Creating Works of Art by Interpreting Objects

A Critical Note on Arthur C. Danto's Theory of Art

HEIKKI SAARI

Arthur C. Danto's influential theory of art has been in the foreground in the ongoing philosophical discussion of the conceptual and institutional conditions for artmaking. According to him, art is institutional, because the creation, interpretation and appreciation of works of art presuppose that there are shared aesthetic concepts and practices and theories of art. Artists can create works of art and receivers can appreciate them as such only if they live in a culture in which there are art-relevant concepts and aesthetic (artistic) practices. Unfortunately, he does not explain more in detail what it is that makes art institutional.

Danto is especially concerned with formulating criteria by which ready-made artworks can be distinguished from similar "mere real things" that are non-art. According to him, the following features distinguish works of art from objects that are not art:

1. The artist intended to create a work of art when he made his artefact, and he presented his creation as a work of art to an artworld public.
2. Works of art are about something (i.e. they have a subject), while ordinary artefacts just are what they are.
3. We can transfigure those art objects that are perceptually indiscernible from ordinary artefacts of the same kind into works of art by interpreting them as works of art. This involves attributing artistic (or aesthetic) qualities to them. These intentional qualities cannot be reduced to the physical properties of the artefacts in which they are embodied.
4. We respond to art objects as works of art in artworld contexts and normally appreciate some of their artistic or aesthetic qualities. Our responses to works of art that are perceptually indistinguishable from artefacts of the same kind express our appreciation of them.

In what follows I shall raise some difficulties about two related aspects of Danto's theory of art insofar as it lays down some necessary and sufficient conditions that distinguish works of art from similar artefacts that are non-art. First, I try to show that his account of how ready-mades that artists present as works of art can be distinguished from non-art is not without problems. There are many cases in which it is impossible to distinguish conceptual works of art from non-art by using the criteria he proposes. I attempt to show that he is unable to clarify sufficiently the relation between the artistic and the aesthetic, especially as regards works of art that have no aesthetically appreciatable qualities. On Danto's theory, such properties as "clever", "witty" and "irreverent" must be (invisible) artistic qualities that we attribute to those artworks that are perceptually indistinguishable from ordinary artefacts of the same kind. At times he contrasts artistic qualities with aesthetic qualities assuming that the former are imperceptible while the latter are perceptible. Nevertheless, when he is discussing the relation between artistic and aesthetic qualities in works of art, he presupposes that some artistic qualities can be perceptible ones and that some aesthetic qualities may be imperceptible. Artistic and aesthetic qualities are thought to be constitutive of works of art, for it is in virtue of such properties that we treat them as art and ascribe artistic or aesthetic value to them. In Danto's view, if we find such artworks as ready-mades artistically valuable, we do not usually value them in virtue of their aesthetic qualities but because they have some artistic qualities.

Second, I try to show that it remains unclear in Danto's analysis how we can transfigure art objects that are perceptually indistinguishable from ordinary artefacts of the same kind into works of art by interpreting them. Also his claim that interpretations of conceptual works of art can be "correct" or "incorrect" is problematic, for we cannot determine whether rival interpretations of such artworks are "correct" or "incorrect" by studying the invisible artistic qualities of these artworks, or by studying the observable physical properties of the artefacts in which they are embodied. There are many conceptual works of art about which it is pointless to ask whether receivers have interpreted them "correctly" or "incorrectly". In this context I also discuss the question of how we can respond aesthetically to conceptual works of art that are not meant to be appreciated as aesthetic objects. Danto recognises the importance of receivers' responses to works of art, but he does not explain in what respects our *artistic* responses to those artworks that are not presented as aesthetic objects for appreciation differ from our *aesthetic* responses to traditional works of art.

I.

The first problem with Danto's theory is that it is difficult to distinguish works of art that are perceptually indistinguishable from ordinary artefacts of the same kind from what he calls "mere real things" (ordinary artefacts) by using his criteria for arthood. (We can normally identify traditional works of art more easily because artists created them by making art objects that are perceptually different from ordinary artefacts and natural objects.) To ask for the necessary and sufficient conditions for arthood is to ask what constitutes a work of art. Danto rejects the physical object theory according to which a work of art is the physical artefact made by the artist. He emphasises that we have to distinguish the work of art and its material counterpart in which it is embodied, for we ascribe different predicates to them. He remarks that "an artwork cannot be flattened onto its base and identified just with it, for then it would be what the mere real thing itself is – a square red canvas, a dirty set of ricepaper sheets, or whatever".[1]

Danto asks us to imagine three altogether similar snow shovels "one of which is definitely a work of art, though not to be told apart from its vastly less illustrious peers by protracted and minute inspection".[2] As artefacts the three snow shovels are perceptually indistinguishable from each other (they are like tokens of the same type), but only one of them is a work of art which cannot be reduced to the physical artefact in which it is embodied. According to him, there are four characteristic features that distinguish the snow shovel which is a work of art from the two other similar snow shovels that are not art. First, the artist intended to create a work of art when he presented it as such in an art exhibition. Second, his artwork is about something, unlike ordinary artefacts that just are what they are.[3] Danto's "aboutness" condition is problematic, because he does not explain in what sense ready-mades (snow shovels, tubs, etc.) are about something. If we say that the snow shovel symbolises the coldness of Finnish winter, we presuppose that it refers outside itself, whereas the other two snow shovels are mere real things that do not refer outside themselves. This is, however, entirely arbitrary, for this art-

1. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 101. Hereafter cited as TC.

2. Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 26. Hereafter cited as PDA.

3. Danto claims that "an artwork expresses something about its content, in contrast with an ordinary representation"; TC, 148. See also Arthur C. Danto, "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense", *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 130.

work could symbolise equally well many other ideas, cultural things or phenomena as well, depending on receivers' interpretations and on the cultural context in which it is presented.

The third distinguishing feature is that receivers ascribe artistic properties to the snow shovel-*cum*-artwork that they do not attribute to the other snow shovels. For example, an art critic may claim that this artwork has such artistic attributes as "witty" and "creative", but he does not assign these qualities to the other snow shovels that are not part of the exhibition. Fourth, we respond differently to the snow shovel in question than we respond to the other snow shovels, because we believe that it is a work of art to be appreciated as such in this artworld context. Danto argues that

> [i]f aesthetic response is always and only to what meets the eye (or ear or whatever sense), it is difficult to see where aesthetic difference can lie, given the indiscriminability of our snow shovels. So if there is to be a difference, it must lie logically hidden from the senses in what remains over when we subtract snow shovel from artwork.[4]

He stresses that our aesthetic responses to the invisible artistic qualities of works of art are different from our responses to their material counterparts because they have artistic qualities that ordinary artefacts do not have. (Danto presupposes here that we can respond aesthetically to invisible artistic properties of conceptual works of art.) But since such works of art are not meant to be appreciated as aesthetic objects, it is inappropriate to respond aesthetically to them. We normally respond aesthetically to works of art only if they have some aesthetic qualities and if they are presented as objects for aesthetic appreciation in an artworld context. Conceptual artists stress that if their works incidentally have some aesthetic qualities, they are irrelevant, as they do not present their artworks as objects for aesthetic appreciation. If conceptual works of art are not presented by their creators as aesthetic objects, then it would be inappropriate to respond aesthetically to them and assess them by aesthetic criteria. For instance, it would be a mistake to respond to Duchamp's *Fountain* by claiming that it is a "bad" work of art because it does not have any appreciatable aesthetic properties, for it is not meant to be appreciated as an aesthetic object.

Assume that someone goes to an art exhibition in which tattooed pigheads are

4. PDA, 26.

presented as a work of art (such pigheads were recently put on display in the modern art museum *Kiasma* in Helsinki). She finds them utterly disgusting objects and assumes that they belong to the class of non-art. Her immediate aesthetic reaction (which is not based on any "art theory") to the pigheads is that she leaves the gallery at once. She could have also expressed her rejection of the pigheads as a "work of art" in words by saying "Pure rubbish!" or the like. Her immediate aesthetic reaction to the pigheads expressed at the same time her appreciation of them as a "work of art". (Her reactions to similar pigheads in a butcher's shop would be different.) Yet, her aesthetic reaction to the tattooed pigheads was "inappropriate" in this artworld context because these objects were obviously not meant to be appreciated as aesthetic objects. On Danto's theory, she should have responded non-aesthetically to the invisible artistic qualities that the tattooed pigheads have *qua* work of art.

Unfortunately, the four characteristic features of art mentioned above do not as such enable us to distinguish such ready-mades as snow shovels from similar mere real things, or pigheads that are artworks from ones that are not art. Even though an artist presents tattooed pigheads as works of art in an art exhibition, this institutional context does not guarantee that he did intend to create a work of art by performing his creative action. It is possible that he did not intend to create a work of art but just wanted to see if he could make gullible visitors adopt these unusual objects as a work of art in this artworld context. Danto does not explain what such potential art objects as tattooed pigheads are about. If they are artistic representations of some phenomena or objects, they should have some artistic qualities that receivers could appreciate. The pigheads presented as a work of art could represent anything, say, political corruption, the decadence of western culture or the relation between mind and body or whatever we can imagine.

II.

Danto's account of the relation between the artistic and the aesthetic (as regards conceptual works of art) gives rise to some problems. He stresses that we have to keep the artistic and the aesthetic strictly apart, because they belong to different categories. According to him, the aesthetic has to do with what can be perceived in works of art. By contrast, he claims that we cannot perceive artistic qualities in works of art whose material counterparts are indiscernible from artefacts of the same kind. He suggests that the artistic is inseparably intertwined with art theories, whereas the aesthetic is concerned with traditional works of art. Danto contends that art has become "theoretical" or "philosophical" in the sense that the

creation of conceptual works of art presupposes that the artist is familiar with the relevant art theories and that he is aware of the conceptual and theoretical boundaries of artmaking.

On Danto's theory, artistic qualities are constitutive of conceptual works of art that are embodied in artefacts. According to him, artistic qualities that we ascribe to such works differ in two important respects from aesthetic qualities. First, artistic qualities ("witty", "clever", etc.) are imperceptible qualities that we cannot see or hear. Second, we ascribe these qualities only to works of art, but not to ordinary artefacts or physical phenomena. He assumes that aesthetic qualities are perceptual qualities that we can ascribe to traditional works of art and ordinary artefacts. Consequently, if Danto's position is correct, artistic predicates only apply to works of art, whereas aesthetic predicates apply to works of art and to mere real things as well. He points out that "[t]here is a whole range of predicates beyond the standard aesthetic predicates which have application to artworks and not to real things, nor, for the matter, to the material counterparts of the artworks".[5] By "standard aesthetic predicates" he means such predicates as "beautiful", "good" and "bad" that apply to traditional works of art. For instance, we may say of a sunset that it is "beautiful" in the same sense in which we say that a work of art is beautiful. In contrast, we apply artistic predicates to those works of art that have no aesthetic qualities that we could appreciate.

The first problem with Danto's account of the relation between the artistic and the aesthetic concerns whether there can be imperceptible aesthetic qualities and how they are related to artistic qualities. If he admits that some aesthetic qualities in works of art can be imperceptible ones, this conflicts with his contention that the aesthetic has to do with what can be perceived. He points out that

> [m]y own view is that a work of art has a great many qualities, indeed a great many qualities of a different sort altogether, than the qualities belonging to objects materially indiscernible from them but not themselves artworks. And some of these qualities may very well be aesthetic ones, or qualities one can experience aesthetically or find "worthy and valuable".[6]

5. TC, 158. Danto argues that "[t]he moment an artistic predicate is applied – such as 'has depth' – we have left the material correlate behind and are dealing with the work of art, which can no more be identified with matter than with content"; ibid., 159.

6. TC, 94. Cf. ibid., 154–155.

He does not thus deny that works of conceptual art may have some aesthetic qualities. But he does not tell us whether he thinks that all aesthetic qualities are perceptible, or whether he allows that works of art may also have imperceptible aesthetic qualities.

If it is Danto's view that all aesthetic qualities are perceptible ones, he cannot consistently claim that some of these qualities are imperceptible ones. (He does not give any examples of imperceptible aesthetic qualities in conceptual works of art.) However, he says that we may respond aesthetically to conceptual artworks. This presupposes that these works of art have some imperceptible aesthetic qualities, because he claims that we do not respond aesthetically to the sensuous aesthetic qualities of the artefacts in which they are embodied. If he means to say that we may respond aesthetically to the (invisible) artistic qualities of conceptual works of art, this leads to problems as well, as he stresses that artistic qualities in such artworks have nothing to do with the aesthetic. Since Danto argues that aesthetic considerations are irrelevant when we evaluate conceptual works of art, it is difficult to see what we are responding aesthetically to when we are dealing with such works of art. One might point out here, in passing, that there are also many imperceptible aesthetic qualities that we attribute to traditional works of art but not to ordinary artefacts. For instance, we do not directly "see" that a work of art is sublime or deep in the same sense in which we see that a cow is depicted in a painting.

When philosophers are discussing, say, Duchamp's *Fountain* as a paradigmatic example of a work of art that is not meant to be appreciated as an aesthetic object, they are not interested in its physical properties. Danto argues that the nonartistic properties of *Fountain* are similar to those (perceptible) qualities that ordinary artefacts (that belong to the same class of artefacts) have, "while the properties *Fountain* possesses as an artwork it shares with the *Julian Tomb* of Michelangelo and the *Great Perseus* of Cellini".[7] According to him, *Fountain* has, *qua* work of art, such artistic qualities as "daring", "impudent", "irreverent", "witty" and "clever". We do not attribute these artistic qualities to the physical artefact in which Duchamp's artwork is embodied but to his creative action in which he used it for his artistic purposes. For example, its gleaming surface is not a cultural but a physical property that we can fully account for by referring to the relevant theories of physics. What interests us in Duchamp's *Fountain* is not its gleaming surface and similar physical qualities but its cultural properties that are

7. TC, 94.

not reducible to its physical properties. As a mere physical object *Fountain* is philosophically uninteresting (any artefact of the same type could replace it). Yet, many theorists and spectators find it interesting as an attempt to explore the conceptual limits of artmaking, or as a critical comment on what is involved in our conception of art.

Furthermore, Danto does not make it clear whether he thinks that all artistic qualities that can be ascribed to conceptual works of art apply to traditional works of art as well. If he accepts the view that all artistic qualities are imperceptible and that they apply to any works of art, this means that we can attribute imperceptible artistic qualities to traditional works of art. (The imperceptibility condition is important for Danto, as he contends that we can only perceive the material counterpart of a conceptual work of art but not the work of art itself.) But when we do praise artistic qualities, say, in Michelangelo's *David*, we appreciate perceptible qualities in this work of art. If Danto admits that traditional works of art have perceptible artistic qualities, he contradicts himself, because he contends that artistic qualities are not perceptible. He has not proved that all artistic qualities are imperceptible. There are many perceptible artistic qualities that we ascribe to traditional works of art. If Danto holds that only those artistic qualities that we impute to conceptual works of art are imperceptible, this may have some plausibility, although it is not part of our notion of "conceptual art" that all artistic qualities in conceptual works of art are imperceptible. Moreover, he fails to explain how imperceptible artistic qualities are related to imperceptible aesthetic qualities. As indicated above, conceptual and traditional works of art may have some imperceptible aesthetic qualities that receivers can appreciate.

The upshot of the above discussion is that Danto's account of the relation between the artistic and the aesthetic is unsatisfactory. On the one hand, he cannot maintain the sharp distinction that he draws between artistic and aesthetic qualities, for there are many cases where they overlap. On the other hand, he fails to show that all artistic qualities are imperceptible and that all aesthetic qualities are perceptible. If some artistic qualities in works of art are perceptible and some aesthetic qualities are imperceptible, as we have good reason to assume, Danto should explain how these artistic or aesthetic qualities are related to their imperceptible or perceptible counterparts. As our discussion indicated, there are many cases where the distinctions imperceptible/perceptible and artistic/aesthetic overlap. For instance, properties that we attribute to art objects may be treated as "artistic" qualities in one cultural context but as "aesthetic" qualities in another context. Someone may regard the gleaming surface of a snow shovel as an aesthetic prop-

erty in an artworld context, while a person who uses the snow shovel as a tool regards it as an irrelevant non-aesthetic property. Such predicates as "powerful" and "insightful" may be treated as artistic or aesthetic predicates that apply not only to traditional works of art but to many conceptual artworks and ordinary artefacts as well. Someone might describe, say, Joseph Beuys' artwork *How to Explain Paintings to a Dead Hare* by using such artistic predicates as "powerful", "insightful" and "provoking", but another receiver might use them as aesthetic predicates. Danto's artistic predicates apply to many ordinary artefacts, phenomena and actions, which should not be possible according to his theory. Although such artistic predicates as "shallow", "deep", "powerful" and "witty" do not apply to the material counterparts of conceptual artworks, they apply to many other artefacts, phenomena and actions outside the domain of art.[8]

III.

As I noted previously, Danto argues that interpretations are constitutive of those works of art whose material counterparts cannot be distinguished from artefacts of the same kind. According to him, "an object is an artwork *at all* only in relation to an interpretation".[9] He points out that "[i]t will have been observed that indiscernible objects become, quite different and distinct works of art by dint of distinct and different interpretations, so I shall think of interpretations as functions which transform material objects into works of art".[10] Further, he contends that an interpretation is "the lever with which an object is lifted out of the real world and into the artworld".[11] Danto's prime example is Duchamp's *Fountain* which, as a physical object, is perceptually indistinguishable from artefacts of the same kind. *Fountain* becomes a work of art when we interpret it as a work of art, which involves ascribing a set of artistic predicates and some meaning to it. By ascribing artistic properties to this object we, as it were, lift it out of the realm of real objects into the class of artworks. He holds that interpretations and art theories are inseparable, for "[t]o interpret a work is to offer a theory as to what the work is about, what its subject is".[12] He argues that "[a]rt is the kind of thing that

8. Cf. Jeffrey Wieand, "Artistic Predicates", *Journal of Value Inquiry* 16 (1982), 313–314.

9. PDA, 44. Since Danto does not maintain that traditional works of art are constituted by means of interpretations, I do not discuss their interpretation here.

10. PDA, 39.

11. Ibid.

12. PDA, 119.

depends for its existence upon theories; without theories of art, black paint *is* just black paint and nothing more".[13] Danto makes three closely related claims about the constitutive function of interpretation in artmaking. First, he maintains that art theories enable artists to create works of art and receivers to interpret them as pieces of art within the artworld. When we interpret a work of art, this involves offering a "theory" that explains its subject or what it is about.[14] Second, he contends that we transfigure those art objects that are indiscernible from ordinary artefacts of the same kind into works of art by interpreting them as artworks, which involves ascribing some artistic qualities to them. Our interpretations of works of art prevent them from collapsing into ordinary real things. Third, he claims that our interpretations are artistic or aesthetic responses to works of art.

Danto is right in claiming that our interpretations have an important role in the creation of those works of art whose material counterparts are indiscernible from ordinary artefacts of the same kind. But he does not make it clear in what sense art theories enable us to interpret works of conceptual art.[15] He claims that Roy Lichtenstein's paintings are deeply theoretic works, as they are about artistic theories with which the spectator must be familiar in order to be able to appreciate them.[16] Another example is Joseph Kosuth's conceptual artwork *One and Three Chairs* which consists of one chair and a picture of a chair. The idea of a chair is present in the chair and in its picture. Kosuth's work is theoretic, in Danto's sense, if it is taken as a witty commentary on Plato's art theory with which the spectator must be familiar so as to understand the philosophical point of his work. Some works of art may thus be interpreted as critical comments on art theories, or on the conceptual limits of artmaking. But Danto is unable to show that we normally have to utilise art theories in order to understand works of art.

Another aspect of the theoretical nature of modern art that Danto seems to have in mind is that the possession of the concept of art and other art-relevant concepts makes the creation of works of art and our talk about them as "artworks"

---

13. PDA, 135.

14. Danto, "The Artworld", *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), 581.

15. Danto does not make it clear whether he thinks that it should be possible to test empirically those art theories that enable us to understand works of art. Art theories usually include both *a priori* claims about art ("Criteria of arthood are universal") and empirical claims ("Art objects achieve the status of arthood when they are presented as works of art to an artworld public"). He assumes that true theories enable us to understand works of art, while false art theories make us misunderstand them.

16. PDA, 109–110.

conceptually possible. Our aesthetic concepts and theories about artmaking enable us to theorise about works of art. Artists could not create works of art and the public could not appreciate their products as works of art if they did not possess aesthetic concepts and if there were no aesthetic or artistic practices in their culture. For example, if the makers of prehistoric cave paintings at Lascaux did not possess the concept of art, they could not intend to create works of art when they made those paintings, although we have adopted them as works of art within our western artworld. Similarly, artists who lived in the nineteenth century could not have created works of conceptual art, because they did not have the concept of conceptual art and art theories that are presupposed in the creation of such works of art. There was no place for works of conceptual art within the practices of the European artworld in the nineteenth century. However, in stressing the importance of art theories Danto tends to ignore the constitutive role that aesthetic concepts and artistic practices have in the creation and appreciation of works of art. These practices provide an institutional context within which artists can present any artefact or natural object as a work of art for appreciation. But as receivers we do not normally have to offer any art "theory" to be able to interpret works of art.

Danto's view that we can constitute works of art by interpreting them gives rise to many problems. First, he does not succeed in making clear what is involved in transfiguring, as he puts it, mere real things into works of art by interpreting them. In an attempt to explicate his position he remarks that "[a]n object *o* is then an artwork only under an interpretation *I*, where *I* is a sort of function that transfigures *o into a work: I(o)=W*".[17] For example, Warhol's *Marilyn* is a work of art only if someone interprets it as a work of art. It is unclear, however, in what sense an interpretation of an art object is a "function" that transfigures it into a work of art. Danto suggests that "interpretation is something like a baptism, not in the sense of giving a name but a new identity, participation in the community of the elect".[18] What he means is that when we put an interpretation on an art object it achieves the status of arthood, because we have transformed it as a cultural object by giving it a new identity in that artworld context.

17. PDA, 125. According to Danto, "we could as easily characterize interpretations as functions which impose artworks onto material objects, in the sense of determining which properties and parts of the latter are to be taken as part of the work and within the work significant in a way they characteristically are not outside the work"; PDA, 42.

18. PDA, 126

Danto contends that "[i]n art, every new interpretation is a Copernican revolution, in the sense that each interpretation constitutes a new work, even if the object differently interpreted remains [...] invariant under transformation".[19] The problem with his standpoint is that if each new interpretation of a work of art constitutes a new work, it is difficult to see how the identity of works of art can be established. If we take Danto strictly at his words, it follows from his position that A's and B's divergent interpretations of the same artwork constitute new, ontologically distinct works of art. A interprets Duchamp's *Fountain* as expressing the idea that artists can break any established rules governing artmaking. On B's interpretation, *Fountain* expresses the idea that artworks have only market value in western capitalistic societies. On Danto's theory, A's *Fountain* and B's *Fountain* are different works of art, although the art object remains the same in their interpretations. This means that although A and B are talking about the same art object, they are in fact talking about different works of art. It follows from his theory that there are as many *Fountains* as there are different interpretations of Duchamp's work, because every new interpretation constitutes a new work of art.

How are we to establish the identity of a work of art in this sort of cases? We cannot show, by studying the artistic and physical properties of *Fountain*, that although A's *Fountain* is numerically different, it is identical in content with Duchamp's *Fountain*, while B's *Fountain* is different from this artwork. Empirical criteria for establishing the identity of *Fountain* fail, because Duchamp's work of art is perceptually indistinguishable from artefacts of the same kind. Assume that a conceptual artist presents a urinal that is of the same brand and model as the artefact in which *Fountain* is externalised as a work of art in an artworld context and names it *Fountain II*. The artefact in which his work of art is externalised would be identical (as a token of the same type) with the artefact in which Duchamp's work is embodied. These two artefacts would be perceptually indiscernible from each other and yet the works of art that are embodied in them would be different. It is also difficult to establish the identity of works of art by applying conceptual criteria.[20] Although A and B agree that their interpretations are of the same work of art, they are in fact talking about different works of art, because Danto implies that divergent interpretations of the same art object constitute different, onto-

19. PDA, 125.

20. Descriptions of works of art serve as conceptual criteria of identity. For instance, A and B had the same aesthetic experience of a work of art, if they agree in their descriptions that they had the same aesthetic experience.

logically distinct artworks.[21] One may ask whether A's and B's works of art, which they have constituted through their divergent interpretations, are embodied in the same artefact as *Fountain*, or in other artefacts of the same kind, or whether they are embodied in any objects at all. Danto remains silent about the unstable ontological status of those works of art that receivers constitute by interpreting them as pieces of art. We can imagine that some conceptual artist's ready-mades may, in the course of time, lose their status as works of art because people do not treat them any more as art under new institutional conditions for artmaking and appreciation. They would vanish into the realm of real things.

Another reason why it is so difficult to establish the identity of many conceptual works of art is that conceptual artists often use ready-made objects that are not "originals" in the same sense in which traditional artists create original works. Duchamp's *Fountain* is original in the sense that he was the first artist to present an artefact of this kind as a work of art to an artworld public. It is not, strictly speaking, the artefact that he used that is original, but, rather, his *act* of presenting it as a work of art in an artworld context, which involved breaking the conventions of artmaking at that time. Duchamp might have used *any* artefact of the same kind for the same purpose. If the original *Fountain* is destroyed, another artefact of the same brand and model could replace it. Artists can use any copy of an artefact as a work of art. To use our earlier example, when an artist presents a snow shovel as a work of art in an art exhibition, it is a copy of the "original" snow shovel (designed by a craftsman) in the sense that it is (as a token of the same type) identical with similar snow shovels of the same brand and model. The snow shovel presented as a work of art is a copy of the original in the same sense in which a Mercedes is a copy of the original car designed by its makers. The point I want to make here is that conceptual artists need not make any "original" artefact, because it usually does not matter who has produced the ready-mades that they use in creating their works. This is clearly seen in the case of digital works of art. A video film which an artist has stored on a DVD disk is identical with any of its digital copies: all copies and the original have exactly the same bits in the same order. In this case we cannot say that the artist's work of art is embodied only in

21. Danto assumes that interpretations constitute ontologically distinct works of art. He remarks, e.g., that "[w]hat constitutes an artwork is an ontological question"; "Responses and Replies", in *Danto and His Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 200. Joseph Margolis contends, in discussing Danto's theory, that "Danto believes that artworks do not exist, are not real entities, and therefore lack the intentionally complex properties we impute to 'them'"; "Farewell to Danto and Goodman", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38 (1998), 367. See also 369–372.

the bits stored on the original disk, because its copies are, though numerically different, identical in content with it.

In view of these considerations it seems that conceptual works of art do not have identities in anything like the sense that traditional works of art have. Danto does not provide sufficient justification for his contention that different interpretations of the same art object constitute different works of art. He commits himself to the problematic position that receivers can *create* a new work of art by interpreting an art object. Here one might point out that an art object presented by an artist as a work of art in an art exhibition normally achieves the status of arthood, although receivers do not interpret it. If they find the artist's work extremely boring and uninteresting, they may just walk by it without paying any attention to it. His work was a work of art before receivers interpreted it as a work of art. Danto's difficulties in keeping apart works of art and their interpretations are closely connected with his thesis that we create works of art by imposing interpretations on artefacts in which they are embodied. Interpretations of a work of art may change its status and significance *qua* artwork in the course of time, but the work of art itself, and not merely the object in which it is embodied, is the same in divergent interpretations. For instance, da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* has been interpreted differently in different ages, but it is still the same work of art. It is only in a metaphorical sense that we may say that each historical age has its own *Mona Lisa*, for what we mean is that this work of art has been interpreted differently in various historical ages.

IV.

In an attempt to explicate his view of the constitutive function of interpretations of conceptual works of art and their validation Danto makes a distinction between "surface" and "deep" interpretation. A surface interpretation is, he says, "what the audience grasps when it understands the work, and, so far as this interpretation answers to the artist's intention, to understand the work is to know what the intention was".[22] He maintains that "we cannot be deeply wrong if we suppose that the correct [surface] interpretation of object-as-artwork is the one which coincides most closely with the artist's own interpretation".[23] Danto thus assumes that we understand a work of art insofar as our surface interpretation is compatible with the artist's intention and interpretation of his work. He emphasises that it is sur-

22. Danto, "Responses and Replies", 201.

23. PDA, 44.

face interpretations that are constitutive of works of art, because they transform physical art objects into artworks.

Deep interpretations, in turn, are not constitutive of works of art and they may go beyond the artist's own interpretation. Danto claims that "[d]eep interpretation undertakes to tell us what is 'really' being said through what in fact is said".[24] According to him, "what deep interpretation undertakes is a kind of understanding of the complex consisting of representations together with the conduct they, at the surface level, enable us to understand".[25] In his view, we can give a deep interpretation of a work of art only if we are first able to provide a successful surface interpretation of this work, because a surface interpretation gives us the *interpretanda* for the former. He admits that it is possible to provide several acceptable deep interpretations of the same artwork, for "the work can mean many different things under deep interpretation without being rendered the least indeterminate under surface interpretation."[26]

Danto's distinction between surface and deep interpretation of works of art may be useful when we are assessing, say, competing and incompatible interpretations of literary works of art. However, as far as I can see, it does not help us to understand how it is possible to create conceptual works of art by placing a surface or deep interpretation on them. My objection is this. We cannot set non-arbitrary limits to interpretations of conceptual works of art whose material counterparts are perceptually indiscernible from artefacts of the same kind. Therefore, we cannot show that rival interpretations of conceptual works of art are "correct" or "incorrect", because there are no objective criteria by which we could judge them. That is, any interpretation of such artworks is as good as any rival interpretation. Since interpretations of conceptual works of art are arbitrary in the sense that they cannot be shown to be "correct" or "incorrect", this means that Danto's distinction between surface and deep interpretations is useless. If it is not possible to show whether rival interpretations of conceptual works of art are correct or incorrect, then it does not help much to call them "surface" or "deep" interpretations.

When we claim that one interpretation of a work of art is "correct" and that interpretations that are incompatible with it are "incorrect", we presuppose that it is possible to show, on some objective grounds, whether the propositions that interpreters assert about them are true or false. However, I would argue that this

24. Danto, "Responses and Replies", 202.

25. PDA, 52.

26. PDA, 66.

condition cannot be satisfied in those cases where receivers interpret conceptual works of art that are perceptually indistinguishable from artefacts of the same kind. Whatever art-relevant judgements receivers make about the artistic qualities and meaning of conceptual works of art, they cannot establish their truth-value by studying their invisible artistic qualities, or by studying the perceptible physical properties of the artefact in which the artwork under consideration is embodied. It makes sense to say that one interpretation of a work of conceptual art is better or more convincing than another interpretation of the same work, but we cannot show that one interpretation is "correct" and that rival, incompatible interpretations are "incorrect".

Assume that someone claims that what Duchamp wants to show with his work *Mona Lisa with Moustache* is that ready-mades are as good works of art as great works of traditional art. He tries to justify his claim that his interpretation of *Mona Lisa with Moustache* is "correct" by referring to the (invisible) artistic properties that he ascribes to it ("provoking", "irreverent" and "clever", etc.). Yet, his interpretation is arbitrary, for any interpretation of this work that makes it in some sense intelligible to us is equally acceptable. It is a striking feature of conceptual works of art that receivers can freely attribute any coherent set of artistic predicates to them. If a receiver renders a conceptual work of art intelligible to himself by ascribing a coherent set of artistic qualities to it, his ascription is equally acceptable as other receivers' coherent ascriptions of different artistic predicates to this work. Each interpreter can freely attribute any coherent set of artistic attributes to Duchamp's *Mona Lisa with Moustache* and claim that his interpretation is the "correct" one. We could not show, by studying the invisible artistic qualities or the perceptible properties of Duchamp's work that a receiver's interpretation of this work is the only "correct" one and that incompatible interpretations are "incorrect". Consequently, it is misleading to ask whether *Mona Lisa with Moustache* "really" has these artistic qualities or not, for it exists as a work of art and has its artistic qualities only in virtue of receivers' interpretations. In this respect there is an important difference between traditional works of art and ready-mades that are used as works of art. We ascribe such aesthetic predicates as "good", "beautiful" and "great" to Michelangelo's *David* and da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, because these works of art have these aesthetic qualities (as any competent spectator can see). By contrast, the invisible artistic qualities that we ascribe to conceptual works of art do not reside in the art objects, for they are inseparably part of our interpretations of these works.

Danto overlooks here the fact that artists often misinterpret their own works

of art, for instance because their works have meanings of which they are unaware. On his theory, if an artist maintains that an old Nokia cellular phone that he presents as a work of art in an art exhibition symbolises masculine power, his (surface) interpretation is correct if his claim is true and if his interpretation is internally coherent. However, the assertion "This old Nokia cellular phone symbolises, as a work of art, masculine power" cannot be tested empirically by studying the invisible artistic qualities that he ascribes to his artwork, or by studying the physical properties of the artefact in which it is embodied. A critical receiver might dismiss the artist's interpretation as "mistaken" and contend that the Nokia cellular phone symbolises, *qua* work of art, Finns' technological awareness. His interpretation could be as convincing as the artist's interpretation. The artist's interpretation of his artwork does not have any privileged status in regard to receivers' divergent interpretations of his work. Receivers could give a host of other equally convincing but incompatible interpretations of the cellular phone as a work of art that would render it intelligible in this artworld context. These considerations suggest that it is questionable, in many cases, whether we can talk about misinterpreting conceptual works of art that are perceptually indiscernible from the material artefact in which they are embodied.

V.

In conclusion, Danto believes that his art theory provides plausible answers to two closely related questions that he has posed for himself: (1) What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for arthood? (2) How can art objects that are embodied in artefacts that are perceptually indiscernible from artefacts of the same kind be transfigured into works of art? He admits that artists can create their works only if there are artistic or aesthetic practices and shared aesthetic concepts and rules that govern people's art-relevant demeanour. However, as I have tried to show in the foregoing, Danto's answers to the above questions are not very convincing, for his theory leads to many problems that he is unable to resolve satisfactorily.

Some of the conditions that Danto lays down for arthood are necessary ones (for instance, the artist intended to create a work of art when he made his artefact and his art object has artistic or aesthetic qualities), but they are not as such helpful when we try to distinguish artworks from similar artefacts that are non-art. There are at least four things that undermine Danto's attempt to define the necessary and sufficient conditions for arthood. First, he fails to reconcile his essentialist view of artmaking with his historicist conception of art as a practice. As an essentialist he insists that there are necessary and sufficient conditions for arthood

that all works of art have to satisfy regardless of time and place in order to count as art. Artistic qualities that we predicate about those artworks that are perceptually indistinguishable from ordinary artefacts of the same kind are constitutive of them in the sense that these works would not exist, *qua* works of art, if receivers did not attribute these qualities to them. On the other hand, as a historicist he claims that the criteria for arthood vary from one period or culture to another.[27] Unfortunately, he cannot endorse both the essentialist and the historicist view, because they exclude each other. If one endorses the historicist view that criteria for arthood vary with historical and cultural conditions, then one cannot consistently defend the essentialist conception that these criteria are always and everywhere the same.

Second, some of the difficulties that Danto meets in trying to define necessary and sufficient conditions for arthood arise, partly at least, from the institutional arrangements for artmaking in our culture. As I noted previously, it is fruitless to ask about an object that an artist presents as a work of art whether it really is a work of art or not, because any artefact or natural object can be *used* as a work of art within our western artworld. Instead we can ask about the artist's art object whether he uses it as a work of art or not in the artworld context involved. The answer to this question depends on the context in which that object is used as well as on its qualities. (The same object may be used for non-artistic purposes in other cultural contexts.) Such institutional artworld contexts as modern art museums play an important role in artmaking: whatever objects artists present there as works of art, they normally achieve the status of arthood regardless of whether they have any appreciatable artistic or aesthetic qualities or not. Their status as works of art does not depend on whether receivers interpret them as works of art or not as long as they are treated as art within the artworld. Yet, they may lose their status of arthood outside the artworld and get lost among ordinary mere real things of the same kind. Thus, a snow shovel that an artist once used as a work of art loses its status of arthood outside the artworld and becomes just an ordinary artefact when it is used for shovelling snow.

27. Danto remarks that "[a]s an essentialist in philosophy I am committed to the view that art is always the same – that there are conditions necessary and sufficient for something to be an artwork invariantly as to time and place. But as an historicist I am committed to the view that what is a work of art at one time cannot be one at another"; "From Aesthetics to Art Criticism and Back", in *Practical Aesthetics in Practice and Theory*, XIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics, Lahti, Finland, August 1–5 1995. Proceedings III, ed. Martti Honkanen (Saarijärvi: University of Helsinki, 1997), 68.

Third, Danto fails to clarify the relation between artistic qualities that we attribute to conceptual works of art and aesthetic qualities that we ascribe to traditional works of art. On the one hand, he assumes that conceptual works of art have only artistic, non-aesthetic qualities. On the other hand, he nevertheless presupposes in his discussion that some of the artistic properties that we ascribe to such artworks may be aesthetic qualities. It seems that whatever artistic qualities readymades have as works of art it is we who "create" them by ascribing a set of artistic predicates to them.

Fourth, Danto is unable to show how we can transfigure art objects, which are perceptually indiscernible from ordinary artefacts of the same kind, into works of art by interpreting them. His account of the constitutive role of interpretations is problematic, because he does not explain how we can "constitute" such works of art by imposing an interpretation on them. His standpoint is defensible, if he means to say that our interpretations are constitutive of conceptual works of art in the sense that they would not exist as works of art if we did not ascribe a set of artistic (or aesthetic) qualities to them. However, as I have tried to show above, it is problematic to claim, as Danto does, that interpretations of conceptual works of art can be "correct" or "incorrect", because we cannot test them on empirical grounds. Receivers can freely ascribe any coherent set of artistic qualities to them in order to render them intelligible as artworks in the artworld context involved.[28]

28. I am indebted to Carola Sandbacka and Grenville Wall for their useful comments on an earlier version of my paper.