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Guy Sircello

Towards A Critique of Contemporary Anaesthetics

Guy Sircello

If we consider the entire history of philosophical Aesthetics (capital-"A" aesthetics), we can discover in it two chief sub-areas: aesthetics (small-"a" aesthetics), or the study of a kind of experience, its general conditions and range of "objects," on the one hand, and, on the other, the philosophy of art. But if we survey the field of Aesthetics over the last fifty years or so — both in North America and Britain and on the European continent, we can detect — and we do not have to look hard to do so — a massive and progressive trend *away* from the sub-area of aesthetics; this trend exemplifies the "anaesthetics" of my title. Now this anaesthetic tendency of modern philosophical Aesthetics shows itself in two main ways: (i) the almost exclusive preoccupation with the philosophy of art and (ii) the negative attitudes — ranging from indifference to outright hostility — to aesthetics as characterized above. Since the great books on Aesthetics of Dewey and Collingwood, the proportion of philosophical Aesthetics devoted to aesthetics proper — in the Anglo-American tradition, at least — must be minuscule; the subject is virtually ignored. And the hostility has shown itself most clearly in attacks on the concept of beauty — since traditionally beauty has always been discussed in association with its mode of apprehension in us and its effects on us — and in direct attacks on the concept of the aesthetic attitude. Such attacks have not been launched, moreover, with a view to *correcting* older views of beauty or aesthetic experience, but, on the contrary, with the intention of consigning these concepts to oblivion.

Now although these twin "anaesthetic" tendencies have jointly dominated contemporary Aesthetics, the history of Aesthetics itself demonstrates that a primary interest in the philosophy of art does not necessarily imply hostility to beauty or aesthetic experience in general. In this paper I want to suggest, in fact, a way in which taking a *certain kind of art* and a *certain theory of art* seriously leads necessarily not only to a higher reevaluation of aesthetics but, ultimately and ironically, also to a kind of indifference or even hostility to art itself *as an institution*. Thus, whereas in the present state of affairs in Aesthetics, the preoccupation with art and its philosophy has led to a trivialization of beauty and aesthetics in general, the kind of art and its theory that I want to explore here leads finally — in a moment, not of self-cannibalization, but of liberation — to a trivialization of the artworld and its characteristic pursuits.

Quite obviously, the view of art I am about to propose is antagonistic to the one elaborated by Arthur Danto over the last quarter century. Danto's view, in my opinion, encapsulates the anaesthetic tendencies of contemporary philosophy in an especially clear and vivid form. It certainly exemplifies those tendencies, for Danto's "Aesthetics" is, in the first place, nothing but a

philosophy of art; it has no positive contribution at all to make to aesthetics. And, in the second place, Danto tends to disparage and trivialize aesthetics in the few remarks he makes on the subject. I am thinking here, in part, of Danto's explicit arguments to the effect that aesthetic considerations cannot be used to define art and that, therefore, aesthetic considerations must be "secondary" in the philosophy of art.¹ For whereas within Danto's own limited frame of reference these points are well-taken, they nevertheless presuppose an extremely trivializing view of beauty as the purely sensory. But I am thinking, more importantly, of Danto's *tone* in discussing aesthetic considerations and, in particular, beauty and the responses to it. Thus he speaks, for example, of art's threatened "servitude to aesthetics" and "bondage to prettiness" as if beauty and prettiness were the same and as if to see aesthetics as central to art were to imprison art in some way.² (What he apparently ignores is that the latter would be true only if one first assumes the former, illicit identification.) And thus, too, Danto writes of the response to beauty as a "delectation"³— like eating candies violets perhaps! And listen to Danto as he imagines someone, a la George Dickie, admiring the beauties of Duchamp's urinal, who will "stand back and vibrate to the arctic sublimities of Mott Works's finest, responding aesthetically to an object pure in curvature and colorlessness, a bare bit of beauty fit for Euclid's cold eye, perhaps a joy forever."⁴ Danto knows better than most that one witty putdown is worth 10,000 words of philosophical argument.

Do not misconstrue me here: I *agree* with Danto's point that you have to *know* what's going on in a work of art before you can identify and appreciate many of its relevant beauties.⁵ But Danto's trivializing rhetoric about beauty and our possible responses to it goes beyond the making of this reasonable point. Why the scorn? Why the ridicule? Why, in other words, the rhetorical overkill? My suggested answer: Attacks of such kinds are often signs that a genuine threat is sensed, one, furthermore, for which there are no adequate defenses. And indeed I speculate here that Danto intuitively at some deep and inchoate level that in the whole realm of aesthetics in general lies a fundamental danger to his philosophical position on art, but a danger that he does not see clearly and thus has no philosophical defense against.

I say "deep and inchoate level," for a peculiarity of Danto's writing on art, I find, is that in it he over and over again allows glimpses of his *true* aesthetic "enemy" (in contrast to the his phoney, trivial, and explicitly recognized aesthetic enemy) to appear, but always dimly, always with its true significance veiled and disguised, as if he is engaged in a kind of terrible, but instinctive exorcism, or a half-remembered ritual of appeasement to some vague spirit of evil. I take as my point of departure just *one*, but perhaps the most striking, of these many passages.

II

At one point in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* Danto is answering an objection to his notion that art historical interpretations *constitute* works of art. He considers a certain "purist" nonrepresentational artist who wants to reject

"interpretations" and who thus says of her painting that it is just black and white paint, nothing more. Danto argues that for the artist to say this is not the same as for the untutored "man on the street" to say it, for the artist in saying it presupposes a whole history and context of other and opposing views of art. Pursuing this point by means of an analogy, Danto writes the following:

I like to think of the return to *paint as art* as a rather Buddhist thing. For a long time, people appreciated art as revealing a certain reality. Instead of seeing paint they saw a girl in the window, the rape of the Sabine women, the Agony in the garden, the ascension of the Virgin. And so it would be like seeing the objects of this world as essentially unreal and merely things to be put behind one as one moved to higher things, to a world beyond, which would be a certain kind of religious attitude toward the world. The Samsara world, as it is called, contrasts with Nirvana, and we are taught to see the world itself as something to be sublated. But in the higher teaching of radical Buddhism — the teaching of the Diamond Sutra — the distinction between Nirvana and Samsara collapses: the world is not to be sublated in favor of a higher world, but is to be charged itself with the qualities of the higher world. We find this magnificently expressed in the passage from Ch'ing Yuan: "Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains and waters as waters. When I arrived at amore intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got the very substance, I am at rest. For it is just that I see mountains once again as mountains and waters once again as waters." He sees mountains as mountains, but it does not follow that he sees them as mountains just as he saw them before. For he has returned to them as mountains by the route of a complex set of spiritual exercises and a remarkable metaphysics and epistemology. When Ch'ing Yuan says a mountain is a mountain, he is making a religious statement: the contrast between a mountain and a religious object has disappeared through making the mountain into a religious object.⁶

Now Danto is here taking this "Buddhist thing" only as an *analogy* to his view of the transformative power of art-historical interpretation. And yet what I find intriguing in this analogy is, first, its elaborateness and exoticism, and, second, the rather loving *elaboration* that Danto devotes to it — more, one would think, than is needed to make a point that is easily, and perhaps more easily, made without the use of the analogy at all. But the most intriguing thing in the analogy, I find, is that Danto's bringing up the whole subject of this Zen perspective conjures into view a notion (or family of notions) of art itself that resonates strongly in contemporary and modern art and art theories. Furthermore, these

are theories that Danto, as far as I am aware, never discusses, but they are theories that, in their world-encompassing implications, might seem to threaten to overwhelm and obliterate the kind of art-historically based theory of art that Danto argues for. Hence perhaps his use of the trivializing and distancing phrase — “a Buddhist thing” — to refer to what is, after all, a point of view of cosmic proportions.

However all that may be, I propose to take Danto’s description of this “religious point of view” toward mountains and waters and Danto’s coupling of it with the view of “paint as art” to construct from them a hypothetical artist who makes a hypothetical kind of art that is, in true Dantoesque fashion, constituted by a particular (and again hypothetical) *theory* of art. I shall put off until later considering if and how this hypothetical art and this hypothetical theory correspond to actual art and actual views of art.

So... let us first suppose that our artist apprehends objects in this Zen way (but without necessarily supposing that she has come to this through the same spiritual path as Danto’s authority, or for that matter through any definite “path”) and that, more significantly, she is able to make objects (her art) such that other persons are able under certain conditions to apprehend those objects in that same Zen way. (And let us agree to call this special way of apprehending objects, not “religious,” as Danto does, but “spiritual.” For the word “spiritual” has somewhat more universalist connotations than does the term “religious” and suggests the dissociation from both Church and deity that I think is appropriate in this context.) Furthermore, let us suppose that the artist believes that were she not able to produce objects that are peculiarly apprehendable in that way she would be unsuccessful as an artist. For her theory of art is not simply that her works are objects intended to have this kind of spiritual dimension, but that they are to provide — in some way — this very kind of spiritual experience of themselves. The “interpretation” of her art thus implies a particular kind of aesthetic experience. Note, however, that one could very well know the proper “interpretation” of this artist’s work without yet claiming to have the kind of experience she intends to produce by means of the work. Note, too, that it may happen that some of the audience of this art is able to experience it correctly (in accordance with the artist’s intentions) only after they are apprised of the correct “interpretation” of the work. On the other hand, it may also happen that, the idea of this sort of spiritual dimension to objects not being unique to artists in general or to this artist in particular and somewhat common property in certain circles, some of the audience of this art might immediately have the “correct” kind of experience of the art, without knowing from any other source (critics’ reviews, say, or the artist’s theoretical statements, etc.) what the correct interpretation of the art is. Indeed, they may be able to apprehend what the correct interpretation of the art is solely on the basis of their experiences of it.

Now let us further suppose that it is part of the artist’s theory that the experiences she hopes to induce by means of her works she intends as educational experiences. That is, she hopes that these experiences will constitute a kind of perceptual (or aesthetic or spiritual) training so that persons who do have the correct experiences from her art will, to a greater or lesser extent, be

able to transfer that way of experiencing to objects other than her art works. And finally let us suppose that this theory of the artist is intended not simply as a theory of her own art but as a general theory of art. More specifically, she believes that it is precisely the experiencing of an object in this way that makes the object a work of art. This kind of theoretical imperialism is, I take it, far from unusual among artists; it is, rather, the norm.

Now it follows rather directly from this hypothetical theory of art that *anything whatsoever can be a work of art*. For it is a tenet of the general point of view I have built into this artist's theory that everything discriminable in the experienceable world can be apprehended in such a way. And, furthermore, it is by hypothesis the mission of this artist to try to induce persons to experience the rest of the world in the same way as they experience her art. And to the extent that she is successful, she will have, according to her own theory, made art out of non-art. All of the "commonplace," to adapt Danto's use of Muriel Spark's phrase, will have been "transfigured." Now of course it is a consequence of Arthur Danto's theory of art, too, that anything whatsoever can be a work of art; and in the next section I want to use this ostensible similarity between Danto's theory and the hypothetical one I have sketched to draw out the vast differences between them.

III

First, the reason that for Danto anything can be a work of art is that anything can be given an interpretation within an art historical context. This is not to say that, in any given art historical context, just anything can be a work of art; but only that there are no general constraints about what *sort* of thing is capable of being interpreted in some *possible* art historical context. On the other hand, for my hypothetical view, anything can be a work of art for the reason that the crucial spiritual attitude can be taken towards it. Again, it is not that for any given experiencer anything at all can be so experienced; it is only that there is nothing in principle about anything experienceable (in general) that would make it insusceptible to such a "spiritualization" by a properly prepared experiencer.

Secondly, for Danto any given thing could in principle be an indefinitely large number of different works of art. For objects that are "perceptually" indistinguishable from one another can nevertheless be interpreted differently in different art historical contexts. Thus if we take the "interpretation" of an object to be the *content* of a work of art, then we can say that, in Danto's view, works of art that are perceptually indistinguishable can have any number of different "contents." But from our hypothetical theory of art, we can say that perceptually different works of art all have the "same" content, if we take "content" here to be the spiritual significance experienced in an indefinitely large number of, perceptually speaking, distinct things.

From the latter difference we can see that Danto's theory of art erects an indestructible difference between an ordinary thing and (what is at a given time) a work of art, whereas my hypothetical theory provides a (relatively) simple means of destroying the difference between ordinary things and (what are at a

given time) works of art. But of whom do I think when I charge in these sentences that the one theory denies to them the power to destroy a categorial rift and the other bestows this same power? To those who may be quite outside, or at best, like most readers of this essay, on the margins of the artworld; to those who may have the capacity for certain forms of aestherico-spiritual experience, but who are definitely outside the ranks of power constituting the artworld: the recognized artists, the curators, the gallery owners, the critics, the moneyed collectors, the art historians.

And thus Danto's theory of art ultimately elevates the power of institutions, of history and tradition, and the power of its owners, tenders, keepers and flunkys, over that of the merely aesthetically sensitive or the spiritually talented. The theory of art I have hypothesized, on the other hand, debilitates precisely those same institutions and their followers in favor of the latter. For Danto, what "transfigures" an ordinary thing into a work of art is precisely its "interpretation" given in and by its situation in the artworld. On my alternative, what makes of an ordinary thing a work of art is just the transfigurative power of a "spiritual" apprehension.

Not only do my hypothetical artist and Arthur Danto have different theories of art, but their theories are of significantly different *kinds*. To bring out this difference in kind, let us ask, of each theory, how it might answer the question: How do we *legitimately* apply the term "art" to a thing? This notion of "legitimation" brings out startling contrasts between the two theories. From a Dantoesque point of view, the question is answerable thus: We legitimately apply the term "art" to all those things — and only those — that are "interpreted" in some art historical context, that is, to what are seen as art by a relevant portion of the artworld. Danto the *philosophical theorist*, thus, gives up his right to determine this question of legitimacy to the legitimizing authorities of the artworld. (Of course, this is not a big sacrifice in Arthur Danto's case, because when he puts on his other hat, he is one of those artworld authorities, a perhaps not insignificant point in understanding Danto's theory of art.) My hypothetical artist, on the other hand, has built into her theory of art a "norm" of art — namely anything insofar as it is apprehended in a certain spiritualized way. And from the point of view of *this* principle of legitimation, there may well be "works of art" — so constituted by the art world — which fail to be "legitimate" works of art; and there may be other things which have not received and never will receive legitimation through the artworld, that would be legitimate works of art. All of which is another way of saying that my hypothetical theorist refuses to give up her "legitimizing" authority to pre-existent institutions and authorities. The difference, on this score, between my hypothetical theory and Danto's theory is a difference in theoretical posture that has divided philosophy — and not only the philosophy of art — since the days of Plato and Aristotle.

But given this difference, where is its real "cash value"? That is, where might this difference make a difference? Perhaps in many ways, but I want briefly to pursue one of these: For a person who takes Danto's general position, my hypothetical theory of art would just be grist for the mill. This theory and the art produced under its aegis would be "interpreted" and placed in its context; it

would thus join all the others in the great and colorful art historical parade. On the other hand, for my hypothetical theorist, and for others who might perhaps be persuaded to her view, the very success of her art can mean the "end of art" — to allude to a theme that Danto himself has approached from quite a different direction — the "end" of art history and of all the institutions of the artworld. The artworld might, for such a person, wither away in significance, because its irrelevance had been revealed. Of course, if *everyone* (everyone in the artworld, or who respects it, say) were to be converted by the hypothetical artist, then art as an institution would *actually* wither away. It would wither away not merely in *significance* because it was *perceived* to be irrelevant, but it would wither away in *reality* because the perception would *make* the reality.

IV

I have thus traced a difference in two theories of art — one actual and one, I am saying, hypothetical — to two possible kinds of action that might have considerable impact on the real world — to kinds of action that might actually alter the lives people live — especially people in and on the margins of the artworld. So it should be important to determine which of these theories is correct; rather, it *would* be important if *both* of these theories of art were *actual* theories of art. But by what means could we make such a determination of correctness? I think the Dantoesque view is, in a way, forced upon us, unless two circumstances obtain: first, that we indeed have the kind of experience that my hypothetical art is supposed to induce and, second, that we take such experience as veridical. And I mean by "veridical" here "giving us insight into the way things are (truly) to be viewed." And the second condition is crucial, for without it, the experience that the art (by hypothesis) induces could be bracketed as merely the clever but evanescent effect — the "manipulations" — of a particular kind of art. But what are the conditions under which we could reasonably take such experiences, even if we have them, as veridical? Or, for that matter, under what conditions could we reasonably reject them as non-veridical?

Philosophy, in one of its perennial guises, might at this point reasonably enter the dispute. For questions about truth-claims are often philosophical questions, especially when they are questions, as this one is, of the truth claims of a whole category of representations. But for philosophy to attempt to settle this question it would have to engage specifically in (small-"a") *aesthetic* inquiry. For as a first step in solving the problem here of veridicality, philosophy would have to describe and analyze those experiences themselves. But were it necessary to bring philosophy in for this task, it would thus be necessary to involve it in an area of inquiry that Danto's whole approach at best relegates to secondary status and at worst seeks to exterminate by trivialization. And yet if philosophy must engage in such inquiry precisely to determine whether Danto's philosophy of art correct, then Danto is ultimately wrong about the priorities within Aesthetics. We might even speculate that Danto's attempted trivialization of aesthetics is unconsciously motivated by a desire to protect his view (and his life?) from the test that philosophy would be required to subject it to.

So — much depends finally upon whether my hypothetical art-cum-art-theory exists in reality. In the following sections of this paper I want to suggest — I could hardly do more — that such an art and such a theory in fact have been with us in the West for some 200 years and that in the course of that period the former has become more important and the latter more articulate.

V

Even to begin to sketch a case, I need to speak of three things: (1) a certain kind of experience, (2) art that concerns itself with this sort of experience, and (3) a theory of art that speaks of such an experience being “induced” by such art. Let me first, with some trepidation, introduce a name for such an experience. I will call it “the experience of secular spirituality.” The modifier “secular” emphasizes that the spirituality is of *this* world and, moreover, that it is in no obvious way religious — concerned neither with deity nor with church. The trepidation arises from a suspicion that even with the modifier, the term “spiritual” will carry with it connotations, not only of past and contemporary *cultic* experience, but connotations of the occult and of popular spiritualism. For philosophers, moreover, there is the danger that the term will carry dogmatic baggage from nineteenth-century German Idealism. My persistence in using the term, despite these dangers of misunderstanding, comes from my conviction that (a) there is no more accurate term and that (b) none of the above associations is essential to the meaning I attach to it. Such a category of experience is first introduced into modern Western art in the poetry of William Wordsworth. Wordsworth in many places celebrates and describes this sort of experience, which finally justifies to himself his calling as a poet.⁷ But the verses in “Lines Written above Tintern Abbey” are characteristic: “And I have felt / a presence that disturbs me with the joy / of elevated thought; a sense sublime / of something far more deeply interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, / And the round ocean and the living air, / And the blue sky, and in the mind of man; / A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things.”

Now as important as this sort of experience is for Wordsworth, his poetry does not conform to my hypothetical theory of art. First, the focus of that poetry is not, it seems to me, to induce the sort of experience it describes; and it is not animated by the theory that it should induce such experiences, despite the role of teacher that Wordsworth finally comes to construct for himself. Moreover, despite the sense, at least in the younger Wordsworth, that this “infused Spirit” is not a traditional or untraditional God, the poet’s descriptions of the experience are not free of suggestions of transcendence. So my idea is that in Wordsworth’s poetry we have my hypothesized notion of art for the first time, but only in embryonic form. I thus imply that my hypothesized art is, as it were, a kind of ideal *telos* of a certain strain in the modern arts — a *telos*, further, which is still in the process of being realized, and a *telos*, still further, which I would not want to claim — at this time at any rate — is immanent in the history of the modern arts, but a *telos* that is a function of my own interpretive structure.

Progress toward the realization of this *telos* has proceeded — though I do not claim smoothly, or unidirectionally, or uniformly in all the arts — along three parameters: (1) the elimination, from the description and conception of the object of this experience, of any kind of transcendence of, or over, the actual world; (2) the progress from the description of, discussion about, or meditation on this experience in art to the more self-conscious communication or “inducement” of the experience; and (3) the gradual expansion of the *kinds* of “objects” in the actual world that can yield such experiences. I want next briefly to sketch the outline of these three parameters of progress.

1) *The disappearance of notions of transcendence, in all of its forms, from the conception of this sort of experience.* In Wordsworth there are still faint intimations of a more or less traditional Spirit that is “deeply interfused in all things.” Such rhetoric lingers still in the “transcendentalism” of Emerson, who is nevertheless quite explicit that he intends no reference to the Christian God. Yet even Emerson still imagines an Oversoul that transcends this or that soul, even though he also imagines the Oversoul as the better *part* of each ordinary soul. In Walt Whitman the rhetoric of a transcendent object completely disappears; and the crucial experience betokens for him an expansion of his “self,” a self which he nevertheless differentiates from “I, Walt Whitman, son of Manhattan.” Coming out of an independent Continental tradition, moreover, the German poet Rilke sees his version of this experience as one of “Orpheus” silently singing the world; yet for Rilke, “Orpheus” is clearly nothing but metaphor. In other passages, Rilke imagines the transfigured soul turned simply towards “the Open.”

But in certain modernist writers, like Wallace Stevens, for example — an admirer of Wordsworth, incidentally — we get, on the one side, a complete elimination of a transcendent “other” that is revealed in this sort of experience, yet, on the other side, a new sort of transcendence. Because for them such a spiritual experience is not only a kind of fiction, it is incorporated into the work of art itself in a way that distinguishes the work from everyday reality. Art, for the modernists generally, was a way of transcending a large part of the actual world, namely, the everyday world. Hence, for them, this sort of “spiritual experience” could be embodied in art as a kind of refuge from that everyday reality. It has thus become a project of *postmodernist* writers who have any interest in the sort of experience I am talking about to break down the modernist barriers between the work of art and the rest of the actual world and thus finally to eliminate all vestiges of “transcendence” from the experience. Possibly the most effective job of doing so has been done in some of the writings of Jacques Derrida, which, precisely because they are seen not to be in a specifically *literary* tradition (indeed because they are seen in a *philosophical* tradition in which “truth” and not “fiction” is the intention) and yet because they so clearly yearn to be read as a particular sort of literary production, are able to break the “frame” closing off “the work” from the rest of the actual world. Derrida’s writings are hence also able to make that luminous, “spiritual” experience that they *can* induce (not to say that they do regularly induce it nor, heaven forbid, that they *intend* to do so) applicable to the *non-literary* world.⁸

2) *The progress from "description" to "inducement."* In Wordsworth's poetry, of course, what we get are, in addition to descriptions of the poet's extraordinary experiences together with a variety of kinds of *discussions* of them, their genesis in his own life, their significance for his calling, their philosophic implications, etc. We get the same, I would say, in Emerson and Stevens and, indeed, in much other literature, literature being well-adapted to such discussion. In Whitman's "Song of Myself," on the other hand, we get mostly the *expression* of Whitman's version of this experience, because the poet thinks of himself there as "singing" from out of himself, i.e., his peculiar sense of a cosmic and all-inclusive self. In some works, especially lyric poetry and music, there is the attempt to "present" this experience, in Suzanne Langer's sense of a "presentational symbol". That is, such works put the "form" of such an experience forward in such a way that we "know" — though not discursively — what it is like. In Rilke's "Sonnets to Orpheus" and the later "Duino Elegies" we get this sort of presentation, I would say, as we do in some musical theatre, for example, the very last scenes of Szymanowski's "King Roger" and Britten's "Death in Venice." Such presentation is very prominent and pervasive in twentieth century painting, for example, in Malevich's most original paintings, in Mondrian, in Jackson Pollock, in Barnett Newman, the later Diebenkorn, in a few of Helen Frankenthaler's works. But "presentations" like the ones I have mentioned are, nevertheless, still "bracketed" off from the ordinary actual world, "bracketed" precisely because they are presentations of what it is "like" to have certain "experiences of secular spirituality." They are still not quite *inducements* to such experiences, however much they may provide "semblances" of such experiences. It is really only fairly recently that art comes onto the scene that induces such experience, that does not bracket it off from the ordinary world that surrounds it, and that, as a consequence, opens up the whole world as a field for that experience. And this happens in certain works of Joseph Beuys, in some of John Cage's music and in some of the dance-happenings of Merce Cunningham. In literature it has not yet quite happened — unless one takes seriously my earlier suggestion about some of Derrida's work; and some might argue that it happens with respect to *Finnegan's Wake*.⁹

3) *The expansion of the category of "objects" with respect to which the experience of secular spirituality can occur.* In Wordsworth, of course, the experience occurs with respect to "natural" objects — and not only inanimate ones — that are typically common or trivial. Such objects are contrasted with the ugly, urban ones that were the products of the new industrialization. They are also in constant implicit contrast with the "elite" objects of earlier modern poetry. But later in the century, Baudelaire and the Symbolist poets turned precisely to the objects of urban civilization as a source of such experience, and sometimes to the ugliest of these objects. And as an even greater contrast with Wordsworth, these poets even found in their own vices — or what they took to be their vices — sources of such experience.¹⁰ In a more optimistic vein, Whitman took all of the impulses, instincts, desires and drives of the body, as well as all of the economic and social activities of his society, as inclusive of his "self" and thus as "objects"

of his secular spiritual experience. Finally, in the twentieth century we find artists turning for materials to the most common, trivial, vulgar and ugly items, the harshest sounds and movements of industrial and post-industrial civilization. And yet it is difficult to think of artists who have turned on those materials just the Zen-like consciousness that I am thinking of. John Cage at his most "aleatory" seems to fit, however. And so — almost if not quite, I think — does the Duchamp of the Readymades and of *The Large Glass*.¹¹ And then, post-finally, we have, as I suggested earlier, the most collagial writings of Derrida, which might, in the properly prepared, induce this same kind of experience but in such a form that it takes as its "objects" precisely the interpretive processes that constitute the Derridean texts. And then, since those texts are themselves simply minuscule "parts" of an infinite "general text," the "Derridean experience" finally encompasses (or might encompass) all of the "general text," which one commentator describes as "a long and complicated historical-intertextual process that no historical movement and no single text dominates or frames."¹² And that process is, of course, in the Derridean universe, precisely what constitutes the actual world, or what is left of it in a post-modern(ist) world.

VI

But where, you should ask, can we find a *theory* or a theoretical tradition that has tried to understand the experience of "secular spirituality"? For if I am correct that my hypothetical kind of art is also actual, even if imperfectly and incompletely so, then our obligation as philosophers is, for the reasons earlier outlined, to try to understand it and the kind of experience that is at its center.¹³ My suggested answer is that the philosophical concept most relevant to the analysis of the experience of secular spirituality is that which Kant, following some of his predecessors in aesthetics, called "the sublime" — the very word that Wordsworth uses to describe his own experience. I would thus argue that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophical discussions of the sublime constitute the earliest significant documents in this analytical tradition. And I take this to be true even though the concept of the sublime in much of this tradition was applied to nature and not to art. But I agree with T.W. Adorno that Kant's theory of the sublime anticipates the notion of "spiritualization" in art.¹⁴ The notion of spiritualization — often unattached, to be sure, from the term "sublime" — was taken up by the post-Kantian German romantics and idealists. The tradition of this sort of theory is continued by some recent and contemporary philosophers who are rooted in that German tradition, such as Heidegger, of course, but also Adorno and Marcuse. The latter three tend, unlike myself, to see all art — or at least all modern art — as being "spiritual".¹⁵ Finally, influenced by Kant as well as by the latter three philosophers, the contemporary Jean-Francois Lyotard has revived even the word "sublime" and sees the sublime as chiefly the sign of post-modern art — art that attempts to "present the unrepresentable."

There is thus in a strain of modern philosophical aesthetics recognition of the phenomenon I am calling the experience of secular spirituality. I am far from

claiming here, however, that there is any unanimity of theoretical result about it. I would venture to say, in fact, that there are probably only two *themes* that figure in all, or nearly all, of these theoretical treatments. One is the recognition that the concept of the *infinite* is essential in the analysis of this experience. And the other is that this experience, whether it is called "the sublime" or not, belongs in the same *category* as beauty, i.e., that it is an *aesthetic* concept. But whether it is conceived as radically different, within the category of the aesthetic, from beauty or whether it is conceived as being essentially connected to beauty is controversial within the tradition.

From my reading of this literature from Burke to Lyotard, as well as from my own reflections, I want now simply to summarize the issues that this aesthetic phenomenon — the experience of the sublime, or the experience of secular spirituality — raises.

- 1) What is the best description of the "infinite" and of its varieties and modes, intimated in this experience?
- 2) What, if anything, is presented ("present") in this experience?
- 3) In what sense is the "infinite" still a *transcendent* element in this experience, and in what sense is it not?
- 4) What is the ontological significance of this experience?
- 5) What is the relation of the cognitive faculties to the infinite intimated in this experience?
- 6) What is the range of human responses to this sort of experience?
- 7) What are the "proper" responses to this experience?
- 8) How does this experience compare to the experience of the beautiful?
- 9) What is the relation of the infinite intimated in this experience to the experience of beauty?

The philosophers in the theoretical tradition I have indicated have a variety of answers to these questions; to some of the questions they have no answers. Some of the artists, moreover, who have been concerned with this sort of experience also have or suggest answers to these questions. I list the questions here only to indicate the formidable tasks philosophy still has ahead of it in this area of aesthetics.

My remarks about an art and a view of art which — I maintain — has not yet been perfectly articulated and therefore has not yet perfectly appeared have necessarily been sketchy. What I hope, however, to have clearly indicated is an alternative to an influential contemporary view of what art is and of the priorities within the field of Aesthetics. But, even more, I hope to have suggested that the presuppositions of at least one prominent philosophy of art — Arthur Danto's — together with a certain strain in the modern arts, lead to questions about the foundations and validity of that very philosophy of art. And yet the questions cannot even begin to be answered unless aesthetic experience is seriously analyzed. This fact alone means that the anaesthetic attitudes dominant in Aesthetics today and advocated, in particular, in Danto's theory need to be reversed in order to defend and adequately ground that theory itself. For, as has

happened with respect to so many past theories of art, art itself threatens to turn on Danto's "institutional" theory and grind it into the historical dust. Only philosophical aesthetics can assess the true danger of that threat.

Notes

- 1 Cf. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1981) pp. 105-06, and *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1987) pp. 31-39.
- 2 *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, p. 13.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 33
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 35. To be sure, in this passage Danto is ridiculing Dickie's "aesthetic" view of Duchamp's piece, but his target here is also beauty and the aesthetic attitude. Why else use "vibrate" and speak of a "bit" of beauty?
- 5 Cf. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, pp. 94, 111.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 133-34.
- 7 Cf. M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (W.W. Norton: New York, 1971) p. 21 and pp. 17-140 *passim*.
- 8 Of course, they do this in part because the ostensibly non-literary world has been taken up and consumed by the "general text." Notice that, in making the above point, I am treating Derrida's works, to use the conventional categories that he himself claims to criticize, as literature and not as philosophy. And notice, also, that to experience Derrida's work in a "spiritual" way presupposes that one has given up trying to make sense of it in more conventional ways; it is to take Derrida seriously, but not quite so, when he avers that his own writings are "meaningless." Such a reading of Derrida was suggested to me by Allan Megill's discussion of Derrida in *Prophets of Extremity* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1985) pp. 275-85, 316-20.
- 9 It is also true that the literary theorist Wolfgang Iser has suggested that the plays of Samuel Beckett can have, as a kind of secondary effect, the inducing of this sort of experience, though Iser does not put the point in my terms, of course. Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (The Johns Hopkins Press: Baltimore, 1974), pp. 271-73.
- 10 M.H. Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism* draws attention to the parallels between the variety of experiences of secular spirituality and older forms of spirituality in Western religious traditions. Thus he points to the parallels between certain strains of Gnosticism and the spirituality of the Symbolist poets (pp. 416-17). In fact, Abrams' main thesis in this book is that the secular attitudes of Romanticism in general show parallels to, and indeed come out of, earlier religious attitudes. This idea suggests to me that perhaps all of the forms of what I am calling secular spirituality have analogous forms in earlier religious traditions in the West. It is interesting to note in this connection that affinities have been found between the writings of Derrida and the Cabbalists. Cf. Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, pp. 316-17. These associations suggest in turn that "secular spirituality" in the modern world may be a manifestation of a fundamental form of human experience that is open to interpretation in a secular way or in terms of specific religious beliefs. And, if that is so, then the development of a *secular* spirituality in artistic traditions of the

modern world could be understood in terms of the recovering of a fundamental form of human experience lost to the West in virtue of the radical critiques of religious traditions that have been prominent since the eighteenth century.

- ¹¹ For a reading of the art of Marcel Duchamp that supports this opinion, see Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art* (Shambala: Boston, 1988) pp. 107-116. One of Lipsey's phrases about Duchamp's *The Large Glass* is that it manifests "Zen without enlightenment." I am not sure that Lipsey's notion of the "spiritual" is exactly mine; but it seems fairly close, at least in its artistic manifestations. Lipsey's book also offers corroboration of my general contention that "spiritual" concerns illuminate a great deal of modern art. Another volume making a similar point is the catalogue of an exhibition organized by Maurice Tuchman of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press: Los Angeles and New York, 1986).
- ¹² David Carroll, *Paraesthetics* (Methuen: New York, 1987), p. 151.
- ¹³ Note that, however willing I am to see Derrida's own work as — to adapt Arthur Danto's concept — bringing about the "death of philosophy," by transfiguring itself and every other form of representation into a kind of "aesthetic" experience, this does not for me mean that philosophy must and can stop doing what it has always done, any more than for Danto the "death of art" means that art no longer does the myriad things it has always done.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1984) p. 136.
- ¹⁵ "Spiritualization" is Adorno's term, though it probably does not mean just what I mean by "secular spirituality." Neither Heidegger nor Marcuse uses this term, as far as I know. But I take Heidegger's idea of art "uncovering" or "disclosing" the "truth of being" and Marcuse's concept of art providing the "beautiful image of liberation" as attempts to understand aspects of the same *phenomena* as are covered by Adorno's "spiritualization."