

## Transsubstantiation of the Commonplace?

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### Abstract

Traditional aesthetics took it for granted that the intersection between artworks and ordinary objects was empty. Artworks and artworks alone could be beautiful and glorious. At the end of the 19th century, artists began giving up on the purpose of creating beautiful works of art. Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades represent the first and decisive step in this direction, a step that is still provoking the artworld. Arthur Danto has used the story of the Biblical *Transfiguration of Jesus* as a model for understanding the difference between an ordinary object and a work of art. But does the object of an aesthetic attitude undergo an illusionistic change of appearance, a transfiguration? We are raising the question whether what Danto had in mind should not rather be described with the help of the theological notion of *transsubstantiation*. Does Danto's move take us back to the old doctrine according to which the difference between an artwork and its ordinary counterpart is ontological in kind?

### The open question: 'What is a work of art?'

In former centuries, artists have tried to leave everything common behind and to create beautiful works of art the contemplation of which would take the spectators into another world, a world better and more beautiful 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. And those who cared at all about art felt competent to distinguish between artworks and other things in the world. This competence, however, was a way of knowing *how* to pick out an artwork intuitively, without applying a conceptually explicit criterion for distinguishing artworks from non artistic objects rather than knowing *that* a certain object was an artwork in virtue of certain determinate properties:

Conceptually explicit criteria for distinguishing between works of art and other things were not available. 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 was bound to failure. It seems that beauty essentially resists any attempt at reducing it to natural properties. At the end of the 19th century, artists began abandoning the purpose of creating beautiful works of art. Photography had been 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, Duchamp raised the question 'What is a work of art?' and made it the central topic of artistic production and artistic reflection. But did Duchamp 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 cartoon), 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, implying that nothing was a work of art unless 'Fountain' was as well? Or was his purpose exclusively that of provoking the artworld, reminding the people in that world of their lack of any explicit and uncontroversial criteria for defining works of art and distinguishing them from other things?

We leave this historical question open. The fact is that 'Fountain', along with Duchamp's further ready-mades, are commonly considered to be works of art. Duchamp's impact on the development of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 or aesthetically distinguished? In any case, we have lost our former competence of knowing how to distinguish artworks from other things. Should more effort than ever before be made to provide a definition of art that would allow to distinguish

artworks from other things – even if they were indiscernible from the latter? Or should we consider giving up the whole distinction between works of art and non-artistic objects?

Postmodernism has campaigned for a positive answer to the latter question – and present debates in philosophical aesthetics still seem to endorse this answer, passing over the provocation it beholds in silence.<sup>1</sup> But provocative this answer still is, almost 100 years after it was given: 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. The denial of this distinction is explicable in terms of tolerance (“Nowadays, you cannot tell a work of art from anything else, but that’s how it is, we have to live with this.”) or indifference born out of theoretical frustration (“After all, who cares?”). Nevertheless, we cannot simply deny the immense potential for irritation and provocation Duchamp’s ready-mades still have, together with all those works of art which have been created under the influence and inspiration of Duchamp. It is this potential for irritation and provocation that present debates in philosophical aesthetics chose to deny. Indifference is, however, not a fruitful theoretical attitude. The questions ‘What is a work of art?’ and ‘What distinguishes a work of art from its non-artistic counterpart?’ should not be cancelled from the agenda of art theory. Arthur Danto is one of the philosophers whose work on philosophical aesthetics has taken its starting point from the artistic provocation inherent in the work of Duchamp and his followers. The question how to respond to this provocation is the central concern of his theory of art which we explore in this paper.

Concerning the question what it is that distinguishes a work of art from its non-artistic counterpart, we can choose between two kinds of answers: one ontological, the other epistemic or, to be more precise, pragmatic. If we distinguish between works of art and their non-artistic counterparts ontologically, we assume that there is a real difference between the two. According to traditional aesthetic theories this real difference is manifest in perception: This is where traditional ‘aisthesis’ and modern ‘aesthetics’ come closest. One of the most prominent defenders of this traditional ontological theory is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel who famously characterized beauty in terms of a ‘sensuous reflection of the idea’.<sup>2</sup> However,

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<sup>1</sup> See for exp. Berger (2000:23/4).

<sup>2</sup> Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*. Hegel, Werke, Bd. 13, Frankfurt 1986 (Suhrkamp), S. 151. We take the English translation from Stephen Bungay 1984, 40 (see also his footnote 61 to the translation on page 198).

such an ontological theory of beauty cannot help us understand the artistic character of a ready-made which is by definition perceptually indistinguishable from its non-artistic counterpart. Can an ontological theory of art simply 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 already Hegel made. But there is no evidence for art having come to its end at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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, not 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?'.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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: There is nothing that distinguishes an artwork as such from a non-artistic object. 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

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<sup>3</sup> Goodman 1978/1981: Chap. IV.

systems. When we make an object an object of an aesthetic experience, we rely on symbol systems with ‘aesthetic symptoms’.<sup>5</sup> There is no doubt that Goodman’s theory of aesthetic symptoms of symbol systems and of aesthetic experience provides an important contribution to the theory of art.<sup>6</sup> 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, it seems to be difficult to avoid the conclusion that art, after or rather with Duchamp, has come to an end and that those who keep making artworks, still assuming that these works are essentially different from non-artistic objects, are just anachronistic. If we choose the second horn of the dilemma, it seems inevitable to concede that everything can be a work of art, and that the actual artistic status of an object depends only on whether or not someone actually cares to experience it aesthetically. Given our pre-theoretical intuitions, cultural habits and aesthetic experience, neither horn has any appeal for us.

### **Arthur Danto’s Claim of the ‘Transfiguration of the Commonplace’**

Today, Arthur Danto is considered as ‘the finest theorist of the avant-gardes’.<sup>7</sup> 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 to be considered as artworks.

In his 1964 paper ‘The Artworld’, his claim is that the difference between works of art and non-artistic objects is not ontological, but pragmatic, namely institutional. Even though every

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<sup>4</sup> Goodman 1978/1981: 70.

<sup>5</sup> Goodman 1968/1981: Chap. VI.5.

<sup>6</sup> Fricke 2001.

object can in principle become a work of art, whether it actually becomes a work of art or not depends on the artworld and its leading representatives: ‘museums’, ‘connoisseurs’, and other ‘makeweights in the Artworld’.<sup>8</sup> Their decision making is obscure, if not just arbitrary. The artworld is a social institution which is subject to historical change. This change is perceptibly manifest, but the underlying forces driving this change are not. We can illustrate the institution of the artworld and its makeweights in particular with the help of the institution of a bouncer. A bouncer stands at the door of a trendy club; his main function is to pick from among the people wanting to get in those worthy of being actually allowed in. Only trendy people are allowed in. But in order to decide which people are trendy and which are not, he cannot rely on any criteria. He can make *ad hoc* decisions. He is typically on the lookout for something new that has the potential for becoming trendy, and by letting certain people into the disco while refusing the entrance to others he himself creates the trend which others pick up and follow. Whereas a trend cannot be institutionalized, the instance of trendsetting can, at least to some extent. The institutional theory of art understands the distinction between artworks and non-artistic objects as a matter of fashion and trendsetting. But it cannot explain why ‘Fountain’ is a work of art whereas other urinals are not, not even those perceptually indistinguishable from ‘Fountain’, neither those among the latter fabricated at the same period of time as ‘Fountain’.

This institutional, sociological theory of art still believes in a difference between a work of art (actual or to become) and a non-artistic object.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, and this has been pointed out by Hans Belting, this theory denies the ‘liberation of art from its own history’<sup>10</sup> which was a major concern of the avant-garde, and it tries to inscribe even the avant-garde into a ‘progressive historical narration’<sup>11</sup> – even though the progression of art, as understood by the institutional theory, does not consist in anything beyond a temporal order of trends or fashions. Danto himself did not hold on to the Institutional Theory of art:

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<sup>7</sup> Herwitz 2008: 119.

<sup>8</sup> Danto 1964: 584.

<sup>9</sup> From their respective points of view, relying on different arguments, both George Dickie and Pierre Bourdieu explicitly deny that there is anything essential about the distinction between works of art and other things: According to them, the whole distinction is nothing but a social invention. See Bourdieu 1979/1984/2010 and Dickie 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Belting in Herwitz/Kelly 2007: 115.

<sup>11</sup> Belting quoting Danto in Herwitz/Kelly 2007: 117.

Meanwhile, though the Institutional Theory did not come into existence until after ‘The Artworld’ was published, it was clear that I would have to reject it when it was enunciated. For since there need be no external difference between the bed that is and the bed that is not a work of art, calling one art and the other not must seem exceedingly arbitrary – and all the Institutional Theory demanded was that something is art if a group of qualified individuals – “experts” – call it that. If that is all there is to the matter, how can they consistently call something art and something exactly like it not art? There has to be some criterion – but the criterion cannot be perceptual.<sup>12</sup>

In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto 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?’ – again with a particular focus on the avant-garde. This theory is informed by contemporary thought in philosophical epistemology, philosophy of science, philosophy of language and semiotics.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Danto’s new claim is surprisingly traditional: Works of art are symbols, bearers of meaning, whereas their non-artistic counterparts are not. As to our knowledge, the only close readings of Danto’s theory have been provided by Daniel Herwitz and Joseph Margolis.<sup>14</sup> But none of them has drawn attention to Danto’s analysis of the ontological shift from an ordinary object to a work of art in terms of a ‘transfiguration’ and its inadequacy. After all, a ‘transfiguration’ is a change in appearance, not in substance. The term he should have used is that of a ‘transsubstantiation’. At least, this is what we are going to argue. Our reading of Danto’s theory 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’.<sup>15</sup> 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.

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<sup>12</sup> Danto 2007 (response to Belting): 125.

<sup>13</sup> 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’.

<sup>14</sup> See Herwitz 2008 and Margolis 1998 and 2000.

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

9:2 Six days later<sup>15</sup> Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John and led them alone up a high mountain privately. And he was transfigured before them,<sup>16</sup> 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,<sup>17</sup> and they were talking with Jesus. 9:5 So<sup>18</sup> Peter said to Jesus,<sup>19</sup> “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three shelters<sup>20</sup> – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 9:6 (For they were afraid, and he did not know what to say.)<sup>21</sup> 9:7 Then<sup>22</sup> a cloud<sup>23</sup> overshadowed them,<sup>24</sup> and a voice came from the cloud, “This is my one dear Son.<sup>25</sup> Listen to him!”<sup>26</sup> 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 Then<sup>27</sup> they asked him,<sup>28</sup> “Why do the experts in the law<sup>29</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup>

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 exclusively 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 is whether what happened when Duchamp transformed a urinal into a work of art can be rightly seen as a transfiguration. In the course of a transfiguration an object of visual perception 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 – as everybody can

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<sup>15</sup> See Danto 1981.

<sup>16</sup> Narratives of the ‘Transfiguration of Christ’ can be found also in the Gospels of Luke (9:28-36) and Matthew (17:1-6).



witness at any time. Thus, who takes the role of God to explain the difference? It is the visual indiscernability of the artwork from the urinal that provokes the question what it is that makes one a urinal and the other a work of art.<sup>17</sup>

What matters to Danto is not the visual, illusionistic transformation of the appearance of an object; nothing of the kind happens while one particular urinal among many similar ones is transformed into the work of art 'Fountain'. Danto is interested in the ontological difference between an ordinary human being and the son of God which becomes visible in the course of this transfiguration. Where there was only the person of Jesus to be seen, suddenly the son of God appeared in a transfiguration of the figure of Jesus. Analogously, Danto seems to think that, where there was only an ordinary urinal to be seen, suddenly 'Fountain' appeared – even though not in a visual transfiguration. No light irradiated or irradiates from 'Fountain'. To characterize this change in terms of a transfiguration is misleading. No perceptible change manifests itself.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the transformation in question has to be described with the help of another theological, even though not biblical notion, with the notion of a 'transsubstantiation'.

'Transsubstantiation' is the transformation of a substance in the course of which its accidents remain unchanged. According to catholic doctrine, the mystery of the Eucharist is to be understood in terms of a transsubstantiation: Bread and wine are being transformed into the flesh and blood of Christ without undergoing at the same time any change of material or phenomenal properties. It is the special privilege of the priests of the Catholic Church to celebrate the Eucharist. Nothing stands in the way of their power to provoke such a transsubstantiation, it cannot fail.<sup>19</sup> Now, it seems that, according to Danto, just as the catholic priests have the exclusive right and the exclusive power to celebrate the Eucharist and transform bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ, the artists – and the artists alone – have the exclusive right and the exclusive power to initiate a transsubstantiation and transform ordinary objects into works of art.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Duchamp's signature of 'Fountain' does, of course, constitute a visual difference between 'Fountain' as a work of art and the original urinal. But this visual difference does not represent an aesthetically relevant difference of the kind we are looking for – unless someone wanted to claim that one can transform any ordinary object into an artwork by just signing it; with such a claim one would fall back into a purely institutional theory of art.

<sup>18</sup> Danto uses the example of two warehouses, which both sell exactly the same kinds of objects. But one of them is an ordinary warehouse selling objects for everyday use, whereas the other has exclusively works of art on display. See Danto (1981:60).

<sup>19</sup> The transsubstantiation as initiated by a priest during the mess can take place even against the will of God. See [www.avenz.de/definition\\_t/transsubstantiation.htm](http://www.avenz.de/definition_t/transsubstantiation.htm).

<sup>20</sup> Danto 1981:99: '... learning it [an object] is a work of art means that it has qualities to attend to which its untransfigured [untranssubstantiated – C.F. u. S.M.] counterpart lacks, and that our aesthetic responses will be

The point we are making here is mainly terminological as there is evidence that what Danto really had in mind when he talked about ‘the transfiguration of the commonplace’ was its transubstantiation: Already in ‘The Artworld’ he raised the question whether the whole world consisted ‘of latent artworks waiting, like the bread and wine of reality, to be transfigured, through some dark mystery, into the indiscernible flesh and blood of the sacrament’.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Danto has revealed that he took the title of the ‘Transfiguration of the Commonplace’ ready-made from a novel by Muriel Spark.<sup>22</sup> The novel in question is entitled *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*; it was first published in 1961 and tells the story of a school teacher in Edinburgh, an aging spinster and admirer of Mussolini, and her favourite pupils. One of these pupils, Sandy, later becomes a catholic sister and takes the name of Helena; for the other sisters she is the ‘Helena of the Transfiguration’<sup>23</sup>, because she has written and published an ‘odd psychological treatise on the nature of moral perception, called “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace”’<sup>24</sup>. As the context suggests, this treatise may have been inspired by the memory of the way Miss Brodie had explained the world and its moral values to them and by the later discovery that things were quite different from what Miss Brodie had pretended them to be, a discovery Sandy, or sister Helena, experienced as a revelation.<sup>25</sup>

It seems, then, that Danto’s theory of the work of art and its creator is traditional in a twofold sense of the term: On the one hand, he defends the view that there is an ontological difference between a work of art and ordinary things. And on the other hand, he understands the role and function of the artist in analogy to that of the catholic priest, a person endowed with the exclusive power to initiate a transubstantiation. According to this view, the artist is the

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different. And this is not institutional, it is ontological. We are dealing with an altogether different order of things.’

<sup>21</sup> Danto 1964: 580/1. Even Belting follows Danto describing the eucharist in terms of a transfiguration rather than in terms of a transubstantiation (Belting in Herwitz/Kelly 2007: 113).

<sup>22</sup> See Danto in Herwitz/Kelly 2007: 126. Here, Danto explains that it were the ‘religious connotations’ of the term that attracted him, referring to the Saint Matthew gospel: ‘... the *Brillo Box*/Brillo Box distinction struck me as resembling the god/human distinction in the case of Christ, who, to all outward appearances, was just a human being. He was a god to the eye of faith but a human being to the eye as such’ (Danto in Herwitz/Kelly 2007: 126).

<sup>23</sup> Spark 1961: 34.

<sup>24</sup> Spark 1961: 35.

<sup>25</sup> The formula of the ‘Transfiguration of the Commonplace’ has now been engraved in the pavement in historical Edinburgh – referring to the novel of Muriel Spark.

hermeneut of a transcendent message, a message of divine origin which only he can receive. Kant had coined the notion of a 'genius' for this romantic conception of artistic talent.<sup>26</sup>

The question how to interpret the rite of the Eucharist is controversial even among Christians. Whereas Catholics believe in the mystery of a transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ, Calvinists deny the possibility of such a mystery. For them, when they celebrate the Eucharist, bread and wine do not have more than a symbolic function: the bread is a symbol for the flesh, the wine for the blood of Christ. Danto understands the transformation of an ordinary object into a work of art ontologically, in terms of a transubstantiation. He is, metaphorically speaking, a good Catholic. At the same time, he holds the view that a work of art is a symbol. The artist who transforms an ordinary object into a work of art thereby makes it into a symbol. Thus, he is, speaking again metaphorically, also a good Calvinist.

That works of art are symbols is a very traditional view. After all, most of the works of the history of art have a mimetic character. But there is one implicit claim which Danto does not take the pain to justify: namely that an ordinary object has to undergo a transubstantiation before it can be used as a symbol, as something which has meaning. Another difficulty inherent in his theory of art concerns his claim that the artistic act which aims at a transubstantiation of an ordinary object into a work of art can fail to achieve its end.<sup>27</sup> If an artist has the power to initiate a transubstantiation of an ordinary object into a work of art and if there are no particular conditions for an ordinary object to fulfil in order to become a candidate for such a transubstantiation, then it is unclear what could interfere and hinder the transubstantiation from actually taking place and reaching its end. The idea of artistic failure would however be compatible with the conception of the artist within the institutional theory of art: It does not depend on the artist alone to create a work of art; his success or failure depend on the support of the 'makeweights in the Artworld' – and even a bouncer can fail to create a trend when others just refuse to follow his ad hoc judgment.

Danto claims that the artists, by transforming ordinary objects into works of art, create symbols, objects with meaning. But how can a spectator become aware of the

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<sup>26</sup> This romantic idea of artistic transfiguration, the transfiguration of something common into a message of divine origin through the artist has recently been revived by John Sallis who refers back to Emerson. See Sallis 2008.

meaningfulness of an object? And what is the meaning of this particular object transformed into a work of art? How should a spectator conceive of her or his task of interpretation? And what distinguishes an artistic symbol from other kinds of symbols? It is only the last of these questions which Danto himself raises explicitly.<sup>28</sup> At first sight, his answer seems to be complex, if not inconsistent. First, he associates the symbolic character of artworks with that of words:

What I want to propose ... is that works of art are logically of the right sort to be bracketed with words, even though they have counterparts that are mere real things, in the respect that the former are about something (or the question of what they are about may legitimately arise). Artworks as a class contrast with real things in just the way in which words do, even if they are in 'every other sense' real. (Danto 1981: 82)

This is not at all to say that art is a language, but only that its ontology is of a piece with that of language, and that the contrast exists between reality and it which exists between reality and discourse. (Danto 1981: 83)

As Ferdinand de Saussure has pointed out, a characteristic feature of a word (be it a graphic or an acoustic token of a word type) is that its phenomenological properties are arbitrary with respect to its meaning. Unlike iconic signs, words do not have anything in common with what they mean. Because of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, we cannot understand an utterance unless we understand the language used for making it. Thus, exposed to an utterance in a language we do not understand, what we see or hear is not a symbol, something with meaning; it is just an ordinary thing. We cannot tell a spoken or written word in a language we do not understand from an ordinary sound or some scribble on paper. Danto compares the spectator who sees an object without knowing that this object actually is a work of art to the person exposed to an utterance in a language unknown to her or him:

To see an artwork without knowing it is an artwork is comparable in a way to what one's experience of print is, before one learned to read; and to see it as an artwork then is like going from the realm of mere things to a realm of meaning. (Danto 1981: 124)

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<sup>27</sup> Danto 1981: 121/2.

<sup>28</sup> Danto 1981: 83, 127, 139.

Danto's theory, according to which every ordinary object can be transformed into a work of art and only artists have the power to initiate such a transformation, attributes to the artist the role of creating and establishing meaning. Therefore, what the spectator of an artwork has to understand is the meaning created and attributed to it by the artist:

It is as if a work of art were like an externalization of the artist's consciousness, as if we could see his way of seeing and not merely what he saw. (Danto 1981: 164)

But how can the spectator have access to this new meaning? Given that Danto compares works of art to words, the question is what, in the realm of the artwork, is the counterpart to the language or linguistic system (as defined by lexicon and grammar) in the realm of the word. But there is no such counterpart in the realm of the artwork. Neither does Danto claim that the spectator of a work of art has to ask the respective artist to inquire about the meaning he or she attributed to it or – if the artist is not himself or herself available as a source of information – study the life of the artist in order to reconstruct the state of mind out of which the artist chose an object and transform it into a work of art. He changes his mind about the symbolic nature of the work of art and gives up the idea of comparing its symbolic character to that of words. He now claims instead that works of art are non-arbitrary or expressive symbols, symbols the material and phenomenological properties of which exemplify their meaning. Nelson Goodman already held the view that 'exemplification' is a 'symptom of the aesthetic', one of the characteristic features artistic symbols tend to have; but Danto does not explicitly refer to him.<sup>29</sup> Iconic symbols are among the most common expressive symbols – even though not for Goodman, his nominalism stands in the way of admitting the truth of this common sensical view of what an iconic sign is.<sup>30</sup> But iconic symbols are not the only expressive symbols:

... the artwork uses the way the nonartwork presents its content to make a point about how that content is presented. (Danto 1981: 146)

The thesis is that works of art, in categorical contrast with mere representations, use the means of representation in a way that is not exhaustively specified when one has exhaustively specified what is being represented. (Danto 1981: 148)

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<sup>29</sup> See Goodman 1981: Chap. VI.5. und Fricke 2001: Chap. 8.4.

At first sight Danto's theory seems to be incoherent in so far as he understands the symbolic character of the work of art both in analogy to arbitrary signs or words and to non-arbitrary or expressive signs. After all, a sign is arbitrary with respect to its meaning or not, but not both. But the appearance of incoherence vanishes as soon as one attributes these two incompatible conceptions of the symbolic character of the work of art to two different perspectives, namely that of the artist and that of the spectator unaware of the object of her or his perception is a work of art. From the point of view of the spectator who does not know that the perceived object actually is a work of art, a symbol, something meaningful, this object is nothing but an ordinary object, an object which does not have any semantic function. From the point of view of the artist, however, who has transformed the respective object into a work of art via a mysterious process of transsubstantiation this object is a symbol; and it does not only have meaning, it also expresses it. That it can actually express its meaning has something to do with its material and phenomenal properties. But this implies that the artist did not arbitrarily pick something from the huge realm of ordinary objects and transform it into a work of art. His choice of the candidate for transsubstantiation was informed by the meaning he wanted to see expressed by the artwork to be brought into existence. The artist looked out for the one ordinary object the material and phenomenal properties of which made it the ideal symbol to express the meaning he had in mind.

The material and phenomenal properties of an ordinary object represent, so to say, its symbolic or artistic potential – at least from the point of view of the artist. Does this mean that the artist recognizes artistic potential in ordinary objects and makes this potential a criterion of choice when it comes to picking a candidate for transsubstantiation? If so, the further question is what entitles or empowers the artist, and the artist alone, to recognize the artistic potential of an ordinary object. It cannot be the artist's exclusive power to initiate a process of transsubstantiation because the choice of one ordinary object rather than any other for being transsubstantiated into a work of art has to precede the actual transsubstantiation. Why is it a privilege of the artist to recognize symbolic and especially artistic potential in ordinary objects? Why should it be a privilege of the artist to make use of this potential? And why does anyone have to transsubstantiate an object before this object can be an artistic symbol, before it can have meaning and express it? After all, the artistic, the symbolic potential of an object depends on its material and phenomenal properties, exactly those

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<sup>30</sup> Fricke 2001: Chap. 4.2.

properties accessible to all who can see or hear and which remain unaltered even after the artistic substantiation has taken place.

Danto's main concerns seem to be to secure an ontological difference between ordinary objects and works of art on the one hand and to secure the artist's privilege to decide what is a work of art and what is not on the other. At the same time, he does not deny that the symbolic and artistic potential of an ordinary object depends on its material and phenomenal properties. He thereby overlooks that one can use the symbolic and artistic potential of an object for artistic purposes without ontologically transforming the substance underlying these properties in an act of transsubstantiation. Whether someone uses an ordinary object for an ordinary purpose or whether this person attends to this object's material and phenomenal properties and the artistic potential inherent in them, trying to see it as an object with artistic merit, as a work of art, that is a question of pragmatics, not of ontology.

Danto's answer to the question what distinguishes the artwork 'Fountain' from an ordinary urinal which looks exactly the same relies on ontological as well as on pragmatic elements. Given his view of the artistic potential of an ordinary object as something relying in its material and phenomenal properties, it is unclear how he can defend the view that the difference between an artwork and an ordinary object has to be understood ontologically, in terms of the kind of substance underlying these properties. It seems that the difference between an ordinary object and its artistic counterpart is pragmatic in kind: The one who makes ordinary use of the object overlooks its artistic potential. But someone whose focus of attention is on this potential and tries to explore it in reflection and further visual attention does not thereby reduce the object to the function of use it has as an ordinary object.

### **Aesthetic Experience and Ordinary Experience**

By relying on the theological doctrine of transsubstantiation (which he misleadingly describes in terms of a 'transfiguration'), Danto does not succeed in defending his claim according to which the difference between a work of art and its ordinary counterpart is ontological in kind. Theories of art had failed to identify those material or phenomenal properties exclusively characteristic of works of art even before Duchamp created his ready-mades. Given Duchamp's ready-mades and their artistic success, we should all give up our attempts at

naturalizing the property of being a work of art. Neither should we rely on the doctrine of transsubstantiation for understanding the difference between an artwork and its ordinary counterpart because the idea underlying this move underestimates the importance of perceptual appearance in our aesthetic experience of an object.

Danto himself, after having tried to explain the difference between a work of art and its aesthetic counterpart ontologically, at the cost of denying the importance of the realm of perception in matters of art and its experience, finally rehabilitates the importance of the perceptual appearance of the artwork, claiming that the artwork is an expressive sign. In order to understand whether a particular object has aesthetic or artistic potential, we have to make it an object of our perceptual experience, we have to ‘submit it to our own eyes’, as Kant said in his Critique of Judgment:

If one judges objects merely in accordance with concepts, then all representation of beauty is lost. Thus, there can also be no rule in accordance with which someone could be compelled to acknowledge something as beautiful. Whether a garment, a house, a flower is beautiful: on one allows himself to be talked into his judgment about that by means of any grounds or fundamental principles. One wants to submit the object to his own eyes, just as if his satisfaction depended on sensation; and yet, if one then calls the object beautiful, one believes oneself to have a universal voice, and lays claim to the consent of everyone, whereas any private sensation would be decisive only for him alone and his satisfaction.<sup>31</sup>

Right before our eyes the aesthetic and artistic potential of an object reveals itself, nowhere else. However, in order to be sensitive to this potential, we have to take our time and make the object an object of our aesthetic experience, we must not reduce the object to those of its material and phenomenal properties on which we normally rely exclusively when categorizing it as of a certain type: as a urinal, as a snow shovel, as a picture or as a naked woman cut in stone. And this we have to do whenever we want to explore the artistic potential of an object that is supposed to be a work of art, not only when the object of our aesthetic curiosity is a ready-made. And we can do this just as well with any other object which no artist ever claimed to have created as a work of art. But from the fact that we can make every object an

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<sup>31</sup> Kant (AA V, 215/6).



object of our aesthetic experience and explore its aesthetic and artistic potential we cannot conclude that every object we thus contemplate will turn out to actually have aesthetic merit. Not even all those objects which artists have created with the intention to make a work of art will have such merit.

What is it, that triggers our aesthetic and artistic curiosity and motivates us to make an object the object of our aesthetic experience? This question allows for two different answers. The first answer is decisionistic: Whether someone makes an object the object of his or her aesthetic experience or not depends on a choice for which he or she cannot rely on either ontological or phenomenal criteria; the decision is arbitrary. It has nothing to do with the Gestalt of the respective object. Note that this answer is compatible with the claim that perceptual experience is an essential part of aesthetic experience. The second answer draws on the perceptual appearance of the object. We perceive many objects, many of them leave us aesthetically indifferent; but there are some which attract our aesthetic or artistic curiosity more than others. Some objects even seem to force us stop and contemplate them, they put themselves forward as artworks, whether we want it or not. Both these answers have a certain degree of plausibility. Whether we care to try and explore the aesthetic and artistic potential of an object or not may well be due to an arbitrary decision. But some objects invite us to turn our aesthetic attention to them in a more appealing way than others. Duchamp's ready-mades and all those artworks which depend on the aesthetic and artistic potential of ordinary objects are not among the artwork which have most aesthetic and artistic appeal.

However, whether or not an object we have decided to make an object of our artistic experience reveals itself as a work of art, as an object which actually deserves our artistic attention and praise, is by no means a question that allows for any answer we may decide to choose. The object which, when contemplated, reveals its aesthetic and artistic power and merit, is the object which we discover and experience as a work of art. 'We may consider it as a favour that [the artwork] has done for us in addition to usefulness', should it have any usefulness at all.<sup>32</sup> But we have to be open to receive such a favour. This line of argument finally takes us back to the idea according to which the difference between a work of art and a non-artistic object is ontological in kind. If it is the object itself which, when we make it an object of our aesthetic experience, reveals its artistic character (quite independently whether it

was created by an artist or not) then there must be something about the object itself that distinguishes it aesthetically and artistically. This insight does not provoke a revival of the search for the material and phenomenal properties characteristic of works of art. Nor does it lead to a revival of the use of the notion of 'transfiguration' in art theory. Whenever we contemplate an object aesthetically and discover it as a work of art we transcend any kind of functionalistic and reductionistic attitude to this object. The aesthetic and artistic Gestalt of an object cannot be reduced to its physical or phenomenal properties. In contemplating an artistic object, we finally have access to 'the supersensible substratum of humanity', something that we cannot describe adequately with the help of our concepts, something that escapes every effort to make it an object of knowledge.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> We are using here a phrase that Kant used to describe natural beauty, but it applies to artistic beauty just as well. See Kant (AA V, 380). See also Fricke 1998.

<sup>33</sup> Kant (AA V, 340).

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