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The European Society for Aesthetics

Department of Philosophy University of Fribourg Avenue de l'Europe 20 1700 Fribourg Switzerland

Internet: http://www.eurosa.org Email: secretary@eurosa.org

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Between Dreams and Perception - Danto's Revisited Definition of Art in the Light of Costello's Criticism

Šárka Lojdová¹

Charles University in Prague

ABSTRACT. One of the topics to which philosopher Arthur C. Danto paid systematic attention is the definition of art. His contribution to the discussion developed mainly in his book The Transfiguration of the Commonplace works on the principle of indiscernibles and aims to distinguish artwork from mere real things. However, Danto did not provide us with a formal definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Later on, Danto isolated two of necessary conditions and characterised art as "embodied meaning" in his Art after the End of Art. But this was not his last say on this topic, though. In 2013, Danto published his last book What Art Is and added the third necessary condition of "wakeful dreams." In my paper, I aim to consider this Danto's step concerning Diarmuid Costello's criticism of Danto's cognitivism as presented in the article 'Whatever happened to "embodiment"? The eclipse of materiality in Danto's ontology of art.' I shall seek to answer a question of whether Danto's revision of the definition can resist Costello's arguments. Or more precisely, given the new necessary condition, I shall argue that the wakeful dreams- condition makes Costello's arguments even more urgent.

1. Introduction

The question of what art is pervades Arthur C. Danto's philosophical

¹ Email: s.lojdova@seznam.cz

writings since the 1960s. Although the topic was more or less present in Danto's texts on beauty or the end of art, it seemed that the structure of the definition had been relatively stable since publishing *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Since then, Danto defined art as 'embodied meanings.' In 2013, however, Danto published a book titled *What Art Is*, in which he added the third necessary condition: artworks should be like 'wakeful dreams' (Danto 2013, p. 48). In this paper, I aim to scrutinise how this new condition influences Danto's account of interpretation as a correlate of the meaning of art. Following Diarmuid Costello's criticism presented in his article "Whatever happened to 'embodiment'? The eclipse of materiality in Danto's ontology of art" (Costello 2007, pp. 83–94). I shall claim that Danto's notion of interpretation is in significant tension with the emotional dimension of art that became a part of his new definition of art due to the condition of wakeful dreams.

2. Interpretation and the Definition of Art

Concerning Danto's ontology of art, the main contribution to the topic remains *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Danto, 1981). However, Danto himself had not explicitly isolated his two necessary conditions for being art until his book *After the End of Art* was published; these are: (1) art has to be *about* something and (2) it has to *embody* its *meaning* (Danto, 1997, p. 195). The structure of the definition results from his analysis of

indiscernibility; we can imagine two perceptually indiscernible objects one of which is a work of art and the second one is a mere real thing, and the task of philosophy is to explain the difference between the two. The paradigmatic example of indiscernibles in the philosophy of art is Andy Warhol's piece *Brillo Box* and its ordinary counterpart from a supermarket. For Danto, a definition has to explain why one of the pair is an artwork if the second one, albeit perceptually the same, is a mere real thing. To do so, one has to rely on the invisible properties of the given object, where the essence of art is located. Following this direction, Danto introduced the two beforementioned conditions and characterised art as 'embodied meanings' (Danto, 1997, p. 195).

The principle of indiscernibles also determines Danto's attitude towards the problem of the aesthetic value of artworks as well as towards aesthetics as a branch of philosophy; also his decision to propose interpretation as an adequate means for dealing with art stems from it. In the essay 'The Appreciation and Interpretation of Works of Art,' Danto argues that the interpretation has a transformative function, i.e., that it can uplift artworks from the sphere of mere real things to that of art. Interpretation consists of a sequence of artistic identifications that determine which of the qualities of the thing belong to this thing considered as an artwork (Danto 1986, pp. 23–46). In Danto's words: "Interpretations pivot on artistic identifications and these, in turn, determine which parts and properties of the object in question belong to the work of art into which interpretation

transfigures it" (Danto 1986, pp. 41-42). As follows from this formulation, not all perceptual qualities of the object belong to this object as an artwork, since some of them belong to it when considered as an ordinary thing, and the interpretation is a means to tell the two groups of qualities apart.²

As I have already mentioned, Danto's reasons for removing aesthetics from his account follow from the principle of indiscernibles and from its role in defining art. Danto's analysis of this problem leads him to the conclusion that the essence of art has to be hidden from the senses (Danto 1986, p. 26) and that perceptual and aesthetic qualities are irrelevant for the definition, and therefore aesthetics has nothing to do with the task of defining art (Danto, 1986, p. 26). Danto had held this position until he published *The Abuse of Beauty* in which he argues for widening the scope of the philosophy of art to accommodate other aesthetic qualities apart from beauty. Danto addresses the problem of a pragmatic or rhetorical dimension of art³ consisting in that some qualities of the artwork: "dispose the viewer to take certain attitudes toward a given content" (Danto, 2003, p. 121). Danto describes this dimension in terms of Frege's 'Farbung' or, more

² Danto further develops this thought in his book *The Abuse of Beauty* in which he introduced a distinction between internal and external beauty. For a discussion on Danto's account of beauty see: Symposium: Arthur Danto, The Abuse of Beauty (2005), *Inquiry*, 48 (2).

³ It should be noted that Danto had already addressed the question of rhetorical dimension in his *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* in the context of his reflection upon metaphor, expression and style. However, Danto quite surprisingly did not accommodate these notions into his definition of art (contrary to Carroll's version of Danto's definition). See (Danto, 1981).

generally, he designates these qualities as 'inflectors' (Danto, 2003, p. 121). According to him, an artist uses these qualities to inflect certain emotions, and therefore, inflectors correspond to the aim of an artist and his work. For example, Duchamp aimed to cause the aesthetic indifference with this readymades. However, although these properties play a significant role in our attitude towards art, Danto is unwilling to include them into his definition:

Whether we must widen the definition of art to make inflexion a necessary condition need not be argued here. But at least inflexion helps explain why we have art in the first place. We do so because, as human beings, we are driven by our feelings (Danto, 2003, p. 122).

For my paper, the question of the relation of inflectors and the emotional response that they provoked, and the interpretation as a correlate of the meaning is of crucial importance. Unfortunately, Danto himself does not pay attention to it. Similarly, as in the previous writings, he privileges the cognitive dimension of art to the affective one; therefore, he approaches inflectors from the perspective of the content (meaning) of the artwork. It is possible to infer such a conclusion from the way he treats the question of whether it is morally justified to depict some content as beautiful or not. The fact that Danto raises such a question implies that he understands inflecting qualities as subordinated to the content of the work. However, the problem of emotional response towards art, which the previously quoted passage

suggests, rests unexplained. This passage also implies that art is so important for human life not because it has a meaning, but because it provokes emotions. And this begs the question of whether the interpretation is able to accommodate both, the meaning and the emotional dimension of art. Costello, as I will show, formulates his criticism along similar lines.

3. Costello's Criticism

In the first decade of our century, Diarmuid Costello devoted several texts to the problem of aesthetics in Danto's writings.⁴ In the article 'Whatever happened to 'embodiment'? The eclipse of materiality in Danto's ontology of art' he challenges Danto's account of embodiment and claims that Danto "is insufficiently attentive to how a work of art's materiality impacts on questions concerning the artist's intention and the viewer's interpretation" (Costello 2007, p. 83). The target of his criticism is, therefore, twofold: firstly, Costello argues that Danto underestimated the importance of the embodiment in his definition of art, and in result, secondly, that his account of interpretation cannot explain our attitude towards art fully.

Costello thinks about Danto's approach in opposition to the so-called aesthetic theories based on the idea of the existence of a specific (aesthetic) response which is caused by the appearance (perceptual qualities) of the artwork in question. This kind of response determines our decision, whether

⁴ See also (Costello, 2004, pp. 424-439), (Costello, 2008, pp. 244-266).

we deal with art or not. But aesthetic theories are unable to explain the case of indiscernibles, and therefore, they cannot be acknowledged as plausible theories of art. In consequence, Danto proposes an alternative: a cognitive response based on art-historical knowledge which informs interpretation. However, Costello considers Danto's use of the principle as problematic and claims that Danto infers from it conclusions which do not follow from the argument from indiscernibility as such. Costello agrees that perceptual qualities are not *sufficient* for art definition, but this does not mean that these qualities are not *necessary*. Not only that they might be necessary, but, as Costello insists, they *are* necessary, and, therefore, they have to be taken into consideration when analysing our attitude to art.

Costello approaches Danto's condition of embodiment from the perspective of the meaning and intention of an artist and tries to grasp their mutual relation. Accordingly, he introduces the term 'artistically worked material', which corresponds to the medium of art, and claims that the intention of the artist (the meaning of the work) reveals itself through and in the material basis (embodiment) or more precisely, it reveals itself in the process of working with the material. This point goes hand in hand with Costello's opinion on the role of cognitive response (interpretation), which is not *sufficient* for treating an artefact as a work of art (Costello 2007, pp. 85-86). The thing is that material basis provokes emotions, and therefore, it is responsible for the affective dimension of art. To explain how it is so

⁵ Similar point makes Martin Seel. See: (Seel, 1998, pp. 102-114).

Costello introduces the notion of 'opacity.' The basis of artwork is opaque in a sense that it makes an interpretation of the work in question more complicated and in consequence, it intensifies the interest of the viewer in communication with the work. Since the response of the audience is emotionally coloured, also due to the properties of the material basis, the process of our interaction with art exceeds mere interpretation since the interpretation is only cognitive. In consequence, Costello claims that the interpretation is not a sufficient means for dealing with art and therefore Danto's conception does not provide us with an appropriate tool which would explain the reason why we are interested in art.

In the last section of his article, Costello considers *The Abuse of Beauty* and asks whether Danto's ideas presented in this book can dispel his objections. He focuses mainly on the idea of inflectors and observes Danto's hesitation to widen the definition and to add the new necessary condition of 'inflecting.' However, he thinks this possibility open (Costello, 2007, p. 90). Regardless of the definition, Costello considers the idea of interpretation being an adequate means to grasp the artwork as a grave problem and appreciates that Danto admits the importance of aesthetic qualities:

Aesthetics is acknowledged as a domain of feeling with a legitimate role to play in the interpretation of some (if not all) art, and the question then becomes how such feeling is to be tied back to art's essentially cognitive nature (Costello, 2007, p. 90).

And this problem became central in Danto's last book *What Art Is*, in which he returns to the question of art definition and modifies its structure by adding a new necessary condition for being art.

4. Between Dreams and Perception: Art as 'Wakeful Dreams'

In the opening paragraphs of his book *What Art Is* Danto addresses Plato and his vision of human knowledge, in which art is situated in the demoted category of mere appearances together with reflections, shadows, illusions, and dreams (Danto 2013, p. ix). Plato's conception of knowledge determined his negative attitude towards art, which he defined as an imitation (and the best means of imitation, as Socrates comments this idea in Plato's dialogue, is a mirror). These paragraphs remind us of Danto's first article on art "The Artworld" published in 1964 (Danto 1964, p. 571), and the opening sequence devoted to Hamlet's and Socrates' ideas about mirrors and reflections. In both cases, Danto's considerations are forming a framework for his further argumentation. In *What Art Is*, however, it is a dream that is in the spotlight rather than a reflection. In this last book of his, Danto reconsiders the problem of defining art and argues that art is in a certain sense 'dreamlike,' and introduces a new necessary condition of art, 'wakeful dreams.'

Before I proceed to this condition, I think it important to recall Danto's

opinion on the role of aesthetics, which is deeply rooted in his system. In What Art Is, Danto insists that aestheticians do not provide us with any explanation why specific artworks move us. Instead, they seek to identify what art is. Accordingly, the definition of art "has to capture the universal artness of artworks, irrespective of when they were made or will be made" (Danto, 2013, p. 40). Apart from this, we have to learn how to interpret artworks taking the context of their culture into consideration. (Danto, 2013, p. 41).

Danto's account was inspired by Plato and René Descartes and by the roles they ascribed to dreams in their philosophical thought. Following preliminary remarks from the preface, Danto reflects on Plato's *Republic*, and the location of art and dreams within his vision of the universe (Plato 1974, Book X). The location itself, however, is less important than shared characteristics of both phenomena, i.e., art and dreams. For Danto: "dreams represent things, and they are made of visible qualities, but they may not be real"(Danto, 2013, p. 47). And this characteristic Danto ascribes to art as well. Concerning Descartes, Danto refers to the passage from *Meditations* in which Descartes argues that it is not possible to distinguish the wakeful state from sleep with certainty (Descartes 2013, p. 25).

Contrary to Plato, Descartes does not compare art and dreams, but dreams and wakeful experience; and this comparison has been crucial for Danto since his early writings. From *Analytical Philosophy of Action*, he had been concerned with Descartes and had treated his dream-perception

opposition as a paradigmatic case of indiscernibles (Danto, 1973). In *What Art Is*, he argues that there is no internal distinction between dreaming and perceiving, and in this, he finds a similarity with Warhol's *Brillo Box* case. Accordingly, there is no inner distinction between an artwork and an ordinary Brillo box at least in terms of perception (Danto 2013, p. 46). Plato's and Descartes' reflections on dreams, therefore, shaped Danto's notion differently, but it is still important to relate this notion to the question of the universality of the definition of art mentioned earlier. As Danto puts it:

My sense is that everyone, everywhere, dreams. Usually this requires that we sleep. But wakeful dreams require of us that we be awake. Dreams are made up of appearances, but they have to be appearances of things in their world. (Danto, 2013, p. 49)

In the just quoted citation, Danto makes a shift from Descartes to Plato, because it is the idea of appearance which determines Danto's further argumentation. The aspect of appearance Danto seeks to illustrate using the example of a ballet performance of Michail Baryshnikov who imitated a movement of a football player in that: "a large portion of the audience read the movement as a football move, even if the football is missing" (Danto 2013, p. 51). An artist creates an illusion (appearance), and this piece of

⁶ To be precise, Danto had paid attention to the so-called Dream- Argument already in his *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge*. See: (Danto, 1968).

appearance is accordingly interpreted by the audience who have learned the necessary vocabulary. This passage, as I read it, refers to the problem of interpretation mentioned earlier as well as to Danto's characterisation of dreams as representations proposed in connection with Plato. Dreams and art are made of visible qualities that might not be real, but they have to have meaning in a particular culture or society. The response of the audience, is, therefore, cognitive since people experiencing art have to grasp the meaning of the artwork in question. But does it explain the alleged universality of art?

Regarding universality, the analogy between dreams and art is not that straightforward as Danto's formulation suggests. Danto claims that "everyone everywhere dreams," but this statement, if true, describes the function of the human mind which consists of producing dreams. However, he addresses dreams as such, which he compares with artworks. But dreams are products of the beforementioned activity of the mind, and it is this activity that is universal. The analogy then should be, as I see it, between dreaming and art-making and not between a particular dream and a specific artwork. Danto, however, infers that it is the response of the audience what is universal. And the response is universal due to a particular appearance made by an artist and due to the appropriate interpretation of the work in question.

The argument from universality is also tied to the emotional dimension of art: "[wakeful dreams] are accordingly not private, which

helps explain why everyone in the audience laughs at the same time, or screams at the same moment" (Danto 2013, p. 49). Not only that art moves us in a certain way, but we are moved in the same way vis à vis one artwork. However, as I have already mentioned, although art-making might be universal, it does not necessarily follow that interpretation, or any other response of the audience is universal as well. Danto's idea that it is follows from the shift between dreaming and a dream described above. But moreover, it rests, as I aim to show in the following section, on the dominant position Danto ascribes to the interpretation.

4. The Interpretation of Wakeful Dreams

In reaction to Costello's criticism, Danto admits that he paid a little attention to the embodiment in the original version of his definition. In *What Art Is*, he characterises it in the following words:

The artwork is a material object, some of whose properties belong to the meaning and some of which do not. What the viewer must do is interpret the meaning-bearing properties in such a way as to grasp the intended meaning they embody. (Danto, 2013, p. 38)

In this passage, it is possible to hear an echo of his distinction between internal and external beauty, as well as his account of interpretation presented above. For my argumentation, however, is crucial that Danto does not change his view of our response to art: he still insists that the interpretation is the adequate approach to artworks. Regarding the wakeful dreams, Danto does not analyse the role of embodiment in creating appearances. Even if we accept the analogy between artworks and dreams – both create appearances - we should also ask in which aspects wakeful dreams differ from real ones. In my view, the crucial difference consists in the fact that art has a medium, *through which* it affects us or in which the meaning is embodied. If I go back to Danto's example of Baryshnikov performance, Danto emphasises *the meaning* of the movements without considering that *the movements themselves* are important to the same degree. This aspect might be explained in terms of Costello's notion of opacity described above.

More importantly, however, the new condition of the wakeful-dreams challenges Danto's notion of interpretation since it provides us with an explanation of the emotional impact of art. I think it possible to interpret the condition of wakeful dreams in the light of Danto's account of inflectors and relate it to his claim that "inflection helps explain why we have art in the first place. We do so because, as human beings, we are driven by our feelings" (Danto 2003, p. 122). Now, there is this new necessary condition of art which can explain, although only as a side-product of cognitive dimension, why we do feel certain emotions when we are in touch with art. But Danto's account of interpretation remains intact. Following the passage quoted above, in which Danto describes the way the viewer grasp the

meaning of the artwork (Danto 2013, p. 38), it has still been the interpretation that has a decisive role. But in my opinion, having a sufficient encyclopedia in which a given artwork is interpretable is only a necessary condition for having such an emotional response, but it does not explain the emotional response itself. If I recall Danto's thesis that wakeful dreams can tell why people in the audience laugh or scream at the same time, I wonder how this emotional response can be explained in terms of the sole interpretation. To understand what is going on is one thing, but experiencing this particular thing as funny or frightening is another matter.

It would be possible to argue that to criticise Danto for avoiding the problem of the emotional dimension of art is at odds with his understanding of aesthetics since he claimed that aestheticians do not explain why artworks move us but rather that they provide us with a definition of art. Following this, it would be plausible to claim that ontological questions represent an isolated problem for a philosopher and that the analysis of the (emotional) response of the viewer is a completely independent theoretical problem. This argument could be related to Costello's criticism because it had been pronounced before Danto introduced his condition of wakeful dreams but not to my analysis. Costello had had a point, but he was ahead of Danto's philosophical development. I have shown in the previous paragraphs that the condition of wakeful dreams is closely tied with the emotional response of the audience, and therefore the problem of "why certain artworks move us" becomes a part of Danto's definition of art. And since the problem has

become integral to the definition, to challenge Danto's notion of interpretation is much more justified than before. Moreover, the issue of the emotional response challenges Danto's argument concerning the universality of art. Without admitting there is something more than a mere interpretation, art cannot be universal as Danto's new definition presupposes.

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