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Interrupting Danto's Farewell Party Arrangements: Comments for Grigoriev

Kalle Puolakka

Abstract

This paper is a response to Serge Grigoriev's article "[Living Art, Defining Value: Artworks and Mere Real Things](#)" (*Contemporary Aesthetics* Volume 3, 2005) in which he develops Joseph Margolis' provocative Danto-criticism. He especially criticizes Danto's art-philosophical starting point, the problem of indiscernibles, claiming that it presupposes an objective value judgment that cannot be maintained and that it misrepresents the way in which people interact with art. In this article, Grigoriev's argument is found lacking mainly on two grounds. First, it overlooks where the source of Danto's starting point lies; and second, I argue that it does not lead to the kind of radical dualism Grigoriev believes. In order to show the problematic aspects of Grigoriev's criticism, Danto's conception of philosophy is introduced together with certain ideas from his latest work, *The Abuse of Beauty*.

Key Words

Danto, Margolis, ontology of art, philosophical method, art and aesthetics

1. Introduction

Some time ago, Joseph Margolis argued in an article with the provocative title, "Farewell to Danto and Goodman," that the logical conclusion of Arthur Danto's theory of art is that artworks do not, in fact, exist.^[1] This, however, was only the tip of the iceberg because a similar claim against Danto can also be found from Margolis' previous works.^[2] Perhaps the reason for Margolis' sudden aggressive outburst was that these writings had not aroused discussion over his provocative challenge against perhaps the most influential theory of contemporary analytic aesthetics. This article had better success because it provoked a response from Danto himself in which he tried to show the criticism invalid and the farewells premature.^[3] No third party, however, has taken a clear stand on the disagreement until quite recently, when Serge Grigoriev defended Margolis' argument against Danto and elaborated the criticism even further.^[4] Despite its challenging nature, his argument is less provocative than Margolis' because Grigoriev admits the intuitive appeal of the kind of contextualist theory of art that Danto supports, whereas Margolis does not seem to find any value in it, claiming that what Danto found to be the necessary constituents of our interaction with art are in fact "unlikely, unnecessary, overly complicated, counterintuitive, ultimately incoherent, [. . .]"^[5]

The starting point of both Grigoriev and Margolis is the same: the problematic nature of Danto's distinction between an artwork and an indiscernible "mere real thing," but their conclusions differ slightly. Margolis claims that precisely this distinction is the reason why artworks cannot be real in Danto's idiom, whereas Grigoriev thinks it fails to embrace

certain important ingredients in our interaction with art. It presupposes a value judgment between artworks and real things that is unwanted and philosophically dubious because, as Margolis' relativistic theory shows, there is no objective, neutral, evaluative criteria to ground such a distinction. Although the distinction is helpful as a tool for analyzing pop-art and readymade works, considering that these are among the anomalies of our artistic tradition a comprehensive aesthetic theory cannot be built on these kinds of examples. (Sec. 3.)

In this article, I will not touch Margolis' criticism because it would require introducing the complexities of his cultural realism and robust relativism with which he tries to challenge Danto's theory. I confine myself to abstracting two critical remarks that Grigoriev makes against Danto and seeing whether he could at least postpone the arrangements of his farewell party.

My first critical remark involves the dubious value judgment Grigoriev thinks Danto's distinction between artworks and real things presupposes. My argument is that Grigoriev has misperceived the nature of the distinction and that it does not contain the kind of normative element he believes it does. Secondly, I contest Grigoriev's claim that Danto's theory is a "version of radical reductive rationalism" (sec. 2) "in which a thing's meaning is radically separated from its identity *qua* physical object" (sec. 3). In order to counter this claim, I will also introduce Danto's latest ideas.

2. Danto's Conception of Philosophy and the "Mere Real Thing"

Danto has had an extremely long philosophical career, and the distinction between artworks and mere real things has been an important part of it since the publication of the seminal article, "The Artworld" (1964). Starting from this distinction, Danto arrived at the conclusion that "to see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry - an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld."^[6] What this thesis implies is that the visual properties of the object alone cannot constitute an object as a work of art; a certain kind of art historical context is necessary. Two objects, like the famous Brillo-objects of Warhol and Harvey, can be visually indiscernible from one another, but still they have totally different properties since one is an artwork and the other only a mere real thing. As Noël Carroll has argued, this argument form has a transcendental character in it: There must be a difference between the two objects, but because no other thing than the concept of the artworld can separate them, contextuality must be a necessary condition for arthood.^[7]

Grigoriev understands the argument perfectly but he rejects the conclusion, proposing a theory more in line with empiricist leanings as an alternative, which maintains "that experiencing an artwork is tantamount to being affected by its manifest and objectively verifiable properties" (sec. 1). Our interaction with art does not involve or presuppose the kind of theoretical mediation supposed by Danto but "an experience of enculturation that molds one's sensibilities on a level that often bypasses self-conscious intellection" (sec. 2). Grigoriev is,

therefore, arguing that there isn't the kind of theoretical or conceptual leap from the realm of mere things to artworks that Danto thinks there is. The distinction assumed by Danto can lead to the extreme conclusion that the sensible properties, which directly affect us in our encounters with artworks, are sacrificed to the value, which is ascribed to works "within the theoretical space of reasons" (sec. 2). For this reason, Danto's philosophical starting point must be rejected.

Two problems, however, are embodied in this counter-argument. First, it overlooks the origin of Danto's starting point, which, in turn, leads Grigoriev to misrepresent the theoretical presuppositions of the distinction. And secondly, it does not see the complex relationship which the indiscernible counterpart has to the work in its constitution. The first problem is addressed here and the second in the sec. 3, below.

Considering how obsessed Danto seems to be with drawing the distinction between artworks and mere things, it is not surprising that it is widely discussed. But it is surprising that people seem to overlook where the distinction derives from. This is Danto's conception of philosophy, according to which the general task of philosophy is to deal with the questions that emerge from the distinction between appearance and reality. Why is this event or object the real thing and, in this sense, part of reality when an indiscernible counterpart is not and thus only an appearance? This corresponds to Danto's art-philosophical starting point, but what should be noted in this instance is that the problem extends to the fields of metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of action, philosophy of mind, and ethics, etc. Metaphysics and epistemology have to this day been plagued by Descartes' problem: how dreams can be separated from reality when they cannot be told apart by perceptual criteria. Without an answer to this problem, Descartes, of course, thought we would be on the verge of skepticism. In the philosophy of action, it involves the distinction between mere bodily movements and actions, both of which can be visually indiscernible from one another. What then separates the former from the latter? John Searle's famous Chinese-Room argument has a similar structure. The persons in different rooms give indiscernible answers to the questions given, but still Searle thinks that only one of the cases is a case of true ability to use language. The questions, therefore, are what separates real understanding from a mere appearance of it and, finally, what separates an artwork from a mere real thing?[\[8\]](#)

This is how, in Danto's opinion, philosophy works. But if this conception is taken into account, what does this prove against Grigoriev? I think it clearly shows that he has misperceived the artwork/mere real thing distinction because, after revealing its true nature, it does not involve a normative element as he thinks any more than the distinction between an action and a mere bodily movement or between dream and reality does. But if it does not involve a reference to a value judgment, Grigoriev must be wrong in claiming that Clement Greenberg's art/commodity distinction corresponds to Danto's art/mere real thing distinction. Together with the sociopolitical criticism, for example concerning the role of the art theorist in society that

he uses against Danto, these do not, at the end, hit their target. (sec. 2) They might hit Greenberg but not necessarily Danto.

What follows from this is that it is possible to maintain Danto's distinction even after Grigoriev's criticism because the existence of objective value criteria is irrelevant to the question. It is no more a value judgment than the distinction between bodily movements and actions. But if it does not involve a value judgment, there need not be any objective normative principles to ground it. The distinction can be sustained by other means.

One could, of course, claim that the distinction presupposes the existence of a certain kind of pure perception that could report the properties of the indiscernible counterpart, and that something like this does not exist, as Margolis seems to be arguing.^[9] This, of course, involves huge philosophical questions that I cannot consider here, but what I would like to point out is that it is not only Danto who is using these kinds of thought examples that involve indiscernibility between two objects or events. Grigoriev shares this view, claiming that a similar kind of distinction has "continued to resurface on a regular basis in philosophical literature" (sec. 2), but he seems to be referring to the literature of aesthetics, for example Jerrold Levinson and Richard Wollheim (sec 1).^[10] What should be noted is that philosophy of art is not the only place where these kinds of Danto-like thought examples are used. There's Hilary Putnam's "brains in the vat" and "Twin-Earth;" Tyler Burge's scenarios where the speech situations in the doctor's office are visually indiscernible but happen in different linguistic communities; Donald Davidson's "swamp man;" Searle's Chinese Room argument, of course; and many others.

What does this analogy prove? I'm only saying that if you think the indiscernibility cases are invalid in Danto's case, they must be also in the above cases. And to show that Danto's argument is invalid would mean showing that some of the most important ideas introduced in contemporary philosophy of language and mind also rest on a fundamental mistake. One could, of course, argue that there is something in the nature of aesthetics as a discipline that would make the use of these kinds of thought examples implausible, but Grigoriev does not provide this kind of argument.

3. Internal Beauty and the Interaction between the Artwork and the Mere Real Thing.

The argument of the previous part, I believe, shows that the distinction can be maintained. Grigoriev could argue, of course, that it *should* not be sustained because it misrepresents the way we interact with art. In order to challenge Grigoriev's second claim that in Danto's theory "a thing's meaning is radically separated from its identity *qua* physical object" (sec. 3), I have to draw ideas from Danto's latest work, *The Abuse of Beauty*, which Diarmuid Costello has called "Danto's most sustained reflection to date on the relation [. . .] between art and aesthetics. . .".^[11] However, as Danto himself states, the ideas introduced in the work have a firm connection to his previous works and especially to the problem that is at issue here, i.e., the problem of indiscernibles.^[12] At the end of his article, Grigoriev says that

his intention has been "to review the current state of the [Danto's] argument," (sec. 3) but his review remains a bit shortsighted because he overlooks the relevance of Danto's latest work. As Costello claims, and I believe correctly, the most important theoretical innovation of the work is the distinction between internal and external beauty.^[13] When the distinction is worked out, I believe, Grigoriev's remarks are put into a new light.

What does this distinction involve? Lately, Danto has construed artworks as "embodied meanings."^[14] The concept of meaning is also central for this distinction, for it involves the question, What relationship does the surface or discernible properties of the work have to its meaning? In the case of internal beauty, they are interrelated because "the thought belongs to the work and explains [its] beauty."^[15] If there is no such connection between the two, it is an example of external beauty, in which case the meaning does not enter into the explanation of the aesthetic nature of the surface properties. There is only a contingent relationship between what the work means and the way it looks. From here, one can see a clear connection to Danto's central "agenda [. . .] to work out the relationship of objects to works."^[16] Some properties can be part of the embodied material of the artwork, i.e., the mere real thing, without being properties of the work itself. The distinction is the task of interpretation, which constitutes the work.^[17]

Jonathan Gilmore uses a fine example to elucidate the distinction. It was irrelevant for the aesthetic nature of Warhol's *Brillo Box* that it was made of plywood. A similar wooden material would have done as well, and a change of material would not have affected the aesthetic nature of the work because the meaning of the work would not have changed. In this sense, the properties of the plywood were external to the *Brillo Box* as a work of art.

Gilmore contrasts this with Donald Judd's art where the relation between material and meaning is different. In this case, the chosen material is "constitutive" for the work because it was the artist's intention to give his work an identity "as low-grade construction material. . . [in order] to block associations with artfulness, craft, and uniqueness. . ."^[18] The material chosen by Judd was significant for the aesthetic nature of his work because it had an intended connection with the meaning of the work and its content. This is a case of internal beauty, because there is a connection between surface properties and meaning; the aesthetic nature of the work is explained by its meaning.

This distinction points to another important factor in the light of Grigoriev's comments because, for Danto, internal beauty "colors" (Frege's *Farbung*) the meaning of the work, which, in turn, "inflects" us to see the content or the meaning of the work in a certain light. These "pragmatic qualities" of artworks, as Danto calls them, "are intended to dispose an audience to have feelings of one sort or another toward what the artwork represents."^[19] So, internal beauty does not merely affect the aesthetic nature of the work but also the way we experience it.

These considerations, I think, not only prove that the

relationship between an artwork and the embodied material is much tighter in Danto's theory than Grigoriev believes, but also that it is a question which has to be sorted out case-by-case. The relationship can be different in different works because the artwork/mere real thing relationship insisted on by Danto has to be understood differently in different cases. Grigoriev writes "in the end it is theory that makes an artwork out of a mere real thing" (sec. 3), but I would rather say it is an individual interpretation. What does it mean in Judd's case that he made his works out of these "mere real things"?

Gilmore rightly claims that the idea of internal beauty suggests that how the artwork looks and how it means must be interrelated.^[20] The way it looks, on the other hand, inflects us to see its meaning in a certain light. However, if the looks are part of the mere real thing, there must be some kind of problem in Grigoriev's argument because he separates the physical thing from the artwork much more radically than Danto does. But since his criticism was based on this kind of radical separateness, Grigoriev's comments seem to lose their critical force. I think the analysis of internal beauty shows, *pace* Grigoriev, that there need be nothing artificial or mechanistic in Danto's distinction and in the kind of contextualism it leads to. If the way the object looks and the way the artwork means are interrelated, I cannot see why Danto could not agree with Grigoriev's correct observation that attention should be drawn to the "artwork itself, *qua* an accomplished product, making it the focus of aesthetic sensibility" (sec. 1). Grigoriev claims "an artwork is good insofar as it works" (*ibid.*). For Danto, they are successful when they manage to inflect us. The mere thing, therefore, does not become "an indifferent object" as Grigoriev argues (sec. 2).

To sum up, Grigoriev's mistake is twofold. First, he overlooks how Danto's conception of philosophy functions behind the problem of indiscernibles. If its presence is accepted, it shows that the distinction does not involve a value judgment as presupposed by Grigoriev. But since his counterargument is mainly based on its existence, his criticism does not manage to undermine Danto's starting point. Secondly, the distinction need not lead to the kind of radical dualism Grigoriev thinks it does because, as the concept of internal beauty and especially Gilmore's Judd-example proves, there is a particular interaction between the artwork as a meaningful entity and the material *qua* material entity.

Because I have made only small references to Margolis' criticism in this article, my views cannot be considered a full-blown defense of Danto. But since Grigoriev's and Margolis' arguments share common ground, I believe if the former can be shown to be problematic, there is also the possibility of answering the latter. For these reasons, I must share Danto's feelings that "the farewells are a bit premature."^[21] They are also premature because although *The Abuse of Beauty* clearly embodies Danto's philosophical method whose validity Margolis has undermined, in this work Danto makes new comments especially on the themes which Grigoriev addresses in his paper. My claim is that aesthetics cannot be in a "position to move past" Danto's theory if they are not taken into account since, as Jonathan Gilmore points out, the work continues

Danto's "ongoing philosophical re-enfranchisement of art", by showing us "how it [beauty] enters into traffic with a human world."^[22]

Endnotes

[1] Joseph Margolis, "Farewell to Danto and Goodman," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 38, 4 (1998), 353-374.

[2] See for example Joseph Margolis, "The Eclipse and Recovery of Analytic Aesthetics," in *Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp.161-189; ref. on pp.179-182. Joseph Margolis, *Interpretation Radical but Not Unruly. The New Puzzle of the Arts and History* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), pp.255-264.

[3] Arthur C. Danto, "Indiscernibility and Perception: A Reply to Joseph Margolis," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 39, 4 (1999), 321-329.

[4] Serge Grigoriev "Living Art, Defining Value: Artworks and Mere Real Things," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Volume 3 (2005). Hereafter cited in the body of the text. An exception is Thomas Leddy "Red Dust," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 41, 2 (2001), 207-221.

[5] Margolis, "Farewell to Danto and Goodman," 373.

[6] Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld," *Journal of Philosophy*, 61, 19 (1964), 571-584; ref. on 580.

[7] Noël Carroll, "Essence, Expression, and History: Arthur Danto's Philosophy of Art," in *Danto and His Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), pp.79-106, ref. on p.80.

[8] Arthur C. Danto, *Connections to the World. The Basic Concepts of Philosophy* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp.6-16.

[9] Joseph Margolis, "Farewell to Danto and Goodman," 371.

[10] For example, Jerrold Levinson's philosophy of music has a similar structure to Danto's theory because it also relies on thought examples that invoke on indiscernibility between two objects. See Jerrold Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is," in *Music, Art, and Metaphysics. Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp.63-88; ref. on pp.68-73.

[11] Diarmuid Costello, "On Late Style: Arthur Danto's *The Abuse of Beauty*," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 44, 4 (2004), 424-439; ref. on 424.

[12] Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty. Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago Ill., Open Court, 2003), pp.63-64.

[13] Diarmuid Costello, "On Late Style," 430.

[14] Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp.193-194.

[15] Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, p.101.

[16] Arthur C. Danto, "Indiscernibility and Perception," 324.

[17] See for example Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p.125.

[18] Jonathan Gilmore, "Internal Beauty," *Inquiry*, 48, 2 (2005), 145-154; ref. on 147.

[19] Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, p.xv.

[20] Jonathan Gilmore, "Internal Beauty," 153.

[21] Arthur C. Danto, "Indiscernibility and Perception," 329.

[22] Jonathan Gilmore, "Internal Beauty," 154.

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