

# Contemporary Aesthetics

---

*Volume 6 (2008)*

---

2008

## Ontology, Criticism, and the Riddle of Art Versus Non-Art in The Transfiguration of the Commonplace

Arthur C. Danto

*Columbia University*, [acd1@columbia.edu](mailto:acd1@columbia.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](#)

## Ontology, Criticism, and the Riddle of Art Versus Non-Art in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*

Arthur C. Danto

### Abstract

In this "Reply to my Critics," I explain that *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* was essentially a contribution to the ontology of art in which two necessary conditions emerge as essential to a real definition of the art work: that an artwork must (a) have meaning and (b) must embody its meaning. Many issues have emerged in the course of art's history that are very much part of its practice but are not part of art's essence. In response to Cynthia Freeland, I argue that though the book does not address art criticism, the two necessary conditions specify a viable rule for critical practice, as was recognized by Hegel. And in response to Ivan Gaskell, I argue that the definition of art arrived at in the book is capable of drawing a distinction between art works and artifacts.

### Key Words

art criticism, artifact, definition of art, enfranchisement, ontology

I am grateful to each of the panelists for their rich and searching papers, but I owe a special debt to Tom Wartenberg for having noticed that 2006 is a significant anniversary of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*; for having organized this silver anniversary celebration; and for having written the kind of wise critique that puts into perspective what kind of marriage between philosophy and art the book exemplifies. Marriage was much on my mind in writing the book, as readers of the preface know, as it was finished in the months after the death of my first wife and published in the early months of my second marriage. The book is certainly as much about philosophy as it is about art, in fact, as Wartenberg knows, even more about philosophy than about art, and I would like to begin by responding to his astute query about their relationship by situating the book in its true philosophical setting.

\* \* \*

Though published in 1981, the issues addressed by *The Transfiguration* presented themselves to me in my 1964 paper, "The Art World," when I was thinking about perhaps five different subjects all at once, and all in the same way: the philosophy of history, the philosophy of knowledge, the philosophy of action, and the philosophy of mind, as well as the philosophy of art. I was terribly lucky that the art world took the turn it took in 1964 or I would not have been able to write on art at all. It was to the history of the art world rather than of the aesthetics world of the time that the book really belongs, which is part of the reason I thought of what was happening in the art world as closer to the kind of philosophy I was doing than to anything then happening in aesthetics. When Paul Benacerraff invited me to give a paper on aesthetics for the APA's Eastern Division meeting that year, Paul Ziff having withdrawn, I was able to do so only because the art that excited me raised questions of the kind that interested me in a general kind of way. I had no special interest in

aesthetics, and that showed in the paper I presented, and continued to show in the *Transfiguration*, fifteen years later. I was interested in *ontology*, in the question of what makes something a work of art. The great thing about the Sixties was the dawning recognition that anything could be a work of art, which was something evident in all the main movements of the time—in Pop, Minimalism, Fluxus, and Conceptual art.

I have increasingly come to recognize that my concern was with enfranchisement, that is, what makes a human being a citizen, which was like: What makes an object an art work? Or, what makes a bodily movement an action? Or, what makes what is present to the mind a piece of knowledge? — and so on, for each of the subjects I was struggling to understand. The big mantra in the art world was Frank Stella's sullen "What you see is what you see." There was not a lot of difference between seeing *Brillo Box* by Warhol and the Brillo boxes designed by James Harvey for the Brillo people to move their products about in. So: why weren't they art works if Andy's factory-produced boxes were?

I knew that art works had rights and privileges grocery boxes lacked, the way citizens had rights and privileges mere persons lacked — which compares with the responsibilities that go with a raised arm when it is an action, but not with a risen arm when it is merely a bodily movement. We have to remember that 1964 was the summer of freedom, in which a number of exceedingly brave whites were no longer disposed to accept "because they are black" as a reason why blacks were disenfranchised, and decided to help a number of exceedingly brave blacks in the South help other blacks claim their civil rights. It later occurred to me that breaking down boundaries began with art works and went on to cover, in the later Sixties, race, gender, and whatever else seemed disempowering. I hardly could have seen that in 1964; it only became visible in 1968 and 1969, if even then. But at least I was not happy with an institutional answer to the question of what made something art any more than I would have been interested in institutional answers to the question of when something is knowledge or action or history. There were real problems with the institutions of enfranchisement if so many persons entitled to enfranchisement were being denied it.

I deeply believed that all philosophical questions had to be answered at the same time and in the same kind of way. My procedural model at the time was Wittgenstein's dazzling question: What remains over when you subtract from the fact that you raised your arm the fact that your arm went up? What remains over when you subtract from the fact that something is a work of art the fact that it is an object? Stella thought nothing remained over, just as Wittgenstein, or at least the Wittgensteinians, thought nothing remained over, that "What happened and what you do are the same thing," as Miss Anscombe said in her book *Intention*. I was of the opposite view. If a work of art is an object plus  $x$ , the problem was to solve for  $x$ , just as, if a basic action is a bodily movement plus  $y$ , the task was to solve for  $y$ .

That led to a search for the necessary conditions for acthood, or arthood, or whatever. The right place to start was with knowledge, since we had behind us two millennia of hard

thought that, beginning with the *Theaetetus*, led to three and, in our time, four necessary conditions. I published *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge* in 1968, the *Analytical Philosophy of Action* — which was almost the same book — in 1973, and only then, in the early '80s, what would have been the *Analytical Philosophy of Art* in 1981, had I not been fed up with the reading lists for courses called that, and stole the title *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* from Muriel Spark's great novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

That book, by the way a religious novel, taught me that the philosophy of religion has all the same questions that concerned me, and that I could have produced a philosophy of religion, using all the same moves. In Spark's book, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* was written by her character, Sister Helena of the Transfiguration. I think I know what Sister Helena's book had to have been about. The Brillo Box- Brillo box problem is exactly like the problem of differentiating Jesus Christ from an imagined commonplace look-alike who happens merely to be human, unlike Jesus, who is also a God. Suppose we subtract from the fact that Jesus Christ is God incarnate everything that belongs to his incarnation — blood, foreskin, hair, c-fibers so that he can feel pain, etc. — then what is left over? The Feast of the Circumcision celebrates Jesus' humanity, since his first blood was shed when his foreskin was cut. But what would have established his godhood, empirically speaking? However that question is to be answered, no really religious person can be an Institutionalist.

When we see that ontology is the pursuit of necessary conditions, a lot of the theory and practice of art drops away. I realized that with a shock in a recent correspondence with a former student, Aili Bresnahan, who picked up what she thought was a flung gauntlet: that if someone can show me something that any given form of art has that my definition, as far as it went, lacked, then my philosophy of art (and of everything) is defeated. Aili was a dancer, and she found in Balanchine's view of dance many things that have no counterpart in literature or painting. She was perfectly right, but I was only thinking that if dance is art, it need only meet the necessary conditions art works meet. I was thinking about dancing that did — Yvonne Rainier, for example, or Steve Paxton, and the Judson Dancer in general — who grasped the Sixties question of distinguishing merely sitting in a chair and a dance movement consisting of sitting in a chair. Noel Carroll wrote a brilliant essay on the end of dance that paralleled exactly my argument for the end of art, which meant that he would have the same problems in dealing with his thesis as he found I had with mine.

Strictly speaking, the end of art could be matched by the end of knowledge, the end of action, the end of history, and the end of religion, which gave Francis Fukayama so much trouble when his book on the end of history appeared. I mean that all these reveal their philosophical structure at once. As we know, people go on believing after that, just as they go on making art when art's philosophical nature is disclosed more by art — as in the Sixties — than by philosophy proper, which was somewhere else at the time, barking up different trees. Not wrong trees, but different trees. I was doing ontology, as I

say, but with a twist. Not dealing neatly with the question "What is an art work?" but with "Given two perceptually indiscernible objects, one an art work, the other not, what accounts for the difference?" That question was the gift to philosophy of the art of the Sixties. Not just to the philosophy of art, but to the philosophy of  $x$ , where the value of  $x$  is pretty much the curriculum of philosophical education, construed ontologically. Apart from the change of question, there is a change of answer to the question. The differences cannot be perceptual, cannot be something that is discerned, to use the title of Caroline Jones' recent study of Clement Greenberg, *By Eyesight Alone*. The differences are all invisible. That by itself explains why ontology isn't science, and why, easy as it was to prove Christ's humanity, his divinity had to remain a matter of faith.

A lot of people were interested in the art of the Sixties, for a lot of different reasons. But I was the only one interested who was also interested in the ontological dimension of the philosophy of history, knowledge of action, mind, and religion at the same time; and where anything not bearing on this was of interest to be sure, but not of great interest to me when I wrote "The Art World" and later *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Once we see the book as bringing to the surface what amounts to two necessary conditions — meaning and embodiment — that led to the doubtless premature definition that something is an artwork only if it embodies its meaning, it is easy to see how much of the concept of art as it grew by accrual over the millennia is in the end not part of the definition, since something lacking it can still be an art work according to the two criteria I felt resisted counter-exemplification. One of these is raised by Cynthia Freeland asking whatever happened to art criticism? There is a lot of what I consider art criticism in the book, but not a lot of discussion of it as criticism.

Not the book so much as I myself, as art critic, have been deemed responsible for what has been called "A Quiet Crisis," by Raphael Rubenstein, an editor of the periodical *Art in America*. It consists in the fact that critics have gotten out of the business of making value judgments. Rubenstein cites a pioneer survey, sponsored by the now-extinct National Arts Journalism Program at Columbia University, that discovered that nearly 75% of the critics surveyed believe that "rendering a personal judgment is . . . the least important factor in reviewing art," while 91% feel it their main role to "educate the public about visual art and why it matters." While I am not exactly blamed for this being "a period of interpretation rather than judgment," it explains "why the philosophically inclined Arthur Danto has been the most widely read and cited critic of the last decade or so." I really do side with the 91% of critics that feels my "main role" is to "educate the public about visual art and why it matters." Since what makes the difference between art and reality is (a) meaning and (b) embodiment, none of which meets the eye, the "good eye of the critic" means not a lot to me.

Hence Clement Greenberg and Hilton Kramer — or Emily Genauer, late critic of the late Herald Tribune — mean not a lot to me since mostly they were deeply wrong about the art that led me into my philosophy. Freeland cites what I found

wrong in Kramer's assessment of Eva Hesse, that he did not really know what he was looking at, though I recently found that he was truly generous to Louise Nevelson, whom Greenberg ridiculed. Greenberg dismissed Duchamp as "novelty art," falling back on the old injunction *epater le bourgeois*. Emily Genauer did not let an opportunity pass to take a dig at the great abstractionist Ellsworth Kelly. My feeling is that critics have to learn to describe what they are looking at, meaning learning to determine which parts of the object embody which parts of the meaning, after which there is not a lot to say by way of pronouncing value judgments. I am not a slavish Hegelian, but I found that Hegel, who was a marvelous art critic, held similar views. When he declares the end of art, for example, he writes:

What is now aroused in us by works is not just immediate enjoyment but our judgment also, since we subject to our intellectual consideration (i) the content of art and (ii) the work of art's means of presentation, and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of both to one another. The *philosophy* of art is therefore a greater need in our days than it was when art itself by itself yielded full satisfaction. Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is. [p.11]

Some eighty pages on he takes this up and amplifies it slightly:

If we recall what we have already established about the concept of the beautiful and art, we find two things: first a content, an aim, a meaning; and secondly the expression, appearance, and realization of this content. But thirdly, both aspects are so penetrated by one another that the external, the particular, appears exclusively as the presentation of the inner. [p.95]

So what more must we do by way of criticism than get all this right when we write our critical essays about individual works of art? Liking or not liking — not that this is what necessarily counts for Freeland as criticism — does not count, or count for much. I was delighted when it occurred to me that Hegel's two conditions were easily mapped onto my two, but that in my case they (1) together constituted a definition of an art work, and (2) together marked the two moments of a piece of art criticism, as I construed it. When we have the content (meaning) and the mode in which it is presented, what more by way of criticism do we need? Greenberg was interested in what he called quality. He felt that only someone who had spent a lot of time looking at abstract painting was qualified to pronounce on its possession of quality, and that critics like John Canaday at the *New York Times* and Emily Genauer at the *New York Herald Tribune* — monsters both — had not earned the right to say whether something had or lacked it. It was like getting to know quality in wine, hence the appropriateness of *taste*. It would have been pointless, for example, for me to have opened *un bon bouteille* for my father, who invariably

dismissed it as horse piss. There is, on the other hand, something silly about wine criticism, as readers of it know, in part because it consists in an inventory of tastes the purchaser is supposed to look for, without any sense of why these tastes make it good or their absence make it bad. But this is because, with wine, it is difficult to think that meaning has a lot to do with its being good or bad.

But meaning is, as we say, where it is at with art, and where we must face the truth that two indiscernible objects must might have deeply different meanings, so that the critic's good eye is, as it were, bandaged over. We need look no further than the two Brillo Boxes. It is easy to write the art criticism of James Harvey's box, understood rhetorically, as celebrating the goodness of Brillo. Warhol's *Brillo Box* instead celebrates the Brillo box, and really the art criticism of Warhol's piece is the same no matter which of the six or eight grocery boxes he happened to have in the 1964 show at the Stable Gallery. What makes *Brillo Box* memorable must be credited to Harvey but not to Warhol, who did not design it. What the art criticism of his grocery boxes would look like is difficult to imagine, since they would all come out alike. For my purposes here, all that I can say is even if more is involved in art criticism than my two conditions, those two conditions must differ with respect to the two works and, perforce, their art criticisms will differ, probably substantially.

It was probably just as well that I did not press on, twenty-five years ago, for a leak-proof definition of art. It was a lot to have learned from the art of the Sixties that we cannot just pick the art works out, the way we can pick out giraffes and rhinoceroses, as the Wittgensteinians supposed we could in their discussions of the futility of looking for a definition of art. They would certainly have balked at the idea that the difference between art works and real things had to be invisible. Recently, the painter Phillip Pearlstein told me how, many years ago, there were two students at Skowhegan when he was teaching there one summer, who simply did no work, and were told that they had better produce something before the summer ended to keep their end of the bargain. One night they dug a hole. In fact, it had sharp corners and clean edges, as if someone had removed a brick-shaped load of dirt leaving an empty space the shape of a perfectly transparent oblong. But any hole would have done. You could not remove it and send it to an art museum, any more, to use a Shakespearean example, you could take an even pound of flesh without a drop of blood. Students and faculty talked about it for what was left of the summer. The sculptor Tony Smith thought that it opened up a new era of art. Why was it art — negative sculpture say — and not just a hole?

Susan Vogel, in 1992 Director of the Museum of African Art, commissioned me to write the essay Ivan Gaskell cites as "Art and Artifact in Africa." At issue was the ontological status of a Zande fishing net she found in the basement of the Museum of Natural History, brought back by an expedition. It would not have been considered an art work then, but the art world had not stood still. Near the end of her life in the late Sixties, Eva Hesse produced two rope pieces — net-like sculptures soaked with latex. She hated prettiness in art, in case anyone observed that the Zande net was prettier than her rope pieces.

Anyone worth talking to in 1969 would have recognized Hesse's pieces as art, and some might have suggested that the resemblance between them and the Zande net was close enough that it could have been enfranchised as art and moved, so to speak, upstairs. That would have been a Wittgensteinian kind of mistake. Aesthetic superiority did not count. It was a (mere) artifact. It had the wrong kind of meaning, which did not give anyone license to throw it into the nearest dumpster. Susan exhibited it for purposes of raising the question of what its status was, in one of her most brilliant exhibitions.

It would be awkward to insist that art and artifact are exclusive terms. George Dickie counts "x is an artifact" as a necessary condition in his definition of art, and I could scarcely tolerate a ruling that demolishes his definition by default, if only because most works of art really are artifacts to begin with. So it would have to be "mere" artifact, like the Zande net, or, for the matter, Artemus Ward's suitably named "riddle" (which is not, I find, etymologically connected to the term Ward's granddaughter uses, "unriddle," on her quilt). The artifact Ivan shows is so called because it is riddled with holes, hence a sieve. Both are artifacts that could be art works, which makes the point that one cannot tell the difference by how something looks. Whether something that looks like a riddle is a work of art depends on whether it embodies a meaning, and that does not meet the eye. It is not a matter of aesthetics. The quilts of the great quilt-makers of Gee's Bend, exhibited a few years ago to great acclaim in the Whitney Museum of American Art, were riddled with meanings, to use the term metaphorically, as well as extremely beautiful, but their resemblance to abstract paintings alone would not have been enough to enfranchise them, even if it would have been enough to get them into museum precincts. Issues of ontology, these days, are but loosely connected to issues of provenance. The artist Jim Hodges makes decorative hangings of silk flowers. The Korean artist Kim Sooja works with the traditional fabrics of her culture, and her exhibit for the 2002 Whitney Biennial served as table cloths in the Central Park Zoo. The great Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia puts the cutting edge of art into contact with high artisanship. The art world is way ahead of us. I am gratified by how much of what has been happening fits the happily weak set of necessary conditions that *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* laid down twenty five years ago.

Arthur C. Danto  
Department of Philosophy  
Columbia University  
New York, NY, USA

[acd1@columbia.edu](mailto:acd1@columbia.edu)

Published March 8, 2008