

Transsubstantiation of the Commonplace?

Proposal for the European Society for Aesthetics Conference 2010 in Udine

Abstract

In former centuries, artists have tried to leave behind everything common and to create beautiful works of art the contemplation of which would take us into another world, a world more beautiful and better than our common world. For powerful institutions of either worldly or religious provenience artworks have been convenient means to communicate the divine promise of salvation or to exhibit political or economic power and supremacy. The artwork was not an object for everyday use; it was an object of an entirely different kind, precious and dispensable in common life. It was an artefact, but it had been designed for no other purpose than that of beauty and glory – it was this purposelessness in the realm of the common due to which the artwork could be used for symbolizing wealth and power. Or should one rather speak of a misuse of the artwork for a non artistic purpose?

Traditional aesthetics and theories of art were theories of the different arts, of painting and sculpture, poetry and prose, music and theatre etc. Typically, these theories took it for granted that the intersection between artworks and common artefacts was empty. Artworks and artworks alone could be beautiful and glorious. However, every attempt from the side of art theorists at naturalizing the artistic character of an artwork and at defining it in terms of the material and phenomenal properties of the respective object were bound to failure. It seems that beauty essentially resists naturalization. At the end of the 19th century, artists began giving up the purpose of creating beautiful works of art. At that time, photography was invented as a new medium of depiction and visual representation. Realistic documentation could not be the new, particularly artistic purpose of an artist. An artistic crisis was inevitable, a crisis both of beauty and of representation as artistic purposes. Aestheticism tried to stand up against this crisis and restore the former artistic value of beauty; but this attempt was bound to failure.

Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades represent the most powerful response to this twofold crisis in the arts. With these works, he raised the question ‚What is a work of art?’ and made it the central topic of artistic production and artistic reflection. But did these works also provide an answer to this question? Did Duchamp, when he bought an ordinary urinal, signed it (with a pseudonym, the name of a then famous hero of a comic strip), named it „Fountain“ and sent it in as a contribution to an art-show for independent artists, really want to create a new piece of

art? Or was his purpose exclusively that of provoking the artworld, expressing his loss of faith in art? We leave this historical question open. The fact is that „Fountain“, together with Duchamp’s further ready-mades, are commonly regarded as works of art. Duchamp’s impact on the development of art in the 20th century has been immense. Without Duchamp and his artistic provocation, neither Andy Warhol nor Joseph Beuys would have been imaginable as artists.

What remains of the traditional distinction between works of art and non-artistic artefacts after the creation of works of art which have counterparts among artefacts of common use, counterparts with which they share all their material and phenomenal properties and from which they cannot be visually, aesthetically distinguished? Should the art experts give up searching for a way in which artworks can be distinguished from all other kinds of objects and in particular from their non-artistic counterparts? Should we consider giving up the whole distinction between works of art and non-artistic objects? Postmodernism has tried to campaign for a positive answer to the latter question – without lasting success. It seems that the distinction between works of art and other, non-artistic objects is deeply rooted in our pre-theoretic intuitions and cultural habits. It is confirmed by our aesthetic and artistic experiences, even though we are not capable of conceptualizing or explaining the relevant difference. All those works of art which have been created under the influence and inspiration of Duchamp and his work still have an immense potential for irritation and provocation. This is explicable only against the background of these intuitions, habits and experiences. Therefore the questions ‘What is a work of art?’ and ‘What distinguishes a work of art from its non-artistic counterpart?’ remain on the agenda of art theory.

Concerning the latter of these two questions, we can choose between two kinds of answers: one ontological, the other pragmatic. If we distinguish between works of art and their non-artistic counterparts ontologically, we assume – just as traditional aesthetic theories did – that there is a real difference between the two. One of the most prominent defenders of this strategy is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel who famously characterized beauty in terms of a „sinnliche[s] Scheinen der Idee“ charakterisierte.¹ However, a theory of beauty cannot help us understanding the artistic character of a ready-made which is by definition indistinguishable from its non-artistic counterpart. Does an ontological theory of art have to deny the artistic character of a ready-made and conclude that, with the work of Duchamp, art has indeed reached its end? That art had indeed reached its end was, after all, a claim that

¹ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*. Hegel, Werke, Bd. 13, Frankfurt 1986 (Suhrkamp), S. 151.

already Hegel made. But there is no evidence for art having come to its end at the beginning of the 20th century (a little less than 100 years later than Hegel had thought)? The artworld has conceded the status of works of art to Duchamp's ready-mades. Does this imply that we have to give up any attempt at understanding the difference between works of art and non-artistic objects ontologically?

The impact Duchamp has had on the further artistic development seems to provide a reason for trying to understand the difference between works of art and non-artistic objects pragmatically, rather than ontologically. Can we distinguish between two kinds of experience, one artistic and one non-artistic, even when the objects of both the artistic and the non-artistic experience are phenomenologically identical, when there is no discernible difference between them? Nelson Goodman has answered this question in the positive. According to him, a purely pragmatic conception of the difference between artworks and non-artistic objects imposes on us a new question: Rather than asking 'What is art?' we should now be asking 'When is art?'.² He provides the following answer to this new question: An object is a work of art if and only if and only as long as we perceive it aesthetically, we make it an object of an aesthetic experience.³

According to Nelson Goodman, every object can be a work of art, we just have to make it an object of an aesthetic experience. Whether or not we choose to make an object an object of our aesthetic experience depends on an arbitrary decision. Nothing of what we see of an object either invites us to look at it aesthetically or discourage us from doing so. And whenever we experience an object aesthetically, we inevitably transform it into a work of art, failure is impossible. Aesthetic experience is not understood as an attitude to an object that we have to take in order to see whether or not there is something characteristically aesthetic or artistic that the object reveals. Goodman himself tries to provide an answer to the question what it is that makes an experience aesthetic. He conceives of experience in terms of using symbol systems. When we make an object an object of an aesthetic experience, we rely on symbol systems with "symptoms of the aesthetic".⁴ There is no doubt that Goodman's theory of aesthetic symptoms of symbol systems and of aesthetic experience provides an important

² Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis 1978, 1981 (Hackett Publishing Company), Chap. IV.

³ Goodman 1981, S. 70.

⁴ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*. Brighton Sussex 1981 (The Harvester Press) (1st ed 1968), Chap. VI.5.

contribution to the theory of art.⁵ However, the fact that his theory does not provide any restrictions as to what can be a work of art makes it again counterintuitive.

Thus, it seems that, after Duchamp, art theory is facing a dilemma: We can explain the difference between a work of art and its non-artistic counterpart either ontologically or pragmatically. If we choose the first horn of the dilemma, we cannot avoid the conclusion that art, after or rather with Duchamp, has come to an end and that those who kept producing artworks were just anachronistic. If we choose the second horn of the dilemma, we have to concede that either everything or nothing is a work of art, depending on whether we care to experience things aesthetically or not. Given our pre-theoretical intuitions, cultural habits and aesthetic experience, none of these horns has any appeal for us.

Today, Arthur Danto is considered as “the finest theorist of the avant-gardes”.⁶ His contributions to the theory of art can be read as a response to this unfortunate dilemma, as an attempt at paving a way around it. In his “The Artworld” (1964) and his *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981) as well as in his later writings, he has tried to explain what it is that made and makes Duchamp’s “Fountain” a work of art without at the same time having to conclude that all other objects, especially all other urinals, are artworks in the same right; indeed, according to Danto not even those urinals indistinguishable from “Fountain” are so be considered as artworks.

In “The Artworld”, his claim is that the difference between works of art and non-artistic objects is neither ontological nor pragmatic, but institutional. Even though every object can in principle become a work of art, whether it actually becomes a work of art or not depends on the artworld. The artworld is a social institution which is subject to historical change. We can imagine the institution of the artworld along the lines of a bouncer. A bouncer stands at the door of a trendy disco and decides who of the people wanting to get in are actually allowed in. He lets only trendy people in. But in order to decide which people are trendy and which are not, he cannot rely on any conceptualized criteria, because once a trend has been conceptualized, cast into rules people can follow the trend ceases to be trendy. Thus, a bouncer always is on the lookout for something new that has the potential for becoming

⁵ See Christel Fricke, *Zeichenprozess und ästhetische Erfahrung*, München 2001 (Wilhelm Fink Verlag).

⁶ Herwitz 2008, p. 119.

trendy, and by letting certain people into the disco while refusing the entrance to others he himself contributes to creating a trend.⁷

This institutional and sociological theory of art is as counterintuitive as Goodman's above mentioned theory was. Danto himself did not hold on to it.

In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, he developed a new answer to the questions 'What is a work of art?' and 'What distinguishes a work of art from its non-artistic counterpart?'. This theory, informed by contemporary thought in philosophical epistemology, philosophy of science, philosophy of language and semiotics, has been discussed and criticised extensively.⁸ Danto's new claim is surprisingly traditional, namely that works of art are symbols, bearers of meaning, whereas their non-artistic counterparts are not. As to our knowledge, no one has as yet provided a close reading of this theory. This is what we are attempting here. This reading will provide evidence for the claim that understanding ontological and pragmatic explanations of the difference between a work of art and its non-artistic counterpart as mutually exclusive might be due to prejudice and that a convincing theory of art and its avant-gardes will have to rely on both ontological and pragmatic elements.

A key notion of Danto's art theory is the biblical concept of 'transfiguration'.⁹ What is a transfiguration, and what did Danto have in mind when using this notion? In order to answer these questions, we start with reading the respective passage in the Bible.

The Transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:2-13)

9:2 Six days later¹⁵ Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John and led them alone up a high mountain privately. And he was transfigured before them,¹⁶ 9:3 and his clothes became radiantly white, more so than any launderer in the world could bleach them. 9:4 Then Elijah appeared before them along with Moses,¹⁷ and they were talking with Jesus. 9:5 So¹⁸ Peter said to Jesus,¹⁹ "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three shelters²⁰ – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 9:6 (For they were afraid, and he did not know what to say.)²¹ 9:7 Then²² a cloud²³ overshadowed them,²⁴ and a voice came from the cloud,

⁷ See Nelson Goodman, "The Artworld". In: *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, 1964, p. 571 – 584.

⁸ When explaining aesthetic experience and its objects, Danto relies, for example, on a Quine-inspired conception of 'theory', on Davidson's semantics and pragmatics as well as on Goodman's theory of the "symptoms of the aesthetic".

⁹ See Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. A Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge/Mass. u. London/England 1981 (Harvard University Press).

“This is my one dear Son.²⁵ Listen to him!”²⁶ 9:8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more except Jesus.

9:9 As they were coming down from the mountain, he gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. 9:10 They kept this statement to themselves, discussing what this rising from the dead meant.

9:11 Then²⁷ they asked him,²⁸ “Why do the experts in the law²⁹ say that Elijah must come first?” 9:12 He said to them, “Elijah does indeed come first, and restores all things. And why is it written that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be despised? 9:13 But I tell you that Elijah has certainly come, and they did to him whatever they wanted, just as it is written about him.”

Mark reports how Jesus underwent a transfiguration witnessed by the apostles who were with him: It seemed as if light was radiating from him. After having experienced this visual, illusionistic appearance, they hear a voice explaining who it is from whom such bright light radiates: It is not an ordinary human being, it is the son of God. Only three of the apostles, namely Peter, James and John witness this appearance because it was them only whom Jesus had invited to join him for the trip to the mountain. The transfiguration is a visual, illusionistic change of something that originally looked common; it lasts only for a short moment and it is being explained ontologically. Only a very small number of especially selected people experience this transfiguration.

The question we want to raise in our essay is whether what happened when Duchamp transformed a urinal into a work of art can be categorized as a transfiguration. In the course of a transfiguration a visual object undergoes an illusionistic change of its visual appearance. However, when the urinal was transformed into a work of art, it did not undergo any change of its visual appearance. The urinal and the artwork „Fountain“ look exactly the same. And it is this visual indiscernibility of the artwork and the urinal that provokes the question what it is that makes one a urinal and the other a work of art.

We shall first explore and reject Danto’s answer to this question and then suggest our own tentative answer.