

## BOOK REVIEW

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### The Philosophy of Arthur C. Danto

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*The Philosophy of Arthur C. Danto* marks the first time the prestigious Library of Living Philosophers has dedicated a volume to a thinker who is considered mainly a philosopher of art and an art critic. The volume is comprised of twenty-seven essays written by contemporary authors, to whom Danto responded in turn; the book also includes an intellectual autobiography written by Danto. Some of the standout contributions include a chapter by Ewa D. Bogusz-Boltuc on Danto's engravings ('Reading Danto's Woodcuts'); a perceptive essay about Danto as a 'unique prose stylist' by Crispin Sartwell ('Danto as Writer'); and—a particularly unusual and enticing feature—Sean Scully's reaction to Danto's interpretation of his paintings ('From an Artist's Point of View'). Although Danto made significant contributions to the philosophy of history and of action—writing, among others, an influential book on Nietzsche—almost all these papers deal with his philosophy of art, which is where, as Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins say, 'he has made his lasting mark as a philosopher' (649) ('Danto: On the Use and Disadvantage of Hegel for Art'). Even so, Danto's contribution in the sixties and seventies to the philosophy of history is arguably just as powerful,

and I believe this book would have benefited from devoting more pages to this topic.

Publication of this volume was pushed back significantly when Richard Rorty's illness led the publishers to prioritize the volume devoted to him. Thus, the book is not as timely as one might wish; for example, Lydia Goehr's essay, 'The Pastness of the Work: Albert Speer and the Monumentalism of Intentional Ruins'—perhaps the most substantial and original of the whole book—first appeared in her 2008 book *Elective Affinities*.<sup>1</sup> Even so, this volume, along with *Danto and His Critics*, should now be required reading for anyone interested in Danto's philosophy or contemporary art criticism in general.<sup>2</sup> Central to many of the discussions in the book—and likewise a central concern for Danto himself—is the fundamental question of what makes a thing into art.

Danto first addressed the question of what makes an object into art in his paper 'The Artworld', and again in his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.<sup>3</sup> When I reread these works now, I cannot but feel I am back in a seminar room at Columbia, listening to his lectures. He was then in the midst of writing *Transfiguration*, and I was a Chilean graduate student in the Philosophy Department, hoping to become a novelist and trying to make sense of the art world by studying aesthetics. I can still hear the tone of his

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1 Lydia Goehr, *Elective Affinities: Musical Essays on the History of Aesthetic Theory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

2 Mark Rollins (ed.), *Danto and His Critics*, 2nd edn (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012 [1993]), 69–83.

3 Arthur C. Danto, 'The Artworld', *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), 119–126; reprinted in Joseph Margolis (ed.), *Philosophy Looks at the Arts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978) (page references are to the Margolis edition); *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

voice, his sudden silences and vacillations, his voice as it gained momentum. I see him with his head inclined to one side, searching his way, thinking on his feet. Suddenly, half-smiling, amused by what he was about to say—something we couldn't imagine—he would launch enthusiastically into his next point. When a student asked a question, he would listen intently: 'It's an interesting question. I'm not sure how to answer it.' And then, of course, he would answer by expanding eloquently on the issue. He would always conclude with '... And so on and so forth'.

It is bitter-sweet to re-encounter in these pages the very same questions, proposals and examples—often the very same words—Danto used in that seminar, when I was first confronting questions of the nature of art. As Danto's student, I remember how easy it was to be caught up in the current of his digressions and ekphrases—his rhetoric was mesmerizing, and it was easy to lose sight of the forest for the trees; that feeling never dissipated through all the years of our subsequent friendship.

Over the years, Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* became a flashpoint in Danto's discussion of the nature of art, and I think his appreciation of Warhol evolved accordingly. When Danto was first writing about Warhol back then, I believe his main concern was not about interpreting the work per se. He used *Brillo Boxes* as an example to raise a philosophical question about the nature of artistic representation. As Mark Rollins has written, 'two major features stand out in Danto's work. ... the concept of representation ... (and) ... the method of indiscernibles'.<sup>4</sup> In the preface to *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto refers to Warhol's crucial 'contribution' almost derisively: the 'banality' of the objects represented made it possible to ask the question as to 'what made them artworks' without 'bringing aesthetic considerations in at all'.<sup>5</sup> In the book itself, Warhol is mentioned only once; Duchamp figures much more. In our seminar, too, we spent more time discussing Jasper Johns' flags and targets than Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*. The difference

between Loran's diagram and Lichtenstein's *Portrait of Madame Cézanne* was analysed with care. The question was strictly conceptual: 'What makes it art?'<sup>6</sup>

Danto never mentioned Hegel. I don't remember him talking about 'embodied meanings' or the 'end of art'. But Richard Kuhn, his close friend, did lecture us on Hegel. In those days, Manhattan art galleries were full of conceptual art. Kuhn suggested, partly seriously and partly tongue-in-cheek, that conceptual art—not pop art—was approaching what Hegel had in mind as the end of art and its transformation into philosophy. I asked Danto after class about this more than once, but he was cautious. So I was surprised when I read his statement in the preface of *Transfiguration* that 'I should like to believe that ... with the *Brillo Boxes* ... the history of art has come, in a way, to an end', and to find Hegel referenced as predicting this state of affairs.<sup>7</sup> However, Danto did not explore the thesis in depth. In conversation I recall he was rather reticent on the issue, but in 1984 he devoted a whole essay to the 'end of art', setting forth ideas that, to me as a writer, were liberating.<sup>8</sup> As he says in his reply to artist David Reed's essay 'Questions for Arthur', there would be 'no more of the "You can't do that anymore!" sort of thing' (103).

Danto writes his own intellectual autobiography in his characteristically casual, clear style. One feels the author is having a good time writing, and that he is grateful. 'Life 'as been too good to me, Arturo', he said the last time I was with him, thirteen days before he died. We know that when he saw in Paris a copy of *Art News* with a black-and-white reproduction of *The Kiss* he 'was stunned. [He] was certain that it was not art'<sup>9</sup> However, after some time he concluded that 'if *The Kiss* was art, anything could be art'.<sup>10</sup> Now, in his autobiography he

6 Danto, 'The Artworld', 136.

7 Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, vii.

8 Arthur C. Danto, 'The End of Art', in Berel Lang (ed.), *The Death of Art, Art and Philosophy*, Vol. 2 (New York: Haven, 1984), 5–35. A revised version was printed in Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

9 Arthur C. Danto, *Andy Warhol* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), e-book, position 50.

10 Arthur C. Danto, 'Afterward: Not by a Soap but First by a Kiss', in Rollins, *Danto and His Critics*, 316.

4 Mark Rollins, 'Introduction' in his, *Danto and His Critics*, 1.

5 Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, vi.

adds: ‘one could go any way one wanted. This, I felt, was the meaning of *The Kiss*’ (24). So, *The Kiss* was the harbinger of the end of art, and the advent of artistic pluralism. This is astonishing: Danto had the intuition of the end of art before his theory of art and before the *Brillo Boxes*: ‘If it didn’t matter whether I was a realist or an abstractionist, if I could do one or the other, I was no longer that certain that I wanted to do either’ (24). His tone was melancholic. Danto was deeply disappointed: ‘There might not be much room in the art world then taking shape for someone whose work was inflected by the style of the 1950s ... I really had no interest in becoming an artist in the kind of pluralistic art world that was now beginning to emerge. Somehow the stakes were too low’ (25). *The Kiss* was a devastating shock for Danto: he dismantled his studio. ‘It was an impulsive but absolute stop’ (25).

Two years later, in 1964, he writes: ‘never mind that the *Brillo Boxes* may not be good, much less great art. The impressive thing is that it is art at all’.<sup>11</sup> Danto’s appreciation of Warhol’s aesthetic merit increased immensely over the years. In 1981 he recalled ‘the philosophical intoxication that survived the aesthetic repugnance of [Warhol’s] exhibition in 1964’.<sup>12</sup> In 1989, he wrote: ‘Warhol, to my mind is the nearest thing to a philosophical genius the history of art has produced. He brought history to an end by demonstrating that no visual criterion could serve the purpose of defining art.’ Notice the verb: Warhol has ‘demonstrated’ a philosophical thesis through a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*. ‘Ours will be the Age of Warhol—an unlikely giant, but a giant nevertheless’.<sup>13</sup>

Returning to the original question of what makes an object into art, in his reply to Fred Rush, Danto offers the following simple formula:

$$W = I(M, O),$$

where *W* is the work of art; and *I* is the interpretation, a function that maps a meaning *M* onto the

material object *O* (482). The only difference between *W* and *O* is that *W* has a meaning which requires interpretation. *O* by itself does not. What transforms *O* into *W* is the interpretation *I* of the meaning *M*. Interpretation, then, has the power to transfigure a commonplace object into an artwork.

In art, Danto claims, ‘*esse is interpretari*’, ‘not to interpret the work ... is not to see it as art’.<sup>14</sup> In spite of this, as Lydia Goehr says, ‘the historicity or ahistoricity of intention is not a matter that Danto pursues in great detail, and, arguably, he leaves intention too comfortably in place’ (365). Goehr argues that the meaning of a work of art does not remain fixed at the point of origin. The ‘original’ meaning ‘does not preclude more things coming to be said about the work as it starts to be interpreted and experienced in an ongoing world of style, influence, and comparative judgment’ (363). In his reply, Danto insists that the interpreter cannot introduce anachronistic concepts or perspectives that the artist could not have known. He gives the example of Michelangelo’s placement of Eve in the Sistine Chapel; while the figure is certainly key, one could not ascribe any feminist interpretation to her presence in the work, since feminist theory was not available at the time of its painting. Danto wants to stress what works of art ‘mean to those who live the form of life to which they belong’ (386). In his reply to Göran Hermerén—who raises the question ‘Is it necessary for the interpretation to be true or in some sense correct?’ (‘Art, Media, and Money’)—Danto asserts that ‘interpretative hypotheses are constrained by the historical situation in which the work was made’ (189).

Danto did allow for distinctions, though. For instance, he differentiated between ‘surface interpretation’ and ‘deep interpretation’. The first requires one to grasp the meaning embodied in the work as intended by the artist. In this sense, ‘surface interpretation’ ought to be ‘scrupulously historical’.<sup>15</sup> ‘Deep interpretation’, although based on ‘surface interpretation’, is much freer, and allows for broader, more ‘creative’ readings of a work.

11 Danto, ‘The Artworld’, 141.

12 Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, vi.

13 Arthur C. Danto, *Encounters & Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), 287 and 293.

14 Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 125 and 120.

15 Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, 66.

In his reply to Goehr, Danto makes another distinction: ‘The first kind of meaning is empirical and local. The second kind of meaning, hermeneutical and speculative’ (387). A further nuance is laid out in his reply to Hermerén, this time between the interpretation that is ‘internal to—is constitutive of—the work of art’ and ‘external interpretations’ which are ‘justified hypotheses’ produced by critics. So, internal interpretation is made by the artist him- or herself: ‘The constitutive interpretation stands to the work as the soul stands to the body’ (188). External interpretations are ‘interpretative hypotheses, understood as candidates for truth. What makes them true is what the artist puts into the work that gives it meaning’ (189). He calls his view ‘interpretative realism’, because ‘interpretative hypotheses are constrained by the historical situation in which the work was made’ (189).

Dickie, in his essay ‘Art and Ontology’, challenges Danto’s theory of interpretation, as well as his concept of meaning. In his view, there are works of art that simply have no meaning, thus lacking one of Danto’s necessary conditions for a work of art. He points to Malevich’s painting *White on White*. Danto replies to Dickie by quoting Malevich himself: ‘Meaning assumes here an external form ... Suprematism did not bring into being a new world of feeling, but rather, an altogether new and direct form of representation of the world of feeling’ (326–327). But Dickie is ready to maintain that a canvas may lack ‘aboutness’ even if the painter thinks otherwise: ‘The painting itself is not about anything, even if that astonishes Malevich’ (317).

On the other hand, as we have been aware at least since T. S. Eliot’s classic essay ‘Tradition and Individual Talent’, new works modify how we see the ones that came before. Velázquez, in his painting *Calabazas*, employed visible brush strokes with seeming abandon, and mere daubs of paint suggest form and light and intimacy. But when we observe his painting today, it is almost impossible not to remember how Manet—the first Modernist, according to Clement Greenberg—changed the way he painted after seeing Velázquez’s canvasses. What is Danto’s reaction to this? He writes, for example:

‘the brushstroke became salient in impressionism, but that was not the intention of the movement ... The brushstroke became important only when illusionism receded as the basic aim of painting and mimesis receded as the defining theory of art, which in my view gave a retroactive validity to impressionist canvasses, now accepted for what the impressionists would have regarded as the wrong reasons.’<sup>16</sup>

So, if Danto is right, we look at Manet’s painting interposing later theories of art, and, having misinterpreted his work by misconstruing his intentions, we then proceed to misinterpret Velázquez’s paintings. According to Danto’s historical theory of interpretation, all of these are simply false readings. But even if they are ‘historically false’ it doesn’t follow that they are worthless. If we look at Velázquez’s paintings through Manet and the impressionists they might gain in depth, versatility, inventiveness and, therefore, in significance for us.

‘Velázquez influenced Manet and Manet influenced the impressionists’ is an example of Danto’s concept of a ‘narrative sentence’. *Ex hypothesi* it is outside the range of Velázquez’s knowledge, since the aesthetics of Impressionism were not available in Velázquez’s time. Impressionism as such was certainly not part of Velázquez’s intention, while for us it may be part of the meaning of his paintings. ‘The events one narrates derive their importance from what they lead to’ (15). The same is often true of artworks.

But the above is just one case among many. I think, more generally, that an artwork may say much more than what the artist intended to say. Danto’s criterion applied to Shakespeare, for instance, would rule out many interesting interpretations of his plays; being able to interpret Shakespeare more freely makes his works more relevant to us today. The historically ‘true’ interpretation of the author’s intention does not exhaust the meaning actually embodied in an artwork, I believe. Interpretation is not so much, as Danto claims, a question of ‘truth’, but rather of experiencing the painting, novel or film in a way that

16 Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 75.

resonates. A convincing review might change my attitude towards a novel or a film. The resonances of an artwork transcend its artist.

What was Danto arguing against? Clearly he was polemicalizing with the post-structuralists, who

‘insist that the author is dead, and that intention is a fallacy. Poststructuralist theory, of course, denies not only authors’ (artists’) intentions, but truth itself. It is in this sense that institutional theory is akin to poststructuralism’ (188).

One of Danto’s targets was certainly Roland Barthes’ influential essay ‘La mort de l’auteur’ (1967). Of course, this essay was in line with the intentional fallacy theory, as well as the writings of Derrida and many other deconstructionists and postmodernists.

Danto believed that the death of the author was belied by our persistent concern with settling interpretive conflicts. He writes: ‘every new interpretation ... constitutes a new work’,<sup>17</sup> and ‘there is not an indefinitely large number of true interpretations. Of course there is always the possibility of ambiguity. But that is the truth so far as the ambiguous work of art is concerned’ (481–482). But can he really mean that some day we shall have the complete set of ‘true’ interpretations of *Antigone*, *King Lear* and *Waiting for Godot*?

Ultimately, I think Danto did not leave behind a convincing theory of interpretation. But he did something possibly more significant: he produced a substantial and influential body of work as an art critic. From his ontological conception of works of art, the art of interpretation follows naturally; I regard his praxis as a critic as the embodiment of his theory.

Danto’s art criticism is addressed in Gerard Vilar’s chapter, ‘On Some Dissonances in A. C. Danto’s Art Criticism’. Vilar’s conclusion is that Danto’s definition of art is, in fact, normative (152); he makes the case that in Danto’s negative review of Kitaj’s *The Ohio Gang*, what he actually finds lacking is an embodied meaning

or metaphor. But this aesthetic requirement only arises from Danto’s ontological definition of art. So, ‘no metaphor = bad art’ (151). Danto counters that his concept of art does not tell ‘whether the art seen is good or bad’. And ‘I criticized Kitaj’s work for its thinness of meaning, and his recourse to “prefaces”, which are no substitute for making the work a visually interesting whole’ (164). Danto could have quoted this thought from Hegel, who held that content or meaning and expression or appearance must be ‘penetrated by one another’, so that the surface ‘appears exclusively as a presentation’ of the meaning.<sup>18</sup> The problem Vilar raises is tricky, but one is left with the feeling that it is Danto who is on the right track. His concept of artworks as embodied meaning does not entail an aesthetic program. However, the aesthetic value of a work has to do, up to a point, with the manner in which meaning and embodiment are assembled and interwoven. A good work of art is ‘a piece of visual thought’ (165), to use Danto’s own words.

Even so, the problem about the grounds of aesthetic judgements in pluralistic times remains open. This volume falls short of addressing the question. It is nevertheless a worthwhile book in that it offers readers the chance to participate in a lively discussion of the ideas of a philosopher and art critic who, more than anyone else I am aware of, has shaped our current understanding of the concept of a work of art, as well as of the spirit and mood of contemporary art. And it is marvelous to encounter once again, now that he is no longer with us, Danto’s insightful examples, his perceptive and imaginative interpretations of specific artworks, his dazzling prose, his generous, unique intelligence, and, most of all, his incomparably cheerful spirit. I am glad that he was able to hold this impressive volume in his hands—he died the very day he received his copy.

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17 Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 125.

18 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: OUP, 1975), 95.