Champions of the status quo are two-a-penny in art criticism. And yet, they are as nothing compared with the patrons of past values who regard the status quo with alarm. The forces of conservatism and reaction are pervasive in the professional world of art journalism because they are insidious. Nevertheless, they do not present themselves in convenient forms for critique. Consequently, if we expect all conservative art critics to write with a plum in their word processors, then we will be outfoxed by those who do not. What do contemporary forms of conservative art criticism look like, and how can we attend to them? *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the End of Taste* is an opportunity to find out.

Arthur C. Danto, a prestigious and influential American analytical philosopher and art critic widely read by artist, critics, art historians and philosophers of art, was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1924, and grew up in Detroit. After spending two years in the Army, Danto studied art and history at Wayne University (now Wayne State University) and then at Columbia University. Since 1984, he has been art critic for *The Nation*, and in addition to his many books on philosophical subjects, he has published several collections of art criticism. Danto has served as Vice-President and President of the American Philosophical Association, as well as President of the American Society for Aesthetics. In addition, he is an editor of the *Journal of Philosophy* and consulting editor for various other publications. On top of developing a distinctive theory of art, he has brokered a settlement between Continental philosophy and the analytical tradition, by taking major figures from the history the modern European tradition, particularly Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre, and treating them as if they were Anglo-American analytical philosophers. He lives in New York City.

*The Wake of Art* is of serious interest as an exploration of some key issues of current debate of the philosophy of art. It is also of historical interest, as a collection of some key texts that are more readable than most writing on art today, and by means of which Danto has established his intellectual reputation and constructed his chief arguments. The editors’ introduction is somewhat eager to impress, and is occasionally obtuse as a result, but it manages to identify what is at stake in Danto’s philosophy, while also indicating a few misgivings. It could not be said that the introduction puts Danto’s writing in its intellectual milieu or social context; the editors, Gregg Horowitz

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and Tom Huhn, concentrate on technical and formal argument to the neglect of historical contingencies and intellectual rivalries. This means that their little attempts at analytical jousting are never more than local cases of what T.S. Kuhn, writing about ‘normal science’, called ‘mopping up operations’.\(^1\) The impression is that Danto’s position is not a position at all, but something more like the best account we have of the condition of art. It is a false impression, but Danto is understandably grateful for it. In his Afterword, he writes, touchingly, of his ‘sense of being rescued from a certain kind of darkness’ (p. 195) by their knowledge and understanding of his work. The softness of their light is flattering. A brighter, sharper light would have been more instructive.

The conservatism of a liberal art critic

Danto is a conservative in the guise of a liberal – a libertarian, even. This alone is enough to cause him to be placed on every Marxist reading list. Like other neo-conservatives, Danto’s prose has the style of a pleasant and considerate personality, even when he shuts another epistemological door on the struggle for a deeper freedom than the moderate American brand that is his own ideological horizon. Danto’s two main theses, the ‘end of art’ and the defence of ‘pluralism’, certainly are more than soundalikes of more familiar neoconservative doctrines (namely, the triumphalist post-Cold-War assertion of the end of history and the licence for inequity known as the deregulation of markets). His neoconservatism is not well concealed, but it is ‘neo’ enough to immunise him from standard leftist complaints about cultural conservatism. Danto is not a typical old-fashioned reactionary art lover. His arguments do not advocate traditionalism, élitism, exclusion, standards or taste. Danto is a conservative who does without the staples of conservative art criticism.

Danto feels misunderstood by philosophers and art writers alike. ‘Art writers in general have too weak a grip on philosophical analysis’, he complains, ‘and philosophers, again in general, have too little interest in art or too scant knowledge of it’ (p. 193). Adding that anyone without a close relationship to New York City would also have trouble dealing with his texts (‘where, after all, so much of that history has unfurled. . . . From the late forties, when I moved to New York, until this very moment, it would have been impossible for me merely to philosophize with the canonical aestheticians, from Plato through Kant to Nietzsche and Heidegger, who for all their conceptual muscularity lacked the privilege of living with the art of the late twentieth century’ (pp. 193–4)), Danto does his utmost to disqualify the vast majority of his

\(^1\) Kuhn 1970, p. 24.