

Danto and Luhmann: Ontological Systems of Art

Francis Halsall
University College Cork

(i) Introduction

As Danto himself acknowledges, we often read literature in the same way as we engage with works of art, that is, with the benefit of hindsight. And, 25 years on from the *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, we are provided with new contexts for its reading. In this paper I propose the work of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann as one of these contexts. This paper introduces the connections between Arthur Danto's arguments in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981) and Niklas Luhmann's sociological account of art that received its fullest expression in *Art as a Social System* (2000)¹.

Luhmann was familiar with Danto's work and makes several references to *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* in *Art as a Social System*. However, although several commentators have alluded to the relationship between Danto's and Luhmann's arguments² it has not been fully explored. Danto himself has not extensively engaged with Luhmann's work although has expressed an interest in the connections between it and his own ideas³.

Perhaps one reason that the connections have not been further explored is the relative obscurity of Luhmann's work. In German speaking academia Niklas Luhmann is amongst the most important and widely read sociologists of the late 20th Century. At the time of his death in 1998 this was not reflected in his English language reception, although this is changing with the continued translation of his work.

(ii) Methodological comparisons

Superficially, there are clear methodological differences between their two positions making the comparison seemed forced. Whilst Danto's work (at least in 1981) was framed by American Pragmatic philosophy, Luhmann was situated within a German sociological tradition.

Luhmann's method is grounded in the development of a methodological tool for sociology in Systems-Theory. This involves the analysis of society as comprised of a variety of sub-systems that are operatively closed and functionally distinct from one another. Each system operates according to its own internal and self-defined rules. For

¹ This paper is a summary of a much longer discussion on the connections between Danto and Luhmann's theoretical positions and, as such, can only introduce some main points of connection. This discussion forms part of a book length examination of Luhmann's aesthetics and theory of art.

² Art & Language: Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison and Mel Ramsden, 'On Painting', *Tate Papers* (Spring, 2004) [<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/>]; Matthew Rampley, 'Systems Aesthetics: Burnham and Others,' *Vector*, (issue B-12, January 2005)

[http://virose.pt/vector/b_12/rampley.html]; Gregory Eiselein, 'Society as Communication, Art as Communication, and the Paradoxes of Autonomous Systems,' *The Review of Communication*, 2.1, (Jan. 2002) pg. 39-43; Savänen, 'Art as an auto-poietic Sub-System of Modern Society: A Critical Analysis of the concepts of Art and Autopoietic Systems in Luhmann's Late Production,' *Theory Culture and Society* vol. 18, no. 1, (Feb. 2001)

³ From personal email correspondence, Sept 13th, 2006.

Luhmann these systems include economic, political, legal, scientific, religious and educational systems. The art system is another such system and thus functions according to a set of activities that are unique to itself. Systems-theory, thus, works from the position that there are similar structures in different social systems that may be analysed from its perspective according to a number of key systems-theoretical concepts.

Danto's theory of art on the other hand is not a sociological one, although it is often misread as such as he has acknowledged:

The expression 'artworld' sounds vaguely sociological, though at the time I had in mind something quite different.....I actually meant a world consisting of works of art, a self-enriching community of ontologically complex objects...And I thought some theory was needed which served to enfranchise it.⁴

One reason for this sociological association is his affiliation with the Institutional Theory of Art which is commonly read as an attempt to entirely situate art in relation to institutional or sociological systems. There are two main problems with this.

Firstly, Danto's own resistance to the Institutional Theory, which he might have inadvertently fostered⁵, yet which he also critiques as being 'shallow.' Whilst Danto has acknowledged that there is something about works of art such as *Brillo Box* which make them receptive to the Institutional Theory, he insists that they are not fully explained by it:

Parallel perplexities remain in the parallel theory of art according to which a material object, or (artifact) is said to be an artwork when so regarded from the institutional framework of the *artworld*. For the Institutional Theory of Art leaves unexplained, even if it can account for why such a work as Duchamp's *Fountain* might have been elevated from a mere thing to an artwork, why that particular urinal should have sustained so impressive a promotion, while other urinals, like it in every obvious respect, should remain in an ontologically degraded category.⁶

Ultimately Danto's argument is about addressing ontological questions regarding the definition of art rather than in describing art in terms of the social conventions from which it emerges. Danto's theory of art is that although art requires a process of interpretation to be seen as such there are conditions by which an object qualifies to be identified as a work of art. These are that it is both about something and that it embodies what it is about: "In the *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* I advanced two conditions, condensed as 'X is an art work if it embodies a meaning'" the chief

⁴ Arthur Danto, 'Responses and Replies,' *Danto and his Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins, (Blackwell, 1993) pg. 204

⁵ "And I got a letter from a guy who said, 'we're doing an anthology on the institutional theory of art and we wonder if we can have permission to reprint your paper [The Artworld].? And I said 'what's the institutional theory of art?' And he said, 'you're the founder of it!'" 'Behind the Brillo Box,' an Interview with Arthur Danto, (with Dr Francis Halsall, Dr Julia Jansen & Dr Tony O'Connor), *The Philosopher's Magazine*, (Jan. 2005), pg. 75 ff.

⁶ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, (Harvard University Press, 1981) Pg. 5

merit of which lay in its weakness.”⁷ Danto argues that art is, ultimately, definable in philosophical terms and therefore not everything may qualify as art. Danto thus holds that art can have an ontological definition (if not a specifically material one,) and that there is something about this definition that is, ultimately, irreducible to the mere process of philosophical definition alone⁸ which will involve appropriate knowledge of the historical and social conditions of the work.

For Luhmann, on the other hand, art is only differentiated by virtue of it being observed as such by the art-system itself. Luhmann’s theory identifies art (and the cognate concepts of form and medium^{9,10}) as utterly relative to the operations of the social systems within which it is located. Art is, therefore, for Luhmann not singularly definable, and there is no irreducible element to it (although he does explain how it facilitates a certain type of communication in social systems.) In fact Luhmann’s account of art is profoundly anti-ontological, as it accounts for art as being entirely relative to the process of observation.¹¹ In summary, for Danto there is something about the art object that is irreducible to its being observed as an art object whilst for Luhmann art is entirely contingent upon the process of it being observed as such. However, as is explored in more detail below, what remains shared between the two thinkers is the exploration of how descriptions of art are relative to the social systems that differentiate art from other objects.

There is a second problem in reading Danto against a sociological account. This is that any attempt to subsume the specifically philosophical aspirations of his theory to Sociology is not sustainable because Danto’s agenda is not a sociological one. It does

⁷ Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, (Open Court Publishing, 2003) pg. 25

⁸ For a further discussion on the element of irreducibility in Danto’s argument see Diarmuid Costello, ‘Whatever Happened to “Embodiment?”: The Eclipse of Materiality in Danto’s Ontology of Art’ *Angelaki*, vol. 12, no.1, (forthcoming, 2007)

⁹ His description of medium and form does apply specifically to art and there are different media in different systems; for example the mediums money, language, law and so forth, all of which can take particular forms. The most general mediums are meaning (sinn) (self-reference within a system) ; time and space. Luhmann identifies his coupling of medium/form in Fritz Heider’s connection of, “Thing and Medium,” *Psychological Issues* 1 (1959): 1–34. For further discussions on Luhmann’s concept of medium/form see: Jesper Tække, “Medium Theory and Social Systems”, Paper presented at: *The 47 Annual Conference of the International Society of Systems Science*. (July in Crete. And the CCC Luhmann conference in Copen.) [http://home16.inet.tele.dk/jesper_t/mt_sosy.pdf] (March 20th, 2006); Elena Esposito, “The Arts of Contingency”, *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Autumn 2004); the whole edition of *Image and Narrative*, # 6, “Medium Theory”, (Jan. 2003); Dietrich Schwanitz, “Systems Theory According to Niklas Luhmann: Its Environment and Conceptual Strategies”, *Cultural Critique*, no. 30, “The Politics of Systems and Environments, Part I.” (Spring, 1995) p. 137-170; and WJT Mitchell, “Addressing Media” in *What Do Pictures Want?*, (University of Chicago Press, 2005); Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, “Silicon Sociology, or, Two Kings on Hegel’s Throne? Kittler, Luhmann and the Posthuman Merger of German Media Theory,” *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13.2 (2000) pg. 391-420

¹⁰ “From a systems-theoretical perspective, by contrast, both media and forms are constructed by the system and therefore always presuppose a specific system reference. They are not given “as such.” The distinction between medium and form, just like the concept of information, is strictly internal to the system. There is no corresponding difference in the environment. Neither media nor forms “represent” system states of an ultimately physical nature.” Luhmann, N., *Art as a Social System*, (trans. Knodt, E.,) Stanford: Stanford University Press, (1995) 2000 pp. 103. See also entire chapter, ‘Medium and Form’ pp. 102 ff.

¹¹ As Kitty Zijlmans has observed a key feature of systems-theory is that its, “starting point has to be an anti-ontological view of the world.” Zijlmans, K, “Art History as Systems-Theory” (unpublished translation by Annie Wright), in Zijlmans, K, & Halbertsma, M, *Gezichtspunten. Een Inleiding in de Methoden van de Kunstgeschiedenis*, Nijmegen: Universiteit Nijmegen, (1993) Ch. 9

not, for example, address specific and empirical questions concerning the social nature of art as sociologists such as Bourdieu and Becker have done. Neither, however, does Luhmann.¹² The strength of Luhmann's work is also its most frustrating aspect - that it works at a very high level of abstraction and is not grounded in empirical observations of particular social activity.

A further unavoidable distinction between the two lies in their relationship to post-modernity. Whilst in 1981 Danto provided a sensitive and well-informed account of post-modern art (and has continued to do so since then), he has done so from within his own particular philosophical and critical tradition. In short he never embraced deconstructionism and this has never worked its way into his method. Thus, whilst Danto has reflected upon post-modern art practice he has not framed his own arguments with deconstructivist vocabularies and strategies. He does not, for example, reflect upon and deconstruct the structure of his own texts. This has meant that Danto's writings are always clear, explanatory and generous to their readers. Luhmann, on the other hand, (who came to deconstructionism through Derrida and his reading of Husserl) is involved in a project of applying deconstructionism to Sociology. He has, for example, worked a theory of complexity into his writings to such an extent that they often become too complex to read. For Luhmann his own systems-theory is an extension of deconstructionism (what he calls a process of 2nd order observation) and can provide further accounts of how human subjects and discursive positions are situated within and constituted by complex social systems.¹³

These differences aside there is at least one similarity in their working methods.

Danto states that his examples in the *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* are not unique to a philosophy of art:

It is a striking fact that an arrayed example of the sort just constructed, consisting of indiscernible counterparts that may have radically distinct

¹² "The sources for Luhmann's thought are a reflection of the interdisciplinary nature of systems-thinking in general and his own erudition and breadth of learning. As a sociologist his work shares a concern with methodological reflexivity pre-figured in Weber, Simmel and Durkheim although his notion of observation makes his position much more radically contingent upon a self-reflexive position. His notion of systems-theory synthesises the sociology of social systems formulated by Talcott Parsons with the General Systems Theory of the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy his theory of communication draws on the Communication Theory of Claude Shannon and the Cybernetics of Norbert Weiner and Von Foerster; his theory of Distinction is based on the obscure calculus of George Spencer Brown and he takes his theories of emergence and autopoiesis from biologist Gregory Bateson and the neuro-biological theories of consciousness pioneered by Maturana and Varela. Philosophically Luhmann's Systems-Theory owes a large debt to Husserl in which the observing system replaces the transcendental ego to produce a phenomenology of social as well as psychic systems. Derrida's engagement with Husserl also re-appears in Luhmann and he frequently acknowledges the comparisons between the self-reflexivity of systems-theory, especially that of 2nd order observations and deconstruction. 2nd order observations in particular recall both Nietzsche's perspectivism and Foucault's questioning of the relationship between discourse and its object." From Francis Halsall, 'Niklas Luhmann,' in Costello & Vickery, (eds.) *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, (Berg Publishing, Jan. 2007)

¹³ Niklas Luhmann, 'Deconstruction as second-order observing.' In, *New Literary History*, 24, (4; 1993), pg. 763-782. Luhmann's use of deconstruction forms part of conditions by which he was systematically critiqued by Habermas. See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, "Excursus on Luhmann's Appropriation of the Philosophy of the Subject through Systems Theory." in: *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA., 1987) Pp. 368-85

ontological affiliations, may be constructed elsewhere if not everywhere else in philosophy.¹⁴

He continues that there are “parallel structures” in philosophy of action and the philosophy of art. These “parallel structures” resonate with Luhmann’s identification of “comparable structures” that are shared by different social systems, and which thus open them up to the comparative analysis of systems-theory. It is in the spirit of such methodological isomorphism that connections between Danto and Luhmann might be further teased out in the comparable structures of their two positions.

(iii) Artworld/ Art-System

As already noted, the most obvious point of contact between the two lies in the similarities between Danto’s well known conception of the Artworld, and Luhmann’s account of Art as a ‘Social System.’ Danto argues that to appreciate something as a work of art is to acknowledge its situation relative to the artworld. The artworld provides the context and necessary conditions under which art is received and encountered. Thus, one’s knowledge of the work of art (such as artist’s intention, historical references, style and so on) actively informs and generates the context of the work of art. Danto’s test cases (such as the opening example of the ‘Red Square’ and ‘Brillo-Box’) are “paired cases where only one member of the couple is an artwork.”¹⁵

Such examples of self-similar objects are used to demonstrate that one cannot use perceptual and aesthetic qualities as a means of making distinctions between art and non-art:

we cannot appeal to aesthetic considerations in order to get our definition of art, inasmuch as we need the definition of art in order to identify the sorts of aesthetic responses appropriate to works of art in contrast with mere things.¹⁶

Danto provides an elegant formula for this:

An object *o* is then an artwork only under an interpretation *I*, where *I* is a sort of function that transfigures *o* into a work: $I(o) = W$. Then even if *o* is a perceptual constant, variations in *I* constitute different works. Now *o* may be looked at, but the work has to be achieved, even if the achievement is immediate and without any conscious effort on the observer’s part.¹⁷

This is reflected more radically in Luhmann’s argument that both art and mediums are utterly contingent upon the art-system. Further, not only are art and mediums contingent upon the systems of their institutional and discursive situation but they are actually constituted by them. In other words; without an art system to observe it, art wouldn’t exist; and without artistic forms there would be no artistic media within which they are manifest. This is slightly different from Danto’s claim that without a theory to describe it art would not be described; it would still exist, but in an undescribed state.

¹⁴ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, (Harvard University Press, 1981) Pg. 4

¹⁵ *ibid.* pg. 90

¹⁶ *ibid.* pg. 94

¹⁷ *ibid.* pg. 125

However, what Danto's argument doesn't really explain (because he's not really interested in it) is how the artworld works and what it does. Luhmann, on the other hand provides an account of how the art-system, like other systems, operates according to a number of processes that systems-theory identifies. An introductory account of this follows below.

Systems-theory opens up a description of the art-world in terms similar to other complex systems. In doing so Luhmann potentially provides a description of the conditions under which Danto's Artworld may operate.

Systems, Luhmann argues, operate via self-organisation or what Luhmann calls *Autopoiesis*. This means that they systematise their elements in distinction to their environments (which are complex and external to the system). For a system to be autopoietic means that the reproduction and sustaining of the system is caused by its own internal operations. The autopoietic system is, in Luhmann's terms, "self-referential" and defines its own elements, structure, function and limits. The art system, thus, not only operates according to its own internal functions, but also generates these functions via its own self-referential and self-organising activities. This means that although the art system might interact with other systems (such as the economic system for example), ultimately it produces meaning on its own terms, or, as Luhmann puts it, "everything that functions in the system as unity receives its unity through the system itself."¹⁸ This is certainly compatible with Danto's observation that the artworld which, through the operations of art theory:

is so powerful a thing as to detach objects from the real world and make them part of a different world, and *artworld*, a world of *interpreted things*. What these considerations show is that there is an internal connection between the status of an artwork and the language with which artworks are identified as such, inasmuch as nothing is an artwork without an interpretation that constitutes it as such.¹⁹

It is important to note here how Danto observes that such theorising is an internal process to the artworld system.

Luhmann argues that because systems are operatively closed they may be distinguished from each other. Thus, the art system operates according to a set of principles that are distinct from those of the economic or legal systems. Each system is also distinct from its environment (Umwelt.) This is to say that a system's identity is a function of its contra-distinction to what lies outside its parameters. For Luhmann this is the distinction that is fundamental to both the operation and analysis of all social systems. Systems distinguish themselves from their environments by virtue of being closed to the complexity of their surroundings. In other words the formation of a system is an enacting of a necessary ordering, via "selective relations amongst its elements" of the multiple relations of a complex environment. In short, systems reduce complexity; and they do so according to the structure which is unique to that

¹⁸ Luhmann, 'The Work of Art and the Self-Reproduction of Art,' 1990

¹⁹ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, (Harvard University Press, 1981) pg. 135

system. Again, this is fully compatible with Danto's observations concerning the role of art theory as internal to the artworld system.

(iv) Interpretation/ Observation

To explain how distinction is managed in a system Luhmann introduces his radical concept of *Observation* (Beobachtung). Observation is the process by which distinctions are indicated. This process is enacted from a position which is relative to the system from which the observation takes place. This is a paradigm shift from a more traditional sociological notion of representation in society to a concept of meaning in social systems that is entirely contingent not only on individual and distinct systems but also upon the process of observation itself. Without observation no differentiation would occur. Thus, the economic system observes and thus differentiates the world in terms of economic value and, likewise, the art system differentiates what it observes in terms relative to itself.

Thus, the system of art distinguishes a work of art from its environment by observations which indicate that its form is highly improbable to have occurred outside of the system. So, to use a Danto example, Rembrandt's *Polish Rider* is observed as being much more unlikely to be result of paint on a centrifuge than an inchoate mess that is not a work of art. Luhmann argues that the art system observes and thus differentiates art according to its own code of differentiation. Returning to Danto, he also grounds his account of aesthetic experience in a comparable process of observation. This is because it is based on an attitude toward the object as opposed to a predicate of it.²⁰ His opening 'Red Square' example can be 'observed' from different perspectives of its being by different artists. And that the history of the work of art, whilst not available to perception, will determine the conditions of this observation. In short, Danto's theory of art is grounded upon principles of distinction and observation which for the second term Danto uses the term interpretation:

it is my view that whatever appreciation may come to, it must in some sense be a function of interpretation. That in a way is not very different from the slogan in the philosophy of science that there is no appreciation without interpretation. Interpretation consists in determining the relationship between a work of art and its material counterpart.²¹

In summary both Danto and Luhmann explore how the defining and engaging with art must acknowledge how it is contingent upon the institutional and discursive systems within which it is situated. Or, to use a vocabulary from a related debate - both acknowledge the relationship between art, and it being '*seen-as*' art. Danto identifies this as a process of interpretation, whilst Luhmann sees this as the similar process of observation (Beobachtung); both of which are framed by the position from which they are enacted. The strength and attractiveness of both theories is that they provide an account of art that is flexible enough to effectively account for the wide variety of things that have happened in art after modernism.

²⁰ "The basis for the distinction is to be found in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, where it sounds, and perhaps is meant to sound, as if there are two distinct attitudes that can be taken toward any object whatsoever, so that the difference in the end between art and reality is less a difference in kinds of things than in attitudes, and hence not a matter of what we relate to but how we relate to it." Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, (Harvard University Press, 1981) Pg. 22

²¹ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, (Harvard University Press, 1981) pg. 113

(v) – Conclusion

Naturally, any such brief account cannot do full justice to the complexity and sophistication of either Danto and Luhmann's theories; and there must be a certain philosophical licence, if not violence, in attempting to read one through the other tout-court. However, I want to close by briefly introducing a further three possible points of contact without having the space to expand upon them sufficiently.

Firstly both Danto and Luhmann fully acknowledge the specific historical conditions of both art *and their own theories of art*. As Danto claims his theory of art was necessitated because art itself had, historically, become increasing self-reflexive and philosophical and it would even: "today require a special kind of effort to distinguish art from its own philosophy."²² Thus, as Wölfflin argued, in art, only certain things are possible at certain times²³. Similarly, Luhmann argued that the contemporary situation of the art-system is that it has, historically, reached a stage in its development where self-reflexivity (what he calls, self-description) is the primary subject matter of art. Perhaps both accounts are framed by a certain sensitivity to specific practices. Danto, for example, peppers his account with specific works (Rauschenberg, Segal, Warhol) and following *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* he developed his role as a critic. Luhmann, despite rarely speaking about specific works and often appearing obscure and abstract as a result, also had a productive engagement with Conceptual Art through his contact with the English group *Art & Language* in 1995.²⁴

Secondly, such an investment in historical conditions suggests a common link in both back to Hegel, and the situating of art at the end of an exhausted historical teleology. It is beyond the purview of this paper to do anything other than leave this at the level of suggestion. It is after only after *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* that Danto really applies his earlier work on Hegel specifically to his theory of art and, as is well known, begins to investigate the 'End of Art.' And Hegel is there as a spectral presence in Luhmann too: in his linking the self-reflexivity of art to its 'end'; in his attempt to create a totalising discursive model in systems-theory; and in his problematic replacing of Hegelian 'Geist' with 'system.'

A final, speculative, point involves the potential reading of both Danto and Luhmann through phenomenology. Danto tantalizingly flirted with phenomenology.²⁵ Even though he was somewhat luke-warm to a certain application, even saying that: 'The phenomenology of perception cannot be appealed to effect the differences [between works of art and mere real things] which are philosophical,'²⁶ important similarities can be seen between his own and the phenomenological attitude. For example, his

²² Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, (Harvard University Press, 1981) Pg. 56

²³ This is a theme that Danto has subsequently explored and argued: 'visual representations belong to forms of life that are themselves related to one another historically.' *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, (Princeton University Press, 1997), pg. 200

²⁴ See Art & Language, 'Roma Reason: Luhmann's Art as a Social System,' *Radical Philosophy*, 109, (Sept./Oct. 2001),

²⁵ Arthur Danto, 'Description and the Phenomenology of Perception,' in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, (eds.) Norman Bryson et al, (Harper Collins, 1991) pg. 201 ff.

²⁶ *ibid.* pg. 212

account of art as being relative to the active “seeing-as”²⁷ process of interpretation certainly resonates with a phenomenological inquiry into the constitution of objects as they are experienced by human subjects. Luhmann too, demonstrates a certain affinity with phenomenology. For example, Luhmann’s Systems-Theory owes a large debt to Husserl whose theory of the transcendental ego and the ‘life-world’ is replaced in Luhmann by the notion of the observing system to produce a phenomenology of social as well as psychic systems (human subjects). Such potential similarities suggest a further dialogue that can only be hinted at here.

²⁷ A further interesting point is how Danto’ use of “seeing-as” links him to Wittgenstein; whilst he states that his attempt to provide a definition of art runs counter to the Wittgenstinian position that art cannot be defined.