

## SUMMARY

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze Danto's theory of art and to assess his contribution to the contemporary debate about art's nature. Although Danto's philosophical approach about art overcomes the definitional task, I have limited the scope of this research to his art's definition and to some notions he has put forward and that have somehow become well-known *loci* of art's contemporary discussion.

Danto has attempted to provide a full definition of art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions<sup>1</sup>. In this sense, he tries to overcome the neo-wittgensteinian's ban against art's definition as well as he provides an alternative view to the aesthetic theory of art. He has formulated the problem of art's definition in terms of the experiment of indiscernible counterparts, which consists in presenting sets of perceptually indiscernible objects that belong to different ontological categories –some are artworks while others are mere objects or representations. It follows from the experiment that no perceptual feature can be invoked as a criterion for distinguishing between art and non-art. Hence, this feature is responsible for the kind of answer Danto offers which, as other philosophers<sup>2</sup> after him have assumed: if artworks cannot be defined by monadic predicates, 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,

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<sup>1</sup> Danto's first attempt to provide an answer to the question of art's definition was in his "The Artworld" *The Journal of Philosophy*, 61 (1964), 571-584; nevertheless, he remodelled it in his *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Harvard University Press, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Mandelbaum, M., "Family resemblances and generalization concerning the arts" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2 (1965) 219-28; Levinson, J., "Defining Art Historically" in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art. The Analytic Tradition. An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishing, Edited by Lamarque, P. and Olsen, S. H., (eds.) Oxford, 2004, pp. 35-46; Dickie, G., "Defining art", *The American Philosophical Quarterly*, 6 (1969), 253- 6; Carroll, N., *Beyond Aesthetics. Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

“The Artworld”, where he also introduced the notion of ‘artworld’ as a necessary condition for art.

Danto holds a representational theory of art, after which an object becomes an artwork when it is *about* something and *embodies* what it is about<sup>3</sup>. Hence, first, art has a representational character and, second, what distinguishes it from other kinds of representations is the way the content is conveyed.

This definition, however, is not free from criticisms. In the first place, it is not sufficient to delimit art from non-art for -as Noël Carroll has pointed out<sup>4</sup>- others representations which are not usually regarded as art satisfy Danto’s definition. Moreover, George Dickie has argued that aboutness condition is not necessary, for there seem to be artworks that do not satisfy it<sup>5</sup>. Danto has only acknowledged the first of these criticisms and, in consequence, he recognizes the insufficiency of his proposal. Aboutness and embodiment might be necessary, but not conjointly sufficient conditions of art.

But, even if this insufficiency is acknowledged it seems to me that his approach has touched some important features that any forthcoming theory of art needs to take into account. In the first place, the experiment of indiscernible counterparts makes evident that perception alone cannot be enough to discriminate art from non-art. This fact, contrary to what some has interpreted, does not involve that art’s experience is undervalued or that what matters in art is never placed at a perceptual level. One thing is that perception alone cannot help us discerning whether an object is art and another -not at all defended by Danto- 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.

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<sup>3</sup> “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” *The Abuse of Beauty Aesthetics and the concept of Art*, Open Court Publishing, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois, 2003, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Carroll, N., “Danto’s New Definition of Art and the Problem of Art Theories”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 37 (1997): 386-92.

<sup>5</sup> Dickie, G., “A Tale of Two Artworlds”, in *Arthur Danto and his Critics*, Rollins, M. (ed.) Oxford, Blackwell, 1993, pp. 73-78.

In the second place, his notion of artworld which I explore in chapter I- has captured an important feature of art that, I believe, cannot be denied without embracing an over-inclusive view of art. This feature is that art's production seems to have a reflexive component; that is, that artists seem to require a certain awareness of what is art in order to properly produce art.

Therefore, I assume Danto's view is right at least in these two things: (i) that certain assumptions about the perceptual nature of art's specificity has wrongly lead the development of traditional art's theory and (ii) that art involves certain awareness about itself as a practice in order to distinguish it from other activities.

Finally, his account, though incomplete, has a further virtue. Art's essence –as it is defined within his theory- may be useful to explain artworks' value for us. It is due to its power to represent something through embodying it that we relate to artworks not only cognitively but also affectively and, hence, we learn something about the world represented and about ourselves in a way that overcomes the mere cognitive aspect.

### **The project**

In Chapter 1 I examine the experiment of indiscernibles, its role and pertinence for art's theory, as well as the philosophical assumptions about perception that its acceptance involves. In Chapter 2, I look at the notion of 'artworld', its role in fixing art's identity and correct interpretation. I look mainly at "The Artworld"<sup>6</sup>, and its latter development in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*<sup>7</sup>, where Danto gives up the ontological connotations of the notion of artworld. Chapter 3 and 4 are devoted respectively to the conditions offered by Danto as definitional of art: 'aboutness' and 'embodiment' conditions. These chapters have a similar structure for they start by trying to clarify the sense in which these notions must be understood and are followed by some possible

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<sup>6</sup> Danto, A. C., "The Artworld", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 61 (1964), 571-584.

<sup>7</sup> Danto, A. C., *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Harvard University Press, 1981.

worries that might be arisen against them. Danto has claimed that these two conditions provide a full definition of art but, as it has turned out, they cannot neatly leave out some representations that we intuitively regard as non-artistic.

### **Indiscernibility**

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. Though it might be used for different purposes, it always presents us with the case of two or more perceptually indiscernible objects that, however, belong to different ontological categories. For example, in *The Transfiguration of the Common Place*, Danto presents a set of red squares where some of them are artworks while others are mere objects. According to Danto, the possibility of these cases involves that art cannot be simply identified by perceptual inspection; we need a theory about art, a set of conditions that artworks satisfy, in order to tell apart art from non-art. Therefore, art's nature must be accounted for in philosophical terms<sup>8</sup>. That the question of art needs to be answered philosophically might not be at odds with common sense; after all, art's practice has been accompanied all along its history by theoretical reflections about its nature, role, and value. However, that art cannot, in principle, be identified by sheer perceptual inspection has become a more controversial claim and has been subject of criticism by those who also opposed the experiment of indiscernible as an adequate method to deal with art's definitional problem.

Danto's point is that if the conditions of the experiment are accepted, then art cannot be defined merely in perceptual terms; for it is conceivable to find objects that are perceptually indiscernible from artworks but that lack artistic status. To this strategy we can find at least two different criticisms. The

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<sup>8</sup> Danto thinks that it is a mark of the philosophical character of a problem that it can be framed in terms of indiscernibility. This claim has been defended in *Connections to the world: The Basic Concepts of Philosophy*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1989 y en *What Philosophy is: a Guide to Elements*, London, Harper and Row, 1968.

first one is rather general and it does not really question the conditions of the experiment, but its relevance for the question of art. In this line, Richard Wollheim<sup>9</sup> and Benjamin Tilghman<sup>10</sup> have rejected the experiment of indiscernible counterparts because they think that the situation pictured in it cannot be generalized to all art. If it were true that each time we encounter artworks we have to solve something like the puzzle proposed by the experiment, then we should abandon an important amount of assumptions we usually hold about art. Moreover, it is precisely because the experiment portrays limit-cases –such as the *ready-made*– that it cannot be taken as a guide to solve the problem of art’s definition.

The second criticism<sup>11</sup>, however, seems to challenge Danto’s theory of perception. Thus, insofar as this criticism rejects the perceptual theory that grounds the very formulation of the experiment, it would threaten the experiment itself. The idea that seems to provide the core of the criticism is the well-known claim about the permeability of perception by thought or language. If this claim is true, then the perceptual indiscernibility hold by Danto seems to vanish. Two different questions must be faced in this case. First, whether the perceptual view hold by Danto is adequate and, second, whether in order to preserve the point of the experiment we need to embrace it –for it could be that Danto’s perceptual view is wrong, but that we need not to embrace it in order to ground the experiment.

Danto’s discussion about perception is framed by the conflict between perceptual internalism and externalism, as he calls it. After Danto’s characterization, perceptual internalism is the view according to which the content of our perceptions are permeable to our conceptual schemata, so that

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<sup>9</sup> Wollheim, R., “Danto’s Gallery of Indiscernible” in *Danto and his Critics*, Rollins, M., (ed.), Blackwell Publishers, 1993, pp. 28-38.

<sup>10</sup> Tilghman, B., *But is it Art?* Oxford, Blackwell, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> The criticism, as I present it, has not been developed by any particular author; however, some have tried to show that the experiment could be undermined if we bring into focus this claim about perception. For example, Garry Hagberg in his “The aesthetics of Indiscernibles” in *Visual Theory*, Bryson, N., Holly, M. A., & Moxey, K., (eds.), Polity Press, 1991, pp. 221-230, and Richard Wollheim, in the article mentioned in note 4, have tried to ground a possible criticism to the experiment by appealing to this claim.

different descriptions of the same sensory input will bring about two different perceptions. Danto places the origin of this view in Wittgenstein's reflections about the notion of 'seeing-as' and aspect perception. I have tried to show that it is within philosophy of science where its presence has become more frequent through authors such as Thomas Kuhn<sup>12</sup> and N. H. Hanson<sup>13</sup>. Normally, internalism appeals to the changing in our way of perceiving things once new pieces of information are provided; in short, they hold the plasticity of perception. Externalism, by contrast, fit a modular conception of the mind, such as Fodor's<sup>14</sup>, which claims the relative independency of each mental module. Hence, the perceptual module will be autonomous with respect to the cognitive one. Normally the kind of evidence the externalist relies upon is of cases of perceptual illusions, where in spite of the perceiver's knowledge about the facts observed, the perceptual experience remains intact. A second argument for the externalist view is grounded on the comparison between animal and human perception. Both species seem to share certain recognitional abilities, but animals, contrary to humans, are not usually attributed conceptual capacities. Therefore, at least those perceptual abilities shared with animals cannot be permeable to thought or concepts; for it seems uncontroversial that animals lack conceptual abilities. Of course, Danto is not assuming that all perceptual content in human experience parallels the animal case, but he thinks that at least at a certain level of recognition, we satisfy what Danto calls "the pigeon within us all".<sup>15</sup>

I hold that arguments based upon perceptual illusions cannot be sufficient to prove the truth of the externalist view; since these cases can also be

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<sup>12</sup> Kuhn, T., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second Edition, Enlarged, University of Chicago Press, 1970.

<sup>13</sup> Hanson, N. H., *Patterns of Discovery: an Inquiry into the conceptual foundations of science*, Cambridge University Press, 1958.

<sup>14</sup> Fodor, J., *The Modularity of Mind* (1983) and "Précis of *Modularity of Mind*" in Fodor, Jerry A., *A theory of Content and Other Essays*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990, pp. 195-206.

<sup>15</sup> Danto, A. C., "The pigeon within us all. A Reply to three critics" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Winter 2001; 59 (1), pp. 39-44. See also Danto, A., "Depiction and the Phenomenology of Perception" in Bryson, N., *Visual Theory*, Bryson, N., Holly, M. A., & Moxey, K. (eds.), Polity Press, 1991, pp. 201-215; Danto, A., "Animals as Art Historians" in *Beyond the Brillo Box. The visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992, pp. 15-31.

accommodated within some versions of internalism. Therefore, the examples are neutral as far as the dispute between internalism and externalism are concerned. On the contrary, arguments based upon animals' recognitional abilities seem to be more promising. Hence, those who embrace the non-conceptual nature of perception within epistemological debates have also put these arguments forward<sup>16</sup>.

Danto's point is that internalism involves a kind of linguistic idealism; if our conceptual nets shape perception, then we cannot make sense of the epistemic role of perception in acquiring knowledge about the world<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, we need to reject the internalist picture of perception. Put in these terms, internalism seems obviously flawed; but it can be argued that Danto's picture of internalism is too strong for it to be acceptable. We can conceive a version of the internalist claim that does not commit itself with the idealist consequences pointed out by Danto. Indeed, Danto himself partly accepts the internalist claim in his characterization of the experience provided by art. In fact, he uses Kuhn's theory of scientific paradigms as a metaphor for the case of art<sup>18</sup>. Perceiving a work of art is always to see the object under an interpretation; hence, the resultant experience is modelled upon the particular interpretation under which the object is perceived. Thus, it could be said that the defeat of the internalist claim owes its success to the unsound portrayal of the view offered by Danto<sup>19</sup>. An internalist, who rejected the ontological

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<sup>16</sup> Evans, G., *The varieties of reference*, John McDowell (ed.), Oxford, Clarendon-Press, 1982.

<sup>17</sup> Danto, A. C., "Description and the Phenomenology of Perception" in *Visual Theory*, Bryson, N., Holly, M. A., & Moxey, K. (eds.), Polity Press, 1991, pp. 201-215.

<sup>18</sup> "A chapter back I cited the slogan in the philosophy of science, which holds that there is no observation without interpretation and that the observation terms in science are, in consequence, theory-laden to such a degree that to seek after a neutral description in favor of some account of science as ideally unprejudiced is exactly to forswear the possibility of doing science at all. My analysis of the works of J and K -...- suggests that something of the same order is true in art. To seek a neutral description is to see the work *as a thing* and hence not as an artwork: it is analytical to the concept of an artwork that there has to be an interpretation. To see an artwork without knowing it is an artwork is comparable in a way to what one experience of print is, before one learns to read. .... In art, every new interpretation is a Copernican revolution, in the sense that each interpretation constitutes a new work, even if the object differently interpreted remains, as the skies, invariant under transformation" Danto (1981), pp. 124-125.

<sup>19</sup> In a sense, Danto is presenting a 'straw man' so that his criticisms against it would be difficult to reject.

consequences that Danto attributes to it, would press Danto's perceptual view, and would be more resistant to Danto's criticisms. Nevertheless, Danto does not take into consideration such an opponent and his arguments are directed against the internalist claim as it has been characterized.

I think that though the strong version of the internalist claim can be correctly rejected after Danto's criticism about its idealist character, the soft version can still play a critical role. An acceptable formulation of the internalist claim would hold that perception is permeable to knowledge but it would not commit itself with the ontological consequences pointed out above. That is, we would have the plasticity of perception without embracing the claim of distinct perceived worlds – which, in turn result from having different conceptual nets through which our perception reaches the world. In fact, Richard Wollheim's<sup>20</sup> criticism can be considered under this light. His thought about the experiment and its relationship with perception's theory is that, though perceptual indiscernibility could be accepted at a very basic level, it seems implausible that the experiment plays any crucial role in our relationship to art once the pertinent information is in place. Thus, the experiment of indiscernibles is either irrelevant or it wrongly portrays art's experience. Therefore, Wollheim holds a form of internalism that does not involve the idealist aspects of the strong version, but he still questions the validity of the experiment for the question of art.

As I see it, the output of these debates leaves untouched the core of the indiscernibility thesis, which is that two objects may be perceptually indiscernible and belong to different ontological categories. Moreover, even if we do not accept Danto's view about perception, the conditions of the experiment can be met, for example, by an internalist such as Wollheim.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the experiment itself cannot be rejected without embracing the strongest and most implausible form of perceptual internalism. It remains,

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<sup>20</sup> Wollheim, R., "Danto's Gallery of Indiscernibles" in *Danto and his Critics*, Rollins, M. (ed.), Blackwell Publishers, 1993, pp. 28-38.

<sup>21</sup> In any case, after Danto's classification.



however, the question whether it is a useful tool to deal with the question of art definition. To this problem I have no straightforward answer. On one hand, it seems that insofar as it portrays a possible situation –indeed, the case of the *ready-made* will provide some historical examples of the condition presented by the experiment- it touches an important aspect of art that, until recently, had remained unnoticed: that art’s status is significantly linked to its genetic conditions rather than to an specific appearance. On the other, it seems an assumed view that artworks’ value and status is intimately related to its aspect, for our appreciation and interpretation of artworks starts and ends in it. I tend to think that the experiment shows at least an important fact about art’s identification: that merely looking at the object may be insufficient to decide whether we are in front of an artwork or in front of something that could be an artwork but that it is not.

### **The Artworld**

Together with the introduction of the experiment as the putative method to deal with the art’s definitional problem, Danto introduced the notion of ‘artworld’. In his seminal article “The Artworld”<sup>22</sup> Danto tried to account for the differences between two indiscernible objects -Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* and the brillo boxes that occupied the shelves of the supermarkets- by relating the former to the existence of an artworld. After him, an artworld is mainly constituted by artistic theories that, in turn, provide distinct criteria to tell apart art from non-art. Thus, the *Sistine Chapel* is art because Raphael lived and worked within an artworld where the work in question could be regarded as a putative example of art due to the specific art’s theory that characterized the artworld at that time.

According to Danto’s characterization in “The Artworld”, the concept of artworld plays an ontological role, since artworks cannot exist out of an

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<sup>22</sup> Danto (1964), pp. 571-584.

atmosphere of art theories. An artworld is the theoretical frame in which artworks can be brought into existence. Hence, the theoretical environment within which a work is done provides the tool to tell apart art from non-art. As Danto says, “(w)hat in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, without an artworld art could not have been possible, and we could not identify something as art without placing the object within an adequate artworld. Moreover, the proper interpretation an artwork requires is constrained by the theoretical atmosphere that characterizes the artworld within which it has been produced. Thus, the notion of artworld not only makes art possible, but it also provides the necessary elements for art’s identification and art’s interpretation. As it provides the means for a correct identification of features the object has as an artistic object, as we shall see.

After the definition offered in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto seems to have left behind the ontological features attributed to the artworld, though he still appeals to it in order to delimit art’s proper interpretation.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that the notion of artworld provides a picture of art as essentially theoretical; since art’s making and identification could only take place within the boundaries of an art theory and an artworld. This is a very strong claim for it discards all works done under no particular art’s theory and, hence, Danto’s thought about works –such as Lascaux paintings<sup>24</sup>- that had been done in a theoretical-free environment was that they are not artworks properly speaking.

I examine some criticisms that have been held against the necessity of an artworld and an art theory for art to exist or to be properly identified. Most of them agree in that the theoretical aspect is not necessary at all and that, on the

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<sup>23</sup> Danto (1964), p. 581.

<sup>24</sup> “It would, I should think, never have occurred to the painters of Lascaux that they were producing ‘art’ on those walls. Not unless there were Neolithic aestheticians” Danto (1981), p. 581.

contrary, we already have accurate means to identify and interpret art. On one hand, holders of aesthetic theories of art claim that art's identification cannot be detached from the work's capability to produce an aesthetic experience in the beholder. For this reason, works that do not provide a distinct kind of experience within which we appreciate their artistic value cannot be regarded as art simply because they have been created within an artworld. On the other hand, within wittgensteinian approaches it is assumed that the notion of 'family resemblances' suffices to discern art from non-art, so that we do not need any theory of art or other sophisticated notion, such as an artworld, at all in order to identify art.

Danto has explicitly answered these two possible worries and has rejected the pictures of art that back them<sup>25</sup>. To the aesthetic view, he says that unless we already know that an object is an artwork, we must admit that a perceptually indiscernible object from it will grant the same aesthetic experience. Hence, the aesthetic view cannot offer the mechanism to distinguish between art and non-art. Moreover, the aesthetic character of a work partly depends upon the category, period, style, etc., under which the work in question has been done, therefore, only when we have already identified an artwork as such it is possible to determine the character of the aesthetic experience it will provide. The criticism does not imply that artworks do not provide aesthetic experiences – they do and this is an important feature in their nature-, but that they cannot play the identificatory role the aesthetic view attributes to them.

On the other hand, Danto has replied to the wittgensteinian approaches that challenge the necessity of an artworld and art theory in order to identify art by appealing to the notion of family resemblance. He reproduces the very experiment upon which the criticism is based in order to show that the notion of family resemblance will be useless in identifying art from non-art. In an

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<sup>25</sup> Danto has argued against the aesthetic theory of art in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, pp. 91-95 and against the wittgensteinian claim about the dispensability of an art theory for art identification in pp. 60-64.

example challenged by Danto, Kennick<sup>26</sup> holds that an informed beholder could be able to separate by mere visual inspection art from non art if she were in a warehouse plenty of objects, in virtue of the family resemblance artistic objects exhibit. Danto's counterexample in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* is that we can imagine two warehouses containing the same objects perceptually speaking but, while the objects in one of them are art, the other warehouse contains mere objects. Therefore, the notion of family resemblance cannot help much in identifying art, for it is possible to conceive things that share a family resemblance with some acknowledged artworks but that are not art. Thus, Danto's opponents regarding the theoretical nature of art not only cannot success in their criticisms, but also find new problems that affect the way they conceive art's identification.

Though the notion of artworld has become the most well known category of Danto's characterization of art -for reasons that escape his own control<sup>27</sup>-, in "The Artworld"<sup>28</sup> he also introduced the concepts of artistic identification and artistic predicate.

The notion of artistic identification refers to the process through which an object is produced as an artwork and it is characterized by the use of a special kind of 'is'. The artistic 'is' identifies two things that might not be identical literally speaking -as when we say, in looking at a painting, that this dab of painting *is* Icarus, or, in listening to a piece of music, that a certain part *is* Kiev's Gates, or, finally, when in being at a theatre we say that that actor *is* Hamlet. It is a use of 'is', close to the metaphoric 'is' and to the magical 'is'<sup>29</sup>. In

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<sup>26</sup> Kennick, W., "Does Traditional Aesthetic Rest on a Mistake?" *Mind*, 67 (1958), 317-34.

<sup>27</sup> In particular, this notion has become central for the Institutional Theory of art developed by George Dickie in *Art and the Aesthetics: An Institutional Analysis*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1974 and in *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art*, New York, Haven, 1984.

<sup>28</sup> For the notion of artistic identification, see Danto (1964), pp 577-580. Also Danto (1981) pp. 125-127.

<sup>29</sup> "This is an *is* which is of transfigurative kin to *magical* identification, as when one say a wooden doll is one's enemy, (...). To *mythic* identification, as when one says that the sun is Phoebus's chariot (...); to *religious* identification, as when one says that wafer and wine are flesh and blood; and to *metaphorical* identification, as when one says that Juliet is the sun. (...) Each of these identifications is, of course, consistent with its literal falsehood, but there is a pragmatic difference between some of them -I except

Danto's words: "in each case in which (artistic identification) is used, the *a* stands for some specific physical property of, or physical part of, an object; and, finally, it is a necessary condition for something to be an artwork that some part or property of it be designable by the subject of a sentence that employs this especial *is*."<sup>30</sup>

An artistic predicate, on the other hand, points to a feature that typically belongs to artworks. As when we say that a piece of music is expressive or that a painting is cubist. Contrary to the 'is' used in artistic identifications, there seems to be no special use of 'is' in the case of artistic predicates. When an artistic predicate is applied to an artwork, it simply identifies a property that the object –regarded as an artwork- may have. In the second place, these predicates apply to artworks, not *qua* objects, but as constituted artworks and their content is intimately related to an artwork's relationship to a period, style, artistic tradition, etc. Thus, we say of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* that it is cubist painting. It makes no sense, for example, to apply this predicate to things or objects that have not been done under a given conception of art.

Danto has pointed out that a pair of artistic predicates, such as "cubist" and "non-cubist", belong to what he calls opposites predicates; opposites distinguish themselves from contraries because the former only apply to a specified range of objects while the latter apply indiscriminately: "An object must be first of a certain kind before either of a pair of opposites applies to it, and then at most and at least one of the opposites must apply to it".<sup>31</sup>

Danto thinks that for an object to be art it must at least be applied an artistic identification and an artistic predicate. The former provides the representational character of art; it makes possible that a painting depicts its subject, a literary work tells a story, and a musical piece conveys its content. Artistic predicates, on the other hand, provides the kind of features relevant for

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metaphorical identification- and artistic identification, consisting in the fact that the identifier had better not believe in the literal falsehood in the nonartistic cases." Danto (1981), p. 126.

<sup>30</sup> Danto (1964), p. 577.

<sup>31</sup> Danto (1964), p. 582.

an artwork's characterization given the artworld under which the work in question has been made; thus, both the kind of artistic identifications and the range of artistic predicates that can be applied to a specific artwork are constrained by the artworld in which the artwork has been conceived. So, as I formerly said, artistic interpretation must be constrained by an artworld<sup>32</sup>.

However, though this claim seems to preserve a common intuition about artworks' interpretation -which is that we should not describe an artwork in extemporal terms to those under which it was conceived- it also conflicts with another mode of enriching artworks' descriptions and evaluations that is not at odds with common critical practice. In fact, it conflicts with another notion put forward by Danto: the notion of style matrix.

This notion has also had a short life within Danto's conceptual frame but its introduction in "The Artworld" allowed accounting for the fact that, sometimes, we describe works of art in terms not strictly constrained by the historical context and the artworld within which a work is produced. Indeed, we sometimes enrich our perception of ancient works by locating them under categories that have been created after these works were done, and couldn't govern their production. Roger Fry's analysis of the primitive Italians<sup>33</sup> painters, for example, owes part of its illuminating effect to the relationship he establishes between them and the post-impressionists artists. It is also well known the so-called re-discovery by the German expressionists of El Greco. Thus, if we cannot, without violating the maxim mentioned above, apply to artworks predicates that do not belong to the time in which an artwork has been done, shall we give up the kind of illuminating descriptions that Fry and the expressionists provided of past works?

I hold that even if the principle is right and that not every artistic predicate -or its opposite- can be applied to an artwork, there can be

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<sup>32</sup> It can be noticed that a similar argument is put forward by Kendall Walton in his article "Categories of Art" in *Aesthetics. A Critical Anthology*. Dickie, G., Sclafani, R. & Roblin, R., New York, St Martin Press, 1989, pp. 394-414.

<sup>33</sup> Fry, R., "The Grafton Gallery -I", *The Nation* (London, Nov. 19, 1910) pp. 31-following, Quoted in Tilghman, B. R., *But is it Art?* p. 74.

retrospective attributions that are valid. Hence, there are typical cases of attributions that are essential to our common description and classification of artworks, such as stylistic predicates. Style predicates are not normally available when an artist is working on her work; a style usually takes time to form itself. When we talk about a period's style, we normally do so when some time has gone by and we can look back at that period in such a way as to being able to point out what features are characteristic of it; when, on the other hand, what is at stake is an artist's style, we might surely not be able to identify a feature as belonging to her style until her work is enough developed. Stylistic categories, then, are such that cannot be normally applied contemporarily. At the same time, we cannot make sense of our normal characterization of artworks without using stylistic predicates, so at least this case of retrospective attribution of an artistic predicate cannot be dropped out.

Style is, in Danto's view, a special category because its nature is intimately related to the logic of historical discourse. That means that a stylistic predicate cannot be wholly ascribed to a work in the very moment it is done; rather, for a stylistic attribution to be accurately applied, it is usually necessary that some time has gone by.

The notion of artworld, art's theory, artistic identification, and artistic predicate provide, then, the elements of Danto's first answer to the problem of art's definition. Though some of them are dropped out in latter works, together they give a sense of his view about art, its historical and theoretical character, and its representational nature.

### **Aboutness**

Danto's definitional project undergoes a shift in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* and, where he put forward his art's definition in terms of the notions of aboutness and embodiment.

The notion of aboutness is, however, ambiguously used and sometimes it seems to point to the representational character of works such as figurative

paintings, or literature works, while others it seems to merely point to a condition of interpretability, as when we interpret a cultural object and attribute some meaning to it -though we do not say that it represents anything *sensu stricto*. In the first sense aboutness is conceived as the relation between a sign and the object it refers to, even if reference is considered in a wide sense. In the second sense, every object belonging in to a cultural context could be interpreted as significant in relation to others objects to their users. In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto stated it that “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>34</sup>. But it is ambiguous. In the first sense of aboutness an object is about something if and only if it has been created as a representation, that is, as something to be interpreted. In the second sense, any object produced into a cultural context, that is, any artefact could be explained, in relation to meaningful practices.

Danto thinks that aboutness serves to draw the line between mere objects and artworks when we face a case of perceptual indiscernibility; that is, the aboutness condition helps to discern which one deserves the artistic status. But is it necessary that an object satisfy this condition in order to be an artwork? It seems that there are at least two different kinds of counterexamples to the necessity of the aboutness condition for art status.

In the first place, there are works that are done without the intention of being representational –such as some examples of abstract paintings- where the question about its content seems out of place. Another, may be more obvious, example comes from minimal art. In fact, if Michael Fried<sup>35</sup> was right in his criticism against minimal art –which he characterized as ‘literal’ precisely because it seemed to lack meaning- this artistic movement could provide a counterexample to Danto’s theory. In its anti-illusionist vein, minimal works were, in Fried’s eyes, non-meaningful art, something that, for him, was almost

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<sup>34</sup> Danto (1981), p. 125.

<sup>35</sup> Fried, M., *Art and Objecthood. Essays and reviews*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1998.



identical with giving up the modernist project of art's autonomy. Are these works counterexamples to Danto's definition? I claim they are not. In an extremely modern vein, these works' meaning is art's nature and its relationship to the spectator. In the very experience they aim at provoking they are exemplifying a certain view about art's place in modern life.

Danto had answered the challenge by minimal works and other similar in the sense that all the attempts to create works of arts without a subject consist of creating works with this as content. So they are works meaning nothing, and not works without meaning. After the second sense of aboutness, these works are the result of a practice of creating meaningful objects –paintings, sculptures, ready-made objects-, even when these particular works want to be referring to nothing.

The second set of works that present a problem to the applicability of the aboutness condition comes from absolute music and decorative arts. Works of absolute music as well as pieces of abstract decoration seem to be about nothing. Both of them were pointed out by Gombrich as the result of a search for order, as opposed to the search for meaning that is prominent in other arts<sup>36</sup>. Different ways to achieve order as well as different orders are felt as differences among information and chaos, tension and termination of it. Works of pure music and decorative arts are usually ascribed expressive properties, and Danto has pointed out this feature as sufficient to guarantee the applicability of the aboutness condition.

Nevertheless, there have been some attempts to account for the expressive ascriptions of absolute music that resist the assimilation of the expressive phenomenon to the representational one. I analyze Peter Kivy's criticism in his *Philosophies of Arts. An Essay in Differences*<sup>37</sup>, where he has reiteratively defended the view that it is a mistake to reduce all the arts to the representational model. In his view, we should pay attention to the specificity of

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<sup>36</sup> Gombrich, E. H., *The sense of Order. A study in the psychology of decorative art*, London, Phaidon, 1979.

<sup>37</sup> Kivy, P., *Philosophies of Arts. An Essay in Differences*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

each artistic medium and try to explain their particular features and possibilities. According to him, it does not imply that some artistic forms are less valuable than others. Absolute music, as he says, is meaningful precisely because of its lack of meaning. Nevertheless, there might be a final way to rescue the notion of aboutness for these cases. Here I try to preserve Kivy's intuitions about the expressive aspect of absolute music as well as maintaining a certain sense of the aboutness condition. The solution comes from an author that shares with Danto the belief in the symbolic nature of art. Goodman's theory of art<sup>38</sup> provides, I think, a useful set of categories that allow explaining the different ways in which an artwork can symbolize without reducing them to the notion of representation. Thus, the notions of denotation, exemplification and expression may qualify as a useful set of categories that cover all the cases of symbolization an artwork can satisfy. Finally, the notion of aboutness, although not free of the concerns we have presented here, seems to hold for all art after all.

### **Embodiment**

Danto's second condition for art, the notion of embodiment, is meant to provide the specific feature that distinguishes artworks from other representations. However, I find the notion lacks a precise definition within Danto's work, so I suggest examining some of the contexts in which this condition has been developed as well as the analogies Danto has provided in order to provide an approximate understanding of it.

First of all, I propose to examine what we have in mind when we say, for example, that a person embodies beauty or courageousness, or that a building embodies somebody's power, or that a painting embodies a certain attitude towards the historical fact it depicts. In these cases, I take that we mean that the person in question is an outstanding *example* of beauty, that the building has

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<sup>38</sup> Goodman, N., *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, INC. 1976.

become a *symbol* for that person's power, and that the painting *express* a certain attitude under which the historical fact is represented. So, at least within the range offered by these examples, embodiment is related to exemplification, symbolization and expression. In fact, Danto calls upon these terms in his attempt to characterize the embodiment condition.

Embodiment literally means to provide flesh to something that lacks it, or to give sensory appearance to something that is immaterial such as an idea or thought. Symbols, for example, paradigmatically provide an image to something that is abstract or immaterial. Thus, in principle, the notion of embodiment means providing a sensory access to those things that normally do not have a material reality. Through embodying a concept, for example, we provide a perceptual way to grasp it, an appearance to apprehend it –as when we represent the concept of 'infinite' with a loop. 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 are affected for his presence. Embodiment is, then, related to providing an appearance, a particular flesh, to an idea, thought, etc.; therefore, in experiencing the artwork we grasp the content through *that* appearance. But 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 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. How can an artist express her attitude towards a subject? Though Danto does not say much about expression itself, he assumes that an artist expresses herself through her style.

He appeals<sup>39</sup> to Meyer Schapiro's considerations<sup>40</sup> about style in order to establish the link between expression and style and, thus, grounding the expressive character of artworks in style. Accordingly, the artist's attitude is primarily expressed through her style which, in turn, can be understood as a set of features that points to her own character. Thus the artist's character –or attitude towards the represented content- is expressed through her style.

In this sense, the beholder grasp the represented content of a work as it is coloured by the style of an artist; the perceived content is inseparable from the way it is presented, from the light under which the artist conveys it. This is also the reason why Danto thinks that artworks have something like a metaphoric structure; for, as well as metaphors present a certain concept, A, under the light of another one, B, -as when we say “the man is a wolf for himself”- and grasping the metaphor is perceiving –understanding, grasping, etc. - the concept A under the light of B, in artworks the content represented is presented under the light of the artist's attitude or character. Therefore, grasping the artwork's content involves seeing it under the point of view expressed upon it.

An important feature also derives from this comprehension of art as having a metaphoric structure. Metaphors may be regarded as rhetoric devices insofar as they not merely present a proposition but also invite the listener to assent to them. In Danto's view this is due to the enthymematic character that underlies metaphors. An enthymeme is a rhetoric device which consists in an argument which lacks either a premise or the conclusion and which invites the reader/listener/beholder to fulfil the missing part. The beholder in collaborating to complete the argument is somehow agreeing with the transit from the premises to the conclusions and, in a sense, she is convinced by the argument in a strong, deeper way. It seems that something like this is also true of the metaphoric structure. A successful metaphor –one to which the beholder assents- requires somehow that the beholder notices the association that makes

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<sup>39</sup> Danto (1981), p. 189

<sup>40</sup> For Meyer Schapiro's view about style, see his “Style” in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*, New York, George Braziller, 1994.

possible regarding A under B, or under some aspects of B. If this rhetoric structure holds for metaphors, then it seems also true of artworks, for we have seen that artworks distinguish themselves from other representations in that, like metaphors, they present something under the light of another thing, that is, the represented content appears under the light of the artist's character.

An artwork, then, is about something and expresses the artist's attitude towards what it is about through stylistic features. The beholder's experience parallels that of a metaphor in the sense that she grasps the content through the way this is presented, that is, as coloured by a specific subjectivity. Moreover, since the content is not separable from the point of view from which it is presented, the beholder engages in the work in an active way, following the enthymematic structure that all works –as metaphors- have.

This complex characterization of the embodiment condition has a further appeal in Danto's view. It helps explaining the specific cognitive value we attach to artworks. In grasping the artwork's metaphor we are, as it were, regarding the represented content under the light of the artist's point of view; hence, we have access to her way of seeing that content. In this sense artworks are exteriorizations of points of view, attitudes, characters, and other mental features that can only be known through their expression or manifestation. Moreover they have the expressive force, the capacity of affecting us as interpreters, persons have.

In "Symbolic Expressions and the Self"<sup>41</sup> Danto also develops this idea about artworks' capacity to provide a valuable insight into the structure of periods and the subjects who inhabit them. Danto distinguishes between symbols, manifestations and symbolic expressions and places artworks within the last category. These, contrary to symbols, are not mere conventional signs, whose meaning cannot be recognized unless we know the code, which governs it. Symbolic expressions also contrast to manifestations, for these are causally

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<sup>41</sup> Danto, A. C., "Symbolic Expressions and the Self" in *Beyond the Brillo Box. The Visual Arts in Post-historical Perspective*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992, pp. 55-71.

related to what they are a manifestation of, as when somebody's shaking is a manifestation of fear. They are, rather, intentionally caused to what they express. Artworks, understood as symbolic expressions, are fragments of a desired world, not an actual one; that is why they cannot be manifestations *tout court*. If the world they stand for were actual, then symbolic expressions would be manifestations of that world. This picture of art as symbolic expression reminds somehow Gadamer's thought about the fragmental nature of art and its ability to make present a desired, non-present, world<sup>42</sup>.

This capacity to show a different world is, in Danto's view of art, one of the most valuable features of artworks. By showing a different world artworks provide knowledge. What kind of knowledge? Knowledge about a possible world, about how would it be to live within it, and about ourselves who, in becoming aware of other possible worlds, become aware of our own world as represented. By becoming aware of other's point of view, we become aware of ourselves as points of view; even though we cannot completely give up our own way of representing the world, we acquire certain distance towards ourselves necessary for self-knowledge.

We have then that artworks distinguish themselves from other representations in their expressive aspect. Mere representations do not embody a certain point of view, while artworks do. Does this mean that we can tell apart artworks from other representation through their contents? Danto's answer is no.

As Danto puts it, "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 it is being represented. This is a use that transcends semantic considerations

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<sup>42</sup> Gadamer, H. G., *La actualidad de lo bello. El arte como juego, símbolo y fiesta*, Introducción de Rafael Argullol, Barcelona, Paidós, I.C.E. de la UAB, 1991.

(considerations of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*). Whatever ... (a) work finally represents it *expresses* something about that content”<sup>43</sup>

For Danto, since expression is not part of the represented content, but something like a colour or tone that the representation exhibits, he claims that it is not part of the work’s content at all.

However, I argue, this claim is a *non-sequitur*. Though it is true that the expressive aspect of an artwork should not be assimilated to its represented content, there is no reason to assimilate the artwork’s content to its representational content. An artwork’s content may perfectly well include expressive aspects that, by definition, do not belong to the representational content. Therefore, it does not follow from the fact that expression is not part of the representational aspect of a work that it does not belong to its overall content.

When claiming that the difference between artworks and mere representations cannot be one in content and, at the same time, that the difference lies in the expressive aspect of artworks, he is implicitly assuming that the latter is not part of the artwork’s content; for, if it were, then he could not deny that the difference searched for can be one placed at the level of the content.

Leaving this particular problem aside, we can follow Danto’s own characterization of the notion of embodiment through his work and see whether it is complete as it is so far.

In his book *Embodied Meanings*<sup>44</sup> Danto puts forward a characterization of embodiment that is less tied up to the expressive view of art as it is presented in his *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. The very expression ‘embodied meaning’ reminds somehow Hegel’s own view of art and its function within the development of the Spirit. In fact, Danto does not hide his debt towards the

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<sup>43</sup> Danto (1981), pp. 147-8.

<sup>44</sup> Danto, A. C., *Embodied Meanings. Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994.

German philosopher<sup>45</sup> and he completely assumes the thought that, given the representational character of art, the critic's role consists in assessing the relationship between the content of the work and the way this content is presented. Artworks embody their content and, hence, the beholder's work must be examining how a given content is presented, how it is embodied in a specific work. "The task (of the critic) is twofold: to identify what the work means and then to show how that meaning is embodied in the work"<sup>46</sup>

Finally, the notion of embodiment seems to undergo a pragmatic shift in Danto's *The Abuse of Beauty*<sup>47</sup>, a work that, among other issues, undertakes the problem of the aesthetic answer to art and its relationship with the question of the content represented. Danto claimed in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* that what makes something an artwork are considerations that go over and above questions about *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*<sup>48</sup>. The relevant notion is, nevertheless, another Fregean concept: the notion of *Farbung* (coloration). The colour of a representation adds nothing to its meaning or content, rather it is a matter of nuances and evocated connotations; it has to do with the use of a given symbol, with the associations that it triggers within a community. Indeed, this aspect of representations is closely linked to the rhetorical aspect of artworks pointed out above. The beholder who is acquainted with the referents employed by the artist is able to get the point of the work easily; she follows the path set up by the artist without much interpretative effort, as if the work speaks to her in her own language. This fact, which explains the rhetoric effect that successful artworks possess, does not imply, however, that a viewer, who is not familiar with the system implicit in the representation, cannot be properly addressed by the work. The process of understanding might be less direct and the resultant experience less immediate, but this does not preclude that it can be understood.

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<sup>45</sup> "the concept of symbol I am advancing is almost entirely Hegelian, in that it consists of giving sensuous material embodiment to what Hegel would certainly have called Idea" <sup>45</sup> Danto (1992), p. 62

<sup>46</sup> Danto (1994), p. 13

<sup>47</sup> Danto, A. C., *The Abuse of Beauty. Aesthetics and the concept of Art*, Open Court Publishing, Illinois, 2003.

<sup>48</sup> See quotation Danto (1981) pp. 147-8, in pages 18-19 of this summary.



Also 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. Though he claimed, “I am not in the least interested in formal features of the work unless these connect with the meaning”<sup>49</sup> it seems that artworks, at least insofar as they are embodied, not only appeal to our understanding, but also to our affectivity. Since artworks are not bare meanings, but *embodied* meanings, their material aspect must have some effect upon our sensibility<sup>50</sup>. Nevertheless, Danto’s interest in what he calls *inflectors* barely touches the core of his view<sup>51</sup>; though he considers their role in art’s experience they do not seem to be central for his art’s characterization.

Finally, it seems that though the notion of embodiment is meant to capture the material aspect that every artwork has, Danto’s view of art falls on the side of meaning. That is why some has regarded his proposal as excessively cognitive and as undermining art’s affective impact upon our sensibilities.

### Conclusion

I have tried to examine Danto’s art definition, its modifications and the view about art’s nature and essence implied by it. I think that it must be acknowledged that, after the experiment of indiscernible, art’s definition cannot be merely understood in terms that have traditionally constituted it. Art needs not have a particular appearance, though its appearance has a full importance when it comes to the experience it provides.

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<sup>49</sup> Danto (1994), p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> However, it seems that the material aspect of artworks does not get the importance it deserves in Danto’s characterization of art. As D. Costello has pointed out, Danto’s view “underplays the *labour* involved in both making and interpreting art” and hence “the process of *making* art by working on some set of materials [...] never impacts in any meaningful way on the kind of thing a work of art is”, Costello, Diarmuid, “Intention and Interpretation: Aporias in Danto’s Critique of Aesthetic Theory” in Pérez Carreño, F., (ed.) *Estética después del fin del arte. Ensayos sobre Arthur Danto*, Madrid, Antonio Machado, 2005, pp. 233-256,

<sup>51</sup> Inflectors are non-representational properties of artworks, such as beauty that, in colouring the representation, endow it with a certain attitude and elicit some feeling towards the representation on the beholder. Danto, though considers the possibility that inflectors belong to art’s essence, does not clearly defend its necessity for art: “the question I merely raise at this point is whether it belongs to the definition of art that something is an artwork if it is inflected to cause an attitude to its content” Danto (2003), p. 121.

Moreover, I think that Danto has also provided the necessary elements for art's interpretation. In particular, in his taking into consideration the historical constraints upon interpretation, he has avoided embracing a too restricted view about artworks' value. Each artwork demands a particular evaluation and only by paying attention to the kind of intentions and regards relevant in its production can we aspire to properly capture its core. In this sense, art's definitions, which excessively rely upon aesthetic value as a criterion for art, might overlook other non-aesthetic regards under which art has been also produced.

Nevertheless, as it has been pointed out, Danto apparent balance between matter and meaning -that the notion of 'embodied meaning' seems to provide- is usually destabilized on the side of meaning. For him, art's value is mainly cognitive and, though artworks teach us through *embodiments*, Danto's attention to our affective response to the flesh of artwork seems relative to the artwork's capacity to provide meaning. What he seems to overlook is that bodies also transmit meaning in their own way, through affecting our eyes, ears and skin.