

Danto's Artworld

Bruce Mackh

Original Publication Date May 4, 2009

Revised May 6, 2012

Introduction

After attending an exhibition of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* in the early 1960s, philosopher Arthur Danto became intrigued by the question of how it might be possible to tell the difference between a work of visual art and another object with which it is visually indistinguishable. His thoughts on this subject inspired "The Artworld" (1964), a philosophical essay offering a way of understanding how objects come to be regarded as visual art. As Danto (1964) says,

These days one might not be aware he was on artistic terrain without an artistic theory to tell him so. And part of the reason for this lies in the fact that terrain is constituted artistic in virtue of artistic theories, so that one use of theories, in addition to helping us discriminate art from the rest, consists in making art possible. (p. 28)

Danto's Artworld theory has had a profound impact on the kinds of objects that are seen today as works of visual art, opening the door to a wide variety of artistic expressions that might not otherwise have been possible under different circumstances. Although the theories discussed in this paper might be more widely applicable, and are certainly drawn from sources with a broader scope, the following discussion is limited to an examination of these factors as they pertain to visual art. Perhaps these ideas could apply to music, theatre, or dance, but that is for others to decide. The intent of this paper does not include any claim for such relevance, but only proposes to show how Danto's Artworld theory marked a change from Formalist thinking about the visual arts and provided a framework for new and innovative means of visual artistic expression.

Danto's Artworld

Philosophies of art have changed greatly over the centuries. For thousands of years, most visual art was imitative of something in the real world. Imitation provided a definition of visual art that was well established and highly useful for centuries: Danto terms this the Imitation

Theory of Art (IT). Indeed, the visual arts were imitative for such a long time that this quality was taken to be a sufficient condition; however, with the advent of post-impressionist painting, imitation no longer served to define what constitutes a work of art. In order to accommodate the new kinds of non-imitative artworks, art theory had to change: works of visual art began to be understood, not as imitations of real objects, but as real objects in and of themselves. The post-impressionists became philosophically established as being genuinely creative—making real objects, not imitations of real objects. This new theory, which Danto called RT, (which likely means “Reality Theory” or “Real Thing”, although this is only implied, not overtly stated) provided an entirely new way of looking at art (Danto, 1964, p. 28).

The post-impressionist movement in art prompted another philosophical change, outlined in the book *Art* by Clive Bell. Bell determined that works of visual art have a quality of “significant form” which inspires “aesthetic emotion” in the viewer. Significant form is determined only by the lines, shapes, colors, and other formal elements of the work, independent of any other factors such as historical context, artist’s intention, subject matter—in Bell’s assessment, all of these are irrelevant to the work of art. The only way a work can truly be art is if it inspires “aesthetic emotion,” a state of being absorbed in the work to the exclusion of other thoughts or feelings. To Bell, then, the visual appearance of the work and the specific aesthetic response it prompted in the viewer were the sole determining factors of a work of art (Bell, 1914). As Malcolm Budd (1996) explains:

Many admirable pictures interest us and excite our admiration but do not provoke the aesthetic emotion and, accordingly, do not move us *as works of art*. A representational (figurative) form may have as such aesthetic value as an abstract form, but if it has aesthetic value, it is *as form*, not as representation that it has it. (p. 50)

This philosophical approach to visual art, termed Formalism, was a notable departure from the Imitation Theory of art, opening the door for many subsequent art movements that did not

typically utilize an easily recognizable subject such as cubism, surrealism, or abstract expressionism. In the half-century that passed between Bell's *Art* and Danto's "The Artworld", artists constantly pushed the boundaries of accepted forms of artistic production. Each foray beyond these borders prompted the formation of new theories of art to accommodate these changes, which in turn stretched the limits even further. One of the movements to cause the most disruption was Dadaism, particularly the works of Marcel Duchamp, whose use of manufactured objects—a snow shovel, a bottle rack, a comb, and most famously, a urinal—as sculptures challenged many closely-held notions about visual art: his "Readymades" intentionally stepped around issues of aesthetics and representation, presenting perplexing dilemmas for art theory and philosophy (Richter, 1978). For instance, a urinal in a plumbing supply warehouse is just a bathroom fixture, but placed on display as a sculpture in a gallery, it becomes a work of art. What makes this transformation possible? How can there be objects that exist as art in one place but not art in another? "Problems in all domains of philosophy, Danto argues, are defined by the identification of what he calls "indiscernibles"—two perceptually indistinguishable things which can be told apart only with the aid of some theory" (Carrier, 1998, p. 5); in Danto's words, "Artworks and real things cannot be told apart by visual inspection alone" (Danto, 1997, p. 71). Martin Seel adds, "What can be concluded from this is that the perception sufficient for seeing any 'real' object is not sufficient for the perception of an art object" (Seel, 1998, p. 111).

As Danto looked at Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, he wondered what the difference might be between an actual box of Brillo pads and one made by Andy Warhol. Clearly, Formalist philosophy could not answer this question because the form of the two objects is identical. Danto suggests that in order to understand the difference between artworks and non-artworks, we

need to master “the *is* of artistic identification” (Danto, 1964, p. 30), a usage of the word “is” commonly heard in sentences such as “This is a picture of a polar bear,” or “This spot of orange paint is the sun.” In his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), Danto uses the example of several paintings that appear to be identical—all are solid red squares. By using the *is* of artistic identification, these red squares may be identified in completely different ways: one is *The Israelites Crossing the Red Sea*, another is *Red Square*, and still another is *Red Tablecloth*, among others (Danto, 1981, p. 2). Using the word “is” in an artistic sense, therefore, has the power to designate an object as a work of art. Someone who says, “I don’t see anything but red paint” has not mastered the skill of artistic identification (Danto, 1964, p. 31). “To see something as art,” says Danto, “requires something the eye cannot descry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld” (Danto, 1964, p. 32).

If Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* are visually identical to the Brillo boxes found in supermarkets, what is it that makes them art? It is not because they are more expensive than real Brillo boxes, nor because they are handmade instead of manufactured, or even because there are no Brillo pads inside of them. The real difference has to do with a theory of art, which is also a product of the work’s historical timeframe; for instance, it would not have been possible to see Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* as art in the 1800s. “The world has to be ready for certain things, the Artworld no less than the real one. It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the Artworld, and art possible” (Danto, 1964, p. 33).

Danto’s Artworld theory strongly influenced later philosophers such as George Dickie, who developed the “Institutional Theory of Art”. Unlike Danto, Dickie’s theory refers more directly to the influential nature of the decisions made by the persons who make up the Artworld, and the effect of these decisions on the definition of art, stating:

A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld). (Dickie, 1983, p. 49)

Dickie later modified this theory in "The New Institutional Theory of Art" to the formula, "A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public" (Dickie, 1983, p. 53). On the other hand, Danto's use of the term "Artworld" refers more generally to the atmosphere of art criticism, art theory, art history, and philosophy surrounding works of art.

Danto argued instead that the artworld provides a background theory that an artist invokes when exhibiting something as art. This relevant 'theory' is not a thought in the artist's head, but something the social and cultural context enables both artist and audience to grasp. ... With *Brillo Boxes*, Warhol demonstrated that anything can be a work of art, given the right situation and theory. (Freeland, 2002, p. 55, 57)

In subsequent books *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981) and *After the End of Art* (1997), Danto further develops many of the ideas in "The Artworld" (1964), responding to the substantial changes that occurred in art practice and art theory since the mid-1960s. Danto defines a work of art as necessarily having a quality of "aboutness"—that is, it must be *about* something, and it must embody that meaning (Danto, 1981). This can be seen as a further development of "the *is* of artistic identification" in "The Artworld." This is not representation in the traditional sense, in which a work must be an imitation of something in the real world, but is more in line with conceptualism, or the philosophy that emphasizes the analysis of the concept, or idea, of a work of art as being more important than the actual work of art itself (Adams, 2008, p. 498). Richard Wollheim proposes another way of looking at the same issue in the idea of "representations": in his view, representations in visual art need not be recognizable imitations of people, places or things in the real world, but may be thought of as a way of "seeing-as" or

“representational seeing” (Wollheim, 1980, p. 16), a concept that is compatible with Danto's *Transfiguration* theory.

The Necessity of Inclusiveness

The philosophy of conceptualism in visual art could be understood to be an extension of Danto's Artworld theory—that it is the atmosphere of art theory and art history surrounding a work that makes it possible to identify that work as art, not the intrinsic qualities of the work itself. During the 1960s the conceptual framework surrounding Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* was what made them art, not any physically discernible characteristic. The same was true of Duchamp's *Fountain*: placing the urinal in a gallery changes the meaning of the object. When understood in an artistic sense, “the work itself has properties that urinals themselves lack: it is daring, impudent, irreverent, witty, and clever” (Danto, 1981, p. 93-94).

Danto's Artworld theory and its role in the identification of visual art can be seen in conceptual artists' deliberate efforts to produce works that defy traditional ideas about the visual arts, including works of visual art that are not actually visible: for instance, Walter de Maria's *Vertical Earth Kilometer*, installed for the 1977 Documenta VI in Kassel, Germany, is a brass rod that extends underground for the length of one kilometer. The artwork itself cannot be seen—the viewer only knows about it in documentation from the exhibition (Seel, 1998, p. 109). Other works challenge traditional art values in other ways, such as Maurizio Cattelan's *Novecento (Twentieth Century)* (1997), a preserved dead horse hanging from the gallery ceiling in a sling, or Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955), which is a combination of regular bedding—a pillow, sheets, and a quilt—streaked with paint and mounted on a gallery wall.

In every case, the question, “But is it art?” has been answered, “Yes, because...” completing the sentence with a reference to an existing work, theory, or art historical connection.

The conceptual framework of art theory, history, and philosophy, the Artworld, is what makes visual art possible. Danto's Artworld theory provides a viable solution to the problem of the identification of objects as works of visual art, particularly in an artistic climate where items such as a dead sheep suspended in a tank of formaldehyde (Damien Hirst's *Away from the Flock*, 1994), an unmade bed (Tracy Emin, *My Bed*, 1999), and a pile of wrapped candies (Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled [Portrait of Ross in L.A.]*, 1991) all occupy gallery space alongside photographs, paintings, and sculpture. In a Formalist understanding of art, these items would not qualify as artworks because they do not seem to have significant form or inspire aesthetic emotion. Instead, the appreciation of such works is dependent on the viewer possessing a significant level of knowledge about the Artworld in order to see them as artworks at all.

We live at a moment when it is clear that art can be made of anything, and where there is no mark through which works of art can be perceptually different from the most ordinary of objects. That is what the example of the Brillo Box is meant to show. The class of artworks is simply unlimited, as media can be adjoined to media, and art unconstrained by anything save the laws of nature in one direction and moral laws on the other. (Danto, 1998, p. 139)

Danto has also modified his position on the *Brillo Box* somewhat, acknowledging that the actual Brillo box is a work of art in its own right, and admitting his earlier prejudice against commercial art as art. The two kinds of Brillo boxes, however, are still quite different by virtue of having different meanings: commercial Brillo boxes are designed to sell soap pads, while Warhol's *Brillo Box*, among other things, raises philosophical questions about the "American Lebenswelt" and "all the great modern things" (Danto, 1998, p. 142). A visual art object must be able to answer the question, "What is it about?" and also to show how this quality of "aboutness" is embodied in the art object. Inside a plumbing supply warehouse it is illogical to say, "What is this urinal *about*?" In a gallery, the question makes more sense. What meaning is the artist trying to communicate through this visual art object? How is this meaning embodied in the art

object? These kinds of questions help us to understand works of visual art that might otherwise be perplexing: they point to the *concept* of the work, which is exactly the point of conceptual art—the *idea* is the most important thing about a work of art, not its physical appearance. This is precisely where Danto's Artworld theory, and his later clarification of it in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, proves to be the most useful: it provides the framework in which these kinds of objects can become art.

Even More Liberal

Danto's Artworld theory and his subsequent writings provide intriguing philosophical arguments that do much to advance the theoretical and conceptual foundations of visual art in an age in which all rules seem to have been cast aside. However, there is room for further thought on this issue. For one thing, Danto's philosophy of the way in which objects are seen as artworks does not address issues *within* the Artworld in which there are ongoing exclusionary efforts—for instance, there are still bitter conflicts about what kinds of works ought to be called “fine art” and whether this designation excludes works of craft, photography, new digital media, commercial, or graphic art. Danto (1998) comments:

However arrogant philosophy may be, its disenfranchisements are rarely as vehement as those which arise within artistic discourse itself, where artists and critics are disposed to say of something that it is not art when there is very little other than art that it can be. (p. 136)

According to Danto, excluding an item from classification as art is more a function of art criticism or art history than of philosophy, and it is true that philosophical theories such as Danto's can often be more inclusive and more progressive than other ideas still in circulation in the Artworld. Noel Carroll, in his essay “Les Culs de Sac of Enlightenment Aesthetics”, explains that the aesthetic definition of art, formulated during the Enlightenment era in the 18th century, continues to pervade the thinking of persons in the Artworld and to color their

perceptions of what is art and what is not. Many people still agree with the idea that an object is a work of visual art *only if* it is created with the *primary* intention to provide aesthetic experiences (Carroll, 2009), a philosophically outdated definition more compatible with Formalism than with contemporary artistic practice.

A more useful definition of visual art than has heretofore been formulated, by Danto or by anyone else, might go a long way towards settling some of these arguments, and it might also allow those with less accomplished backgrounds in the intellectual aspects of art to understand and even appreciate some of the kinds of works that are so mind-boggling or downright incomprehensible to those outside of the Artworld. Danto admits that understanding a work in terms of the Artworld requires prior knowledge about the history and theory of art (Danto, 1964, p. 32), but the understanding of visual art ought not to be as esoteric as it has become. Art touches every aspect of our daily lives: from the fixtures in our bathrooms, to our breakfast cereal boxes, our clothing, our cars, our media...every item with which we come in contact was *designed* and could reasonably be viewed in an aesthetic or artistic light. To recognize, or even to celebrate, these everyday encounters with visual art would be a worthy outcome of a better definition of visual art.

Another flaw in Artworld theory is that it functions on a macro-level, looking primarily at how works are seen in large public settings. What about a micro-view, that of individual works by more everyday sorts of artists? Not every artist's work makes it into a museum or a gallery. Who ought to decide what's visual art and what's not? *The Dot* and *Ish* by Peter K. Reynolds offer two of the most eloquent contemporary statements about artistic production. Ostensibly a children's picture book, *The Dot* follows the story of a girl who did not think she had any artistic talent until her art teacher encouraged her. From one half-hearted dot on a piece of paper, she

goes on to produce an astonishing variety of dot-based artworks, even becoming a mentor to another discouraged young artist. In *Ish*, the main character is a boy whose brother ridicules his artistic efforts, causing him to stop making art until he finds that his sister has saved and displayed all of his rejected drawings. He decides he doesn't have to produce works that are accurate representations of objects: instead of a picture of a vase of flowers, his picture can be "vase-ish", and this revelation frees him to reach new artistic heights. In the end, he makes art simply because it gives him joy, not because of anyone else's opinion of it (Reynolds, 1993, 1994). Like the boy in *Ish*, many artists create works of visual art only for their own personal reasons and never show their works in any kind of public setting. Is this art if it never comes into contact with the Artworld? What if the artist him/herself does not see the works as art? The *Dot* and *Ish* would suggest that yes—it is art. Granted, these are not scholarly, philosophical monographs, but truth can sometimes be found in surprising places. This idea is also compatible with George Dickie's "Institutional Theory of Art", which suggests that status as art can be conferred by someone other than the artist (Dickie, 1981).

Arthur Danto's Artworld theory and his subsequent writings provide a strong philosophical basis for understanding how objects such as furniture, plumbing fixtures, or facsimiles of Brillo boxes can be viewed as visual art through the context of art theory and art history into which they are positioned—the Artworld. In this context, these items exhibit a quality of "aboutness" and embody this meaning, aiding in our comprehension of these items' artistic features. This does not, however, provide a completely satisfactory definition of art, nor does it answer many remaining questions about visual art such as how we make determinations of quality in a work of art or what the nature or purpose of such artworks may be. "Danto's open-door theory of art says 'Come in' to all works and messages, but it does not seem to

explain very well *how* an artwork communicates its message” (Freeland, 2002, p. 58). In a climate of artistic production in which works of art have little or nothing that could be determined to be common features, there is room for an even more comprehensive and inclusive definition of visual art; such a definition could serve to replace outmoded understandings about visual art and could perhaps be instrumental in settling long-standing Artworld conflicts. It might even open the door, just a little, to those who stand outside the Artworld shaking their heads in bewilderment or rolling their eyes in scorn.

References

- Adams, L. (2008). *A history of western art* (Rev. 4th ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Bell, C. (1914). *Art*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Budd, M. (1996). *Values of art: Pictures, poetry, and music*. New York: Penguin Group USA.
- Carrier, D. (1998). Danto and his critics: After the end of art and art history. *History and Theory*, 37, 1-16.
- Carroll, N. (2009). Les cul-de-sac of enlightenment aesthetics: A metaphilosophy. *Metaphilosophy*, 40, 157-178.
- Danto, A. (1964). The Artworld. In P. Lamarque & S. Olsen (Eds.), *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. (pp. 27-34). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Danto, A. (1981) *The transfiguration of the commonplace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Danto, A. (1997). *After the end of art: Contemporary art and the pale of history*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Danto, A. (1998). The end of art: A philosophical defense. *History and Theory*, 37, 127-143.
- Dickie, G. (1983). The new institutional theory of art. In P. Lamarque & S. Olsen (Eds.), *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. (pp. 47-54). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Freeland, C. (2002). *But is it art? An introduction to art theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Reynolds, P. (2003). *The Dot*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Reynolds, P. (2004). *Ish*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Richter, H. (1978). *Dada Art and Anti-Art*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Seel, M. (1998). Art as appearance: Two comments on Arthur C. Danto's After the End of Art. *History and Theory*, 37, 102-114.
- Wollheim, R. (1980). *Art and its objects* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Works of Art Cited

Cattelan, Maurizio. (Artist). (1997). *Novecento (Twentieth Century)*. [mixed media]. Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art. Retrieved May 2, 2009 from <http://www.bos2008.com/app/biennale/artist/61>

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

De Maria, W. (Artist). (1977). *Vertical Earth Kilometer*. [mixed media]. Kassel, Germany. Retrieved May 2, 2009 from <http://www.diaart.org/ltproj/vek/>

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Emin, T. (Artist). (1998). *My Bed*. [mattresses, linens, pillows, objects]. London: Saatchi Gallery. Retrieved May 2, 2009 from http://www.saatchigallery.co.uk/artists/artpages/tracey_emin_my_bed.htm

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Gonzalez -Torres, F. (Artist). (1991) *Untitled [Portrait of Ross in L.A.]*. [multicolored candies, individually wrapped in cellophane]. Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago. Retrieved May 2, 2009 from <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/152961>

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Hirst, D. (Artist). (1994). *Away from the flock* [mixed media]. London: Tate Modern. Retrieved May 2, 2009, from <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=98344&searchid=25444>

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Rauschenberg, R. (Artist). (1955). *Bed*. [combine painting: oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet on wood supports]. New York: Museum of Modern Art. Retrieved May 2, 2009 <http://www.moma.org/>

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Warhol, A. (Artist). (1964). *Brillo Box*. [silk screened ink on plywood]. New York: Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/Artists Rights Society. Retrieved May 2, 2009 from http://www.artchive.com/artchive/W/warhol/warhol_brillo_box.jpg.html

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.