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Aboutness and Aura: Toward a Benjaminian Critique of Danto

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ABSTRACT. In elucidating the distinction between art and “real things” A.C. Danto requires that an artwork be about something or satisfy the criterion of “aboutness”. His theory assumes that art exists at a distance from the world, and, like language, says something about it. Although the assumption seems innocent enough, it contradicts Benjamin’s understanding of reproducible art in his “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”. The mass reproducibility of film and photography, according to Benjamin, challenges the aesthetic predominance of “aura”, which is defined as “the unique apparition of a distance, however near [the work] may be”. Benjamin’s understanding of aura raises the possibility that the “distance” Danto regards as part of art’s fundamental character is in fact non-essential. This paper explores the relationship between aboutness and aura, and the resources in Benjamin’s understanding of film and photography for a critique of Danto’s theory.

A.C. Danto’s theory of art has been criticized for abstracting too radically from the content of artworks. Either the interpretation of Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, which is central to Danto’s theory, is accused of neglecting Warhol’s intentions,¹ or despite its permissiveness, the theory is regarded as too essentialist to do justice to the historicity of works of art.² While these objections are, in my view, powerful, they do not provide an alternative conceptual understanding of art and its history that can account for the historical and interpretive sensitivity of Danto’s theory, while showing where it breaks down. I argue here that Walter Benjamin’s reflections on art in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” can provide the resources for such a critique. Specifically, Benjamin’s account of the effect of technological changes on the traditional concept of art and its “auratic” character contradicts Danto’s ontology.

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¹ See, for example, Paul Mattick 1998.

² See, for example, Noël Carroll 1998 and 1993.

1. Interpreting *Brillo Boxes*

In his interpretation of Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, Danto views Warhol as a philosophical artist in the sense that he poses the question of what art is—what makes an artwork an artwork. The physical indiscernibility³ of the *Brillo Boxes* from their counterparts on a supermarket shelf exhibits, for Danto, the necessity of a historical, theoretical context that provides the background conditions under which a work can qualify as art. It is only because Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* have the history of modernism's increasingly self-reflexive concern with the self-definition of art behind them that they can qualify as art in the present. An artwork must be *about* something, according to Danto, and the context of an art tradition is required for the possibility of this expressivity. Danto's theory includes not just a set of conditions that an artwork must satisfy but also a Hegelian historical narrative, wherein pop art and related movements occupy a privileged place, marking the point at which art hands off the project of its definition to philosophy and art's historical project comes to an end.

Danto compares the artwork's aboutness to the representational character of language. Artworks, he writes, "stand at the same philosophical distance from reality that words do".⁴ This gap between artworks and reality not only opens art to philosophical theorizing, but is the subject matter of that theorizing, much like language's capacity to model the world becomes the object of philosophy. The philosophy of art thus becomes an investigation of the question of what sets artworks at a distance from real things, and art like Warhol's and Marcel Duchamp's therefore verges on the philosophical, insofar as it shows that this distance is not produced by anything inherent in the work.

One alternative way to read Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, however, throws into question the view that the expressivity of art depends on this distance from reality. Such an interpretation sees Warhol's work not as revelatory of a gap between artworks and "real things", but as an implicit critique of the cultural forces keeping this mythical gap open. The mechanisms that transfigure these *Brillo Boxes* do not confer the ontological status of "art"

³ Or near indiscernibility. Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* were in fact slightly larger and constructed from plywood.

⁴ Danto 1981, p. 82.

on them; they are rather a particular socio-cultural atmosphere, which is politically dubious. That is, Warhol's work, by drawing the supermarket into the art gallery, shows that the designation of "art" and the distinction between the commercial and the artistic is conventional, institutional, ideological, and, therefore, vulnerable.

A number of commentators have made such an argument about Warhol's work by drawing on Walter Benjamin's interpretation of "aura" and mechanically reproducible art.⁵ In brief, the idea is that Warhol's work puts to work Benjamin's theory of the destruction of aura—"the apparition of a distance" in the work "however near it may be"—through the technology of mass technological reproducibility.⁶

One of the virtues of Danto's theory is that it seems not to depend on any single interpretation of Warhol's work. It appears able to accommodate alternative interpretations like the one just sketched. Even if the Benjaminian reading of the work is right, it seems to depend on the more basic conditions of expressibility and interpretability that Danto's theory sets out. In other words, even if the work is attempting to draw attention to the ideological transfiguration of objects carried out by the artworld in connection with late capitalist cultural conditions, its very ability to make such a statement seems to depend on a prior and more basic ontological transfiguration carried out by the art-historical context. In criticizing the transfigurative independence the artworld generates from the real world, the work depends on that independence. It is the artworld—the environment of art theory and art history—that makes the work's expressivity, its *aboutness*, possible.

But the Benjaminian interpretation of Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* complicates the criterion of aboutness as it is satisfied on Danto's interpretation. Again, on the latter interpretation, the work, in its material indiscernibility from a real thing, draws attention to the theoretical conditions that must be operative in making art art. On the Benjaminian interpretation, however, the work problematizes the barrier between the artwork and real thing by showing how the cultural-institutional atmosphere artificially sets

⁵ See, for example, Crone 1970.

⁶ Benjamin 2008, p. 23. I quote from the second version of Benjamin's text, which best reflects Benjamin's intentions for the essay.

a mundane object apart from the rest of the world.⁷ Danto's interpretation depends on a deeper stability in the historicized concept of art—the essentialist bedrock beneath Danto's historicism⁸—since *Brillo Boxes* qualifies as “art” in the same way as all other artworks have qualified. Although the interpretive context changes as well as the artworks themselves, the basic relationship between the works and this context must remain the same. But the Benjaminian interpretation presumes a concept of art not only subject to critique, but subject to change—change, moreover, capable of coming from the artworks themselves.⁹

In other words, on the Benjaminian interpretation of Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* it is the centrality of that relation in defining art that is being challenged. The apparent necessity of an interpretive context that carves out a special sphere for artworks, whatever that context's content, is being challenged, and shown itself to be historically conditioned.

2. Aura in Retreat

The question that arises here is the relationship between the criterion of aboutness and the concept of aura. Aura, as Benjamin defines it, has typically been guaranteed in the history of art by the uniqueness or authenticity of the work, its ineliminable material and media-based difference from any material object and from any attempted reproduction of it. The possibilities of technological reproducibility throw uniqueness as a condition of art into question, especially when film turns reproducibility itself into a medium.¹⁰ For Benjamin, these new media and the changes that accompany

⁷ Danto sets his theory apart from merely institutional theories of art like George Dickie's.

⁸ See Carrol 1993, p. 89-99.

⁹ Cf. Heidegger's interpretation of Hegel's end of art thesis. Heidegger argues that Hegel's end of art thesis applies to only a particular understanding of artworks, going back to the Greeks, and not to art *überhaupt*. The possibility of art representing the absolute is, therefore, not closed off, but to be determined by the future of artworks themselves. The argument I want to make against Danto, as will become apparent, is similar to the one Heidegger makes against Hegel. Heidegger 1977, p. 204.

¹⁰ Benjamin 2008, p. 28. The question of original versus copy is thus rendered moot. Erwin Panofsky makes a similar point when he refers to the “medium of the movies” as “physical reality as such”. Panofsky (1997), p. 122.

them in the production of art—modernism, surrealism, and mass art—are not a death knell for art itself, but for a particular concept of art hinging on the artwork's aura, which stems from art's origin as a cultic practice.

Aura survives the secularization of art by means of the Renaissance's cult of beauty and the self-claimed independence of art in the 19th century's *l'art pour l'art* movement. But with photography and film, Benjamin writes, "exhibition value beings to drive back cult value on all fronts."¹¹ The reproducibility inherent in film, its accessibility to the masses, and the manner in which can penetrate space and time all contribute to a tendency to destroy the authoritative and cultic value of auratic art.

"But cult value does not give way without resistance".¹² Indeed, the ideological fetishization of reproducible art in 20th century societies, especially under fascism but also capitalism, is quickly becoming the norm by the time Benjamin writes his essay. Films like Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* use the medium of film against its aura-destructive tendency and reanimate it with the cultic aura of nationalism and fascism. Likewise Hollywood films are imbued with the auratic cult of celebrity, and photography and film in general become an integral part of what Susan Sontag calls an "aesthetic consumerism."¹³ Whereas film seemed capable of undermining a bourgeois conception of art and reflecting the industrialized experience of the masses back to them, it is instilled in western Europe and America with new commercial forms of the auratic.

Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, and many of his other works, can be said to rehearse this process. They are mass-produced objects reanimated with the auratic. The uneasiness one feels when viewing them is, on this interpretation, not the product of the indiscernibility (or possible indiscernibility) of the boxes from something one might find on supermarket shelves, but from seeing mundane, mass-produced objects turned into cult objects by the context of the "artworld". The effect of Warhol's work is the result of a displacement of one kind of aesthetic experience, consumerism, to the realm of another, the artworld. Whether one ultimately takes Warhol's intention to be critical or celebratory, the work takes advantage of a cultural distinction between high and commercial art, and it is in relation to

¹¹ Benjamin 2008, p. 27.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sontag 1977, p. 24.

this distinction—and not that between artwork and “real thing”—that the significance of the work is to be found.

Danto is right, from this point of view, that the work throws into question the nature of art. But it does not shed light on the ontological conditions that have always undergirded art. Instead it points to the aesthetic character of present commercial experience, and the recalcitrance of auratic art, which can even attach itself to the mundane objects of mass production. It reveals that aura is not, or at least not only, the product of the conditions of uniqueness or the authenticity of a work created by an individual in a singular time and place, but of an institutional context and authority.

3. The Concept of Art

The Benjaminian interpretation of *Brillo Boxes* depends on a much more fluid understanding of the concept of art than that on offer from Danto—one which depends on the state of technology of a given culture. Thus, he writes of the Greeks, “The state of their technology compelled the Greeks to produce eternal values in their art. To this they owe their preeminent position in art history—the standard for subsequent generations.”¹⁴ The technological character of Greek art, determines, at least to some degree, the concept of art – the singularity and authenticity of the work, the veneration of the audience, the “genius” of artist. Film as a technology breaks down many of these values by making the product multiple and reproducible, delivering it to the audience in their own particular situation, and giving rise to the individual’s “legitimate claim to being reproduced.”¹⁵

This would seem to require the development of a new concept of art—one that undermines the attendant concepts of genius, contemplation, authenticity. Instead film and photography are treated both by theorists and producers according to the concept of art that came before it. Theorists asked “whether photography was art” when they should have asked “the more fundamental question of whether the invention of photography had not transformed the entire character of art.”¹⁶ Hollywood identifies and

¹⁴ Benjamin 2008, p. 27-28.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

exploits the marketing opportunities by creating a publicity machine, turning its directors and into stars, and producing escapist fantasy that denies to the proletariat the opportunity, Benjamin thinks, to see itself reproduced, to recognize itself, to understand “themselves and therefore their class.”¹⁷

Whatever one’s evaluation of Benjamin’s disappointed hopes in the political power of the reproducible arts, his history of art in terms of the degradation of the auratic reveals the dangers of attempting an analytic definition of art. Despite (and perhaps also because of) the historically and interpretively indexed criteria of Danto’s theory, and their consequent permissiveness, the theory does assume certain a particular picture of art that places art outside the world of “real” objects and asks what conditions must obtain for it to play its expressive role and to be open to interpretations of a certain kind. What is glossed over here is the possibility that this apparently obvious and harmless assumption—this distance between art and world—is itself the result of privileging of certain kinds of art and artists (sculpture and painting being perhaps the most obvious culprits), and certain kinds of reception conditions (the museum and gallery, the connoisseur and critic).

4. Conclusion

As we saw, Danto speculates on the relationship between philosophy of language and his philosophy of art, suggesting both are concerned with the distance of their objects from reality. He writes in particular of Wittgenstein in this regard, reading the turn in Wittgenstein’s thought as moving from a position that countenances a pictorial relationship between language and world in the *Tractatus* to one that rethinks that connection in terms of use.¹⁸ But it would be more natural to characterize Wittgenstein’s later work as giving up entirely on the notion of language as disconnected from the world. Wittgenstein comes to see this picture as one generated by privileging factual descriptive language above all others.¹⁹ In the

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁸ Danto 1981, p. 82.

¹⁹ Benjamin’s own philosophy of language is similar in combatting this privileging of descriptive or “designative” language. See Benjamin 1996.

same way, Benjamin's philosophy of art comes to see the assumed distance between art and our experience of the world as generated by the privileging of certain forms and technologies of art. Benjamin shows that the placement of the work outside the world is not a condition for the applicability of an interpretive framework, but itself a particular framework—albeit a dominant and recalcitrant one.

What certain art movements and media in the 20th century point toward is the possibility of a continuity of art with the objects of real life, received, like architecture, Benjamin writes, in a state of distraction rather than contemplation.²⁰ Far from such works declaring the end of art, they show the possibility of art being “absorbed” into human experience (whether to good or ill effect) in an immediate way, instead of occupying a separate sphere to be venerated or contemplated at a distance.²¹

Danto's theory is evidence of the recalcitrance of a theoretical and institutional structure of art which insists on preserving a distance between art and the objects of everyday life, a distance that is by no means necessary and can be collapsed by the media in which art is made and the uses to which it is put. This a concept of art that, like the theories Danto imagines make art possible at various stages in its history, itself has an origin and history and an application. Benjamin tries to document the possibility that this concept of art will (1) continue to be applied to art media to which it is no longer well-suited, and (2) become a way of generating and maintaining certain ideological roles for art.

Danto verges on admitting the limited application of his theory when he seems in “The Artworld” to deny the cave paintings of Lascaux the status of art, since art is impossible without aesthetics.²² Here Danto's theory seems dangerously close to being a theory of what we call “art”, rather than a theory of art. To say that we require a context of art theory and history to determine former is not to say very much: what we call art depends on what we think it is. What interests Benjamin, however, is not what is called “art” but humankind's desire and efforts to reproduce itself and its experience, and the means it has at its disposal in given epochs to do so. Where theory denies these efforts the status of art and constrains

²⁰ Benjamin 2008, pp. 39–41.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²² Danto 1964, p. 581.

them, either in the past or the future—where art theory, in other words, puts itself before art practice—it is arguably no longer theory, but ideology.

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