

Transfiguration and the Illusion of the Real:
Danto and Adorno on the Political Meaning of Aesthetic Semblance

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One if not the most important of Arthur C. Danto's contributions to recent philosophy of art has been to have shown that artistic modernism raises problems worthy of philosophical attention. In taking seriously the claims raised by modernist art, not only but especially that of the post war period, Danto introduced philosophy to our time. He continues a Hegelian legacy in taking philosophy as having the task of grasping its own time in thought, of responding to a genuine need in times of crises. While for Hegel the French Revolution and the resulting crisis of normativity called for a philosophical response, for Danto the aesthetic revolution and crisis triggered most representatively by Warhol's Brillo Boxes changed the world of art and the way we should think about the relationship between this and our world. Art is for Danto, just as for Hegel, a way of coming to grips with who and where we are as a culture. On this model art provides the semantic resources of collective self-recognition and, we could add, cultural self criticism. From *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* onward Danto has interpreted works of art as convex mirrors "that tell us what we would not know about ourselves without them." They are irreplaceable "instruments of self-revelation."¹ While Danto is not hesitant to situate himself in a Hegelian tradition when it comes to assigning art a structurally analogous role to what Hegel calls absolute spirit, it is rather surprising and ultimately unfortunate that there has not been any sustained dialogue between his philosophy of art and those of other 20th century thinkers within the Hegelian tradition, most notably the aesthetic theory of Theodor W. Adorno.

Beneath the surface layer of different styles of thinking (analytic vs. dialectic) and vocabularies (although these are often strikingly similar) one witnesses surprising convergences and overlaps of concerns of both Adorno and Danto.² It is not just the case that both view

¹ Arthur C. Danto: *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1981), henceforth cited as *The Transfiguration*, p. 173, 9.

² The striking similarities between Danto's philosophy of art and Adorno's aesthetic theory even extend to what has been seen as a major difficulty of their respective positions. Thus critics have for example argued that both face the problem of adjudicating the tension between essentialism and historicism. Cf. for example Michael Kelly: "Essentialism and Historicism in Danto's Philosophy of Art," in: *History and Theory*, Volume 37, Number 4, December 1998; Thorsten Bonacker: *Die normative Kraft der Kontingenz. Nichtessentialistische Gesellschaftskritik nach Weber und Adorno* (Frankfurt/ New York: Campus Verlag, 2000).

aesthetics as a central rather than peripheral philosophical discipline, but also that they develop a worked out and rather systematic philosophy of art, which situates art within the general terms of a philosophy of history. Art is seen as having in some sense exhausted its possibilities.³ Secondly, both Adorno and Danto interpret philosophy's relationship to art as displaying an unfortunate tendency to disenfranchise (Danto), identify and subsume (Adorno) and thus dominate its object. Thirdly, in order to circumvent this tendency to domination, both have invested much time and energy in the concrete labor of art criticism; thus paying careful attention to the stakes raised by their object of study.⁴ Finally, both attempt to reverse the pejorative connotation, predominant since Plato, of artworks as illusory images, secondary in rank to what is purported to be real. In particular modernist works of art, Adorno and Danto contend, are not images in the sense of duplicates of some external entity to which they stand secondary in rank. Rather, they are interpreted as mirroring images, *Spiegelbilder*, indispensable media for the purpose of self-revelation. In assigning to art the role of mirror image, both emphasize the revelatory force of what Hegel discussed under the heading of *Schein*, aesthetic semblance or appearance. I would like to focus on aesthetic semblance as a central category and concern that connects both positions. For the purpose of this paper I will argue that Adorno (explicitly) and Danto (implicitly) assign to aesthetic semblance the role of *denaturalizing ordinary interpretations*. A transfiguration of our vision through works of art takes on a genuine *political* meaning in calling into question what is taken to be real. After reconstructing this meaning, I will raise a question concerning the tenability of the kind of vindication of modernism as a medium of critical self revelation that both Adorno and Danto share.

I. Aesthetic Modernism as Denaturalizing Transfiguration

The transformation, which Danto takes to be the key revolution with philosophical import in recent art history, consists in the fact that after Duchamp and Warhol in principle every object

³ Arthur C. Danto: *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), Theodor W. Adorno: "The Aging of the New Music," in: *Essays on Music* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002) p. 181-202.

⁴ It would be worthwhile to analyze the significance of the fact that Danto primarily uses examples from the domain of visual artists (Warhol, Duchamp and their history) and their work, in particular conceptualism and minimalism, to develop his ontology of art while Adorno focuses mainly on music (the second Vienna School and its history) and high modernist literature (Kafka, Beckett, Proust) as the basis of his critical aesthetics.

can be an art object. The boundaries between art and commonplace objects, "mere real things," have not been abolished but become fuzzy and more difficult to account for. This raises the problem of differentiating perceptively identical objects. What criteria allow us to distinguish a telephone book or a forgery from objects that are perceptually and materially *indiscernible*, while the one is an artwork and the other obviously not? Clearly the answer cannot rely on perceptible features or material properties of the respective object. Neither is it possible to take its content as the distinguishing criterion, since we could have identical contents of two objects, where the one is an object of art and the other a mere real thing. Moreover, with the advent of aesthetic modernism and abstraction the idea of representational content becomes increasingly problematic as a distinguishing criterion. Danto persuasively argues that we have to draw on information external to the material conditions of the work of art. The art world is one of *artistic contexts*, specific relationships that amount to a complex artistic ontology. Danto situates the difference that makes a difference between art and mere real things in the embodied or medium-bound *aboutness* of artworks, their specific *style*, as well as their inherent directedness at an audience, their *performability*.

Although Danto claims that his main interest is to develop a defining ontology of art based on the above criteria, it seems that his project extends far beyond the confines of engaging ontological questions as they are commonly understood. The ontology of artistic modernism is presented in part as a *political ontology*. When reading *The Transfiguration* closely, one finds repeated discussions which go beyond the confines of a narrowly understood conception of artistic ontology. Danto uses the ontological question concerning what constitutes art to address the issue of what art does and how it does what it does. Danto's work, or so I want to argue, has been pursuing the attempt of or at least providing the means for interpreting modernist art as possessing a subterranean political meaning. This strain of his thought has been largely overlooked by focusing on the more narrow epistemic and ontological issues. It is also due to the fact that it is not always clear what Danto sees as the political import of art, in particular art which does not present itself as political.

What is the political subtext of artistic modernism that *The Transfiguration* helps to elucidate? Some of Danto's (real) examples might help here. Cezanne, in painting his wife Camille, is described as a monster who dissects the object of vision through a "certain

dehumanizing transfiguration of the subject," an "analytic subversion"⁵ that makes her into an object without inner life. Artworks are depicted as transfiguring images to "underscore the violence of the times,"⁶ as the example of the Crucifixion by Grunewald shows. According to Danto, Grunewald depicts a "green-splotched anguished Christ" in which hypothetical additions would only "transfigure the painting into something of an even greater horrendousness," and would usher in further "acts of artistic sadism."⁷ Unless it is only a personal predilection on Danto's part to highlight examples of the world of art that transform our vision through the eyes of the artist in ways that are described in a strong evaluative language as "dehumanizing transfiguration," "analytic subversion," "underscoring the violence of the times" or "acts of artistic sadism," it seems that an inherent feature of modernism's ontology is for Danto that it transforms our vision in the ways described.

Sometimes Danto suggests that the political import of art consists in the content of such acts of transfiguration. He mentions examples such as artistic comments on the Kennedy assassinations, the Watergate confessionals, Vietnam, and Abu Ghraib. Critical journalism, war photography or political speech, however, could equally and often more effectively transform our conceptions of such events in the way Danto portrays it. This kind of politically explicit art, art with a message, is also not characteristic of the modernist avantgardism and minimalism, Danto has been most interested in over the past 25 years. A more promising approach consists in assigning to *artistic transfiguration itself* a normative role. While premodern art, say Giotto's paintings, opened up a transcendence to a sacred reality, modernism transcends historical reality from within by way of formally transfiguring this very reality through the eyes of the audience. The political significance of art thus seems to consist less in any particular content or message, but in the very act of artistic transfiguration. This line of argument extends from *The Transfiguration* to some of Danto's most recent work, in which he continues to show "how images can change what we are, and from that perspective they must from now on act as standards against which we can judge the political efficacy of art."⁸

⁵ *The Transfiguration* p. 143.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 146.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 153 f.

⁸ Arthur C. Danto: "American Self-Consciousness in Politics and Art," in *Artforum*, Sep 2004, Vol. 43, Iss. 1.

The paradigm case of experiencing art is the identification with what is depicted "where the artwork becomes a metaphor for life and life is transfigured. The structure of such transfigurations may indeed be like the structures of making believe—of pretending for whatever pleasure that brings and not for the purposes of deceit."⁹ Artworks as metaphors of life require the transformation of the viewer (including her life, as expressed in Rilke's Archaic Torso of Apollo) to see the world as one of living and meaningful things rather than mere real things. Thus artworks have consequences for the way we see the "real" world. It is thus not only the work of art, but mere real things in general that, through the work done by the artwork, are taken to be "powerful," "swift," "having depth," "honest," "astonishing," "eloquent," "delicate," "lifelike," or "dead." In the case of Madame Cezanne we see that artworks can even (re)transfigure our perception of living things into inanimate things. Extending the claim about transfigurability to Danto's object of initiation, we can generalize that if even a Brillo Box, the paradigm of a commodified mere thing, can be seen as a meaningful object of art and thus transformed into a thing of a second order, what couldn't? Emphasizing that these acts of artistic transfiguration have to be distinguished from "ordinary" acts of "real" transformation, Danto qualifies his conception of the experience of artistic transfiguration by adding that "in such pretending one must always know that one is not what one is pretending to be, and pretending, like a game, ceases when done."¹⁰ Artistic transfiguration is thus real and not real. It is thus transfiguration in the mode of semblance, not transformation.

The setting up of the problem of differentiating indiscernibles is intended, I think, to evoke in the reader a sense of perplexity. While we commonly take an indiscernible image to be a copy of something else, Danto shows that such an image, while not changing the real, transfigures it so that it becomes perceivable in a new light, as possessing a radically new meaning that is detached from the standard meaning and usages of its twin, the mere real thing. The image thus reveals that *sedimented interpretations, ways of viewing the world, and usages are subject to change*. Thus it exposes an aspect of reality that is often lost in a way peculiar to image making: reality's openness to interpretative transfigurability. It brings about a certain disillusion about reality's claim to be just real and beyond transfigurability.

⁹ *The Transfiguration*, p. 172.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

While transfigurability of the real through artistic semblance is a rather abstract notion of what art does, Danto gives some flesh to the specificity of artistic transfiguration when arguing that "[w]hat is important to us in art is of a piece with what is important to us in one another."¹¹ If what is important for us in one another is our individual non-replaceable personality and liveliness, and artworks, even if they are on the surface indiscernible, do make a claim to be perceived in their singularity as the specific kind of copies they are, then it follows that Warhol's experiment "proved" that every object, animal, and person could in principle be perceived as possessing a singular, non-replaceable, extraordinary meaning. Since we live in a world in which this is usually not taken for granted, artworks are thus stand-ins or placeholders for experiences of meaningful singularity. Since we also know, however, that Brillo Boxes as things are replaceable, we know that in dealing with art we are dealing with semblance. Works of art are the kinds of things that thrive on semblance. But we have rushed too far ahead. The question of how to conceive of artistic semblance as at once a placeholder and an illusion that emerged from Danto's ontology of modernist artifacts is taken up in Adorno's aesthetic theory.

II. Adorno, Danto, and the Aporia of Modernism

Adorno's aesthetics, indeed his philosophy as a whole, shares with Danto a concern for the problem of (re)presentation and (re)semblance and the way it is presented by modernism. Under conditions of modernity, Adorno argues in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, *Negative Dialectics* and the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, we are under the "spell" (*Bann*) of not being able to do justice, nor can we fully experience singularity and true plurality. Every act of representation by conceptual means involves a moment of violence by not living up to the material richness of what the representation is intended to be about. Where everything is for another and can be represented to be exchanged according to its market value, singularity and genuine diversity is covered over and objects, animals, and human beings are taken into account only with regard to their relative value in a market economy rather than as singular individuals with concrete needs and claims. They become "mere real things," to use Danto's phrase. In an economy of qualitatively indiscernible placeholders, where sign and image has been

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

distinguished, artworks embody the possibility of humane, i.e. irreplaceable experience. As stand-ins for this possibility they are at the same time media of criticism of conditions in which such experience is nearly extinct or limited to artistic and some other rare practices. Art thus has the double role of (i) transfiguring our conception of mere real things and (ii) doing so in a way that is distinguished from ordinary cognition. The rationality of art consists in its evocation of the experience of singular meaningful objects, which embody more than mere thinghood. In Adorno's words: "[a]esthetic comportment is the capacity to perceive more in things than they are; it is the gaze under which the given is transformed into an image."¹² The image character of artworks, their aesthetic semblance, distinguishes them from their structurally indiscernible twins.

Adorno argues that to come to terms with aesthetic modernism means to come to terms with what he regards as an inescapable aporia inscribed into the logic of aesthetic semblance. It consists in the fact that works of art are at the same time free and impotent. They are works of art but also mere art things. Modernism, contrary to traditional representational or functional art, is self-legislating. Modernist works of art do not have to abide by any externally given standards, be it from religion, politics, or metaphysics. Rather they pursue a logic immanent to the history of art. Under conditions of modernity, artworks *qua* artworks (not as commodities, although they are subject to commodification as well) are embodiments of autonomy and step out of the various heteronomous practices of life and accompanying rigidified interpretations. Their autonomy extends beyond autonomy of directives (their aboutness cannot be reduced to being a function of something else) into an autonomy of perception on the side of their audience. Aesthetic experience preserves a form of disinterestedness in a world governed by external interests, seemingly fixed interpretations and external demands.

Adorno interprets modernist works of art as allowing the viewer to step out of her regimented form of life for a moment to see it and features of the world she lives in and usually interprets as merely given "from the outside" as it were. This stepping out reveals that these features and her life are to some extent contingent and as such subject to potential change and different interpretations. Art's normative role thus consists in denaturalizing what is taken to be essential and unchangeable. The prescribed range of potential usages assigned to an object such

¹² Theodor W. Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p. 330.

as a Brillo Box is transfigured and renegotiated. The point is that this normative role is not assigned to any particular content which is critically commented on by the work, but consists in the work's and the ensuing experience's ability to transfigure seemingly fixed ways of perception and at the same time reveal that they are *constructed*. The work of art is thus guided by a normative impulse that manifests itself in the appearance of aesthetic disclosure of constructedness of what claims to be natural rather than itself depicting what is wrong or what needs to be done (as the avantgarde sometimes attempts to do). Through instances of successful transfiguration modernist works of art thus keep open the possibility (perhaps even necessity) of change while being conscious that they, as mere art things, cannot bring it about. At best they provide fleeting images of social reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) through their structural fittingness (*Stimmigkeit*), which remains a background condition even and particularly for dissonant works, without presenting an outline of what emancipatory change requires.

However, this autonomy is double-sided. Adorno argues that artistic autonomy, which on the one hand opens up the possibility of reinterpretation, also sentences it to impotence (*Ohnmacht*). Modernist autonomous art makes claims not ushering in any corresponding transformation of what aesthetic semblance reveals as the illusion of the real. The fact that art has lost its capacity to legislate action (if it ever possessed it) and with it any political role corresponding to its political meaning sentences it to live an afterlife of continuing self doubt, a "necessary moment of anti-art" that is attached to every work. The moment it for example proposes programs for emancipatory action, the moment it makes a political statement in the ordinary sense of politics, it is transformed from an autonomous object into a tool guided by external considerations, the very idea of which it set out to protest against. Far from denying that art has and can always be put to a variety of uses, Adorno interprets the logic of semblance to consist in its claim to autonomy despite the pointlessness of this autonomy. Autonomy and impotence of modernism are two sides of the same precarious coin. What Adorno regards as a *necessary crisis* of artistic meaning is not just visible from the vantage point of philosophy but inscribed into the logic of modernist works themselves. It manifests itself in what Danto diagnoses as its search for a definition, its tendency to question any meaning or definition provided, to emphasize dissonance over harmony and brokenness over continuity. From the vantage point of Adorno's interpretation of the logic of modernism Danto's example of the Brillo

Box is thus a bad example, because it does not present the aporia of artistic autonomy within the work itself and thus falls short of being part of what Adorno saw as the "most advanced" artistic practices. Whereas Danto's work after *The Transfiguration* sees a potential resolution of modernism's crisis in freeing itself from philosophy, Adorno claims that its aporia of promising transformation while only providing transfiguration, commits it to an endless death struggle to be reflected in the structure of artworks. The crisis of modernism could only be overcome under altered social and economic conditions in which there would be no need for aesthetic semblance, because art's autonomy would not be sentenced to impotence. It would not have to lie to tell the truth.

Danto captures an aporia related to Adorno's, perhaps unintentionally, towards the end of *The Transfiguration* by depicting the peculiar fate of the metaphor of transfiguring commonplace objects into those of art as at once pointless and necessary: "The moment it was possible, something like the Brillo Box was inevitable and pointless. It was inevitable because the gesture had to be made, whether with this object or some other. It was pointless because, once it could be made, there was no reason to make it." Nevertheless the book ends on a rather positive note. Reminiscent of Adorno's utopian finales to otherwise dark texts, Danto picks up on the initial characterization of art as a tool of self-revelation and writes that despite its pointlessness, art is indispensable in "offering itself as a mirror to catch the conscience of our kings."¹³

Let me end with a question. I have argued that, in spite of obvious differences, Adorno and Danto see the political import of aesthetic modernism and its precursors in its capacity to transfigure our conception of what is real. What appears to be a mere real thing or dead object is revealed as changeable and imbued with meaning, even if only in the mode of aesthetic semblance. If this reconstruction holds true, it seems that the political meaning of artistic transfiguration would have to be brought into clearer focus to have any critical bite today. Much of the social imaginary of late capitalist societies hinges on the denaturalizing faith that things could be ultimately different, mere real things could be art things, and the constant expansion of our imaginary potential has turned into a natural law. As Richard Sennett argues, the belief in contingency and flexibility of perspectives, which might have been critical and emancipatory under more static economic conditions, has turned into a justification that servers the expansion

¹³ *The Transfiguration*, p. 208.

of a rampant neo-liberal economy, which thrives on the rhetoric of changing perspectives and imagining the new, including radically new attempts at self-critique.¹⁴ If it is true that any object can in principle be an object of aesthetic appraisal, as Danto has it, should we not conclude that the crisis of aesthetic modernism and its current exhaustion is a mirror that represents where we are as a culture in a much deeper sense? Should we then not further consider the possibility alluded to by Adorno that the potential of resolving the necessary crisis of modernism has to go beyond the confines of aesthetic modernism and its recent post-isms as well as beyond philosophy? Wouldn't this, finally, imply the need of a transformation rather than a transfiguration of the commonplace?

¹⁴ Richard Sennett: *The Corrosion of Character* (New York: Norton, 1998). Cf. also Daniel Herwitz: "Danto on Postmodernism," in: Mark Rollins (ed.): *Danto and his Critics* (Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993) p. 142-158 and Fredric Jameson: *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990).