

Danto on Interpretation and Ontology of Art

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Interpretation plays a central role in Danto's philosophy of art. Probably his most famous claim regarding interpretation is that interpretations are elements in the constituting of artworks. "...[E]ach interpretation constitutes a new work, even if the object ... remains... invariant under transformation. 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: $I(o) = W$."¹ This passage, taken literally, implies that interpretations figure in the metaphysics of artworks, which, as Danto puts it, can be construed as wholes consisting of two parts – an object and an interpretation.² We get a new artwork each time one or both member of the pair changes. Notice that if interpretations are constitutive in this way, it is hard to understand what a right or wrong interpretation would be. The response to I transfiguring o into w can't be 'right' or 'wrong'. It could be 'I see', 'I don't get it' or something along those lines. To take an analogy, suppose certain classroom conventions "transfigures" the raising of an arm into a request to ask a question. That is, it allows one to make such a request by raising one's arm. Now suppose an arm goes up in my classroom just with the intention of stretching it. My response can't be: 'wrong, you made a request.' Rather, it's 'I see.' Danto suggests something similar when he imagines one of his sets of indiscernibles: a rectangular canvass bisected by a straight line. There is the interpretation which creates a work illustrating Newton's first law, another which creates a work illustrating Newton's third law, another which creates a landscape where the line is the

horizon, But he doesn't 'get' an interpretation in which the same design represents fate or and old man planting spring cactuses.³

On the other hand, Danto also speaks of interpretation in a way that gives it a more epistemic role, rather than a metaphysical one. "To interpret a work is to offer a theory about what a work is about, what its subject is."⁴ When one offers a theory about something, one is making a claim about its properties, properties the object of one's theory already possesses. If one offers a theory about an artwork, one is not constituting it, but making a claim about something already in existence. Theories can be right or wrong, and hence interpretations on this epistemic understanding of them can be right or wrong. (Let me mention parenthetically that the scope of such interpretation goes well beyond identifying what a work is about, and further that often enough the identity of a work's subject is not something that needs interpretation.)

Is Danto simply identifying two types of interpretation here – a work-constituting type and a work-understanding type? It is possible that this is what is going on, but I suspect that Danto didn't actually notice he was using "interpretation" in two rather different ways in these passages. For one thing, the quotations above come from the same chapter of Transfiguration of the Commonplace, and are separated by only a few pages. There is no indication in those pages that two different types of interpretation are being singled out. Rather, there is simply a discussion of "interpretation." Further, in other writings, these two different types seem to be conflated (or at least referenced) in the same paragraph, even the same sentence. "I believe that we cannot be deeply wrong if we suppose that the correct interpretation of object-as-artwork is one that coincides most closely with the artist's own interpretation."⁵ If correctness is at stake, we would seem to

have the epistemic type of interpretation, whereas it's plausible that Danto thinks of the artist's own interpretation as constitutive. This suggests a rational reconstruction of Danto's thoughts on interpretation might go something like this. Artists give constituting interpretations, while audiences and critics give epistemic interpretations, and the mark of a correct epistemic interpretation is that it identifies the constitutive interpretation of the artist.

Danto may find something like this acceptable, but I think that such a reconstruction is not unproblematic – in part for textual reasons, and in part for conceptual ones. There is some tendency in Danto to say that, even in talking about works of art, we give constitutive interpretations, contrary to our reconstruction. “How close is my interpretation in the case of Fountain to Duchamp's? Close enough, I suppose, and in any case the work I sought to constitute could be the work he made. The possible interpretations are constrained by the artist's location in the world, by when and where he lived, by what experiences he had.”⁶ The last part of this quotation expresses Danto's exemplary contextualism. There is nothing puzzling about that. But other parts of the passage are puzzling. Was Danto really intending to constitute an artwork in his discussion, which for all the world appeared to be about one already in existence: Duchamp's? It might actually be a virtue of our reconstruction that it filters out this claim and assigns Danto's interpretation to the epistemic kind. Then there is the claim about constraints on possible interpretations. We would want to ask: possible interpretations of what? The answer seems to require a single entity and presumably one and the same artwork. Again this suggests that the kind of interpretation on which a constraint is being imposed is the epistemic type. For when we have constitutive interpretations, we get a

different work with every different object/interpretation pair. Furthermore, the contextualism about interpretation expressed in this passage only makes sense if we are trying to figure what is going on in a work by putting it in its appropriate context. This again suggests that it is the epistemic type of interpretation that is in question. A constitutive interpretation could not appeal to context in the same way. In constituting a work of art, an artist fixes the context that others have to appeal in order to understand the work.

So much for the textual issues. The conceptual issue concerns the very idea of a constitutive interpretation. If anyone gives constituting interpretations, it would be artists in creating artworks. Let's return to Fountain and ask, what if anything, did Duchamp interpret? Surely, he did not give us an interpretation of the urinal. This is the sort of thing semioticians do in identifying the symbolic value of ordinary artifacts, but this is not what Duchamp is up to. Nor did Duchamp give us an interpretation of the artwork, Fountain itself. To interpret Fountain presupposes it is already in existence, but a constituting interpretation brings something into existence. So a critic might interpret Fountain and if Duchamp offered an interpretation it would be ex post facto, and not constituting. However, I can't think of anything else Duchamp could be interpreting that could constitute Fountain. Further, although Fountain is, or once was, an unusual artwork in many respects, it is not unusual in this one. For any artist, the same reasoning applies.

So is the idea of a constituting interpretation illusory, and hence much of what Danto has to say about interpretation mistaken? If Danto is claiming that artists create artworks by interpreting something, that would at best be a half-truth. Artists don't interpret the object that is the "material" part of the artwork or the artwork itself in

making it. Sometimes, however, artworks reveal an artist's "interpretation" of a subject matter. War and Peace reveals Tolstoy's "interpretation" of Russian society among other things. Warhol's endless frames of Marilyn and Jackie perhaps offer an "interpretation" of what is valued in American culture. What this comes to is that some works express thoughts about a subject matter, and sometimes these thoughts are appropriately called interpretations of the subject matter. It's not important to quibble whether such thoughts are always appropriately called "interpretations" of a subject matter. Interpretations (thoughts about) of a subject matter aren't constitutive in any case. They (claim to) inform us about something rather than create something. We only create something when we use a medium to express those thoughts.

This last point suggests a new and more charitable way of understanding the point Danto is making in speaking of constitutive interpretations. "Interpretation" like "belief" is ambiguous between something containing or standing in some other relation to a content and the content itself. In the case of beliefs, it is an attitude that contains the content. Taking a cue from one of Danto's remarks, in the case of interpretation it is a theorizing about something that contains the content. (Theorizing is always an epistemic enterprise.) But if we are simply referring to the content of an interpretation, we can refer to it independently of any theorizing or other sort of activity, attitude or other "container". My current suggestion is that Danto's talk of constitutive interpretation boils down to the claim that to be an artwork an artist must imbue a object with some sort of content or meaning. Call this the minimal view of constitutive interpretation. There is at least one passage where I find Danto supporting this construal. "My own best candidate for the minuend minus the subtrahend of the physical object in the case of the

work of art is the interpretation of that part. Or one can think of it as the meaning of that part.”⁷ If Danto is willing to substitute “meaning” for “interpretation”, that suggests he is really interested in referring to a content a work of art possesses rather than the way it got there.

This suggestion allows us to avoid saying that much of what Danto has to say about interpretation is mistaken. It does so by construing all that he has to say about constitutive “interpretation” as not really about interpretation – in the sense of a type of container of content – but about meaning. It simply comes down to the idea that a necessary condition for being an artwork is that it have a content or meaning.

My wish would be to leave the matter there, since it resolves a tension in Danto’s discussion of interpretation in a way that I would recommend were I presuming to give advice. But I wonder whether it comports with enough of what Danto wants to do with the idea of constitutive interpretation to be a really acceptable reading of him. We can see whether it is by asking two questions. What sort of things are responsible for a work’s acquiring a content, according to Danto? How does the suggestion to reduce constitutive interpretation to meaning comport with Danto’s ontology of artworks, which claims that interpretations are constituents of those works?

Determiners of Meaning

According to Danto, the type of interpretations that we should identify with constitutive interpretations are “surface” interpretations.⁸ Surface interpretation, we are told, “is what the audience grasps when it understands the work, and, in so far as this interpretation answers to the artist’s intention, to understand the work is to know what this intention was.”⁹ This passage seems to support my recommended reading of Danto.

Surface interpretations are what the audience grasps. But this is plausibly an (intended) content or meaning. So the identification of constitutive interpretation with content per se seems right. Furthermore, when members of a work's audience interpret in this way, they are engaged in a clearly epistemic activity. They are attempting to understand a work, not constitute one. Success would imply they have acquired knowledge, and would not imply that they have participated in constituting a work. So if there is anything about surface interpretation which is constitutive, it is not the act of interpreting, nor is it the interpretation produced by the act. What belongs to the work can only be the content identified by the interpretation.

Danto also tells us "to intend a work is to intend the object of it together with the interpretation through which the object is a work of art."¹⁰ If one reads this claim in a certain way, it is absurd. It would be absurd to suppose the artist creates an object, then theorizes about this object, or simply authorizes a meaning for it (see below), thereby producing an interpretation of it; the object combined with this interpretation so produced is the work of art. On the hand, if one takes interpretation simply to refer to an (intended) content, we get something much more plausible: to intend a work of art is to intend to make an object that possesses a particular content. So our reading is again supported in so far as it provides a more charitable reading of this passage.

However, when one turns to what Danto originally said about surface interpretation in the well-known paper "Deep Interpretation", the sailing is less smooth. Here Danto initially refers more to someone's authority, rather than an original intention, as the thing that fixes meaning. Faulkner can change the meaning of Abasalom, Abasalom by an ex post facto pronouncement about a possibly unintended feature of the

text. “Like Faulkner...,” Charles VII, in allowing the Anglo-Burgundian garrison at Troyes to leave with their baggage, “stood in a position of authority over which interpretation(s) [of baggage] would be allowed, whatever may have been his precise intentions...”¹¹. This passage, and the surrounding discussion reminds me of something judges sometimes unavoidably do in interpreting the law. Common law judicial interpretation has a significant epistemic aspect in attempting to identify the intention of lawmakers, the contextually-informed meaning of legal texts and of precedents created by earlier decisions, and the implications of these for the case at hand. Sometimes, however, all these considerations do not determine an unambiguous legal outcome, and judges then have to exercise judicial liberty and appeal to extra-legal considerations in deciding a case. Furthermore, whether their reasoning is good or bad, and whether they decide wisely or not, certain judges at least possess authority to make law in virtue of their decision, where it was previously indeterminate, or just different. Such legal interpretations really are constitutive, and Danto is ascribing a similar authority to artists and other actors. If Danto were right here, artist’s pronouncements would be something like genuine constitutive interpretations in the full blown sense of creating meaning by “authorizing” it. This goes against my minimalist reading of constitutive interpretation.

As far as I know, these few pages at the beginning of “Deep Interpretation”, are the only ones where Danto speaks of the artist’s authority in quite this way. In any case, I find these claims implausible. In interpreting Abasalom, Abasalom, we try to figure what Faulkner is doing in that work, in attempting to identify its content. Later pronouncements by the author are at best treated as fallible evidence, rather than exercises in authority. One just does not find the literary world giving them the authority

that Danto suggests and that the legal world gives to the decisions of supreme courts. This is a social fact, and I don't know what else to appeal to in deciding questions of this sort of authority.

So Danto is at least better off with my minimalist reading of constitutive interpretation though it now seems more uncertain what exactly he actually had in mind. I would point out, however, that even in the text just discussed, Danto soon reverts to a view closer to that expressed in the passages already quoted from Danto and his Critics. "...What speakers or rulers might or must have meant, or would have allowed on reflection were they consulted, is consistently appealed to as casuistry proceeds..."¹² This would be an attempt to figure out speaker's or ruler's intended meanings, not the identifying of an authorized meaning, whatever the intended meaning had been. So there would be no need to find a constitutive meaning in the more full-blown sense.

Ontology

I now turn to the second question: how does the minimalist account of constitutive interpretation comport with Danto's views about the ontology of artworks. Here we are faced with a problem. Danto clearly thinks that "interpretations" play a role in constituting artworks, and he often represents this as an interpretation transforming a physical object or "mere real thing" into an artwork. But he does not have a single, clearly preferred way of spelling out this idea. I find two main alternatives in his writing, though I wouldn't claim that these are the only proposals that can be extracted from it. One idea is that artworks are wholes consisting of two parts: an object and an interpretation.¹³ The other idea is that interpretations are "functions that transform material objects into works of art."¹⁴

How does the idea that artworks are wholes whose parts are a physical object and an interpretation comport with my minimalist account of interpretation? I fear that the answer here is: badly. If by “constitutive interpretation,” Danto only intends “content” or “meaning,” then it’s implausible to think of artworks as wholes consisting of the above mentioned parts. To see this, let us start with a non-art example. Recall the earlier discussion raising one’s hand in order to make a request to ask a question. The action I am interested in is the making of the request. In what does this act consist? Here is a possible proposal: this act is a whole consisting of two parts: the hand being raised and a meaning this hand raising has in virtue of an intention to exploit the classroom convention. The problem with this proposal is that it confuses a part of something with a property of it. The meaning is a property of the hand-raising and not a distinct part contributing to a larger “whole.” This comes out in the way we attempted to identify the purported second part of the whole. We said: “a meaning this hand raising has...” That is the give away. A meaning something has is a property of the thing. It is like a color something has, and not like an appendage something has. The difference between this hand-raising and the one that was nothing more than a stretching is not that they are common parts entering into different wholes. It consists in their being two different acts in virtue of having some different properties. The former means something, while latter does not mean something. The latter satisfies a physical need or desire, the former does not satisfy a physical need or desire.

The same is true of the meaning or content of artworks. These are properties of those works, not parts of them. Danto’s indiscernibles are objects with different, non-perceptual properties, different meaning properties. Surface interpretations identify these

different properties allowing us to understand the works in question – just as Danto says in the passage quoted earlier.¹⁵ Surface interpretations that bring about this understanding, being containers of a content distinct from the artworks we are trying to understand, are not parts of those artworks at all. It doesn't make sense to speak of contents or meanings per se as parts. They are properties.

The idea that interpretations are meanings and meanings are properties comports better with Danto's other suggestion that interpretations are functions. In Transfiguration, Danto represents this idea in the following "formula": $I(o) = W$. (Here it looks like $I(o)$ is the function and I is an argument of the function, but perhaps I am splitting hairs.) Substitution instances of I might well be meaning properties which, when "acquired" by o "make it over" into an artwork W . However, this leaves many questions unanswered. The one I want to focus on is: what object has I as a property? Is it o or W or both? Surely the artworks themselves possess their meanings. So where does physical object o fit into this picture?

Danto wants to reject the idea that an artwork just is the physical object that we see, whether we think of this object as a part or in terms of a function. However, if a meaning is a property that transforms a physical object into a work of art, then there is reason to think that the physical object has this property. How does a physical object get transformed by a property, unless it possesses it? If so, it looks like that very object is the work, and the idea that it is not has to be rejected. So our question comes down to this: is there any reason to think that the meaning is not a property of the physical object, but of something else?

A reason might be this. The very physical object we are looking at could have had a different meaning. It would if it had been made with a different intention, or in a different art-world context. However, the artwork has its meaning essentially. Hence, it is not possible that it could have meant something different. So the physical object and the artwork have different modal properties. So, they are not identical.

Danto's view that the artwork is not identical to the physical object would be vindicated by this argument. But it could also be true that the physical object is a constituent of the artwork, as Danto also claims.

However, we now have a puzzle. On the one hand, we seem to have reached the conclusion that an artwork such as a sculpture is not the physical object we see. On the other hand, we have rejected the idea that the physical object is a part of the artwork, the other part being its meaning. So what is the sculpture? What ontological category does it belong to?

I don't believe that Danto has provided the resources to pursue this issue further. For this reason, I will offer my own solution and ask to what extent it preserves Danto's basic ontological viewpoint.

The problem we are discussing applies to artifacts of all kinds, not just to certain types of artworks. Consider an iron wheel. Where the iron wheel is, there is also a wheel-shaped lump of iron. A lump of iron is a physical object. If the wheel is a physical object, and there cannot be two physical objects in the same place at the same time, then the wheel is the lump of iron. But the wheel and the lump have different modal properties. If the piece of iron were put in a press and made into an iron cube, the lump would survive, but the wheel would not. So an iron wheel is not a physical object. This conclusion is

absurd. So the principle that leads us to it is false. A plausible alternative principle says that we can have different physical objects in the same place at the same time as long as they are different kinds of physical objects.¹⁶ There is no reason why the identity parameters of some physical objects, especially functional objects made by human beings, should not be interest-relative and culturally conditioned. So wheels and lumps of iron (even wheel-shaped lumps) are both physical objects, but different kinds of physical objects with different kinds of identity conditions.

The same is true for painting and sculptures on the one hand and paint on canvass and lumps of metal or clay on the other. The entity identical to the sculpture is not simply a lump of material shaped in a certain way but such a lump structured to fulfill an artistic function or intention (typically) made possible by certain institutions or practices. Exactly the same is true of a red painting. It is a canvass covered by red paint to fulfill an artistic function or intention made possible by certain institutions or practices.¹⁷

I believe this proposal captures much of the spirit of Danto's ontology while jettisoning the letter of it. The visual artworks under consideration are not the physical objects that Danto would call mere real things. They are physical objects, but ones individuated by the sorts of contextual and intentional properties important to Danto. This ontology is also consistent with the minimal view of Danto's remarks about constitutive interpretation, which identifies interpretations with meanings. So they imply a plausible reading of remarks on the subject of interpretation with a sympathetic reworking of his ontology. The alternative for Danto (or a friend of Danto's view) would be to reject the minimal reading just mentioned to leave room for a part – whole ontology that he at times

explicitly proposes. I don't see how that could lead to conception of art interpretation that Danto could endorse, if it were actually coherent. But perhaps others can.

Notes

1. Arthur Danto, Transfiguration of the Commonplace: a Philosophy of Art (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1981) 125.
2. Danto and his Critics, 199.
3. Transfiguration, 130.
4. Transfiguration, 119.
5. Arthur Danto, The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 44.
6. Disenfranchisement, 45-6.
7. Danto and his Critics, 200, Danto's emphasis.
8. Danto and his Critics, 201.
9. Danto and his Critics, 201.
10. Danto and his Critics, 200.
11. Disenfranchisement, 50 my emphasis.
12. Disenfranchisement, 50.
13. Danto and his Critics, 199.
14. Disenfranchisement, 39. Also see Transfiguration, 125.
15. Danto and his Critics, 201.
16. This is the view of David Wiggins, Sameness and Substance (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).
17. Jerrold Levinson makes a similar claim The Pleasures of Aesthetics (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 129-137.