especially rewarding. It was (I believe) in 2008 when we met by chance while viewing an exhibition of Pop Art at the Met. It was very special to hear Danto's perceptive insights into differences among the various Pop artists, as we moved through the exhibition together viewing the individual works on display. Not unexpectedly, he paid particular attention to the works of Andy Warhol, who had been so important in the development of his contributions to aesthetics. We know much about Danto's thoughts on Andy Warhol. It would also be interesting to learn what Andy Warhol might have replied, if we had asked him the question, "What do you think about Arthur Danto?"

Danto's contributions to aesthetics, and to other areas of philosophy in the second half of the Twentieth Century can hardly be overestimated. He, together with Nelson Goodman, with whom I was fortunate to have spent a great deal of time discussing art and aesthetics over some 20 years, have marked two essential trails for the advancement of aesthetics into the future. While pursuing different philosophical paths, they both shared a common interest in linking aesthetics to the arts.

Not the least of Danto's contributions is his efforts to link contemporary discourse in aesthetics to important themes in the Writing of G. W. F. Hegel. Danto is one of the few Analytic Philosophers of his generation to acknowledge the on-gong importance of Hegel to a philosophical understanding of art. For Danto's appreciation of Hegel, which I share, Danto is to be accorded high praise. His work on Hegel represents an important step toward reconnecting Twentieth Century Western Analytic Aesthetics with an important part of the history of aesthetics. If Danto may have initially misread Hegel's commentary on the end of art, his later writings have clarified his views on the end of art issue. Perhaps with greater success than many philosophers, Danto manages to write about difficult philosophical problems in aesthetics in ways that succeed in attracting the interest of contemporary students, even those for whom philosophy and art are not the main focus. At least this is what I have observed while using his writings in undergraduate and graduate university courses over several decades. This is the case, especially with the writings connected to his interpretation of Andy Warhol's art and the end of art. What seems to be missing from the remembrances of Danto's close associates and friends is an acknowledgment of the importance of the global import of his work, which has already spread throughout many parts of the world. Danto is a giant among aestheticians the USA. But he is also one of the first in importance among contemporary aestheticians whose works are being studied as well beyond the boundaries of western culture. I have been especially conscious of the interest in Danto's work among Chinese scholars and students, as I have travelled to various universities and conferences, for example, throughout China.

Danto's ability to show the inter-connections of art and philosophy, both as philosopher and art critic, will remain one of the keystones of his legacy.

Curtis L. Carter

Past President, International Association for Aesthetics
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