
Warhol's Discovery and Danto's Philosophical Transfiguration

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Apparently Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* plays a pivotal role in Arthur Danto's philosophy of art. In this paper I want to examine two of Danto's theses regarding Warhol's *Brillo Box*:

(I) It is to the credit of Andy Warhol to have discovered that the difference between artworks and mere real things is not a perceptual difference.¹ The evidence for this discovery is Warhol's *Brillo Box* (AEA, 35). What makes an object a work of art is its historical context (AEA, ch. 11).

(II) Warhol's *Brillo Box* marks the end of the art-theoretical attempt to answer the question "what is art?" by reference to essential physical qualities; it marks the beginning of the "age of pluralism" (AEA, 37) which concerns the borderline between art and reality (AEA, 113).

Thesis (I) is historically false. Granted that mere real things and artworks can be perceptually identical, Duchamp created such artworks long before Warhol did. Moreover, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* were made of plywood rather than cardboard. Plywood boxes are perceptually different from cardboard boxes.

Let us abstract from this historical point and assume that Danto's first thesis is correct. I shall leave the arena of history and move to the arena of fiction or philosophy and assume that Warhol displayed original Brillo boxes. There are no reasons for claiming that the difference between artworks and mere real things is not a perceptual difference. For my perception of Brillo boxes in the Stable Gallery certainly differs from my perception of Brillo Boxes in a supermarket. I therefore propose to modify thesis (I) along the following lines: If we replaced Brillo boxes in the gallery with type-identical boxes from the supermarket, the aesthetical and theoretical features of the *Brillo Box* would remain the same.²

1. See Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) [AEA], 125.

The modified thesis (I) does not permit Danto's conclusion that aesthetics—conceived as a theory of perception—becomes obsolete. *Brillo Box* as an artwork consists of a Brillo box and its mode of presentation. Let us assume that it is the mode of presentation which constitutes an artwork.³ In this case we could replace the Brillo boxes with type-identical boxes, without altering the “aesthetic truth” of the *Brillo Box*. And the same holds on Picasso's *Bull head*; for we could just as well replace Picasso's bicycle saddle with another saddle of the same type.

A possible objection to my view that it is the mode of presentation which distinguishes Brillo boxes in the supermarket from *Brillo Box* is that necessary and sufficient conditions for modes of presentation cannot be specified. However, I do not think this is a serious objection, since it can be made against any attempt to define art.

Let us consider another objection to the view that it is the mode of presentation that constitutes an artwork. At the beginning of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*⁴ Danto invites us to imagine a museum which displays eight red squares with no perceptual differences, but which are in fact seven different pictures painted by different painters plus a red grounded canvas. What he wants to show is that perceptual differences among the eight red squares neither explain which of them are the artworks nor do they determine the qualitative identity of the seven works. Danto argues that we cannot discriminate the red canvas from the depiction of the red table cloth and from the minimalist painting entitled *Red Square* by means of perception alone.

My first problem with Danto's example is this: it is not clear how a visitor in the imaginary museum could know which of the eight squares he is facing. How could he discriminate the squares, if not by their visible features? We cannot say that he discriminates them by the different gesture of painting or by differences in the material of colour (acrylic, oil or tempera). For all differences of this kind are perceptual and the history of painting demonstrates the profound importance of such features. One could not, for instance, imagine the *Hesperiden* by Hans von Marées painted in water colours. To preserve the power of Danto's example we must assume that even under ideal perceptual circumstances the eight squares are

2. The thesis modified in this way is called the *Indiscernibility Thesis*.

3. Consider the first exhibition of some of Duchamp's ready-mades in the United States. The audience did not recognize that the *Trap* was a sculpture.

4. Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

indiscriminable. Take, for example, the *Black Square on White Ground* by Malevitch or a black square picture by Ad Reinhardt. It is easy for a connoisseur to distinguish between pictures, but to the layman they look alike.

I don't want to deny the *philosophical* point of Danto's museum-example but I want to emphasize its extreme artificiality. Let us go back to the question raised above: How do we distinguish between the squares, if not by their perceptual features? One possibility is that under every red square there is a small label indicating the artist and title. Even though we *could* in this case, distinguish the squares, this museum would not be of any interest. The number of visitors would be low and the museum shop would have to be subsidized. From an art-historical and aesthetical point of view this museum is pointless. There is no reason for a visitor to see more than one of the exhibited pictures since none is any different from any other. When a visitor has seen one square he has, in a sense, seen them all. There is no reason to envy the museum guides. They may confine themselves to showing just one picture. Moreover, when standing in front of a school class they have a hard time justifying the different interpretations. Why is the one painting a depiction of a landscape and the other an abstract painting? No feature of the red square could help. At best, the guide could tell the class the different uses of red squares in art history and how their meaning changed. But there are no good reasons to do this in a museum rather than in a classroom setting.

Danto's museum scenario is too unrealistic to be convincing. Such a museum cannot be found in the actual artworld which is part of our *Lebensform*. It might be objected that Appropriation-Art and the work of Elaine Sturtevant do provide actual counterparts to Danto's museum scenario. Let us imagine a mini-museum with just three objects on display. The first object is a bottle rack, the second is a *Bottle Rack* by Duchamp, and the third object is a *Bottle Rack* by Mike Bidlo. These objects are perceptually indistinguishable and we know this. We have seen at least one of the bottle racks and know every relevant feature of it. We are not interested in the mode of presentation of the bottle racks.

Moreover, we do not value one bottle rack more than another just because it is an original Duchamp or Bidlo. We are interested in art and not in relics. Given this scenario, I claim, there is no art-theoretical or aesthetical reason to visit the mini-museum. It could, of course, be interesting to engage in a conversation on bottle racks and ready-mades and to talk about ontological problems which arise because of the way we conceive of artworks. But to examine a bottle rack with the same aesthetical considerations as when we examine a Ryman or Titian would run counter to the intentions of ready-made artists. And if we focus on the philosoph-

ical messages of ready-mades, they lose all aesthetical qualities and there is then no reason to look for interesting perceivable features. The same applies to works of Appropriation-Art.

We might look at a picture by Mike Bidlo and ask ourselves whether it is a *good* copy or not. The question of whether it is a copy or a new original is an interesting philosophical issue, but belongs to “armchair philosophy” and has no place in our ordinary interactions with art and museums. It seems to me that when I have seen one picture by Bidlo I have seen them all. This is why Appropriation-Art is a philosophical aperçu rather than a important artistic position. Once the audience has discovered the philosophical point, the art vanishes into thin air. Analogously, it is not surprising that the famous *Don Quixote* by Pierre Menard only has fictional reality (in the story of Borges).

What I want to suggest is that artworks which are concerned *only* with the limits of art are aesthetically boring. The difference between mere real things and artwork is, of course, a central theme in contemporary art theory, but we should not infer, like Danto, that this question sheds light on the essence of contemporary art.

Moreover, I think that Danto’s argument is at best inconclusive as support for the claim that this question is relevant only for *contemporary* art. The very question is equally significant for the so-called unfinished sculptures of Michelangelo, the water paintings of Turner, the ready-mades of Duchamp, and the works of Dada. All of these works represent the attempt to broaden the pale of art and, furthermore, they show that this attempt is not only a romantic feature of artists, but a necessary condition of art. I don’t want to deny that the pale of art has undergone changes since Michelangelo’s time, but the broadening of the pale is as old as art itself. It is to Kant’s credit to have discovered that the broadening of the pale of art is a necessary condition of art. He has shown that the violation of existing artistic rules and the creation of new ones is the privilege of the genius, i.e. the artist.⁵ The advantage of Kant’s approach is that he doesn’t use this observation to develop a teleological metaphysics of art.

Kant’s idea can be integrated into the kind of institutionalism developed in Stephen Davies’ *Definitions of Art*.⁶ This kind of institutionalism is compatible with Wölfflin’s view that not everything is possible at any time: “Every artist finds cer-

5. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) [CJ], § 49.

6. Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art* (London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

tain visual possibilities before him, to which he is bound" so that "even the most original talent cannot proceed beyond certain limits which are fixed for it by the date of its birth".⁷ The interesting thing about this passage is that Wölfflin uses Kant's notion of "original talent" which is synonymous with "genius" (CJ, § 47). According to Kant, the genius cannot exist without a historical framework, since any change of artistic rules presupposes a given system of such rules. The work of genius is not only a "reaction against his predecessors" (AEA, 8) but sets an example for the followers, i.e. a *school*. According to Kant, a genius without a school is impossible (see CJ, § 49) for he would not create art. Institutionalism with a Kantian flavour is a more promising candidate for a theory of the essence of art than a teleological narrative à la Hegel.

Let us return to our mini-museum. Institutionalism in the manner sketched above provides an answer to the question why the three bottle racks differ aesthetically and art-theoretically. To say why two of the bottle racks are artworks while the third one is not, we must describe the change in artistic rules brought about by Duchamp and Bidlo and thereby refer to the historical frameworks of these works. There is no reason to maintain that Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* is a more fascinating artwork and a greater discovery than a still life by Matisse. We could say that the *Bottle Rack* is of greater historical significance than a still life by Matisse. (A way to spell out historical significance is to employ Nelson Goodman's concepts of entrenchment and projectibility).⁸ Maybe the *Bottle Rack* is richer in connotation and reference and maybe it exemplifies more important attributes than a still life by Matisse. To discern these features we must know the oeuvre of the artist in question. For it is possible that one attribute is significant with respect to Bidlo's *Bottle Rack* but not with respect to that of Duchamp. It is, for instance, unimportant for Bidlo's *Bottle Rack* that it is an article of daily use. But it is important that Bidlo's *Bottle Rack* is easily mistaken for a crucial artwork of our century, namely the *Bottle Rack* by Duchamp. It is not an important feature of Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* that it can be easily mistaken for another artwork. In the case of Duchamp it is important that his *Bottle Rack* may be confused with an article for daily use. It is notable, however that both features are significant and also perceivable. Perceptually, most of Bidlo's works are similar to famous works of art, while Duchamp's ready-mades are perceptually similar to mere real things. I grant

7. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Basel: Schwabe 1991), 24.

8. See Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1988), 158-160.

that an “innocent eye” may not perceive these features, for sometimes perception requires background knowledge. To perceive and/or to identify a bottle rack is no more mysterious than to perceive and/or to identify the *Brillo Box*. The perception and/or identification of Brillo boxes in a supermarket equally presupposes background knowledge.⁹ The differences between concepts of perception, recognition and identification do not line up neatly with those between artworks, pictures,¹⁰ philosophical reflections and mere real things.

9. In this context we might be reminded of a passage in Goodman's *Languages of Art* [1968], 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976): “The eye comes always ancient to its work. [...] It functions not as an instrument self-powered and alone, but as a dutiful member of a complex and capricious organism. Not only how but what it sees is regulated by need and prejudice. It selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyzes, constructs” (p. 7).

10. This critique of Danto's philosophy of art also applies to Wollheim's theory of pictures. Wollheim has the following idea: When an observer *understands* a picture he must *see* the mere real thing and he must see the subject of the picture. Wollheim calls this the *twofoldness constraint*. Now the problem is how to explain the two meanings of to “see”. A common answer is that the former use of “see” means mere perception while the latter use means something like recognition. However, this response confuses physiological with philosophical explanations. Just as in the case of the *Brillo Box*, an “innocent eye” cannot see a mere real thing as a mere real thing, for this would also require cognitive faculties.