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Arthur Danto's *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* – 25 Years Later
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Aesthetic Theory and Artistic Practice: Danto's Transfiguration of the Artworld¹

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Philosophy of mathematics seeks to articulate and understand aspects of mathematics and/or mathematical practice; philosophy of physics aims to make explicit one or another aspect of physics and/or physical theorizing; semantic theory seeks to provide systematic codifications and explanations of natural language. In each such case, the theorist is engaged not in constituting the practice under study, but in explicitly identifying and reflecting upon the norms and concepts sustained within it. By analogy, one assumes that aesthetic theory is in the business of articulating aspects of artworld practice: aesthetic theory is *about* the artworld, not *a constituent of* the artworld. But Arthur Danto has taught us that there is no artworld without artistic theory: in some important sense, theory makes art possible. Thus the familiar contrasts between a practice and philosophical reflection upon it, or between object language and semantic metalanguage, might have no clear echo in the philosophy of art: for if theory makes art possible, then aesthetic theory cannot be regarded as codification and/or explanation of

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some already existent practice. It is thus unclear what aesthetic theory is supposed to do, what questions it should be addressing, and what conditions govern acceptable answers.

My goal is to motivate and explore a question inspired by Danto's work in aesthetic theory: What is the relation between those artistic theories required for the very existence of art, and those aesthetic theories that result from critical systematic reflection upon artworld practices? If no useful distinction can be sustained here, then how are art criticism, evaluation, and creation to be contrasted with the philosophy of art, and how does aesthetic theory compare and contrast with other mainstream philosophical inquiries?

I

Noting the "general dismal appraisal of aesthetics" as an academic discipline, Danto once observed that

...the "dreariness of aesthetics" was diagnosed as due to the effort of philosophers to find a definition of art, and a number of philosophical critics, much under the influence of Wittgenstein, contended that such a definition was neither possible nor necessary.²

Danto would surely agree that not all work in aesthetic theory qualifies as "dreary" or warrants "dismal appraisal": doubtless the field contains creative and insightful contributions. Nevertheless, Danto here recognizes a sentiment occasionally broached by others: a general skepticism about the value and prospects of aesthetic theory. Stuart Hampshire asks "What is the subject matter of aesthetics?" and replies "Perhaps there is no subject-matter; this would fully explain the poverty and weakness of the books."³

Nicholas Wolterstorff registers similar concerns:

2. Arthur Danto, "Art, Philosophy, and the Philosophy of Art," *Humanities* Vol.4 No.1 (February 1983): 1-2.

It is beyond dispute that the glory of twentieth-century analytic philosophy is not revealed in the field of the philosophy of art. If one is on the lookout for analytic philosophy's greatest attainments, one must look elsewhere. Why is that?⁴

Diagnosis aside, Wolterstorff takes the marginal status of aesthetic theory as a datum to be explained. Here is a related observation by Mary Devereaux:

...philosophers widely regard aesthetics as a marginal field. Aesthetics is marginal not only in the relatively benign sense that it lies at the edge, or border, of the discipline, but also in the additional, more troubling, sense that it is deemed philosophically unimportant. In this respect, aesthetics contrasts with areas like the philosophy of mathematics, a field which, while marginal in the first sense, is widely regarded as philosophically important. A few years ago Arthur Danto quipped, and he wasn't that far off the mark, that the position of aesthetics is "about as low on the scale of philosophical undertakings as bugs are in the chain of being."⁵

Devereaux then asks "What are we to make of this situation?," and proceeds to defend the philosophical importance of aesthetics: her strategy involves rehearsing the philosophical importance of art, the relevance of humanistic inquiry to philosophy, the importance of value theory, and the recognition that "aesthetics is part of value theory."

Complaints about the quality, legitimacy, and/or status of aesthetic theory are not new. Almost a century ago Clive Bell lamented the poor state of art theory and offered an explanation:

He who would elaborate a plausible theory of aesthetics must possess two qualities—artistic sensibility and a turn for clear thinking....unfortunately, robust intellects and delicate sensibilities are not inseparable.⁶

3. Stuart Hampshire, "Logic and Appreciation," reprinted in W.E. Kennick (ed.), *Art and Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979): 651.

4. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Philosophy of Art After Analysis and Romanticism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46 (1987): 151.

5. Mary Devereaux, "The Philosophical Status of Aesthetics," available online at <http://www.aesthetics-online.org/ideas/devereaux.html>.

6. Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958; first published 1913): 15.

After discussing those “robust intellects” lacking in aesthetic sensibility, Bell turns to those with the reverse deficiency:

...people who respond immediately and surely to works of art...are often quite as incapable of talking sense about aesthetics. Their heads are not always very clear. They possess the data on which any system must be based; but, generally, they want the power that draws correct inferences from true data.⁷

Bell is surely right that effective theorizing demands both sensitivity to the data and skill in theory construction: but aesthetics is not unique in occasionally attracting theorists who fall short. If there is legitimacy to the claim that aesthetic theory is “dreary,” “marginalized,” and/or otherwise flawed, deeper factors might be at work. One such factor is a curious tendency to ignore the contrast between artworld practices and theoretical reflections upon them: but in light of Danto’s seminal observations about the relation between artistic data and aesthetic theory, it is worth asking whether the contrast is viable. If it is not, then the very idea of aesthetic theory and its aspirations must be revisited.

II

Devereaux’s classification of aesthetics as “part of value theory” is puzzling: it suggests a misleading picture of what the philosopher of art is up to. Aesthetics is no more part of “value theory” than is epistemology, the semantics of natural language, or the philosophy of mathematics. The task of the philosopher of art is to provide an accurate systematic picture of the artworld, making explicit the norms sustained therein: norms that govern recognition, evaluation, and interpretation of artistic objects and events. Admittedly the artworld contains criticism and evaluation—as do the worlds of

7. *ibid.*: 15-16.

knowledge attribution, informal argumentation, and mathematical proof—and studying the latter domains admittedly requires focus on normative assessment (whether epistemic, inductive, or proof-theoretic). But this hardly suggests that these areas are usefully subsumed under “value theory.”⁸

The issue goes beyond classification. If some aesthetic theorists see themselves as engaged in the business of art criticism and evaluation—if the philosopher of art is somehow portrayed as an art critic—no wonder there are “marginalization” problems. Whatever else the philosophy of art might be, it is not to be conflated with art criticism—any more than the philosophy of physics is to be conflated with physics, or the philosophy of mathematics is to be conflated with mathematics.⁹ Participation in a practice is one thing, analytical reflection upon that practice quite another.

Or so I say. Obviously, engagement in a practice—whether epistemic appraisal, mathematical proof, art criticism, or marriage—involves deployment of a certain amount of theory; a reflective participant will be aware of various aspects of the form of life in which he or she is engaged. Still, there is an important contrast between participating in a practice and reflecting upon the principles, norms, and behavioral uniformities constitutive of that practice. Physics is not the philosophy of physics (however difficult it might occasionally be to draw the line); mathematics is not the philosophy of

8. Similar opposition to “aesthetics as value theory” is registered in Kendall Walton’s “How Marvelous! Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Value,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 499-510; my objections on this front were formulated long before I became aware of Walton’s paper.

9. These contrasts are subtle and controversial. For a well-informed and provocative discussion see Stewart Shapiro, “Mathematics and Philosophy of Mathematics,” *Philosophia Mathematica* (3) Vol. 2 (1994): 148-60.

mathematics; art criticism is not the philosophy of art (however difficult it might occasionally be to draw the line).

Granted: art criticism, evaluation and creation are saturated with theory. Participation in the artworld requires background assumptions about the nature and purpose of art, the relevance of genre categories, the contextual determinants of content, the artistic “problems” a work purports to solve, and so on. One need not dispute the role of theory in practice, the “theory laden” character of observation and intention, or the possibility of engaging in institutional activities without substantial theoretical baggage; readers of Kuhn, Feyerabend, and Gombrich need not reaffirm that there is no innocent eye (or ear). The point is not that participation in the artworld—as artist, critic, or consumer—is somehow “theory neutral.” It is not. The point, rather, is that participation in the artworld is not to be conflated with theoretical reflection upon participation in the artworld.

But the contrast is frequently ignored, to the detriment of aesthetic theory. Aaron Ridley, for example, rails against Goodman-inspired individuating questions about whether a musical performance is an instance of a given work, and laments that contemporary philosophers of music generally neglect “evaluative issues”:

The question whether this or that performance, or style of performance, is actually any good, or is minimally worth listening to, is scarcely raised...If one is serious about the philosophy of music, this last fact should strike one as scandalous.¹⁰

I don't think so. It is not scandalous that recent work in the philosophy of mathematics contains not a hint about how to prove Fermat's last theorem; nor is it scandalous that philosophers of physics “scarcely raise” questions about which elementary particles are

10. Aaron Ridley, “Against Musical Ontology,” *Journal of Philosophy* 100 (April 2003): 208.

likely to exist, given the experimental data. Ridley has collapsed the philosophy of art into art criticism: unlike Ridley, when I wish to know whether a musical performance is “actually any good” I read music criticism, not the philosophy of music.

Thus there is resonance between the sentiments of Ridley and Devereaux: each of them chooses words that suggest a conflation of aesthetic theory with the activities of art criticism and evaluation. This kind of conflation—between artistic practice and theoretical reflection upon that practice—is conducive to the marginalization of aesthetic theory, insofar as it prompts the accusation that philosophers of art are doing art criticism (or art) rather than philosophy: they should, for example, be reflecting upon critical practice—codifying the norms and uniformities sustained within it—rather than engaging in it. Even if actual involvement in the production and/or evaluation of artworks provides requisite data for theorizing responsibly about these practices, the evaluation and/or making of art is not the philosophy of art; if it is permitted to collapse into it, no wonder there is marginalization of aesthetic theory.

III

The contrast between engagement in the artworld and theoretical reflection upon such engagement is complicated by the fact that many artworks are themselves reflective commentaries upon the norms and mechanics of the artworld: thus the line between artistic practice and aesthetic theory is difficult to draw. Rene Magritte’s surrealist paintings focus on the very idea of aboutness, and the contrast between representational mechanisms (both linguistic and perceptual) and the items represented; de Chirico’s “metaphysical” art speculates on fundamental realities inaccessible to explicit depiction;

Duchamp's work provides ongoing commentary upon commodification and the contrast between art and non-art; Lichtenstein's paintings are comments upon Abstract Expressionism and the methods by which mass media portray their subjects; Mondrian explores tensions generated by painterly resources (for example, tendencies of colors to advance or recede from the picture plane) and the possibility of equilibrium; Kaufman and Jonze's film *Adaptation* is a curiously self-referential study of filmmaking. And so on. Such art—often designated as “art about art”—involves modernist self-awareness of the sort described by Clement Greenberg as “the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself.”¹¹ Given such works—not only elements *in* the artworld, but also elements *about* the artworld—contrast between artworld practice and theoretical reflection upon such practice is dubious.

Moreover, the alleged practice/theory contrast sits poorly with Danto's insistence that “there could not be an artworld without theory, for the artworld is logically dependent upon theory.”¹² If art does indeed require an “atmosphere of artistic theory,” and “artistic theories...make the artworld, and art, possible,”¹³ it is hardly clear that “first-order vs. higher-order” or “language vs. metalanguage” or “practice vs. theory” contrasts are applicable—or even intelligible—in connection with the artworld.

11. Clement Greenberg, “On Modernist Painting,” *Arts Yearbook* No.1 (1961); reprinted in Goldblatt and Brown (eds.), *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997): 17-23.

12. Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981): 135.

13. See, for example, Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) and *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* for extended development of the idea that “theory makes art possible.”

We need to show that the existence of “theoretical” artworks does not vitiate the otherwise plausible contrast between artistic practice and aesthetic theory. An example is helpful: Danto says of Lichtenstein’s paintings that

they are...rich in their utilization of artistic theory; they are about theories they also reject, and they internalize theories it is required that anyone who may appreciate them must understand...¹⁴

Consider Lichtenstein’s *Portrait of Madame Cezanne* (1962): the work provides a startling black-and-white outline diagram that makes explicit Cezanne’s compositional methods. In this and related works “...Lichtenstein raised a host of critical issues concerning what is a copy, when can it be a work of art, when is it real and when fake, and what are the differences.”¹⁵ All of this sounds suspiciously similar to issues raised in aesthetic theory: the content of these Lichtenstein paintings is (according to this interpretation) indiscernible from that of certain philosophical articles dealing with fakes, forgeries, and the nature of art. Lichtenstein’s paintings are thus exercises in aesthetic theory: therefore the alleged contrast between artworld practice and aesthetic theory is nonexistent.

Not exactly; here it is useful to consider the structure and theory of natural language. Consider semantic discourse: discourse explicitly about reference, satisfaction, meaning, and truth. The existence of such discourse does not undermine the contrast between linguistic behavior and theoretical reflection upon such behavior. Let some discourse *M* function as a semantic metalanguage for *L*: *M* contains expressive resources adequate to formulate a predicate for truth-in-*L*; the fact that *M* sentences are “language

14. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*: 110.

15. Jean Lipman and Richard Marshall, *Art About Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton and the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978): 102.

about language” does not impugn the distinction between *M* and the semantic metalanguage in which *M* itself might be interpreted. A holistically adequate semantic theory must accommodate—among other things—languages sufficiently rich to express truths of semantic theory. Likewise, an adequate aesthetic theory must accommodate artworks that express theoretical reflections upon the artworld. The existence of semantic discourse does not entail the collapse of the contrast between linguistic activity and syntactic/semantic theory; the question—given the present desire to contrast aesthetic theory with artworld participation—is whether the existence of art-about-art entails the collapse of the distinction between artworld practice and aesthetic theories about that practice.

It does not. Grant that some pieces of the artworld are about the artworld, and thus—perhaps—content-indiscernible from some statements in aesthetic theory. Nevertheless, Lichtenstein’s *Portrait of Madame Cezanne* is a graphic representation—a painting—not a piece of scholarly text. Its proper interpretation requires locating it on the map of comic strips, commercial advertisements, parody, and the recent history of art. There is thus little risk that theorists engaged in discursive practice—writing philosophy articles, for example—would lapse into gestures and achievements similar to Lichtenstein’s. This is obvious but relevant: the “collapse” of aesthetic theory into artworld practice—a collapse earlier hypothesized as a partial cause of the marginalization of aesthetic theory—surely does *not* involve confusion between paintings and theories about artworld practices relevant to the emergence, interpretation, evaluation, and appreciation of those paintings. The “collapse problem” rather concerns an ongoing tendency to conflate certain descriptive/explanatory enterprises with other

discursive endeavors—for example, evaluation and interpretation—which partially constitute artworld practice. Reflection on the problem was occasioned by a noted tendency of some theorists to bounce—for example—between theories about art-evaluative practice and participation in art-evaluative practice.

Despite the existence of theoretically reflective art, it is *not* the job of aesthetic theorists to determine how best to understand Lichtenstein’s work: that is the job of art critics and viewers. Nor is it a task of aesthetic theory to determine, for example, that proper understanding of Barnett Newman’s paintings demands scrupulous attention to number and orientation of stripes in relation to color of background. Here analogies with other philosophical inquiries are helpful: it is not the job of philosophers of physics to provide theories of radioactive decay (that is the job of physicists themselves). It is not the job of philosophers of mathematics to prove that all positive even integers ≥ 4 can be expressed as the sum of two primes (that is the job of mathematicians themselves). Despite Danto’s foregrounding of the theory-ladenness of art, and despite the existence and significance of art-about-art, there is no resulting collapse of aesthetic theory into artistic practice. Indeed, art historians themselves recognize the required contrast:

We do not go to the theories of the artists to find the answer to aesthetic problems but turn to them as materials for philosophic study.¹⁶

The theories required by Danto’s conception of the artworld—theories that “make art possible”—are themselves “materials for philosophic study.” Such theories are taught in art history classes; their “philosophic study” is pursued in seminars on aesthetic theory. If aesthetic theorists (*qua* aesthetic theorists) find themselves arguing about the proper

16. Charles E. Gauss, *The Aesthetic Theories of French Artists* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1949): 5-6.

interpretation of Newman's paintings or the artistic value of John Cage's compositions, they have lapsed into artworld practice; if this happens frequently, no wonder aesthetic theory faces marginalization: philosophy is not art history, nor is it evaluative criticism. Aesthetic theories are *about* the artworld.

Thus the blurring of artworld practice and aesthetic theory can be prevented, but caution is required. Danto's insistence that theory makes art possible forces upon us the question broached at the outset: What is the relation between those artistic theories required for the very existence of art, and those aesthetic theories that result from critical systematic reflection upon artworld practices? If no useful distinction can be sustained here, then how are art criticism, evaluation and creation to be contrasted with the philosophy of art, and how does aesthetic theory compare and contrast with other mainstream philosophical inquires?