

Danto, Popular Music, and Indiscernible Counterparts

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I

Arthur Danto has summarized *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* as addressing one question. “Given two things which resemble one another to any chosen degree, but one of which is a work of art and the other an ordinary object, what accounts for this difference in status?” (Danto 2000, 131) Famously, Danto answers this question by proposing that “to see something as art at all demands nothing less than this, an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art” (Danto 1981, 135).

I endorse the idea that works can only be individuated by reference to their historical contexts. But I am not persuaded that Danto offers us any reason to conclude that distinct but indiscernible works are only individuated by their place in art history. (History and theory? Yes. Art history and theory? Not always.) But if that is so, then an important element of Danto’s definition of art must be removed from that definition. Noël Carroll has pointed out that Danto might not really mean art *theory*. Danto might only require “that artworks must be subtended by some artworld concepts” (Carroll 1990, 115). My main point is related but different. Danto establishes something about historically sensitive interpretation, but it does not follow that either art theory or artworld concepts are necessary.

In this essay, I apply something like Danto’s own method to Danto’s argument. *Transfiguration* says very little about music. What happens if we construct a series of indiscernibles by locating musical counterparts for Danto’s visual and literary counterparts? We can then compare parallel series. One series will involve artworks (Danto’s various sets of indiscernibles) and the other series will involve music. But we can select musical examples that do not presuppose the importance of distinguishing between artworks and non-artworks. As thought experiments, Danto’s examples and my

examples will otherwise resemble each other “to any chosen degree.” Comparing these parallel sets of examples, what accounts for their difference in status such that Danto’s involve works of art while mine involve music but not always art? The crux of the problem is that a musical concept is not necessarily an artworld concept. For many musical examples, a “transfiguring” interpretation can be supplied without reference to the concept of art. If Danto’s method elucidates the essence of art while my sonic counterparts do not, then perhaps most of Danto’s examples do not, either. What emerges is the possibility that, aside from a few very special cases such as Warhol’s Brillo boxes, Danto’s method of indiscernible counterparts does not invite reference to art theory and art history. Perhaps art theory is not the theory that must be brought to bear whenever we properly attend to the transfiguration that occurs in works of art.

To get a better sense of why this point makes a difference, consider its implications for Danto’s insight that there is “a special aesthetics for works of art” (Danto 1981, 95). Because artworks have a semantic dimension, they can have aesthetic properties that do not belong to the uninterpreted perceptual façade of the object created (or, in some cases, appropriated) to embody an artistic gesture. In other words, perception alone will not yield up all of an artwork’s aesthetic properties. To take an obvious example, Duchamp’s *Fountain* has an ironic humor that is utterly lacking in an indiscernible “real” urinal. I have no problem with this thesis; a variant is independently defended by Kendall Walton: “certain facts about the origins of works of art have an essential role in criticism [because] aesthetic judgments rest on them in an absolutely fundamental way. For this reason ... the view that works of art should be judged simply by what can be perceived in them is seriously misleading.” (Walton 1970, 337) In Danto’s version of the same point, “the aesthetic qualities of the work are a function of their own historical identity” (Danto 1981, 111). Consequently, “aesthetic appreciation of artworks” is “a function of interpretation” (Danto 1981, 113).

II

Our obvious starting point is music that might be confused with a “mere real thing.” The most obvious candidate is John Cage’s *4’33”*, which notoriously instructs the performing musician to refrain from playing. Attending a concert of twentieth century music, one might neglect to study the concert program and, wondering why the pianist is waiting so long to begin the next piece, might confuse the sonic richness of the performance with ordinary whispering, squeaking chairs, and rustling programs. But is *4’33”* even music? Stephen Davies argues that it is not. I am inclined to accept his argument, which hinges on the premise that a musical composition necessarily organizes sound. However, one does not really organize sound unless one prescriptively excludes “some sonic possibilities” from correct performances of the music (Davies 1997, 458). Since Cage’s instructions for *4’33”* fail to provide for any distinction between performance sounds and ambient noise, no sonic possibilities are excluded. So it cannot be a musical work (Davies 1997, 460).

Many critics have claimed that *4’33”* is music that is composed entirely of silence. On this reading, it is the musical analogue of a primed but otherwise unpainted canvas that is displayed as an artistic comment on the art of painting. But Davies offers evidence about the piece’s history and Cage’s philosophy of music that together point in a different direction. *4’33”* is a work for performance, with a fixed duration, during which the audience is to attend to any and all sounds that occur. Ordinary sounds become the object of interpretive focus. However, the audience is not to regard the sounds as “aspiring to the conditions of music (traditionally conceived)” (Davies 1997, 450). Cage is calling attention to art-historically informed sonic properties. On this reading, the piece is more like exhibiting an empty picture frame than a primed but unfinished canvas or a uniformly white painting.

Danto’s fingerprints are all over Davies’ analysis. *4’33”* is certainly an artwork, argues Davies, for it has the requisite “aboutness” and point of view. However, rather than being

a musical composition, it is a piece of conceptual art about music (Davies 1997, 460). It transfigures any and all sounds heard during a performance of it.

Cage's transfiguration of ordinary sound requires reference to the concept of art, for it requires an understanding of conceptual art. It also requires an understanding of music as that has been traditionally conceived. However, it is not itself a musical work. So the example establishes nothing about the conditions that must be true of a musical work in order for interpretation of its performances to require reference to the concept of art. *4'33"* leaves us without direction on the issue of whether all music must be "involved with the concept of art" (Danto 1981, 95) in order to transfigure its relevant sonic properties.

III

Although interpretation of *4'33"* must be related to the concept of art, it is not music. Like *4'33"*, musical transfigurations involve facts about the origins of music as a necessary horizon for recognizing at least some rhetorical and aesthetic properties. But appropriate interpretation and recognition can be achieved by music fans who do not grasp art theory and who do not guide their interpretation by reference to the concept of art. In short, transfiguration does not always require the concept of art.

Danto clearly endorses the position that the concepts of music and art are only contingently related. Not all music is art, and not all art is music (Danto 1986, 78). If this position seems in any way odd, remember that Immanuel Kant offers theoretical reasons why instrumental music is fine art, and then reasons why it is not fine art. Then Kant sits on the fence on the question (Kivy 1993). So it is not far-fetched to say that a piece of Baroque *Tafelmusik* is music but not art, perhaps for the very same reasons that a child's song is music but not art. Corresponding to what Danto says about a child who produces something indiscernible from an artwork, the object might look the same, but the child's achievement lacks properties that the indiscernible artwork possesses (Danto 1981, 40). The child doesn't know enough about art history to make the same statement that an adult

artist would make by making an indiscernible thing (Danto 1981, 51). So Danto's position supports the parallel conclusion that children's songs are music but not art. The same might hold of most folk music. While I have no reason to think that Danto is opposed to art status for some popular music, reasons very similar to Danto's have been cited to prove that most rock music is too impoverished as expression to be art (Scruton, 157 and 502).

For Danto, a piece of music is an artwork only if it also satisfies the requisite necessary (and jointly sufficient) conditions for being an artwork. Carroll carefully enumerates Danto's essential conditions, and Danto has endorsed Carroll's statement of them (Carroll 1993, 80; Danto 1993, 205). According to this formulation, X is a work of art if and only if: (a) X has a subject, (b) about which X projects some attitude or point of view (it may be sufficient for X to have a style), (c) by means of rhetorical ellipsis (generally by the presence of metaphor), (d) which ellipsis engages audience participation (i.e., the operation of interpretation), (e) where the work in question and its interpretations require an art-historical context (generally involving a background of historically situated theory).

What generates the requirement for an art-historical context? Let's suppose that I can neither understand nor aesthetically appreciate Beethoven's symphonies unless I understand that they are music, that they are symphonies, that they are tonal works of a particular era, perhaps even that the set of nine was composed by a single pupil of Haydn. But if I know all of that, what more do I gain by interpreting them in light of the concept of art, or in light of the historically situated art theory of Beethoven's place and time? Yet Danto requires the relevance of that information if this music is art.

What about popular music? Even if some of it is art, there are many borderline cases. What's more, Anita Silvers is right to remind us that most of the popular audience has no reason to wonder if pop songs are art (Silvers, 448). If a piece of popular music does the job of transfiguring sonic properties without requiring any reference to the concept of art,

then why must we relate the historically contextualized transfiguring to the concept of art?

To move the argument forward, here is a case of indiscernible counterparts involving the boundary between organized sound and ambient sound.

In the spring of 1965, a British rhythm and blues quartet enters a London recording studio and records a pop song written by the group's guitarist. When the producer of the recording session sends the tape to the record company for pressing as a single, the engineers at the record label hear that the recording has been spoiled by feedback leakage onto the tape. The high-pitched, fluctuating wailing is the result of the electric guitarist holding his instrument at the same level as the speaker through which the volume is amplified; when the sound waves are captured by the guitar's electric pickup, it literally feeds back into the amplification process, producing feedback. In short, a mere real thing—a sonic malfunction—has intruded on the aural properties of the musical performance. The engineers at Decca Records return the master tape to the record producer, requesting a new recording session.

In this example, real life collides with a musical performance. Yet a three minute rhythm and blues song recorded in 1965 is no more a work of art than would be a tie painted blue by Cezanne's repeatedly wiping his brush on it (Danto 1981, 46).

Now imagine that it is the spring of 1965, and a British rhythm and blues quartet enters a London recording studio and records a pop song written by the group's guitarist. During recent live performances, the guitarist has been experimenting with the "found" sound of feedback, originally produced as an accident one evening as he raises his guitar's pickup to just the right level to capture the reverberations of its own amplification. (Although the Beatles have recently used a short burst of feedback at the start of their recording of "I Feel Fine," there are to date no pop music recordings integrating feedback as an ongoing element of a musical composition.) The quartet plays the song in standard fashion, then the guitarist overdubs extensive feedback over the music. When the engineers at Decca

Records hear the finished tape, they return it to the record's producer because the session has been ruined by a sonic malfunction. Bursts of guitar feedback saturate portions of the tape. However, the producer returns the tape to the engineers, explaining that the feedback is intended because it is one of the hallmark's of the young guitarist's performance style.

Here, the quartet is the Who, the recording is "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere," and the story is true (Marsh, 173). The music, to borrow from Danto's description of a different example, "has all the subtlety of a mackerel thrown in one's face" (Danto 1981, 44).

We can now embark on our Danto-derived pursuit of the difference that explains why the first case features music plus non-musical intrusion when the second case features only music. The two recordings are indiscernible with respect to their manifest properties. To explain this difference, we need something that the ear cannot hear. We need a theory of music as a historically evolving "language" of rhetorical communication. But, so far as I can tell, we do not need a theory of art. We do not need to know why music is one of the fine arts, nor why this particular piece is a case of fine art. (After all, it is doubtful that it is fine art.) However, it otherwise parallels Danto's example of the painted ties. When Danto denies that the tie painted by Cezanne is an artwork, it is because Cezanne is a historical juncture where the tie is the problem, not the paint. The incorporation of the ordinary object denies art status to this combination at this historical juncture. Likewise, when the Decca engineers rejected the Who's recording, they responded to the gulf between what was acceptable (the rhythm and blues performance) and what made no sense (the feedback, which constituted the intrusion of non-musical sound). As luck would have it, the Decca engineers were presented with "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" at that moment in the history of popular music where the two could be brought together into a single thing, a musical performance of a work designed to include feedback.

IV

If “Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere” parallels the case of the painted ties, I have not yet offered a case where the totality of a musical work could be mistaken for ordinary non-musical sounds. The mere possibility of such a mistake advances the argument. But the importance of the “atmosphere” of history and culture is more readily presented by extending real cases. So here are two examples of actual acts of interpreting sound that lend themselves to indiscernible counterparts.

In August, 1971, former Beatle George Harrison organizes two benefit concerts to aid famine victims in Bangla Desh. The concert opens with a sitar and sarod duet featuring improvisation by Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan. As can be heard on the album assembled from the shows, *The Concert for Bangla Desh* (1971), Ravi Shankar is introduced and he asks the crowd to refrain from smoking and to listen respectfully. His words are followed by about thirty seconds of sound from the four instruments on stage. The audience applauds with enthusiasm. Ravi Shankar tells them that he hopes they enjoy the music as much as they've enjoyed the tuning. Contrast this with a second (fabricated) case. Amused by the ignorance and arrogance displayed by Americans as they appropriate “world” music, a pop musician scores a work for sitar, sarod, tabla, and tamboura. She calls it “The Complete History of the Music of India.” The piece lasts about thirty seconds and it reproduces, note for note, the sounds made by Ravi Shankar and the other three musicians as they tuned up in front of the audience at Madison Square Garden that day in 1971.

At the benefit concert, the sequence of sounds produced by Ravi Shankar and his accompanists was not music, yet many members of the audience believed that music had been performed. “The Complete History of the Music of India” is sonically indiscernible, but it is music. Ravi Shankar’s tuning has no subject and the sounds are not about the world in any way, and it adopts no attitude or point of view by means of rhetorical ellipsis. In contrast, “The Complete History of the Music of India” elliptically conveys the naivety with which Americans have enthusiastically treated music as a universal

language, as mere sonic wallpaper that can be consumed for enjoyment without concern for its originating cultural location. Popular culture is sufficiently rife with parody and complex allusion that this musical work need not be a case of *artistic* allusion in order to succeed as a musical allusion (Gracyk 2007, 71).

My second example goes in the opposite direction, from an actual piece of music, copyrighted in 1969, to imagining a set of identical sounds that are not music. At the end of 1969, the Grateful Dead released the double album *Live Dead*. (Regarded as one of the best live rock albums ever assembled, it now fills one compact disc.) As the title suggests, the album presents concert performances of their music selected from three different 1969 concert performances. One of the seven pieces is a free improvisation for which all seven performing musicians receive equal composing credit. The title, “Feedback,” gives a good description of the piece. Where the Who’s “Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere” embellished a song with electronic feedback, the Grateful Dead developed the practice of using feedback as the basis for group improvisation. As bass player Phil Lesh makes clear in his autobiography, the Dead’s interest in sounds that were traditionally excluded as unmusical did not arise from their theoretical awareness of similar trends in art music. Lesh points out that they only “later learned that this approach was a fundamental tenet” of the work of John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen (Lesh 2005, 71 n. 4). Tom Constanten, one of the Dead’s two keyboardists at the time, knew some of this art music. But Constanten seems to have played no special role in their improvisational practices, which were already well developed before his brief time with the group. With their roots in blues and jazz performance practices, the Dead were also aware of the British rock musicians who had begun incorporating feedback into rock performance. The *Live Dead* performance of nearly eight minutes of feedback seems to have been a natural outgrowth of the Grateful Dead’s collective interest in improvisation, electronic instrumentation, and democratic musical processes.

Interpreted as music, “Feedback” progresses from spiky dissonances that recall the music of Béla Bartók to a gentler ebb and flow that recalls the pastoral charm of Ralph Vaughan Williams’ *The Lark Ascending*. This progression of feeling is probably the organizing

principle understood in advance by the participating musicians, for the Dead had established a practice of ending the evening by transitioning from feedback into an a cappella rendition of “And We Bid You Goodnight,” a traditional folk song they found on an album of Alan Lomax field recordings, *The Real Bahamas*.

Contrast the Grateful Dead’s “Feedback” with a second, indiscernible sequence of sounds. Some rock musicians are testing the sound levels of their instruments during the sound check before a concert. The drummer determines whether his trap set meets his needs. He hits the snare drum a few times and then taps each of his cymbals. He makes a few adjustments and then does the same thing again. Meanwhile, the guitarist loosens up with some bluesy single-string note runs. The bass guitarist plucks a few isolated notes. The pianist is not heard because the piano is being tuned. The organist eventually tests his sound volume with a handful of sustained chords. As this is taking place, the sound technicians bring a series of electric guitars and bass guitars to the stage. They connect each one and make sure that it has a live feed into the amplifiers. The guitars produce “extremely loud distorted tones wrenched from the speakers by electromagnetic interaction between the musical notes perceived by the pickups and the magnetic fields of the pickup, speaker, and amplifier” (Lesh 2005, 71). These tones vary as the sound technicians test the guitar feeds to the amplifiers and then move the instruments to their stands at the back of the stage.

Recorded, these sounds would be indiscernible sonic counterparts of the Grateful Dead’s “Feedback.” However, they are not music. Furthermore, they do not adopt any attitude or point of view by means of rhetorical ellipsis. They lack, for instance, a subject. In contrast, “Feedback” has a subject: collective processes. The unplanned, uncoordinated feedback lacks the narrative structure built into “Feedback,” lacks its overarching tension and release, and lacks its anarchistic critique of the repressive forces that undermine the American experiment of democracy.

“Feedback” is music that transfigures various sonic properties by virtue of its musical-historical context. Yet I cannot see why a Grateful Dead fan needs to think about Cage

and Stockhausen in order to “get” what the Dead are doing. Nothing I have come across about the band and their processes suggests that they had a collective intention to make art. (Their collective intention to make rock music that parallels jazz seems to have been unrelated to any interest in art history or the nature of art.) In contrast, the feedback made during the sound check is not music and it satisfies none of Danto’s five conditions. Similarly, Ravi Shankar’s tuning process satisfies none of Danto’s five conditions. Yet a piece of pop music that sounds exactly like it might satisfy four of the five conditions, and it might partially satisfy the fifth condition by demanding interpretation relative to a musical-historical context.

V

Why, exactly, does Danto build the requirement of an art-historical context into his analysis? Again and again, it comes down to this insight: statements that would be false as statements about a non-art object become true when said about them as works of art. Therefore the ability to recognize that any otherwise false statement about the ordinary object is a true statement about a work of art requires awareness that we “make different statements depending upon a variety of contextual factors” (Danto 1981, 133). In some cases, an apt interpretation requires awareness that an artist is making a statement that is informed by the artist’s knowledge of “artistic themes and the history of art.” This “atmosphere” or context of interpretation allows the artist to make a statement about “art objects.” In short, knowledge of art theories and art history is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for an artwork to make a statement or express an attitude about art. Therefore, art status involves the requisite “atmosphere of artistic theory [and] knowledge of the history of art” (Danto 1981, 135).

This argument fails to provide evidence that the transfiguration of the commonplace (when that involves something over and above mere representation) requires reference to an art theory, to art history, or to the concept of art. Statements that are false as statements about a non-musical sound become true when said about them as music, and music need not be art, nor understood as such, for the transfiguration to occur. Said of a

recording of feedback generated accidentally at a sound check, “Those sounds are a collective process coming to terms with dissonance” means something very different from the same sentence said about the feedback improvisation on *Live Dead*. “That’s feedback” said by the Decca sound engineers rejecting the tape of “Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere” has very different implications than the same sentence said by a Who fan. For knowledgeable listeners, the Who’s feedback and the Dead’s feedback are interpreted things. But there is no need for the musicians, record producer, and sound engineers to share a theory of art. Some agreement about music will be sufficient.

If real properties become elliptical/metaphorical/expressive by contextualizing them, and the appropriate interpretation can be grasped by thinking about music but without reference to any theory of art, then reference to a theory of art is only relevant when the work in question is making a statement about the art status of works of art. Some songs and some instrumental music satisfy four of Danto’s five conditions, and they satisfy the fifth in every way except by appealing to the concept of art: musical activity “transfigures” sequences of sounds so that literally false statements about them become true statements about them *as music*. (That some music fails to function rhetorically is no more relevant here than is the fact that most prose is not art.) So the atmosphere of art history and theory is not a necessary condition for accomplishing what Danto finds most remarkable about art, namely that false statements are true when said about the object in its historically contextualized, rhetorical use. Danto only needs the fifth and last condition to specify an art-historical context in the special case where the work’s subject is artworks. As Carroll observed some years ago, we may need a historicity requirement, but the version presented in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* is far too exclusive (Carroll 1993, 103). But where Carroll offers a counter-example that he thinks must be granted the status of art (so that the analysis of art can be shown to involve a weaker fifth condition), we can find counter-examples of full-blown transfiguration that do not require any such admission. Transfiguration is something different from either imitation or mere representation, but transfiguration is not the special province of artworks.

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