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Arthur Danto's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. A Philosophy of Art* (1981)

Hans Maes & Kalle Puolakka

For the final version, see G. Pooke & D. Newall, *Fifty Key Texts in Art History*, London, Routledge, pp. 161-164.

The Transfiguration of the Commonplace is generally considered one of the most important works of philosophical aesthetics of the 20th century. In this book, Arthur Danto not only develops a methodology that has proven very influential (his so-called method of indiscernibles), but he also makes a substantial and original contribution to a wide range of philosophical debates, including those focusing on the nature of depiction, artistic interpretation, the notion of style, and most notably, the definition of art. While each of these topics will be of interest to the art historian who wishes to reflect on their own discipline, there are (at least) three additional reasons why this philosophical milestone deserves a broad cross-disciplinary readership.

First, Danto's philosophy of art is deeply historicist in that he emphasises and builds upon the fundamental contextual and historical nature of art. Second, he presents a wealth of examples, drawn from both traditional and contemporary art, to illustrate and corroborate his theories, thereby manifesting his profound engagement with, and knowledge of, the history of art and the world of contemporary art. Third, Danto is an exceptionally gifted writer making *The Transfiguration* one of those rare philosophical interventions that is thoroughly engaging for non-philosophers and philosophers alike. It is indicative that, shortly after publishing *The Transfiguration*, Danto became a successful and celebrated art critic.

Andy Warhol's transfiguration of a commonplace 'Brillo Box' into a work of art, in 1964, was a moment of revelation for Arthur Danto. It convinced him that a mere reliance on perceptual or aesthetic features is insufficient to separate artworks from other worldly objects, or from what Danto calls 'mere real things' (Danto 1981: *passim*). As such, Warhol's *Brillo Box* revealed the appropriate form for the philosophical question regarding the definition of art, namely: what distinguishes a work of art from a 'mere real thing' when they are visually indiscernible from one another? This is the issue of indiscernibles – a problem that has various guises and that arises, according to Danto, in every area of philosophy. Philosophy, he argues, addresses its subject matter (knowledge, action, art, morality, etc.) by seeking the conditions that make the things under scrutiny the kinds of things they are. Danto believes that the appropriate way of seeking these conditions is to examine how the thing, whose essence it is the task of philosophy to reveal, differs from an object or event that is perceptually indiscernible from it. Therefore, one will find the definition of action by considering how an action differs from a visually indiscernible bodily movement, like a tick or a spasm. Similarly, one will arrive at the definition of art by considering the distinction between an artwork and its visually indiscernible counterpart.

The notion of the 'art world' is one of the key elements in Danto's explanation of the distinction between artworks and real things. Objects are art not because of some

intrinsic perceptual quality they possess, but by being connected to the theoretical atmosphere of the art world. In the end, it is a theory of art that takes Warhol's *Brillo Box* up into the world of art and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is. The crucial role that is assigned to a broad, theoretically informed art world ties in significantly with another central feature of *The Transfiguration* – its emphasis on the contextual and historical nature of art. For Danto, art is essentially a historical undertaking, in the sense that there are historical constraints on what sorts of objects can be considered art at given historical moments. This is an aspect of art that, in Danto's opinion, receives its most illuminating expression in Heinrich Wölflin's claim that 'not everything is possible at every time' (Danto 1981: 44). For example, the equivalent of Warhol's *Brillo Box* could not have been an artwork in 15th century Florence, since a certain kind of historical development in the theoretical atmosphere of the art world was needed before an object of that kind could be considered a proper candidate for art-status.

Danto's focus on the historical and contextual nature of art has had a decisive and lasting impact on the way the definition of art has been approached in 20th century aesthetics. Within this field it became widely accepted that a definition of art could not be built on formal or intrinsic perceptual qualities alone, and that historical and contextual factors had to be incorporated. George Dickie in particular was inspired by Danto's ideas and he developed his own Institutional Theory of Art on the basis of his reading of Danto's notion of the art world. However, Danto has repeatedly distanced himself from Dickie's account, and in the introduction of *The Transfiguration*, one finds some sarcastic comments on Dickie's Institutional definition of art. One of the most striking inadequacies of the latter, according to Danto, is precisely its lack of historical depth.

Danto's conception of art's historical nature is also evident in the view of interpretation he formulates in *The Transfiguration*. The idea that not everything is possible at every time does not merely characterise the artist's condition, but it extends to concern the interpretation of art as well. The theoretical atmosphere of the art world determines what sorts of meanings artworks may embody at given contexts. Since the possible meanings artworks may possess are historically conditioned in this way, there are also constraints on interpretations, which are supposed to track what those meanings are.

While *The Transfiguration* has become strongly associated with works of conceptual art, it is important to observe that Danto does not consider the distinction between artworks and real things solely by way of discussing the differences between conceptual artworks and their real world indiscernible counterparts. The problem of indiscernibles is also evident in Danto's account of the characteristic features of an artwork's manner of representing, which he contrasts with the form of representation typical of maps and diagrams. In the final and seventh chapter of *The Transfiguration*, Danto analyses the concepts of metaphor, expression, and style in order to explain how a work of art's manner of representing is not transparent with respect to its content (as is the case with maps, diagrams and other more 'mundane' vehicles of representation). A work of art always expresses something about its content by way of showing it in a certain light. Unlike representations attempting a full transparency, works of art invoke in their viewers a particular attitude towards the content of representation. Therefore, it is not surprising that Danto compares the

effective characteristic of art's representational impact to the powers of rhetoric, with metaphor as one of its most important devices.

Style, according to Danto, is the artist's way of seeing. As he puts it in a discussion of Giotto's frescoes: 'what I call 'style' must have been less what Giotto saw than the way he saw it...' (Danto 1981: 162). Style is often something which the artist, together with the contemporary audience, may be unaware of and which only becomes perceptible with the passage of time. Again, Danto illuminates this aspect of style by referring to Giotto. He writes: 'I have little doubt that the contemporaries of Giotto, astounded at the realism of his paintings, should have seen men and women and angels in those paintings and *not* a way seeing men and women and angels which we now recognise as Giotto's way of seeing...' (Danto 1981: 42-43).

In his more recent work, *The Abuse of Beauty* (2003), Danto observes that together with *The Transfiguration* and *After the End of Art* (1997), *The Abuse of Beauty* forms a trilogy. In the first work, he outlines a general philosophical theory of art, in the second an ambitious philosophy of art history, and in *The Abuse of Beauty* a theory of aesthetics (Danto 2003: 14). This trilogy makes up one of the most ambitious philosophical accounts of art within any strand of contemporary aesthetics. Its starting point, however, is remarkably simple. It all begins with the question how a work of art differs from its visually indiscernible counterpart. The multifarious and wide-ranging ideas Danto develops in *The Transfiguration* just show how far such a seemingly simple question can carry.

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