

A Companion to Arthur C. Danto

Edited by

Jonathan Gilmore and Lydia Goehr

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Writing with Style

ARTURO FONTAINE

Danto had style, a good style. When I make this aesthetic judgment, I'm sure I am right, although justifying my claim is another matter. We cannot define what good style is, yet we know it when we see it. Danto was engaged with questions of style all his life, as a philosopher and as an art critic. The last chapter of his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* is devoted to metaphor, expression, and style. It is as if his whole exploration of the concept of a work of art culminates with his reflections on the nature of style. Hemingway said he had tried 39 versions of the final words of his novel *Farewell to Arms*. Asked why by *Paris Review* interviewer, George Plimpton, his famous response was: "getting the words right." As a novelist myself, I'm absolutely sure that whether a page has life or not is a question of finding the right words. Why is style so crucial?

When I say that Danto had also a distinctive style – as I hope my samples of his writings will show – this does not mean that he wanted to erase the frontier between philosophy and literature. Philosophy is concerned with truth in an altogether different way than literature is, and Danto believed it important to maintain this distinction. Derrida's alleged proposal – to read philosophy, the whole history of philosophy as literature – is, as Danto wrote, like visiting "a museum of costumes we forget were meant to be worn" (Danto 1986, 160).

Danto began with Buffon's classic dictum (1753): "style c'est l'homme même" – style is the man himself. How did Danto interpret this dictum? Let us turn to an example of visual art: Lichtenstein's "Portrait of Madame Cézanne" (1963) reproduces Erle Loran's diagram of Cézanne's famous painting of his wife. Loran's diagram, included in his book, *Cézanne's Composition*, attempts to show the geometric structure of the painting using lines, arrows, and vectors. Visually, says Danto, Lichtenstein's picture and Loran's diagram are roughly the same. However, the former is a work of art and the latter only a diagram. Why?

Danto used this example to distinguish between a straightforward representation – a diagram – and a picture that is about a diagram (Danto 1981, 141ff). Lichtenstein's