

What is the end of art?

The 'end of art' argument, once prominent among at least a certain cadre of critics and artists, rings as hollow now as Lyotard's opposite diagnosis of the death of grand narratives. If the end of art is going to retain any critical or explanatory force after the exhaustion of a whole series of monolithic histories of progressive development (modernism in art, Marxism in politics, positivism in science and philosophy), then we need to reconsider what this rather catchy phrase entails.

To reactivate the relevance of 'the end of art' we should first insist that it is not a descriptive statement about the current state of artistic production. The evaluation of such a descriptive claim would require a careful consideration of its accuracy, its ability to capture contemporary aesthetic practices more or less globally. Such an evaluation would, I think it is clear, prove less than favorable for the theoretical veracity of our critical claim. If the end of art is not a theoretical description of artistic practices, then what is it?

We should understand critical claims concerning the end of art to be a part of the constellation of practices that determine the current state of art. That is, critical diagnoses and interventions should be recognized as a part of the field of activities that contribute to the determination of the contours of the art world, the works it produces and identifies, the artists it lionizes, and the ideas it develops. If art is autonomous (an important claim whose validity demands careful evaluation), it is not autonomous from art criticism. Art critics determine the contours of contemporary art at least as much as the productions of individual artists do, and it would be wrong to look on the critical contribution as an external intervention unjustly narrowing the scope of legitimate art practice.

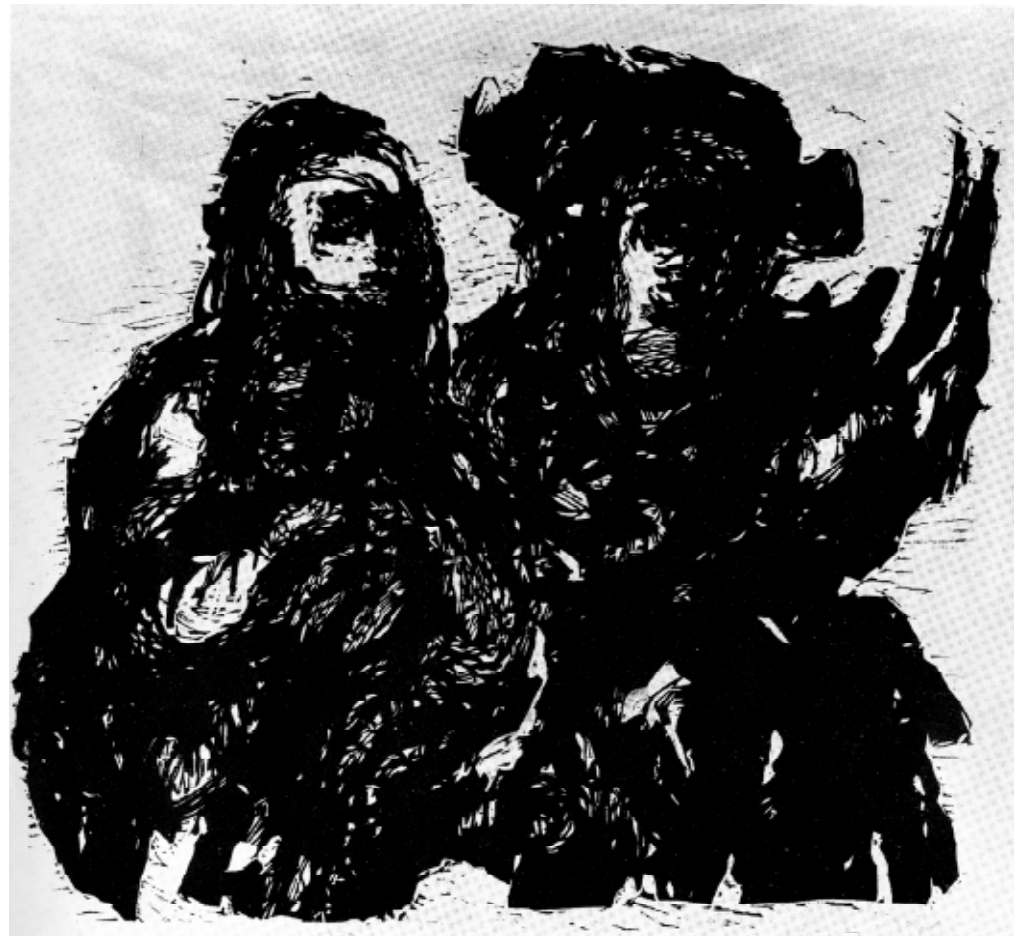
If art can be identified as an intellectual endeavor (and if it cannot, we ought to abandon it to the superficialities of interior decorating), then the task of the critic is not to distill the ideas animating works of art but to intervene in the production of those ideas themselves. Sometimes in collaboration, more often in tension, artistic production and critical analysis do not stand in an external relation, and so it makes little sense to reject the critical diagnosis of the end of art because it is false. That would be something of a category mistake.

The end of art does not signal the death or exhaustion of a set of artistic practices; it rather identifies something about the constellation of artistic productions, critical reflection, and curatorial goals as a whole. What has come to an end is the conceptual unity of this constellation. The artist and critic are no longer engaged in a collaborative pursuit of some common aesthetic project (realistic representation, formal reflection on the limits and conditions of media). The formal unity of art, prized since its elevation by German idealism and romanticism, has given way to the kind of embarrassment that leads us to only very hesitantly talk about 'art.' Art has ended inasmuch as artists and critics have abandoned the previous majesty of the conceptual unity

of art. The end of art is a reflexive position in a critical-artistic theoretical practice, and not a theoretical description of artistic practices.

Once seen in these terms, the end of art is no longer a rather quaint theoretical declaration, but a critical intervention that polemically insists on the necessity of abandoning previous critical conceptions of the art. Such an abandonment requires a reconsideration of the theoretical practice of criticism and artistic production. In particular, it calls for a reconsideration of the end, or now more properly, the ends of art. The end of art demands a reorientation of art and criticism toward new and diverse ends. The articulation of such ends is what is immediately contained in claims about the end of art. And such a reorientation is of the utmost importance if art and criticism are to contribute intelligently to a current economic, political, and intellectual disputes.

-Mike Olson



Rembrandt and Saskia: A Wedding by Arthur Danto circa 1964