

“MAKING A BRILLO BOX RED, WHITE, AND BLUE IS EASY:
MAKING IT AN ARTWORK ISN'T”

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“Making it yellow is easy. Making it real isn't.” Or so reads a billboard ad for the *Yellow Pages*, self-assuredly the real as well as original telephone book for business information. But how exactly are we to distinguish it from the look alike competitor publications we periodically find at our front doors, since they too are yellow and seem to contain the same kind of information? Presumably, we're expected to look inside, since we cannot judge this book by its color any more than by its cover. Adding the word 'real' in the title, as the publishers of the *Yellow Pages* now do, tells us what we should expect to find, but not how we are supposed to find it. So how should we look inside to discern what is perceptually indiscernible on the outside and finally discover the difference between the real *Yellow Pages* and its imposters?

Not surprisingly, at least to those who know his philosophy, Arthur C. Danto has answers to these questions, as well as to many others he has engaged in his distinguished career. After all, the *Manhattan Telephone Directory*, a local white sibling of the *Yellow Pages*, made a cameo appearance in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*,ⁱ albeit as a non-performable look alike of an avant-garde musical work. But the real reason to turn to Danto here is that he claims that many philosophical problems have the same Leibnizian structure of the identity of indiscernibles, namely, a perceptual predicament where two objects appear to be the same but in essence are different. Faced by such problems, the philosopher endeavors to account for the difference by identifying the

relevant essence. In this light, the *Yellow Pages* example poses a serious philosophical question: What is the essence that determines the identity of the book that claims to be real so that, despite appearances, we can henceforth tell it apart from its look-alikes?

Danto's list of examples of indiscernibles in the history of philosophy includes Descartes on the difference between our waking and sleeping states, which we cannot rely on perception to differentiate; Kant on the distinction between virtuous and non-virtuous actions, which can appear to be the same but morally are not, with a universal principle accounting for the difference; Wittgenstein on the puzzle involving a person's raising her arm with the intention to do so and her raising her arm involuntarily, given that intention, the solution in this case, is imperceptible; or Strawson on personal identity in contrast to a person's inseparable physical body to which, however, identity cannot be reduced. In all these examples, a logical conundrum arises on a perceptual plane; to resolve it, each philosopher argues, we have to move to another – conceptual or philosophical – plane. Danto's own preferred example is in the philosophy of art: the indiscernibility between a supermarket Brillo box and Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964). By all appearances, they are indiscernible perceptually, yet it is equally clear that one is an ordinary object ("mere thing") and the other is a work of art. What differentiates the artwork from its look-alikes in the supermarket? On what plane can we answer this question? "Making a Brillo box red, white, and blue is easy. Making it an artwork isn't."

Harking back to the days when the telephone company had no real competitors, the *Yellow Pages* can claim to be real because original. By contrast, artworks do not have this option. They cannot claim to be more original or real than their real-world look

alikes, though from time to time reality may imitate art and though theorists, such as Baudrillard, insist that contemporary culture privileges simulacra over reality. In Danto's world, reality precedes art. But his philosophical point here is not that art follows or even imitates reality because, as he convincingly shows in *Transfiguration*, the nature of representation (and thus of art) is too complex to be captured by the concept of imitation. Rather, art asserts itself as such not by resembling or looking like reality but, on the contrary, by demonstrating its difference from reality. What better way to announce such a difference, Danto might say, than through the appearance of identity? "Identity in the service of difference." Take that idea to the lawyers or marketing people representing the *Yellow Pages* and see whether they become as inspired by it as Danto has been, beginning with the *Brillo Boxes* case and continuing on a remarkable journey through the histories of art and philosophy. *Transfiguration* is the philosophical anchor making this journey possible and clarifying the way for others to follow.

However, if neither perceptual appearance nor originality can help us to discriminate between artworks and their real-world look alike, what is the trick? Danto's solution, which by now is as familiar in much of the art world as it is within philosophy, looks like this. Despite the fact that reality has logical priority over art, he says we cannot "define art in terms of features that either compare or contrast with features of the real world" (pp. 30-31). Such contrasts only generate the kind of logical puzzles exemplified by the *Yellow Pages* and *Brillo Boxes* cases. So, according to Danto, we have to move to "another plane," which, in the *Yellow Pages* case, means not only that we have to look inside the book, but that in doing so we have to "look" on a non-perceptual level at something the eye cannot descry. We have to examine the *content*,

which, though mediated by perception, is also independent of it. In the end, we have to judge the *Yellow Pages* and its competitors by virtue of their respective conceptual content: completeness, accuracy, clarity, and other properties expected of such a book. This content is all there in black and yellow, but it's largely invisible to the eye alone.

But how are we supposed to look inside artworks? We can open novels, and some sculptures have insides, but generally artworks do not have an inside and an outside. Of course, Danto's reference to the inside is not literal in the *Brillo Boxes* case any more than it would be in the *Yellow Pages* case. For example, in discussing the literary example of Borges's Pierre Menard, who wrote a book that appears to be identical with fragments of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Danto says that we have "to avert our eye from the surfaces of things." Instead, we have to "ask in what if not surfaces the differences between distinct works must consist" (p. 35). With all the differences among these contrasting pairs (whether the two things are books, Brillo boxes, or any other combination involving an artwork and a mere thing), the commonality is that we should expect to find a content inside one object in the pair that we cannot find inside the other. In short, we have to conceptualize the non-perceptual inside of an artwork and thereby discover its content or, in philosophical terms, its essence (art's essence is to have content while history fills in the particulars of art's content). To quote Danto again: "I offer the speculation that the phenomenon of confusable counterparts belonging to distinct ontological orders arises only when at least one of the confusable things bears a representational property: where at least one of the counterparts is about something, or has a content, or a subject, or a meaning" (pp. 138-39).

The more precise philosophical language for all this talk of the “inside” of an artwork is Danto’s well-known definition of art as “embodied meaning,” a combination of meaning and embodiment, which jointly comprise the necessary and sufficient conditions for an artwork.ⁱⁱ Real-world objects, such as the supermarket Brillo boxes, either have no meaning or, if they do have meaning, it is not embodied. The special embodied meaning of Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* is the philosophical insight that the essence of all artworks is to have embodied meaning. This explains why Danto infamously credits Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* with opening up the possibility for a real philosophy of art.

Aside from its contribution to solving the *Brillo Boxes* indiscernibility problem, what are we to make of this inside/outside distinction in art?ⁱⁱⁱ When we look back at *Transfiguration* twenty-five years later, as we’re doing for this online conference, it is clear, among other things, that this inside/outside distinction also involves a distinction between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic, where ‘aesthetic’ seems to be equivalent to ‘perceptual’. Danto’s philosophical point, first expressed in his earlier “The Artworld” essay (1964), is that any appeal to the aesthetic/perceptual properties of Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* (e.g., made of wood) are not helpful in distinguishing it from a supermarket Brillo box (e.g., made of cardboard). In *Transfiguration*, he explicitly says that what makes Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* art “could be broached *without* bringing aesthetic considerations in *at all*” (p. vi; italics added). For aesthetic considerations do not belong to the definition or logic of art, though they do belong to artistic practice (p. 91). In response to philosophers who attempt to solve the indiscernibility problem by appeal to such considerations, Danto states firmly that the definition of art as embodied meaning is logically prior to aesthetic considerations because we need the definition to identify the

kinds of considerations that are appropriate to artworks (p. 95): “we often cannot perceive the aesthetic properties of artworks, as distinct from the aesthetic qualities of their material counterparts, until the concept of art is available to us” (p. 158). In short, aesthetics “hardly ever touches the heart of art” (p. 173), even though artistic practice remains deeply aesthetic.

To highlight Danto’s own emphasis on the virtually nonexistent role of aesthetics in the philosophical understanding of art, we could say that there is an “anti-aesthetic” component to his philosophy of art, though in a qualified sense relative to other anti-aesthetic tendencies in contemporary art theory. A major difference is that Danto’s anti-aesthetic is intended to open up the possibility of the philosophy of art, whereas other anti-aesthetic views are also aimed at the philosophy of art with the conscious aim to discredit both at the same time. Clearly, this is not Danto’s intention. Despite this very important difference, however, I want to analyze his anti-aesthetic precisely because I find it problematic in ways he does not intend or likely accept.^{iv}

The problem, as I see it, starts with his critique of aesthetic theories that rely on the perceptual properties of artworks. Although this critique is accurate, in part, because of the limits of relying on perception *alone* to understand art philosophically, it should not apply to aesthetics as well. To begin with, ‘perceptual’ and ‘aesthetic’ are not synonymous terms or concepts. Moreover, aesthetic properties are not just perceptual because they include the conceptual plane Danto discusses. That is, the aesthetic encompasses the perceptual and conceptual, whereas in his philosophy of art, the aesthetic is equated with the perceptual and the two are opposed to the conceptual. This causes problems because the making and experience of artworks are marked by the

mixture of the perceptual and conceptual and thus by the aesthetic; so to understand artistic practice and experience, we cannot leave the aesthetic out of the picture, even while – in fact, precisely when – we are trying to understand art philosophically. In a word, to leave the aesthetic out would be to leave artistic practice out as well, since (even on Danto’s account) the two are linked. If we were to do that, we would have an opposition between artistic practice (perceptual-aesthetic) and the philosophy of art (the conceptual). How could this opposition be tenable, given that an understanding of artistic practice is the goal of the philosophy of art? Danto’s own distinguished history of writing art criticism belies such an opposition, yet his philosophy of art seems to support it. So, if I’ve reconstructed his philosophy of art accurately, it seems that something in his account of the aesthetic needs to be clarified or, more likely, changed.

The philosophical difficulty here begins when Danto claims that the aesthetic properties of artworks are not part of the definition of art. On his account, something can be an artwork without having any aesthetic properties that could possibly contribute to its being art, though they could contribute to its effectiveness as art. Of course, Danto recognizes and discusses the aesthetic properties of artworks (especially in his art criticism), generally under the heading of rhetoric. One way to clarify the issue here is to review, briefly, what is unique about aesthetics in contrast to the philosophy of art. In the end, I believe a richer notion of aesthetics will allow Danto to avoid even any hint of the anti-aesthetic in his philosophy of art – a goal I know he shares.

While the philosophy of art is as old as art and philosophy, aesthetics is a modern phenomenon, despite the fact that the word has etymological roots as old as philosophy. What is modern about aesthetics is, among other things, the way aesthetic properties are

understood. Taking beauty as not only a single aesthetic property but also as the surrogate for the entire set of aesthetic properties (or for aesthetic value as a whole), eighteenth-century philosophers (e.g., Hutcheson, Hume, Kant, et al.) argued that beauty is not a property of an artwork.^v Rather, beauty is a relational property. That is, beauty is the cognitive and affective effect of a relationship between a subject and an object, as well as among subjects in the presence of an object, where the “subject” is more of a community or general public than a single individual and where the “object” is in principle any existing thing (though in fact there are limits). The artist in this scenario is the one who uses style, expression, rhetoric, and metaphor (Danto’s key concepts in *Transfiguration*) to create an object that, if it serves as an occasion for such a relationship, thereby becomes a work of art (as happened with the supermarket Brillo boxes in the case of Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*). On this understanding, beauty is not a surface or perceptual property, or any such property that an artwork would have in common with real things. Moreover, if the aesthetic properties associated with artworks are of a different type than the perceptual (and other) properties of their real-world counterparts,^{vi} the kinds of indiscernibility problems that Danto’s definition of art are intended to solve do not arise on the plane of aesthetics. If they arise at all because we focus on only the *perceptual* properties that artworks and ordinary objects sometimes do share, then an appeal to aesthetic properties – which, on my account, are distinct from the artwork confused with an ordinary object – would be a way to resolve this logical problem. If so, my conclusion is the same as Danto’s. Remember that he excludes aesthetic properties from consideration when he is explaining the logic of art because, he claims, they cannot solve the indiscernibility problem and that, in general, you cannot

stay on the same plane as the kind of properties that generate such problems, if you expect to solve them. But the move to another plane – to philosophy – needs to be a move *away* from aesthetics – and thus an anti-aesthetic move – only if aesthetic properties are understood exclusively or primarily in perceptual terms, which they needn't and shouldn't be.

It may seem odd to attribute aesthetic (or any) properties to relationships rather than to objects (or subjects). After all, can relationships even have properties? Why not? For we commonly speak of the properties of good marital, business, and other types of interpersonal and professional relationships. Nevertheless, would it make more sense to say that aesthetic properties are those properties of subjects and objects that allow them to have certain kinds of relationships? In the *Brillo Boxes* example, we could speak of the properties of Warhol's object of that name and we could likewise speak of the properties of the people who experienced it, beginning in the Stable Gallery in April 1964, whether they were members of the art world or any other world. But what we are trying to understand here is the kind of relationship that exists among these subjects in the presence of this object. In this light, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* would best be seen as a performance rather than just as an object. What are the properties of that performance? In asking this question, we have moved away from the object alone, or the artist alone, and we have begun to ask about the effects of this performance on subjects who experience *Brillo Boxes*. This performance, and thus this experience, are marked by aesthetic properties.

In Danto's own account, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* asks the philosophical question whether it can be a work of art. Or, to put this question in more positive terms, the work

assert itself as art and, in doing so, asks how art must be understood philosophically to account for the possibility of such a work. These conceptual or philosophical questions are indeed generated by Warhol's object, but only in the presence of subjects to whom these questions can be asked and from whom we can expect answers (on Danto's account, only philosophers can answer these questions, while only artists can ask them – so, in effect, he acknowledges the different types of subjects involved here). At the same time, this performance has perceptual as well as conceptual dimensions, the combination of which I'm calling aesthetic. As such, the aesthetic properties belong to the performance or experience or, as I've put it, to the relationships between a particular object and some number of subjects. As Dewey would say, the only relevant aesthetic properties are properties of art as experience.

Now, a relational account of beauty, and by extension of all aesthetic properties, may sound relativistic to some, but here's why I believe it's not. First of all, not any object will do, because there are historical constraints on what can count as art,^{vii} though in principle any existing object can be transfigured into art if it is capable of generating the kind of relationships that constitute art.^{viii} As Danto puts it, objects need an "atmosphere of theory" to be regarded as art, which means that some explanation has to be provided not only to show *that* an object generates such relationships but *how* it is able to do so. Likewise, not any subject will do, for the relationships necessary for artworks to exist have to be shared by multiple subjects who are, among other things, breathing the atmosphere of theory. This sharing – open to all in principle but only to some in fact – is what Kant and others since the eighteenth century have understood, in various ways, as the "common sense" requirement of art.^{ix}

Now, if what I've described bears any possible similarity to (or compatibility with) Danto's views, he would likely still prefer to understand my relational property – or Beauty – in terms of the notion of embodied meaning. In the *Brillo Boxes* case, for example, Warhol created an artwork that made subjects ask whether it is art and, if so, on what *new* theory of art, since existing theories of art would not allow it to be art. As we have seen, this set of questions is the embodied meaning of Warhol's work, and it is what makes it art in the first place. At the same time, this set has important philosophical implications because any theory of art that explains how Brillo boxes can be transfigured into art must also account for all other artworks.

However, is the concept of embodied meaning broad enough to capture all the kinds of relationships among subjects that artworks can generate? It seems to capture the questions and relationships generated by Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (and the other art examples in *Transfiguration*, real or imagined). But, as Danto describes them, they are particularly philosophical questions and thus seem to support a notion of embodied meaning that excludes aesthetics, that is, one that is conceptual without any aesthetic considerations coming into philosophical play. What if this Warhol example is not typical of all artworks? What if other artworks, accepted as such under Danto's philosophy of art, cannot be grasped philosophically or experienced as art on the basis of embodied meaning alone? For example, Gerhard Richter's Baader-Meinhof paintings (a set of 15 paintings from 1988, known collectively as *October 18, 1977*) do not have as their meaning the terrorism of that group, the responses to it by the German State, or the legacy of that period (late 1960s to the 1990s, with October 1977 being the climactic moment, when several Baader-Meinhof members died in a Stuttgart prison). Rather, the

paintings open up a reflective space for grief and compassion for all the subjects, German or otherwise, who have been affected by any of the events surrounding the complicated social history of the Baader-Meinhof Gang or, again, its legacy, especially in the context of more recent forms of terrorism.^x The paintings are not *about* this space, as they would be on Danto's account (for meaning is aboutness); they *create* that space, a real space experienced by all those who have seen the paintings in a gallery, museum, or some other setting (possibly even in books) since they were first exhibited in 1989. At the same time, we have a potential indiscernibility issue here because Richter's paintings are based on real-world source photographs taken by the police, media, and friends of the Baader-Meinhof Gang. Danto would be right to respond here that it is the difference between the source photographs and paintings that explains why the paintings are artworks when their look-alikes are not. Where I would then differ from him is in my account of what makes that difference possible. Meaning is not enough, even when it is embodied, to create the kind of space that make these paintings into artworks. Rather, the meaning would be derivative of this space in the sense that the paintings would be said to be about (the creation and experience of) that space. The creation of reflective space is what makes the paintings art when the look-alike photographs are not art. The notion of aboutness, which may still have a place here, only refers back to that space having been created and an artwork established.^{xi}

To shift now to Danto's second condition, embodiment, I want to ask, again with reference to Richter's Baader-Meinhof paintings, how much it helps us to understand art philosophically. To start with, I worry that the embodiment criterion seems to point back to the view that aesthetic properties are properties of artworks, even if they're located

inside rather than outside, even if they are conceptual rather than perceptual. Rather, as the effects of relationships between subjects/objects and subjects/subjects, aesthetic properties are located in the relationships between subjects and objects instead of inside or outside objects. For example, the space for grief and compassion created by the Richter paintings is an aesthetic space situated between the paintings and the individuals who experience them, and even more so among the individuals who have such experience. It is the relationship between these paintings and individuals or among the individuals that has the aesthetic properties, which in turn are what constitute the paintings as art works.

A possible advantage for Danto if he were to consider adopting this account of aesthetic properties (and of aesthetics more generally) is that he would not have to explain, as he often does, why he seems to ignore aesthetics. In his *The Abuse of Beauty*, for example, he tries to show how beauty could fit into his philosophy of art after years of having been excluded, not only by modern art, a fact Danto documents well, but by the philosopher himself. Many people seem to read *The Abuse of Beauty* as a return to beauty or to aesthetics, and in some sense it is. But it is an account of beauty within the framework of the concept of embodied meaning established in *Transfiguration*. That framework seemed to exclude beauty, but Danto shows, sixteen years later, that it need not. I welcome this effort to accommodate beauty, for I think it remains a central aesthetic concept, at least in its role as the surrogate for all other aesthetic properties, including the properties that seem to have displaced beauty as a specific property: the sublime, uncanny, grotesque, etc. This accommodation would not be seen as a “return,” however, if Danto had not earlier turned *away* from aesthetics.

My point, in closing, is that Danto would not need to make a return to aesthetics now if he had not made a turn away from it earlier, which he would not have had to make if he had adopted a different and richer notion of aesthetics. His concept of embodied meaning would still be a powerful tool for understanding art. I just think it would be more powerful if it were successfully integrated into (a reconceived notion of) aesthetics, which I believe would be beneficial for art and art criticism as well as for philosophy. I realize, of course, that the burden for following through on this suggestion falls on me not on the perennially youthful and inspiring author of *Transfiguration*.

ⁱ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). Page references to this text are in parentheses.

ⁱⁱ Danto sometimes says that these conditions may not be sufficient but, to my knowledge, he has not yet specified what other conditions would be needed.

ⁱⁱⁱ More recently, Danto again utilizes this inside/outside distinction in *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), where he distinguishes between internal and external senses of beauty in artworks.

^{iv} In my *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), I critique Danto's philosophy of art on this point. For Danto's response to this critique, see *Action, Art, History: Engagements with Arthur C. Danto*, Daniel Herwitz and Michael Kelly, Editors (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

^v Aesthetic properties are neither the properties of representations alone, nor of whatever the representations may be construed to be of (neither of representations nor of their content). But representational properties are tied to the objects that generate relationships that constitute artworks.

^{vi} Perceptual properties of ordinary objects can be pleasing but such pleasure is not aesthetic. Whether we call it "agreeable," as Kant did, or something else, the nature of the aesthetic hinges on such distinctions, which are, of course, the focus of Danto's indiscernibility model. My point is that he should not leave the aesthetic (or beauty) behind when he tries to solve them.

^{vii} To use one of Danto's examples, Etruscans could not have made an artwork out of a typewriter erasure.

^{viii} To use another *Yellow Pages*'s slogan: "If it's out there, it's in here." Danto's counterpart slogan is "Anything goes," that is, any object can in principle be a work of art, though in fact there are limits.

^{ix} In turn, this same "common sense" requirement links aesthetics to ethics; for with the idea of common sense we are dealing with relationships among individuals in the presence of artworks – hence the notion that art can also serve as the symbol of morality.

^x See my forthcoming "Terrorism and Aesthetics: Richter's Baader-Meinhof Paintings."

^{xi} To put it another way, aboutness by itself has no efficacy in the world, yet a large part of what makes art significant for us is its efficacy. To explain art is to explain how that efficacy is possible. In this light, the history of aesthetics is the history of such explanations. Danto's concept of embodied meaning offers one such explanation, but it would offer more, I believe, if it were (re)joined with aesthetics.