

# DANTO AFTER WARHOL

## TOWARD AN AESTHETICS OF MEANING

*Manrica Rotili*

*Paintings are today apprehended with the ears.*

(H. Rosenberg, *Art and Words* 1973, p. 151)

*It is the theory that decides what can be observed.*

(A. Einstein)

ABSTRACT. – It is a well known fact that 1964 is a pivotal year in Danto's life: in the Spring of that year he saw Andy Warhol's exhibition at the Stable Gallery in New York and the readers of Danto's work are familiar with how much Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* – exhibited in that show – has meant to him since that very moment. *Brillo Box* brought the established trajectory of Western art to an end and gave rise to an era of absolute pluralism in which everything is permitted since nothing any longer was historically mandated. After the end of the linear progress of western art, in a sense, anything goes – pluralism reigns. *Brillo Box* has changed the way art is made, perceived, and exhibited claiming that the distinction between works of art and ordinary things could no longer be taken for granted. This is the starting point of Danto's philosophical investigation on art. His inquiry on the art's nature begins from the question *Brillo Box* rises: when the art does look so like to the reality, how is possible to distinguish it? According to Danto the new thing about art in this era – which he called *post historical period of art* – is that we can no longer tell whether something is art by looking at it. For him, the possibility to find objects that are perceptually indiscernible from artworks but that lack artistic status involves that art cannot be simply identified by perceptual inspection. In this sense Danto invites us to speculate on what works of art have in common and on how they differ from other things, starting from the case of indiscernibles. As a result of his reflection work of art are *embodied meanings*, which implies that what works of art have in common is *to have* a meaning and how they differ from other things is *to embody*

their meaning. Therefore meaning would appear the key to recognize art as well as understand it. My ambition in this essay is i) to demonstrate that Danto's theory of art of embodied meanings leads to an «Aesthetics of Meaning» and consequently ii) to try to explain what «Aesthetics of Meaning» means. I will attempt to argue this in three steps. First I will underline the way in which Danto's definition of art is oriented to the meaning and in doing this I will follow the well known Noël Carroll's critics in order to show that Danto's apparent balance between matter and meaning – which the notion of *embodied meaning* seems to provide – usually leans towards meaning. Hence I will attempt to show that for Danto art's value is mainly cognitive because, although artworks strike us embodying something, Danto's attention to our affective response to the flesh of an artwork seems relative to the artwork's capacity of providing meaning. It will follow that interpretation hold a fundamental role within his Theory of Art, that criticism advanced by Danto implies that aesthetics considerations are commingled with cognition, and hence that aesthetics experience *after Warhol* is mostly cognitive: it's an Aesthetics of Meanings.

## 1. BLAME IT ON A BOX

As we know *Brillo Box* served a purpose in making vivid the deep question in ontology on how something could be a work of art while other things which resembled it to the point where at least their photographs were indiscernible, were not. Hence, *why Brillo Boxes* were works of art, when the *Brillo* cartons they so completely resembled were merely cartons for Brillo pads. Determining how, given a pair of largely indiscernible objects, one can be a work of art and the other not is an ontological question, and hence a matter of philosophical analysis. This is the starting point of Danto philosophy of art.

If something has become a characteristic feature of Danto's way of facing the problem of art's definition, this is the experiment of indiscernible counterparts. According to Danto, the possibility of the case of two or more perceptually indiscernible objects that, however, belong to different ontological categories involves that art cannot be simply identified by perceptual inspection: no perceptual feature can be invoked as a criterion for distinguishing between art and non-art. The eye is incapable of determining the answer to this question and indeed that the «good eye» of artist and critic alike no longer was of great use in arbitrat-

ing the deep questions of art. Therefore Warhol's exhibition demonstrated that the resemblances – so dear to the art historian – were of no great value either.

And if artworks cannot be defined by formal qualities, denoting perceptual or aesthetic properties, then it is worth to develop the idea that art may be defined in relational terms. In fact, this was one of the main claims in his first article on art's definition, *The Artworld*, where he also introduced the notion of *artworld* as a necessary condition for art: we need a theory about art, a set of conditions that artworks satisfy, in order to tell apart art from non-art:

The eye is of no value whatever in distinguishing art from non-art. It occurred to me that one needed, at the very least, some sort of theory in order to do that; and that in fact the art world must be an atmosphere saturated in theory if a work like *Brillo Box* was to be possible. I defined an art world as an atmosphere of theory and of historical beliefs, relative to which things get constituted artworks.<sup>1</sup>

To see Warhol's *Brillo Box* as a work of art meant that one had to know something about the theory and history of recent art.

Danto's attempt to provide a full definition of art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions – overcoming the neo-wittgensteinian's ban against art's definition – undergoes a shift in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981) when he sought to answer to the question «What are art's essential features?» arriving at a provisional formulation of part of the definition of art. Danto argued, first, that works of art are always about something – and hence have a content or a meaning – and secondly that in order to be a work of art something had to «embody» its meaning. What distinguishes work of art from other kinds of representations is the way the content is conveyed.

The thesis which emerged from my book *The transfiguration of the Commonplace* is that work of art are symbolic expressions in that they embody their meanings. The task of criticism is to identify the meanings and ex-

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Danto, *Embodied Meanings. Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1994, p. 7.

plain the mode of their embodiment. [...] to see something as art is to be ready to interpret it in terms of what and how it means.<sup>2</sup>

This last sentence is significant: to see something as art is to be ready to interpret it in terms of *what* and *how* it means. Therefore to be a work of art implies the existence of a piece of art criticism, which relates the meaning of a work to the mode in which it is embodied in the physical object that is its vehicle. In this sense the two conditions – *aboutness* and *embodiment* – turn out to be what Danto thinks of as *two moments* in a piece of art criticism stating that works of art are *embodied meanings*.

Insofar embodied meanings condenses what Danto takes his task as a critic to be. The task is twofold: to identify what the work means and then to show how that meaning is embodied in the work. In this way the differences in the art criticism explain the differences between two works of art. Let's consider the case of the two Brillo boxes. We know that James Harvey is the original designer of the ordinary Brillo box. He was a failed second-generation Abstract Expressionist who went into commercial art as a second best. Danto himself admits that his own definition, so far as it goes, fits Harvey's Brillo boxes as well as it fits the *Brillo Box* of Andy Warhol. In fact also the ordinary boxes of *Brillo* are about something – namely *Brillo* – and they embody the meaning they wish to convey by means of their design. But the two pieces of art criticism are disjoint: there is no overlap between the explanation of Harvey and the explanation of Warhol. The mere Brillo boxes were among the kind of things Joseph Margolis called cultural «emergents» which, like artworks, embody meanings. The interesting thing is to show how the meanings of these two cultural emergents differ, and hence how their aesthetics differ, that is, to show the difference in the art criticism of these two objects<sup>3</sup>. Warhol's rhetoric has no immediate relationship to that of the Brillo boxes at all: «to understand *Brillo Box*, one would have understand the philosophy of Andy Warhol [...]. To understand the Brillo box, one

---

<sup>2</sup> Id., *Beyond the Brillo Box. The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, New York, Farrar Strauss&Giroux, 1992, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> See Id., *Embodied Meanings. Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, quoted, p. 384.

would have had to understand not philosophy but rhetoric»<sup>4</sup>.

In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* Danto took a fairly hostile position on aesthetics. He felt that aesthetics does not really belong to the essence of art. His argument should be clear: two objects one a work of art and the other not, but which happen to resemble one another as closely as may be required for purpose of the argument, will have very different aesthetic properties. But since the difference depended on the ontological difference between art and non-art, it could not account for the former difference: the aesthetic difference presupposed the ontological difference – hence aesthetic qualities could not be part of the definition of art.

Unquestionably the work of art has a set of aesthetic qualities. But in any case one would need the concept of art to say *in what* the difference must consist. So Danto is able pretty much to put aesthetics on ice in working out so much or little as he is able to work out of the defining character of works of art. What Danto wants to underline is that since the differences are invisible, each artwork demands a particular evaluation and only by paying attention to relation between the meaning and the form we can aspire to properly capture its core. In this sense, art's definitions, which excessively rely upon aesthetic value as a criterion for art, is unfitting with artworks after the end of art.

## 2. HAPPY ENDING

Danto used «end» in a narrative sense, declaring the end of a certain story. It was «consistent with the story coming to an end that everyone should live happily ever after, where happiness almost meant that there were no more stories to tell»<sup>5</sup>. Danto's thought was that art came to an end when it achieved a philosophical sense of its own identity, and «that meant that an epic quest, beginning some time in the latter part of the nineteenth century, has achieved a closure»<sup>6</sup>. Therefore Danto's ex-

---

<sup>4</sup> Id., *Action, Art, History: Engagements with Arthur C. Danto*, D. Herwitz, and M. Kelly eds., New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 148.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 324.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

perience at the Stable Gallery in 1964 not merely opened up a way to do the philosophy of art: it opened up a way of doing the philosophy of the history of art. A great narrative ended in 1964, in the work of Warhol in particular: «for the first time there were something philosophically instructive about art»<sup>7</sup>.

Danto began to see the history of Western art as having a remarkable internal structure in which a narrative of dawning self-consciousness unfolded over time. It was the very Hegelian vision. What especially moved him at the time was the sense that in that moment at last was a philosophical question raised from within the art world: the theory of the end of art means that the history of art in the West has been the history of achieving self-consciousness of the nature of art, that is, of achieving a philosophical understanding of what art is. And when art ends in philosophical self-consciousness of its own identity «art had to be understood as one with its own philosophy»<sup>8</sup>. Danto called the art after the end of art *posthistorical art*, that is an art created under conditions of what he wants to term «objective pluralism», by which he means that there are no historically mandated directions for art to go in, at least so far as the history of art considered internally is concerned.

The only thing that is no longer possible, is to paint as past painters did. It is possible to make paintings that *look like* those by Leonardo, as Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia made with their Mona Lisa in the first half of the twentieth century. But such paintings cannot *mean* what Leonardo's paintings meant, because they were made in a different historical context and for a different purpose. We cannot escape our historical situation. In contemporary times art may have other aims than aesthetic ones, and hence has criteria of quality other than those defined by aesthetic quality (like Greenberg wanted). Quality has come under attack by those who ask of art something other than the gratification of the eye: what makes something art is not something that meets the eye and what art criticism has to make explicit is why so much rests on meaning.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Embodied Meanings. Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, quoted, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 325.

### 3. WHAT AESTHETICS OF MEANING MEANS

Danto compares the first impression of a painting to that given by Proust in the famous episode of the Madeleine: the novelist is conscious that there is a meaning to the experience, but he is as yet unable to get it to disclose itself<sup>9</sup>. He wrote:

Until those meanings are recaptured, modes of their embodiment remain opaque, and the works in question are alien to us, as are many opaque artifacts we know to be meaningful but whose meaning we cannot grasp [...] At the very least, it seems to me, a critic must make plain – or as plain as the work allows – what meaning it [a work of art] has and what meaning the reader who experiences it as intended is supposed to have, and hence what mutual transformation of person and object constitutes the successful artistic experience. *After* that, one can make critical judgments.<sup>10</sup>

In brief. Danto think that aesthetics, as a philosophical approach to art, should focus at least as much on what a work of art means (or says or expresses) as on the appearance of the work. As we know, he argues that to focus only on the formal qualities of art is to miss certain deep features of art, such as how its meaning is embodied in its form.

In principle, the notion of embodiment means providing a sensory access to those things that normally do not have a material reality, to give sensory appearance to something that is immaterial such as an idea. Through embodying a concept, for example, we provide a *perceptual way* to grasp it, *an appearance* to apprehend it. Similarly, artworks, through embodying their contents not only provide a representation but a special way to grasp the content represented. In this sense, grasping an artwork's content does not merely require acknowledging the represented content, but also responding to it as the body it is, that is, to the way the content appears, we grasp the content *through* that appearance. Therefore we do not merely understand the meaning intended by the artist but also respond to the way this meaning is presented to us.

Moreover, in Danto's view, as it is presented in *The Transfiguration*

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 347.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xiii.

of the *Commonplace*, what is embodied in the artistic representation is a certain point of view or attitude upon the represented content. The thing represented is shown under a certain light or perspective: that of the artist. She expresses her attitude towards the represented content through her style. Danto established in this way a connection between expression and style. In this sense, the beholder grasp the represented content of a work from the light under which the artist conveys it: the perceived content is inseparable from the way it is presented. This is why Danto thinks that artworks have something like a metaphoric structure; for, as well as metaphors present a certain concept under the light of another one.

But the notion of embodiment seems to undergo a pragmatic shift in Danto's view, which became clear in *The Abuse of Beauty*.

In fact, the definition advanced by Danto in 1981 could not have been the entire story: «In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* I advanced two conditions, condensed as 'x is an art work if it embodies a meaning' the chief merit of which lay in its weakness»<sup>11</sup>. In *The Abuse of Beauty* there seems to be a certain shift towards the aesthetic aspects of artworks and their inflecting role in the embodiment of a meaning. Since artworks are not bare meanings, but embodied meanings, their material aspect must have some effect upon our sensibility. In this book Danto sets straight his special way to consider the aesthetic qualities: he comes to think that aesthetics did have a certain role to play. In this sense *The Abuse of Beauty* is a sort of «Aesthetics turn» in Danto's theory, but since he is not interested in formal features of the work unless these connect with the meaning, the aesthetic qualities which he considers are strictly cognitive because they are internally related to the meaning of the work of art: in Danto's words they are *inflectors*.

According to him when an aesthetic quality, like the beauty, is internally related or intrinsically part of the meaning of the work of art, when aesthetic qualities are not incidental, they serve to illustrate one mode in which feeling is connected with the thoughts that animate work of art. In this case we can appreciate the form, the sensory side, therefore

---

<sup>11</sup> Id., *The Abuse of Beauty Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois, Open Court Publishing, 2003, p. 25.



the «aesthetic» of the artwork, only after an understanding of its meaning. So, if beauty is internally connected to the content of a work, it can be a criticism of a work that it is beautiful when it is inappropriate for it to be so. Nevertheless, Danto's interest in what he calls inflectors barely touches the core of his view, indeed, though he considers their role in art's experience they do not seem to be central for his art's characterization. Indeed, if beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the brain at the very least keeps the object of beauty in focus, the eyes open and upon it, the rest of the body's impulses put on hold the beauty of a work of art is internally related or intrinsically part of the meaning of the work of art<sup>12</sup>. According to Danto in the first instance the beauty is internal to the concept of the work in the artist's mind, and then enacted in the work itself: it born twice, first in the idea and then in the embodiment of the idea<sup>13</sup>.

Once we think of beauty as something intended and then embodied in the work of art, if the intention is fulfilled, hence as something that has to be explained through whatever interpretation we give of the work of art, so that we are dealing with something cognitive rather than merely aesthetic.<sup>14</sup>

It should be clear that Danto is not interested in formal features of the work unless these connect with the meaning, and do so in such a way that they in fact are that meaning's embodiment in the work. In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto writes «An object *o* is then an artwork only under an interpretation *I* where *I* is a sort of function that transfigures *o* into a work:  $I(o) = W$ »<sup>15</sup>. Interaction between form and meaning (embodiment and aboutness) is what it is all about. Indeed the meaning of a work of art coincides essentially with its aboutness and the role played by interpretation is primarily to shine a light on it – contemplation is not the defining aesthetic posture at all because the aesthetical

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 381.

<sup>13</sup> See *Id.*, *Embodied Meanings. Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, quoted, p. 366.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 368.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 125.

response is caused by what the work of art *reveals* and not by its form. Only when the meaning comes out we can get an aesthetic experience: in this sense interpretation is the fulcrum of the aesthetical experience, which is, consequently, no a perceptual but a cognitive process.

## CONCLUSIONS

Lately, Danto has entertained two views of art evident in one of Kant's great works, *Critique of Judgment*:

There is a view of art as providing experiences little different from those provided by nature, with which Kant opens. It leads to an empty formalism. Much later in the book, Kant shifts into an entirely different mode, in which the aesthetics of nature can play no role. This is an aesthetics of meaning, requiring a kind of interpretative perception, and it concerns what Kant calls «spirit». It has nothing to do with taste or pleasure, the main components of his initial position. It is because taste and pleasure are too pallid to accommodate the power of the great Abstract Expressionist canvases of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, and Barnett Newman – or the work of a more recent master, Sean Scully – that I felt philosophy had nothing worth saying about that art.<sup>16</sup>

Paraphrasing Danto we can say that this is an aesthetics of meanings, requiring a kind of interpretative perception, and concerning what he calls «aboutness», that is, the meaning of a work of art. His effort is to break away from the Kant-Greenberg aesthetics of form, and instead develop an aesthetics of meaning<sup>17</sup>. Danto's interpretative perception is a sort of seventh sense, comparable with Greenberg's sixth sense and with Panofsky's synthetic intuition.

According to Greenberg the critic's eye is the most important instrument we have when relating to art, as it goes beyond any information we could have: conversely, any data must be isolated in brackets. A good

---

<sup>16</sup> Id., *Stopping Making Art*, «American Society for Aesthetics», 30(2), 2010, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> See Id., *Embodied Meanings, Isotypes, and Aesthetical Ideas*, «Journal of Art and Art Criticism», 65(1), Winter 2007, p. 126.

eye is a sort of sixth sense complementary to artistic perception. This is why Greenberg had to be in topform when seeing a work of art for the first time: the time interval between first viewing and formulation of judgment is crucial for the destiny of a work of art. His aim was to prevent the eye from using any theoretical support when interpreting a work of art. Aesthetic experience for Greenberg is grounded on this immediacy, whereas for Danto this kind of experience works in a different way. It is not good a eye that connects us to the aesthetic experience, it is theory that does this; theory and good interpretive skills<sup>18</sup>. Eye alone, without theory, without the intervention of interpretation, cannot summon the artistic experience. Danto wrote that «Modernism came to an end when the dilemma recognized by Greenberg between works of art and mere real objects could no longer be articulated in visual terms, and when it became imperative to quit a materialist aesthetics in favor of an aesthetics of meaning»<sup>19</sup>.

Meaning is the key and in order to *see* meaning within the artistic object we need an interpretative perception: in Panofsky's terms, we need a synthetic intuition. According to him this intuition is based on a solid understanding of the «essential tendencies» of the mind<sup>20</sup>. Panofsky suggests, in other words, that what general viewers themselves see in the image and what the image means to viewers in sociohistorical terms is understood by the critic intuitively as a result of his expertise, experience and understanding of human nature<sup>21</sup>. Danto's «aesthetics of meaning» seems to go in the same direction.

Therefore Danto inverts the traditional order to respond to the artwork: he goes from (the) meaning to (the) form. In this sense (the) form is part of (the) meaning; in this sense art can be located neither in the formal aspects of a work of art, nor exclusively in meaning, but in the

---

<sup>18</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 124-127.

<sup>19</sup> Id., *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1997 p. 77.

<sup>20</sup> E. Panofsky, *Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction on the Study of Renaissance Art*, in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1955, pp. 26-54, in part. the table at pp. 40-41.

<sup>21</sup> On Panofsky's «synthetic intuition» and his methodology in general see M. Hatt - Ch. Klöckner, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to Its Methods*, UK, Manchester UP, 2006, pp. 96-119.

interaction of the latter with the former. His view is very close to Hegel's: «The work of art, as a sensuous object, is not merely for *sensuous* apprehension; its standing is of such a kind that, though sensuous, it is essentially at the same time for *spiritual* apprehension; the spirit is meant to be affected by it and to find some satisfaction in it»<sup>22</sup>. Danto's concluding proposition is that we understand the aesthetics of art as art criticism, staking all – even our aesthetic response – on meaning. But if the experiment of indiscernible counterparts clarifies that perception alone cannot be enough to distinguish art from non-art in the first place, this notion, contrary to what some have opined, does not imply that the experience of art is undervalued or that what matters in art is never placed at a perceptual level. One thing is to say that perception alone cannot help us discern whether an object is art; another that art is a non-perceptual activity. Artworks are objects to be seen, heard, touched, and read but this does not imply that we can identify them just by sight, ear, or hand.

I conceive Danto's Aesthetics of Meaning as a reduction of the ultimate conclusions in his Philosophy of Art, and I regard this as the most controversial part of Danto's theory precisely because Danto ties together *aesthesis* and *cognition*. The question, in my view, is: can aesthetics and cognition be any less commingled today?<sup>23</sup>

MANRICA ROTILI

University of Palermo  
PhD Aesthetics and Theory of Arts  
manrica.ro@gmail.com

---

<sup>22</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1975, pp. 35-36.

<sup>23</sup> I would like to thank Jonathan Gilmore, Jerrold Levinson and Bertrand Rougé for their helpful comments about my idea of Danto's Aesthetics of Meaning.