

# What Is Art? - Arthur Danto's Philosophical Inquiry



## What Art Is by Arthur C. Danto

★★★★☆ 4.6 out of 5

Language : English

File size : 572 KB

Text-to-Speech : Enabled

Enhanced typesetting : Enabled

Print length : 189 pages

Screen Reader : Supported



What is art? This seemingly simple question has perplexed philosophers, artists, and art enthusiasts for centuries. In the 20th century, American philosopher Arthur Danto emerged as a leading figure in the philosophy of art, challenging traditional notions of art and proposing a new way of understanding its nature and meaning.

## Danto's Philosophical Background

Arthur Coleman Danto (1924-2013) was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and studied philosophy at Columbia University. Influenced by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and other analytic philosophers, Danto's approach to art focused on the analysis of language and concepts, particularly in relation to the nature of reality.

## The Transfiguration of the Commonplace

Danto's seminal work, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace" (1981), argued that the definition of art had undergone a radical transformation in the 20th century. According to Danto, traditional theories of art, such as those based on representation or aesthetic qualities, were no longer adequate to account for the emergence of new and challenging forms of art, such as conceptual art and performance art.

## **The End of Art History**

Danto famously declared that "the artworld has ended," meaning that the traditional narrative of art history, with its progressive development of styles and movements, had come to an end. He argued that the distinction between art and non-art had become increasingly blurred, making it impossible to define art based on essential properties or characteristics.

## **The Definition of Art**

So, what is art, according to Danto? He proposed a contextual theory of art, which defines art as something that is presented to the world as art. In other words, art is not defined by its intrinsic qualities, but by the way it is presented and received within a particular context, such as a museum or gallery.

## **The Role of the Viewer**

Crucial to Danto's theory is the role of the viewer. He argued that it is the viewer who ultimately determines whether or not something is art by interpreting it as such. The viewer's knowledge, expectations, and beliefs play a significant role in shaping their experience of the artwork.

## **Institutional Theory of Art**

Danto's contextual theory of art evolved into what is known as the institutional theory of art. This theory emphasizes the importance of the artworld as an institution that creates and maintains the conditions for the production, interpretation, and evaluation of art.

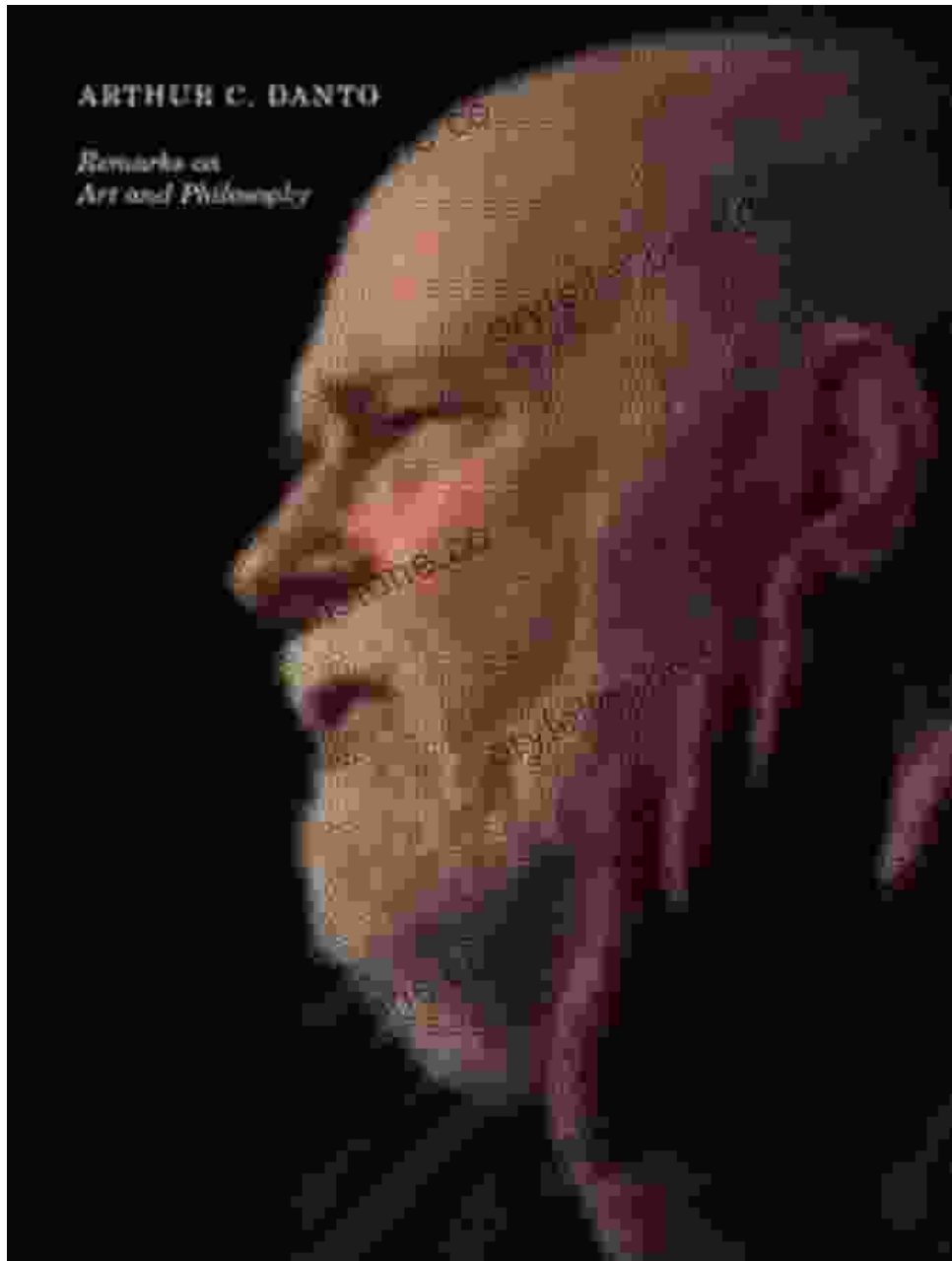
### **Criticisms of Danto's Theory**

Danto's theory has been met with both acclaim and criticism. Some critics argue that it is too vague and that it fails to provide a clear distinction between art and non-art. Others contend that it overemphasizes the role of institutions and the viewer, neglecting the intrinsic qualities of artworks.

### **Legacy of Arthur Danto**

Despite the criticisms, Arthur Danto's ideas have had a profound impact on the philosophy of art. His challenge to traditional definitions of art and his focus on the contextual and institutional factors that shape our understanding of art have stimulated ongoing debate and discussion.

Arthur Danto's philosophical inquiry into the nature of art has left an enduring legacy in the field. His theory that art is defined by its context and the role of the viewer has transformed our understanding of what constitutes art and how we interpret it. Danto's work continues to inspire and provoke artists, philosophers, and art enthusiasts alike, pushing the boundaries of our thinking about the nature and meaning of human creativity.



Arthur Danto (1924-2013), American philosopher and art critic



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