

# Contemporary Aesthetics

---

*Volume 6 (2008)*

---

2008

## Not Just Mere Things

Thomas E. Wartenberg

*Mount Holyoke College*, [twartenb@mtholyoke.edu](mailto:twartenb@mtholyoke.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts\\_contempaesthetics](https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics)

 Part of the [Esthetics Commons](#)

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts Division at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Aesthetics by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact [mpompeli@risd.edu](mailto:mpompeli@risd.edu).

[About CA](#)

[Journal](#)

[Contact CA](#)

[Links](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Search Journal](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Permission to Reprint](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Publisher](#)

[Webmaster](#)

## Not Just Mere Things

Thomas E. Wartenberg

### Abstract

This paper examines Arthur Danto's contention, put forward in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, that at a certain point in its history art becomes philosophy. The similarities and differences between Danto's view and the Hegelian one from which it is derived are examined. Using Danto's favorite example of a philosophical work of art, Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* (1965), it is argued that a more plausible interpretation of the meaning of the work undermines Danto's claims about art's transformation into philosophy.

### Key Words

art, aesthetics, definition of art, meaning, interpretation, philosophy

I am honored to be a part of this Symposium to honor the 25th anniversary of the publication of Arthur Danto's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.<sup>[1]</sup> I recall reading the book for the first time in the spring of 1986 when I was on sabbatical in Munich writing a book on social power. I was stunned when I first read *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* and that impression has only deepened when I returned to it, as I have numerous times, in the intervening years. Here is a short list of some of the things about the book that draw me to it: Danto's witty and pithy writing style; his marvelous interpretation of works of art, interpretations that allow me to understand previously unintelligible works; his bold attempt to develop a definition of art that could withstand the many counterexamples that had developed over the years; his enlightening interpretations of philosophers of art, from Aristotle to Nietzsche and from Bell to Weitz, that treat them as partners in a grand conversation about art.

Each of these features of the book, and many others besides, deserves to be discussed at length and some of them will be by the papers that follow mine in this symposium. But the one on which I shall focus is a claim that Danto makes about the relationship between art and philosophy that has always fascinated me. In the third chapter of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* entitled "Philosophy and Art," Danto asserts that art has "itself evolved in such a way that the philosophical question of its status has almost become the very essence of art itself. . . ." And he goes on to cite Hegel, claiming that "art virtually exemplifies Hegel's teaching about history, according to which spirit is destined to become conscious of itself." (TCP, 56) Although the most familiar aspect of these claims is Danto's embrace of Hegel's thesis of the end of art, they also impress upon us the question of how we are to distinguish art from its own philosophy, if at all, given the fact that art itself has come to pose the philosophical question about its nature. Can we say that, on Danto's view, art becomes philosophy at a certain point in its development?

As he makes clear in making his claim about art's achievement of self-consciousness or self-referentiality, Danto sees himself following in Hegel's big, if somewhat ungainly footsteps. But Hegel's claim about art differs from Danto's in some significant respects. A first difference has to do with the subject-matter of art. For Hegel, art's subject is reality as such. In its own unique way, art attempts to express the truths about reality that are also the subject-matter of religion and philosophy, the other two forms of absolute knowledge. So, for example, Hegel thinks that the narrative of Sophocles' *Antigone* — a paradigmatic work of art

from his point of view — highlights the contradictions in ancient Greek society that led to its downfall and supersession by Rome, viz. its inability to reconcile the demands of the individual with those of society. The play personifies two abstract — and, hence, philosophical — principles of right in Creon (universality) and Antigone (individuality), using the story of the characters' tragic clash to demonstrate the inevitable conflict between the principles as they are embodied in Greek society.

But art for Danto, at least at the point where it becomes self-conscious, is less concerned with reality as such than it is with its own nature. Roy Lichtenstein's *Brushstroke* paintings of the late 1960's, for example, take as their subject-matter brushstrokes, Danto tells us, an obvious element of all painting and, especially, abstract expressionism, the object of Lichtenstein's critique. (TCP, 107 ff.) So in spite of sharing a cognitive orientation towards art, Danto and Hegel differ significantly on what art is about.

Part of the explanation of this difference between Danto's and Hegel's views is the differing artistic context in which they articulated their two theories of art's nature. Writing in the first decades of the nineteenth century, Hegel was a contemporary of the Romantic art movement. He saw this as the latest, and the last, phase of art's historical development. It boggles the mind to wonder what Hegel would have made of much modern and contemporary art. For Danto, on the other hand, it is precisely the works of post-World War II American art that clearly expose the possibility of art becoming philosophy. And, as is well-known, the artist who develops the philosophical potential of art, according to Danto, is Andy Warhol.<sup>[2]</sup> So if Danto thinks that art became philosophy at a certain point in its history, we would expect him to point to Warhol as the artist who best exemplifies this development. And it is therefore no surprise to discover an article of his entitled, "The Philosopher as Andy Warhol."<sup>[3]</sup> But we need to be cautious in attributing too much significance to the article's title, since Danto takes it from the ironic one Warhol gave his own 1975 book, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*.<sup>[4]</sup>

Let's spend a moment, then, considering how Danto characterizes the philosophical significance of Warhol's art in that 1999 essay. "Since at least Warhol's exhibition of Brillo (and other) cartons at the Stable Gallery on East 74th Street in Manhattan in the spring of 1964," he begins, "I have felt him to possess a philosophical intelligence of an intoxicatingly high order." [PAW 62] He goes on to say, "I believe it was among Warhol's chief philosophical contributions to the history of art that he brought artistic practice to a level of philosophical self-consciousness never before attained." [PAW 63] There follows an approving reference to Hegel's identification of art and philosophy as two forms of absolute spirit. And Danto then identifies his project in the essay with the following words: "to reveal some fragments of the philosophical structure of Warhol's art." [PAW 63] So if Warhol's art is not itself philosophy, it does have, at a minimum according to Danto, philosophical structure and it also makes a philosophical contribution. I take this to mean that, while still retaining their identity as works of art, Warhol's art—or, at least, some of it—is also philosophy.

So let's consider Danto's favorite example of a philosophical work of art, Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* of 1965. The work consists of a wooden box that is painted with red, white, and blue silkscreen paint so as to appear identical to the cardboard cartons in which boxes of Brillo pads were shipped to grocery stores in the early 1960s. (See illustration below.)



Why might Danto think that this apparently simple work is a paradigmatic instance of philosophy done in art? I think that Danto has two very different reasons for making this claim. The first is that it is a counterexample to all the theories of art that preceded its creation. None of the main contenders in the marketplace for an adequate definition of art — such as those that posit art as imitation, expression, significant form, etc. — can account for *Brillo Box* being the work of art that Danto takes it to be.<sup>[5]</sup> The reason for this is that, at the time the work was made, there existed myriad other objects that were perceptually identical with *Brillo Box* that were not works of art: namely, those cartons containing the boxes of Brillo pads then in the storage rooms of countless supermarkets and grocery stores across the U.S. Since each of these shared all of *Brillo Box*'s perceptual properties, *Brillo Box*'s status as a work of art could not be attributed to its possession of the very properties that it shares with those more mundane cartons. So *Brillo Box* counts as philosophy in the first instance, according to Danto, because its dramatization of the problem of perceptual indistinguishability make it a counterexample to the major theories of art that existed prior to its creation.

This allows us to recognize a second respect in which Danto's view differs from Hegel's: Danto posits *Brillo Box* as itself a philosophical counterexample, whereas Hegel thinks art requires philosophical supplementation to adequately establish its claims. Danto saw Warhol as making a philosophical counterexample by means of a work of art — *Brillo Box* — one that did not need Danto's subsequent commentary to make its point. It is for this reason that he speaks in the essay of Warhol as making a philosophical contribution to art. Although Hegel thinks of both art and philosophy as forms of absolute spirit and, as such, capable of expressing the same truths, he thinks that they do so in different ways, with art needing philosophy to put its images into the form proper for philosophical thinking, viz. concepts. Because art is, according to Hegel, pictorial thinking, it must be supplemented by philosophy proper through conceptual means alone. So whereas Hegel claimed that art's sensuous form required the conceptual supplementation contributed by its philosophical interpreters, Danto's initial point about *Brillo Box* is that it is an art object that we might be tempted to call a work of philosophy in

artistic form. So on Danto's view, Warhol's piece does not suffer from the lack Hegel characterized all art as having—the "impurity" of its content—one that Hegel thought meant that art required supplementation by philosophy proper in order for truth to be adequately grasped.

As I have indicated, there is a second reason why Danto takes *Brillo Box* to count as philosophy, one that allies his view more closely to Hegel's. He thinks that *Brillo Box* was not only a counterexample to these contending definitions of art but that it also formulated a criterion that a successful definition of art would have to satisfy. Although the question of what makes a work of art a distinctive type of entity had long been discussed by philosophers of art, Danto views Warhol's work as making philosophers accept a subtle shift in how the question had to be posed. After *Brillo Box*, it became clear that a definition of art, if it was to distinguish works of art from the rest of reality, had to contend with, to use Danto's term, "mere things" from which the artwork was visually indistinguishable. And for this reason Danto thinks that *Brillo Box* changed the way in which the basic question about the ontology of works of art is formulated. Subsequent to Warhol, philosophers cannot just ask what makes something a work of art, but need to ask about works that have perceptually identical counterparts that are not works of art why is *that* — the artwork — a work of art, when *that* — the counterpart — is not. This is a new formulation of the traditional question in the philosophy of art I take Danto to be asserting because, among other things, it implicitly rules out certain answers: those that take the distinction between art and non-art to be based upon perceptual criteria. So holding that artworks have special perceptual properties such as that of possessing significant form gets ruled out of court as a definition of art, for such a view cannot successfully address the reason why perceptually identical counterparts to genuine works of art do not count as themselves art. Art is not, as Danto put it, something that the eye can descry. And it is this that Warhol's work established.

Why Danto takes this to be an important advance in the discussion of what makes something a work of art can be seen in his rejection of the then-popular Wittgenstein answer to the question. The Wittgensteinian argues that the philosophical attempt to find some property in virtue of which works of art can be distinguished from everything else in the world rests upon a mistake, as is evident in the rhetorical question that forms the title of William Kennick's influential essay, "Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?"<sup>[6]</sup> According to Kennick, traditional philosophy of art's mistake was the assumption that a concept like art could be defined by specifying a set of necessary and sufficient criteria that anything would have to satisfy in order to count as an instance of the concept. To use the example made famous by W.V.O. Quine, on this view of concepts, "bachelor" is defined by two criteria each of which is singly necessary and both of which are jointly sufficient for something to count as a bachelor: "being male" and "being unmarried." But Wittgenstein had showed, according to Kennick and others, that this understanding of concepts (or words) was a mistake. Through his notion of a language-game, Wittgenstein had established that the words of a language function through overlapping similarities and differences, much like that of a family. To be a member of a family, one does not have to possess any specific property, like being red-headed or pug-nosed, for the properties that characterize a family shift as one views different members of the group.

To show the applicability of this view of concepts (language) to "art," Kennick asked us to envision a warehouse filled with both art objects and, to use Danto's terminology, mere things. Kennick claimed that the ordinary person — much championed by Wittgensteinians — would have

no trouble picking out all and only the art objects in the warehouse, even though she was unable to define 'art.' But Warhol's art, according to Danto, called into question exactly what Kennick took to be unproblematic: our ability to distinguish art objects from other things based solely on their appearances. How would the ordinary person, faced with *Brillo Box* and its perceptually-identical counterpart, decide whether to remove one of the works, both, or neither? Clearly, not by looking at them, for there is no difference to be discerned between their visual appearances. Whatever the difference between them is, it cannot lie in something that can be seen from a simple inspection of them. Warhol's achievement in *Brillo Box* was to show that the standard ways of posing the question of what makes something a work of art prior to Warhol are inadequate, that the question has to be raised in a philosophically more perspicuous manner so as to be able to take account of the problem of perceptually identical counterparts.

It is my contention that Danto's articulation of this second aspect of the philosophical significance of *Brillo Box* puts him much closer to Hegel. For it becomes clear that Danto thinks that one reason that *Brillo Box* should be accorded artistic status is his own philosophical interpretation of it that shows what its philosophical significance is. Once we realize that Danto himself provides the purely conceptual version of the claim that he thinks Warhol made visually with *Brillo Box*, namely, that a successful definition of art would have to explain why this object is a work of art while its counterparts in the grocery storerooms are not, it becomes harder to distinguish Danto's view from Hegel's. Thus philosophy, on this interpretation of Danto's claims, follows on the heels of art, providing proper conceptual form for the view that had already been made, albeit visually, by the artwork itself. And as we have seen, this is precisely the view that Hegel himself adopts in calling for philosophy's supplementation of art.

So, enlightened by *Brillo Box* on the proper form of the question about art's nature, Danto thought himself able to articulate in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, if not a full-blown definition of art, some necessary criteria for a thing's being a work of art. Starting with the insight that a work of art, unlike a "mere thing," has to be *about* something, Danto developed a range of more specific characterizations of the *aboutness* of artworks that would, he hoped, account for the artistic status of *Brillo Box*.<sup>[7]</sup> In particular, he argued that works of art are distinguished from their more mundane counterparts by the possession of meaning, a feature that those things are said to lack. And he asserted that we should understand an artwork's possession of meaning on the model of a metaphor, for they also had cognitive elements that could not be reduced to simpler forms of meaning.

At this point, I want to raise the question of whether Danto's account of the distinction between works of art and *mere* things is adequate to the task of distinguishing artworks from other types of existing entities. Part of the problem here is understanding exactly what he means by a "mere thing." It is worth pausing to note how difficult it is to explicate this concept. Part of the rhetorical force this notion has in Danto's writing is the deflationary force of the "mere." Works of art acquire a certain elevated status when all the other "things" from which they need to be distinguished are referred to as "mere." But what exactly are we to understand by this "mere"? In what does the *mereness* of a "mere thing" consist? A first attempt might be to identify it with what other philosophers have called "mid-sized physical objects," among which they include things like tables and apples. The trouble is that there are other types of things in the world besides such mid-sized physical objects and artworks, in particular other types of representations. An adequate

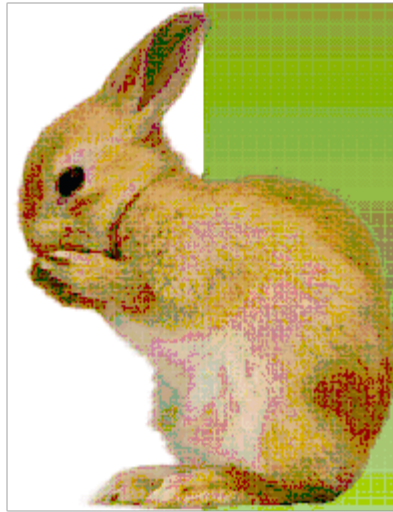
definition of art needs not only to distinguish artworks from such apparently obvious instances of non-art as tables and apples, but it also needs to distinguish them from other types of representations such as newspapers stories and sociological treatises. This is why Danto spends a great deal of effort in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* distinguishing works of art from other species of representation, such as political tracts and even philosophical essays. He will be able to offer an adequate definition of art (or, more modestly, a set of necessary criteria for something being art) only if he can show that it was capable of more than just distinguishing works of art from mere things, though that task was certainly essential to finding an adequate definition of art.

This helps us understand the presence of one of the fascinating aspects of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*: the parallel that Danto draws in it between a variety of different representational realms and what he calls their material counterparts. These include: inscriptions and words, bodies and minds, bodily movements and actions, mere things and works of art. In each case, Danto claims that an intentional notion supervenes upon a material base. Thus, for example, mere marks on a piece of paper don't constitute a word, though they are, to be sure, its *material counterpart*. Words only exist once we enter the realm of meanings, an intentional one, and it is this realm that can, to use Danto's pregnant phrase, transfigure mere marks on a surface into meaningful elements in a linguistic system. And similarly for each of the pairs of terms listed above: the former are transformed into the latter when they take their rightful place within an intentional system of meanings.

The synoptic and systematic point of view that we can see Danto mobilizing here is one of the real virtues of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, for it helps us see why the philosophy of art is more than a marginal field in the domain of philosophy, despite that not being the majority view in the philosophical profession these days. (The recently published *Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy*, to cite the latest outrage, lacks a section on aesthetics, though it claims to "give readers a sense of the range and excitement of contemporary analytic philosophy [excluding formal logic]."[\[8\]](#)) Indeed, at times Danto suggests that questions about art and its distinction from philosophy lie at the very root of the philosophical enterprise itself, as if philosophy had to defend itself against art's claims to a legitimacy that philosophy desired to take for itself alone.[\[9\]](#)

So there is a clear philosophical explanation for Danto's concern with representational domains other than that of art: the need to develop an account of art that distinguishes it from them. But there are other supplementary explanations that cast additional light on the book and its philosophical significance.

At the time Danto wrote the book, not only were Wittgenstein accounts of meaning widely accepted, as we have seen in Kennick's application of them to the issue of defining art, but the ideas of W.V.O. Quine were also in their ascendancy. Among Quine's many significant claims, the one that is relevant here is his attack on the traditional notion of (linguistic) meaning. After Frege, philosophers had assumed that language was to be understood as a system in which words had both what Frege termed "meaning" (*Sinn*) and "reference" (*Bedeutung*). The reference of a word is, quite simply, the non-linguistic item that the word picks out. Thus, the reference of the word "rabbit" is the cute, furry creature that we all take the word to apply to.



According to Frege, a word's meaning is that which enables us to pick out its reference. Although there had been a tendency to think of meanings as mental pictures, Frege's point is that this is too graphic a way of understanding them. But what exactly his alternative account was is not easy to say. Suffice it to say for our purposes here, there was a great deal of discussion of what exactly a Fregean meaning was, whether it was purely mental, etc.

Enter Quine. In his famous argument for the Indeterminacy of Translation, he attacked the coherence of the post-Fregean notion of meaning.<sup>[10]</sup> Imagining a situation of "radical translation" in which a linguist confronts a tribe whose language he has no prior way of understanding, Quine argued that there was no unambiguous way to understand the meaning associated with a word, no way to interpret a person's linguistic behavior that did not import empirically ungrounded assumptions about how they understood the world. When a native uttered "*gavagai*" in the presence of a rabbit, there was no way for the linguist to decide whether the native was referring to a rabbit or to an undetached rabbit part, etc. Only by investing the native's utterance with an ontology in a manner that could not be given an empirical justification could the linguist provide a meaning for the native term, *gavagai*.

This brief summary does not convey the power of Quine's argument, which had a huge impact on analytic philosophers in the 1960's. The result was that "meaning" fell into disrepute as a way of understanding the nature of language.<sup>[11]</sup> It was assumed that an adequate theory of language would have to be purely extensional, that is, not make reference to any such suspicious entities as meanings. Although Quine's own attempt to give a behaviorist account of meaning was generally acknowledged to be a failure, this did not lessen the suspicion with which the notion of meaning was viewed in the wake of his onslaught against it.<sup>[12]</sup> And linguistic meaning was not the only notion upon which doubt was cast, but mental states more generally as well as the distinction between actions and mere behaviors.

What does this have to do with *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*? My point is only that to comprehend the structure of the book and the presence of certain extended discussions within it, it is important to realize the intellectual context within which the book was written, one in which there was widespread hostility to the notion of meaning. Since Danto is attempting to argue for a view of art in which art objects are things that are imbued with meaning — not linguistic to be sure, but meaning nonetheless — he needs to show that reference to such a notion is philosophically respectable. And to do that, he needs to make a



general, anti-behaviorist philosophical argument that shows why reference to such things as mental states and meanings is not only legitimate, but necessary. For this reason, Danto pays a great deal of attention to the analogy between linguistic meaning, actions, and works of art. In all of these domains, the Quinean preference for "desert landscapes," which had denied the legitimacy of certain intentional notions, had to be shown to be problematic. As a result, I think that it is important, in addition to acknowledging *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* as a superb work in the philosophy of art, to recognize the role that this book played in changing the general philosophical hostility to the notion of meaning — and other intentional concepts — that was so prevalent when the book was written.

So let us return now to *Brillo Box* and Danto's contention that it marks the transformation of art into philosophy. First, we need to consider the work's more ordinary counterparts in the grocer's storeroom:[\[13\]](#)



These latter, which one might take as examples of the mere things of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, are not—as Danto explicitly recognized subsequently—mere things, if what we mean by this are mid-sized physical objects, for like art objects, they are composed of both a representational component and what Danto calls its "material counterpart." Indeed, we can go beyond this description to say that they are containers of commodities bearing commercial art upon their surfaces. The cartons in the grocery store are, to use Heidegger's term, *Zeug* (equipment): They are "holders" that make it possible to ship and store the individual Brillo boxes that consumers can purchase, themselves being further "holders" of the soap pads people wish to use to clean their pots. The painted surfaces of these cartons include the word "Brillo," thereby allowing them to refer to the product they contain. Hardly mere things, these cartons have a rich ontological structure that is obscured when they are put into the lowly category of mere thingdom.

But why do I think it is crucial to recognize the complex ontological structure of ordinary Brillo cartons? For one thing, it suggests an interpretation of Warhol's work different from that put forward by Danto in *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* and elsewhere. On this other interpretation, Warhol sought less to elevate mere things to artistic status than to blur or transgress the boundary between commercial art and fine art. If *Brillo Box* and the Brillo carton in the storeroom are

indistinguishable, we can ask, following Danto, what is it that accounts for the difference in the status that these two things possess? But what gets called into question by the two objects' perceptual indistinguishability, I am suggesting, is the distinction between commercial and fine art, rather than that between artworks and mere things.

Since commercial art is, by its very definition, art that is employed for a commercial purpose, an obvious place to start would be to say that the storage room carton fulfills a specific commercial purpose — enabling the product to be stored, transported, and identified among other things — while the Warhol piece does not. Indeed, it cannot since there is nothing inside it to store, transport, or identify. Although the two things are visually identical, they have very different uses and are treated very differently by us.

But this, in turn, raises the question of what purpose this artwork serves. Is it, in distinction from its grocery store relative, simply useless? And, if so, why look at it? Even more pressing is the question: Why buy it when you could get a more useful version of it for a lot less money in a grocery store? Ric Burns' recent film, *Andy Warhol: A Documentary Film* (2006) includes a gallery owner explaining that, when he showed Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* at his gallery, a competitor went to a local grocery and put cans of Campbell's Soup on display for sale at 29¢. It might also not be out of place to mention here that the director of the National Gallery of Canada helped Canadian customs officials at the time determine that Warhol's boxes were not sculptures and so subject to duty. Is the appellation art merely a way of evading such taxes?

Following this line of reasoning, we might develop an interpretation of *Brillo Box* according to which it asserts that works of commercial art are as deserving of our aesthetic attention as works of fine art. We can have as complete aesthetic experiences looking at the grocer's carton as we can at Warhol's work, in so far as what we are looking at is a striking design made with intense colors. The question this in turn poses is less, "Why bother with fine art when we are surrounded by commercial products whose surfaces could afford us experiences as rich and varied as those traditionally associated only with the products of fine art?" than with "Why we don't take advantage of the aesthetic opportunities offered to us by the surfaces of commercial art products that populate our world so densely?"

We can support the notion that Warhol sought to problematize the distinction between fine and commercial art in *Brillo Box* by noting that Warhol himself was a highly successful commercial artist prior to turning to fine art. Given his professional transformation, it makes sense that he might seek through his art to raise questions about the difference between products of commercial art and those of fine art, to show that they are not as distinct as our categorization makes us think.

Even though I have been critical of Danto's interpretation of Warhol's work—shall we call it a sculpture?—I agree with him that it renders the designation "art" problematic. Our disagreement is over the context for that disagreement, the term that we take to be vying with "(fine) art" in Warhol's piece. Whereas he takes it to be "mere thing," I have been suggesting that it is actually "commercial art." Why is this interpretive disagreement philosophically significant?

The reason is this: On my interpretation of *Brillo Box*, it is less a propaedeutic to renewed philosophical speculation on the nature of (fine) art than it is a tactic in the deconstruction of that concept as it has developed in the West. That is, if we find *Brillo Box* no more worthy of our aesthetic attention than the grocer's carton with its commercial art

surface, why not simply reject philosophical justifications of fine art as requiring a distinctive type of entity, one that is suitable for our attention?

To this point, my discussion of *Brillo Box* only contests Danto's interpretation of Warhol's work. I have not yet addressed the significance that this interpretive dispute might have for his more general philosophy of art, specifically for the claim that art became philosophy at a certain point in its history. I turn now to that task.

In discussing this thesis of Danto's, I pointed out that Danto believes that *Brillo Box* should count as philosophy for two reasons: It is a counterexample to previous definitions of art and it provides a more philosophically perspicuous form to the question of what art is. But if my interpretation of *Brillo Box* is convincing, it shows that it fulfills neither of these two desiderata. If Warhol's work is a deconstruction of the fine art/commercial art distinction, it cannot be classified as philosophy for either of the reasons that Danto suggests. And this suggests that Danto's account of art's self-transformation into philosophy loses its prime justificatory example.

Let me conclude by reiterating my admiration for *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. It is a truly remarkable work for many reasons. The one that I have discussed here is its contention that works of art can be philosophy. This is a fruitful idea, one that I have been greatly intrigued by. Despite the misgivings I have outlined about Danto's answer to this question, my thinking about the relationship between art and philosophy has been deeply influenced by this deep and admirable book. For that, I can only thank its author, who has enriched my philosophical life and that of many of the others who have read and absorbed the claims of this extraordinary book.[\[14\]](#)

### Endnotes

[\[1\]](#) Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). Future references to this book will be given parenthetically as TCP.

[\[2\]](#) Warhol was preceded by Marcel Duchamp as a philosophical artist. Although Danto sometimes acknowledges Duchamp's importance, he gives pride of place to Warhol. Whether there are philosophical or merely autobiographical reasons for this is an important question in regard to Danto's theory.

[\[3\]](#) In *Philosophizing Art: Selected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 61-83. Future references to this essay will be given parenthetically as PAW.

[\[4\]](#) Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1975).

[\[5\]](#) As is the case with Duchamp, it is possible to regard *Brillo Box* as an affront rather than a work of art. Danto does not, to my knowledge, give sufficient weight to this aspect of the relevant works of these two artists.

[\[6\]](#) William Kennick, "Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake," *Mind* (1958) 317-334. A similar view is defended by Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1956) 27-35, among others.

[\[7\]](#) I focus on the "aboutness" criterion for something being a work of art in this paper. There are other criteria that Danto develops in *Transfiguration*, but I cannot address their adequacy here.

[8] Frank Jackson and Michael Smith, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), v.

[9] This comes out most clearly in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

[10] Quine makes the argument in *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), chapter 2.

[11] There were dissenters, myself included. See the article I wrote with David Ross, "Quine and the Third Man," *Metaphilosophy* (1983) 267-275.

[12] Quine's attack on the analytic-synthetic distinction also play a major role in the discrediting of the notion of meaning.

[13] I am cheating here. This is actually Surasi Kusolwong's 2001 installation at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Accessed on September 21, 2006, at: [http://galleriacontinua.com/english/opera-dettaglio.html?id\\_artista=11&id\\_opera=1438](http://galleriacontinua.com/english/opera-dettaglio.html?id_artista=11&id_opera=1438) =e

[14] Diarmuid Costello gave me some very useful criticisms and suggestions on an earlier version of this paper. The present version was much improved as a result.

Thomas E. Wartenberg

Department of Philosophy

Mount Holyoke College

South Hadley, MA 01075 USA

[twartenb@mtholyoke.edu](mailto:twartenb@mtholyoke.edu)

Published March 8, 2008