

## Content, Embodiment and Aesthetic Force

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What is art? What properties differentiate artworks from mundane objects, events or states of affairs? The question, which is central to the philosophy of art, has preoccupied Arthur Danto for more than 40 years now. In *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto sets out a detailed answer, which he later in “Art and Meaning,” his introductory essay in *The Madonna of the Future*, parses down. There Danto suggests that for something to be an artwork it must have two properties, viz. content and embodiment. While this economical explanation is well motivated in some respects, it is problematic. The two conditions, I contend, are by themselves insufficient to distinguish artworks from all non-artworks. My intention is to bolster Danto’s explanation by outlining a third condition. I will argue that artworks are metaphysically distinct in part because they possess aesthetic force. I begin my discussion by motivating Danto’s two conditions for art. Next, I present several counterexamples that reveal the insufficiency of his characterization. Finally, I present the idea of aesthetic force and suggest how it handles the problem facing Danto.

### *1. Two Conditions: Content and Embodiment*

Among the cornerstones of Danto’s philosophy of art is his claim that artworks have intentional content. Unlike chairs, mountains or shooting stars, artworks are *about* things (objects, events, states of affairs, and so on). For example, Manet’s *Olympia* depicts a female prostitute reclining on a bed to whom a servant is bringing a bouquet of flowers. Of course, the painting is about more than just that: it is surely also about the hypocrisy of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century art-going bourgeoisie,

the role of spectatorship in art, and, by likening a Parisian prostitute to Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, the gradual empowerment of women.

It's noteworthy that, according to Danto, non-representational as well as representational artworks have content. Despite the fact that the major works of Pollack and Rauschenberg don't depict material objects, this doesn't imply that they're not *about* anything. For example, Pollack's splash and drip canvases are about, among other things, movement and color and Rauschenberg's all-white painting is about shadows and the changes of light that register on its surface. In fact, even an artwork about nothing has content. As Danto is apt to observe, a distinction must be recognized between "not being about anything and being about nothing" (xx).<sup>1</sup> A painting about nothing still has content.

The type of intentional content Danto believes that all artworks have seems to be Fregean in character. This is suggested in several ways. First, artworks that lack reference (e.g. those about nothing) have content.<sup>2</sup> Second, an artwork's content is something that (at least in many cases) can be expressed descriptively. One of the central goals of art criticism, according to Danto, is to make explicit an artwork's content (meaning) (xxviii), and this of course the critic does through descriptions. In fact, the critic's role in expressing the artwork's content is especially required in the case of contemporary art, which is commonly not only non-representative but about the concept of art itself (ix). A critic's knowledge of the various social, political, historical, etc., conditions of the artwork's creation, possession and consumption thereby helps her to express the work's content because, in general, a work doesn't wear its meaning (content) on its sleeve. In effect, this suggests Danto's utilization of a Fregean notion of content as well. Content, after all, is considered by him to be a non-perceptual (abstract)

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<sup>1</sup> All references are to Arthur Danto's 'Art and Meaning,' in *Madonna of the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> I recognize that this is put rather quickly and requires a more substantial defense. But, it nevertheless strikes me, as I know it does Danto, that reference-less terms and concepts (or sentences and mental states) continue to be a basic problem for Referential Theories of Meaning and Content.

property: “what makes something art is not something that meets the eye” (xxvii-xxviii).

It’s noteworthy that while all artworks, according to Danto, have content, this doesn’t imply that an artwork’s content must remain invariable over time or that it must have one content (whatever that could mean). While there are better and worse interpretations (art criticisms) of an artwork’s content (dependent on such things as its coherence and how well it accounts for biographical details of the artist and the social, economic and political conditions of its creation, possession, and consumption, among other things), the postmodernist’s claim that meaning (content) is highly sensitive to context and ever-changing is consistent with Danto’s claim that all artworks have content. In short, by insisting that artworks have content one need not be insisting that they have the same or a single content in different contexts or at different times.

Danto’s second condition for art is material embodiment, or just ‘embodiment.’ As he observes, this brings his notion of an artwork in conflict with Hegel’s notion of symbolic art, the content of which is external to rather than embodied by the object (xx). Similarly, the embodiment condition also distinguishes Danto’s notion of art from Croce’s. For Croce, art is ultimately a mental state or event, one that can be expressed or embodied materially but need not be. By contrast, for Danto embodiment is an essential condition of an artwork, something without which an object (event, state of affairs) could not be a work of art.

The embodiment condition serves to do several things. For example, in addition to distinguishing Danto’s notion of art from both Hegel’s and Croce’s, it enables one to distinguish different kinds of artworks with the same contents. For example, it’s conceivable that a painting and a piece of music could have the same content, e.g. that both could be about nothing. Without the embodiment condition, there would be no way of distinguishing them as different artworks. For if contents are indeed non-perceptual (abstract) properties, then there wouldn’t be a way of distinguishing artworks based on their distinct material embodiment (in this case an object of canvas and paint vs. an event of tones and tempo), let alone based on their unique spatiotemporal presence (embodiment).

Moreover, the embodiment condition enables one to distinguish a piece of art criticism from the artwork it is a criticism of. If indeed the goal of an art critic is to make explicit the content of an artwork, a good piece of art criticism, one that succeeds in this task, might be taken to have the same content as the artwork it is a criticism of. Without the embodiment condition, there would be no way of distinguishing the piece of art criticism from the artwork itself. Of course, this may already suggest a problem for Danto's characterization of art. If indeed a piece of art criticism and an artwork are embodied and have content, then isn't a piece of art criticism also an artwork? I'll return to this question momentarily.<sup>3</sup>

The two conditions certainly differentiate artworks from many non-artworks. Without the content condition, Danto would be unable to distinguish certain kinds of artworks from mere objects, e.g. Duchamp's *Fountain* from an identical-looking mundane urinal. And without the embodiment condition, Danto would be unable to distinguish artworks from mental states and, for that matter, from one another. Any two objects, events or state of affairs with the same content (whether it's generally considered an artwork, non-artwork, or intentional state) could not be distinguished.

## 2. *The Inadequacy of the Two Conditions*

While Danto's two conditions are relatively well-motivated, the question is, Are they sufficient? The answer, I believe, is 'No.' The problem is that many things besides artworks meet these conditions, things we wouldn't generally consider art. For example, a billboard, a street sign and a soup recipe each have content and are embodied. A billboard may be about the luxury and gas

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<sup>3</sup> The embodiment condition, it should be noted, is or at least should be more flexible than I've intimated. For example, works of film, music and photography (especially in digital formats) suggest that embodiment can't require that a work is instantiated in a particular material substratum. This leads to the question, How must it be instantiated? It seems clear that in the case of film, music and photography that the token identity of the work isn't dependent on a token material embodiment, though perhaps it is dependent upon a type of material embodiment. But even this might be questioned. If Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* were never performed again, many would nevertheless admit that it still exists. I'll refrain from exploring these problems here.

mileage of an automobile, a content (message) that it materially embodies on a poster glued to an enormous wooden frame. A stop sign is about stopping and is materially embodied on an octagon shaped piece of aluminum (or steel) painted red and white. And a recipe is about the ingredients and the making of a kind of soup, a content which is materially embodied on the pages of a cookbook.

Or consider a rather different example, viz. human action. An action such as George's lifting his arm is distinct from mere bodily movement in that it involves (essentially) his wanting to lift his arm, an intentional state with content. (Note the parallel between an action and artwork on the one hand and a mere bodily movement and mere object on the other.) Moreover, without being embodied, without a body or at least an arm, George could not perform such an action. In this way, actions have both content and embodiment. However, while some actions may be parts of or may themselves be artworks, most are not.

The same might be said about a piece of art criticism. Like actions, art criticisms have content (they are, among other things, about artworks and presumably attempt to make explicit their meanings) and are embodied on the pages of a magazine like *The Nation*. But isn't it far-fetched to presume that all pieces of art criticism are themselves artworks?!

It's noteworthy that appealing to the possibility that, in this day and age, anything could be an artwork, that any billboard, street sign, soup recipe, human action or piece of art criticism could be a work of art, is beside the point. The fact is that most billboards, street signs, soup recipes, human actions and pieces of art criticism are not artworks despite the fact that they meet Danto's two conditions for art. This is the problem.

Danto is not unaware of the problem, which he observes was raised to him as a friendly criticism by Noel Carroll (xxi). But his discussion of the matter seems beside the point. He recognizes that the original Brillo boxes, designed by the commercial artist James Harvey, have content and embodiment just as both Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and the appropriationist artist Mike Bidlo's *Not Warhol* do. However, he also recognizes that Harvey's Brillo boxes are

artworks themselves, works of commercial art, to be sure, but artworks all the same! The problem he addresses in the latter half of his essay, 'Art and Meaning,' is the problem of how to distinguish the contents of these three works, something he believes art criticism is well suited for. Despite being almost indistinguishable to the eye, the contents of the works of Harvey, Warhol and Bidlo are distinct, which he illustrates characteristically with wonderful adeptness by showing that the art criticism appropriate to one is not appropriate to the other.

While much of this is certainly true, it doesn't speak to the problem concerning the adequacy of his two conditions of art. Short of accepting the rather implausible view that all billboards, street signs, recipes, actions, and so on, *are* (rather than simply could be) works of art, what appears to be needed is a third condition. And this is something I now want to propose.

### *3. The Third Condition: Aesthetic Force*

Where there is content, there is force. In fact, the three notions, *content*, *embodiment* and *force*, are recognized and distinguished by linguists as well as philosophers (especially of language and mind). For example, consider an utterance such as 'John is at home.' The utterance's meaning or content (its semantics) concerns its aboutness, the fact that it is about John being at home. The way this meaning is embodied in the utterance is unique, given the distinctive syntax (lexicon and grammar) of English. But semantics (content) and syntax (linguistic embodiment) aren't the only properties that the utterance possesses. In addition to these, it is characterized by its force or use (pragmatics). For example, the sentence 'John is at home' can be used as an assertion, a question or even a wish. In other words, while its content and linguistic embodiment remain the same, it can have different uses (forces).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Obviously, more can be said about the relation between these 3 notions. For example, an utterance's translation from one language to another illustrates a change of linguistic embodiment but a preservation of content and force. An ambiguous utterance illustrates a possible change of content and perhaps even of force but a preservation of linguistic embodiment. A conversation in which one interlocutor remarks 'John is going to the store.' and another responds with 'John is going to the store?!' reflects a change of force but a preservation of meaning and linguistic embodiment.

What is true of utterances (sentences) is, I believe, likewise true of works of art. In much the way contents can be linguistically embodied in different languages, they can be artistically embodied in different media, e.g. film, painting, music, and sculpture. But if artworks have both content and embodiment, then surely they also have force, aesthetic force. Elsewhere I've argued that aesthetic force is not the same as linguistic force, as the force of mundane utterances (speech acts) and sentences. This isn't something I have space enough to defend here. So, I'll assume the point for now and attempt to explain what I take aesthetic force to be.

Like linguistic forces, aesthetic force has a function (point). Yet, where an assertion commits the speaker to the truth of a content and a question requires that the speaker intends for the hearer to answer, artworks have a function without a function. In other words, the way artworks present their contents is as functionless or purposeless. In claiming this, I'm not suggesting that artworks lack a function, this would be equivalent to saying that they lack force. Rather, what I'm suggesting is that there *is* a distinctive way in which the content of artworks is presented, viz. functionlessly.

Aesthetic force, I suggest, is an essential property of all artworks, whether verbal or nonverbal. Their function without function helps to distinguish them from other content-bearing media, whether linguistic, mental or artificial. This is not to say that an artwork's force is transparent. One might not recognize the fact that the object or event before one has a function without function. But this just illustrates that aesthetic force isn't a perceptual property, an artwork doesn't wear its force on its sleeve either. This, of course, is true of utterances as well, e.g. to recognize that 'Do you have a dollar?' is a request, we need to appeal to something external to it, viz. a speaker's intention. Of course, the difference in the case of an artwork is that this non-perceptual, external component need not be fixed by the artist or performer's conscious mental states. Just what, then, might fix an object's aesthetic force? This all depends on the theory of art one endorses. For example, aesthetic force might be fixed external to the artwork by appealing to the artist's unconscious mental states, the social conditions of the work's

origin, the audience's experience of the work, the art community's reception of it, and so on. For my purposes here, it isn't necessary to decide between these theoretical options.

If indeed artworks do have a unique kind of force, a unique way of presenting their contents, then this third condition, aesthetic force, enables us to handle the counterexamples we considered above. A billboard, a street sign and a soup recipe each have force as well as content and embodiment. A billboard serves to solicit or entreat, a street sign functions as an order or command, and a soup recipe presents its content as a directive or suggestion. An action such as George's lifting his arm is accompanied by George's *intention* to lift his arm (the mental force type analogous to or a precondition for a request or command). And a piece of art criticism has the role of describing, questioning and/or criticizing an artwork.

This isn't to say that artworks themselves cannot entreat, command, suggest, request and criticize. But, this is not their primary function, this is not what makes them works of art. Once an object, event or state of affairs becomes an artwork, it's previous linguistic and non-linguistic functions are superseded (though not necessarily completely abandoned) by their aesthetic force. In other words, like Duchamp's *Fountain* which, as an artwork, no longer functions (primarily, at least) as a receptacle for urine, any linguistic or non-linguistic function an object once had is superseded by its role as an artwork, as an embodied content with aesthetic force.

Obviously, much more needs to be said. A more careful explanation is needed for what aesthetic force is. An argument is required for why non-artworks that have content and are embodied never have it. And an account of the relation between aesthetic force as a primary force type and secondary, linguistic force types (e.g. assertions, questions, commands) must also be given. However, while the notion of aesthetic force deserves to be developed further, I do hope to have suggested how it, as a condition for art, could help to provide an adequate characterization of art.

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### **Abstract**

What properties differentiate artworks from mundane objects, events or states of affairs? The question, which is central to the philosophy of art, has preoccupied Arthur Danto for more than 40 years now. His most recent attempt at addressing it is found in 'Art and Meaning,' where he suggests that for something to be an artwork it must have two properties, viz. content and embodiment. While this economical (and ecumenical) explanation is well motivated in some respects, it is problematic. The two conditions, I contend, are by themselves insufficient to distinguish artworks from all non-artworks. My intention in this paper is to bolster Danto's explanation by outlining a third condition. I argue that artworks are metaphysically distinct from mere objects in part because they possess aesthetic force. By appealing to this third condition, I maintain, the difficulties facing Danto's more economical account can be dealt with.