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Danto's artworld: Where nine indiscernible red squares yield nine distinct contents

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INTRODUCTION OF THE PROBLEM

Many philosophers of art readily employ Arthur Danto's term the artworld, which he coined in 1964. Back then, he employed the word "artworld" to convey a cultural context, an atmosphere of art theory, or knowledge of art history. Several philosophers of art, such as George Dickie and Noël Carroll, have since claimed that their views are grounded in Danto's notion of the artworld. A clear problem arises since their usage of his term clearly clashes with the notion of artworld implicit in Danto's Indiscernibility Thesis (1981), for which nine red squares are syntactically identical but semantically different. For some, syntactic identity seems implausible, yet such situations do arise, and not only for contemporary art such as monochrome paintings, but for historical artworks, such as the five legitimate *Death of Marat* paintings on display in museums. One could probably write a paper that explores the dozens of different ways philosophers have adopted Danto's artworld for their own use, making Danto's compound noun itself syntactically identical, but semantically different. My focus here concerns the particular implications for Danto's special term "artworld" in light of his Indiscernibility Thesis, which he discusses in the opening pages of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981).

Just as some theorists appeal to "intersubjectivity" in order to explain how communication is possible amidst diverse language-users, some philosophers appeal to the "artworld" to explain how/why its participants capably recognize, grasp, appreciate, and interpret artworks, however outré. Let's call this notion of the artworld the Shared Interpretive Capacities View (SICV). Of course, this is hardly Danto's point, since he doesn't consider either artists or artworks to be constitutive of some artworld, or their historical circumstances. Rather, artworks are constitutive of artists' intentions, even when artists are not conscious of their intentions. Danto called this the Theory of Embodied Meaning (TEM). Problematically, some philosophers consider TEM a version of the Non-Identity Theory, whereby interpretations transform artifacts into artworks, but Danto subtly discourages this view. He writes, "By the constitutive character of interpretation, the object was not a work until it was made one. As a transformative procedure, transformation is something like baptism, not in the sense of giving a new name, but of giving a new identity, participation in the community of the elect" (Danto, 1981:125). Transformation requires a new identity, not just a new name, which interpretations provide. Regarding this issue, Danto has remarked that he was looking for an analogous pair along the lines of body and soul associated with persons, so he selected the "physical object in the case of works of art" and "*the interpretation of that part*" or "one can think of it as the *meaning* of that part" (Danto, 1993:200). Whatever transformation took place happened prior to its first public presentation. As Cristian Nae recognizes, the public's constitutive interpretation is meant to retrieve this metaphor[ically expressed intention] and thus the author's actual intentions" (Nae, 2009:94).

It is thus artists, and not interpreters, who constitute meanings on Danto's account, though artists leave it to interpreters to tease out their intentions. Were artworld participants to enjoy shared interpretative capabilities (SICV), another problem would surface. So long as artworld participants' cognitive stocks overlap, unfamiliar artworks would rarely arise, and if they did, there would be no way to recognize them as art, so art would either never vary

or it would change very slowly. Nae considers a related problem implicit in interpretive monism (the view that each artwork has only one appropriate meaning). Whether the artwork's meaning is *fixed* by: the artist, his/her correct interpreters, or artworlders with similar interpretive capacities; "art history becomes a closed system that runs the danger of *academism*: if no creative innovation is possible, being ontologically *incorrect*, then" as Nae notes "we have the opposite problem of interpretive pluralism. How should we accept that the history of art is a field of changing values, canons, and ideas, which is always on the move"? (Nae, 2009:100)

Here is an even more bizarre consequence of SICV. If artworld participants do share interpretive capacities, then syntactically identical artworks should have identical contents for like-minded artworld participants, presuming the artist belongs to the artworld; eradicating any genuine need for Danto's Indiscernibility Thesis to demonstrate how syntactically identical artworks are not so semantically identical as one might think. Of course, some might make the case that artworks are just like words. If words like "mean" or names like "Venus" can convey multiple references, aren't syntactically identical artworks equally polyvalent? But of course, each of Danto's nine red squares is actually monovalent. Moreover, few philosophers of art attribute polyvalence to artworks. Most, including Danto, are rather interpretive monists who attribute only one correct meaning to an artwork, or to each of nine red squares. In fact, Danto goes to great length to semantically differentiate these nine paintings. Anything else is mere interpretation.

In this paper, I first discuss Danto's artworld in terms of his Indiscernibility Thesis. I next show how positions held by Dickie and Carroll conflict with notions of the artworld implicit in Danto's Indiscernibility Thesis, as well as ideas that he developed in an earlier essay, "Basic Actions and Basic Concepts" (1979), which I consider to be a far fuller account of the connection between artistic action and artists' intentions. Finally, I discuss the implications for the artworld in light of the asymmetry between presentation and reception, which generates failures and flukes.

1. THE ARTWORLD OF THE INDISCERNIBILITY THESIS

“Basic Actions and Basic Concepts” qualifies actions as being “representationally characterized events” that cause “representationally characterized events” (Danto, 1979:83). In *Transfiguration*, Danto collapses this two-step process into a one-step process. I could offer several conjectures as to why he does so, but the most obvious reason concerns the ease of presuming symmetry between presentation and reception. Incidentally, Nelson Goodman does something similar in *Languages of Art* (1968), since he distinguishes allographic works as instantiable (two-stage account) from autographic visual artworks that aren’t (one-stage account). By presuming a symmetry between presentation and reception, Danto avoids having to explain the possibility for failures or flukes, should presentation result in an unexpected reception, what I call asymmetries.

In *Transfiguration*, Danto characterizes artworks as belonging to a rather large class of “representationally characterizable events,” which includes nonart examples such as words, advertisements, billboards, posters, signs, packaging, maps, charts, graphs, logos, illustrations, facial expressions, gestures and other nonart actions (Danto, 1981:83). Since he never really explains in *Transfiguration* how reception (effect) occurs, I imagine readers either inferring that it is spontaneous, as his text implies, or remaining curious about the particular process one follows to glean artists’ intentions accurately. Danto’s neglecting reception suggests that reception and presentation are two sides of the same process, even though avant-garde artworks often require many more occasions for presentation and reception, before the public notices them, let alone receives them as artworks (Spaid, 2013b). Such failures (Case 2) indicate asymmetry.

The following table matches Danto’s 1981 examples, which he discussed in *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, to his 1979 Theory of Action, enabling readers to grasp how art and nonart presentations (cause) engender varying receptions. I’ve added Case 1 and Case 4 comments to complement his Case 2 and Case 3 comments (Danto, 1979: 481). In *Transfiguration*, Danto uses R to

stand for “representationally characterizable” events, yet R in his 1979 table stands for “representationally characterized” events. Despite their different wording, they are rather synonymous. If we consider artworks enacted by artists, then artworks, though not nonart representationally characterizable" events prompt receptions (or consequences) that are "representationally characterizable" effects. Effectively the echoes resulting from some artwork's impact, "representationally characterizable" effects convey our capacity to reflect upon our experience, or to ascribe contents to our own thoughts, as a result of our having experienced an artwork. As already mentioned, I consider Danto's basic view to be that the presentation of artworks causes the reception of artists' intentions.

CASE	Cause	Effect	Theory of Action Comments	1981 examples
1	R	R	It is an artwork when the representation is true and its being true is explained by its impact when the resulting representation is satisfied.	Andy Warhol's <i>Brillo Boxes</i> , Picasso's Tie, Roy Lichtenstein's portrait of Madam Cézanne, or Duchamp's shovel.
2	R	~R	"It is action, when the representation is true but its <i>being</i> true is explained through the impact of the person whose representation it is on the world."	Erle Loran's Cezanne diagram, Brillo cartons stacked in stock room, a tie painted by a child, most advertisements, posters, TV programs, stories and "failures."
3	~R	R	"It is knowledge when the representation is true and one's having that representation is explained by whatever confers truth on that representation."	Giorgione's primed canvas, An ordinary snow shovel, or a Forged "Picasso" tie, and "flukes."
4	~R	~R	It is an experiential happening if the effect is satisfied by its cause.	Colliding billiard balls and "avant-garde" art.

Let's see how this applies to Danto's exhibition of nine red square paintings. Both artworks and nonart representations are "representationally characterizable events" (Cases 1 and 2). To distinguish actions that are artworks or nonart from those that are not "representationally characterizable" events, he describes the contents of these nine red squares in great detail: *The Israelites Crossing the Red Sea*, *Kierkegaard's Mood*, *Red Square (2x)*, *Nirvana*, *Red Table Cloth*, primed canvas, red lead (rescued by J) and J's *Untitled*. Not surprisingly, he differentiates nine indiscernible red squares either by appeal to their titles (or referents) or to descriptions of particular actions that originated them. He remarks, "A title is more than a name; frequently it is a direction for interpretation or reading, which may not be helpful, especially when someone perversely gives the title *Annunciation* to a painting of some apples" (Danto, 1981:3).

Despite Danto's worry that perverse titles misrepresent artists' intentions, he believes that every artist has his/her own intentions for doing what he/she does, independent of his/her artwork's appearance (aka surface interpretation). One imagines artists' actions correlating with artists' intentions, such that artists' intentions motivate their artistic actions. Symbolism, allegorical painting and religious narrative work precisely because there is some regular correlation between artistic intention (to convey a particular idea/allegory/story) and actions (the most appropriate way to convey it), otherwise outcomes would be no less perverse than Danto's *Annunciation* example. With Danto's nine red squares, however, one action (painting a red square) is the outcome of varying intentional states. It thus seems that actions are independent, even though we ordinarily consider artists' actions intention-dependent, such that if one has an x intention, one would do x .

When put into a formula, our ordinary view of artists' actions looks like: artist's action = f (artist's intention), where the artist's action is the dependent variable. Before Danto proposed his Indiscernibility Thesis, this view seemed most plausible, since different intentions motivated different actions. Danto's Indiscernibility Thesis engenders an alternative relationship, since the same action (painting

a red square) reflects as many as nine intentions. Even though artists' intentions cause their actions, the original formula breaks down when differing intentions provoke identical actions. Given the artist's intention, one could not anticipate the artist's action, and vice versa. Of course, Danto is surveying the intentions of nine different artists, who happen to paint identical objects, even though they are each driven by a different intention. Not only is there no way to discern each intention from the resulting action, but it's plausible that any artist's action could reflect some particular intention (this recalls Goodman's 1968 view that "anything can be used to stand in for anything"). Post Danto's Indiscernibility Thesis, there is no longer an obvious correlation between artists' actions and their intentions, meaning that artists' intentions are effectively action-independent, even though artists' intentions remain embedded.

Danto's Indiscernibility Thesis thus suggests that artists' actions are not reducible to their intentions, let alone language, otherwise all that would matter would be the paintings' contents. But for Danto, an artwork's contents must fit an artist's actions otherwise the artist's intentions are not embedded. Danto's Indiscernibility Thesis is designed to show that SICV must be false, since artists' intentions are action-independent. Were SICV true, particular intentions would regularly engender particular actions. Those who counter that the artist's action is actually the content of the artist's intentions, not the act of painting a red square, must find a way to justify how there is only one action for nine different contents. Artists' actions are still intention-dependent, it's just that any action could be the outcome of some intention. That Danto's exhibition includes two paintings both titled *Red Square*, steers readers clear of polyvalence. Titles may be identical but their contents are distinct. Had J. painted all nine paintings, Danto's case study might suggest a noetic act, whereby one object elicits various contents, but we know Danto rejects polyvalence.

Dissuaded of polyvalence, we recognize these various points.

1) Artists' actions and artists' intentions are irregular (*Kierkegaard's Mood, Israelites Crossing the Red Sea*).

- 2) Titles offer a clue to intention, but offer little reassurance. (*Red Table Cloth, Nirvana*).
- 3) Artists' intentions are action-independent. (same action reflects 8 distinct contents).
- 4) Artistic actions are metaphorical (not symbolic and not allegorical) (*two Red Squares*).
- 5) Artistic actions can double as artists' intentions (J's raid).
- 6) Some artistic actions are intentionless. (J's untitled contribution).

What does this tell us about Danto's artworld, which includes the very artists enacting said actions? We could say that artists' intentions matter most, even though the artworld includes artists, spectators, critics, curators and historians. Some might argue that these points tell us nothing or very little about the artworld. If the takeaway is that artists' intentions are action-independent, then we have already delimited the artworld in a manner that is inconsistent with the way most philosophers use the term. Rather than providing explanatory power, the artworld is merely the setting in which artistic actions occur and artists' intentions get expressed, however metaphorically. Any justification that defers to the artworld is a philosophical loss leader.

2. DICKIE'S ARTWORLD AS SOCIAL INSTITUTION

Dickie has suggested that artworks gain their status either from some artworld participant who baptizes the work (1974) or from the artist who makes something to be presented as art (1997c). Although this initially recalls Danto's artist transforming some object into an artwork via "baptism," it turns out to require far more. Dickie's notion of status-conference entails content-articulation, however rudimentary ("this is art"). The baptizer's reasons for deeming it artworthy stand in for artwork contents until a consensus develops around its contents. Dickie's artwork thus gains some contents prior to its presentation, while Danto's artwork begins with its contents embodied, though not yet articulated. I take

Danto's beginning *Transfiguration* with his assembling an exhibition to indicate the significance of both presentation and reception, which he rather fails to distinguish. One's capacity to articulate one's reception depends on how artworks impact artworld participants, yet such "representationally characterizable events" enable artworld participants to achieve a consensus regarding the best possible theory (justifying its status as art) and content in light of plausible artistic intentions.

While Danto has argued that an artwork's reception is constitutive of its contents, he has nowhere claimed that its reception is constitutive of its artworld, which Dickie's view requires. Danto's artworld is in constant flux, gaining and losing participants, and thus regularly adopting new conventions. Danto would not argue however that an artwork's contents change with its participants. In fact, his view clearly states the opposite. It makes no sense to employ new conventions to evaluate older artworks. One may appreciate the Cycladic people's slender statues for their biomorphic tendencies, but one could not consider them exemplary of modern art, even if no one ever thought to exhibit them until Alberto Giacometti recognized them as art.

Dickie adopted Danto's artworld to refer to the "broad social institutions in which works of art have their place," employing the notion of institution to indicate "an established practice, law, custom, etc." When Marcel Duchamp relied on the artworld to receive his *Fountain* as art, his artist peers earnestly rejected it. If one considers most important artists' careers, one realizes how frequently existing institutions are unprepared to accept anything unusual as art. The efforts that Duchamp took to solidify his art's reception anticipate Danto's two-step system for action. Dickie's move to see the artworld as some nifty, adjudicating convention proves not only self-defeating, but downright ironic, since the "R. Mutt Case" specifically demonstrates the uselessness of artworld systems when tackling systems-disrupting contemporary-art practices. If some spectator still has a lingering doubt as to whether an unfamiliar artifact qualifies as nonartifactual art, he/she cannot necessarily rely

on artworld conventions, let alone their agents, to identify it as art, let alone articulate some artist's intention. The social institutions primarily work for conventional practices. And conventional art practices are typically too passé to count as art.

3. CARROLL'S ARTWORLD AS CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

For Carroll, some prior "artworld framework" makes artworks possible. Carroll claims that "[t]he artist cannot create, nor could an audience decipher, an artwork without an artworld framework. The historical circumstances of a work are in this way constitutive of its art status" (Carroll, 1995: 252). On first glance, Carroll's emphasizing the relationship between historical circumstances and an artwork's status seems consistent with Danto's view that possible artworks of later eras would have been impossible during earlier eras. However, Danto's Brillo Box Case and scores more demonstrate that artworld frameworks typically expand with subsequent presentations, and thus an artwork's status is not solely linked to its historical circumstances, which are fixed in time and place. In fact, the presentation of unfamiliar or non-standard artworks problematizes existing frames, leading artworlders to modify and adapt old frames or invent new ones. Danto regularly admits that his philosophical obsession with Warhol's brillo boxes was originally prompted by his not understanding them, so he'd likely find the audience's not being able to decipher a work unproblematic.

On the other hand, Carroll's notion of modest actual intentionalism, whereby an artwork's content corresponds to the artist's intention, seems to parallel Danto's notion of embodied meaning, for which each artwork's content is constitutive of its capacity to prompt particular attitudes. Carroll's modest actual intentionalism, whereby content is established by the artist prior to reception, restricts the artwork's contents to its artworld framework, minimizing the possibility that recipients might recognize more relevant and interesting content than the artist intended. Although Danto has said on numerous occasions that artworks have one best meaning, he says nowhere that the artist knows it is or is the ultimate

arbitrator of the artwork's meaning. The artworld's job is to pool its resources to glean its best meaning, not to impose a framework that trains its meaning.

When faced with nine indiscernible objects, recipients who adopt Carroll's modest actual intentionalism would have no good reason NOT to assign one artist's intention to the others, since presumably their contents are derived from the same artworld frame. Paradoxically, art critics who do so usually find themselves in trouble, since artists' intentions vary despite obvious similarities. What is interesting is that Danto doesn't even consider this possibility, since he trusts that spectators will derive the artwork's correct content, even if they only have access to an artwork's title, though not the artist's intention. Of course, there is no reason to assume symmetry between title and intention, as Danto's titling two paintings "Red Square" suggests. The same title references two different things, a place on one hand and a "minimalist exemplar" on another. Carroll seems to assume that artworld participation grants one access to artworld conventions/frameworks that make understanding artworks uncomplicated, as if there's a constitutive relationship between artworld framework and artist's intentions. Danto's Brillo Box Case (and scores more) exemplifies the fact that neither an artwork's status nor its content is readily apparent to artworld participants prior to reception, as Dickie and Carroll's views presume.

4. DANTO'S THEORY OF EMBODIED MEANING AND ASYMMETRIES

Although I am hardly an intentionalist, let alone an interpretive monist, I consider Danto's two-step process useful for explaining asymmetries between presentation and reception, such as failures and flukes. For Danto, *failures* are intended artworks that no one considers art, while *flukes* are nonart representations that succeed as art (Danto: 2008). Although I don't believe he explored such situations, he tipped me off to such possibilities, which encouraged me to recognize even more connections between his 1979 essay and his 1981 book. Perhaps the best known example of an asymmetry is that of Duchamp's *Fountain*, which was deemed a failure for 33 years,

since it wasn't accepted as art until 1950 when Sidney Janis exhibited a replica, which Duchamp later signed. On this level, *Fountain* can be considered a representationally characterizable event that *does not* cause a representationally characterizable event, which effectively makes it a nonart representation. This asymmetry persists until today. When I teach in Philadelphia, I send my students to explore the Duchamp galleries at the PMA. And *Fountain* still fails, even in a museum setting, but of course its failure especially satisfies Duchamp's 1912 quest "Can one make works of art that which are not 'of art'."

Danto's methodology seems especially tricky here. On one hand, he appeals to representationalism, as embodied contents cause spectators to have particular propositional attitudes (beliefs) about the artwork. Contents, however embodied, are not necessarily visible. *Fountain's* visible properties, which inspired its surface interpretation, failed to register as art for most artworlders in 1917. The prevalence of such failures offers further proof of the falsity of SIVC. Another paramount case that characterizes a failure and challenges received views concerning the "artworld" as a consensus generating mechanism is Hans Haacke's *Bowery Seeds* (1970). Forty-five years later, only a tiny percentage of today's artworld would feel obliged to swerve to avoid damaging his living sculpture. Those who do recognize it as an artwork would have little problem relaying in words the sculpture's physical impact, its contents, art historical significance, or the artist's intentions with the intervention.

Exemplary of flukes is Devo's music video "Whip It", as well as their infamous Devo Energy Domes, which were exhibited in "The Artist's Museum" (2010) at Los Angeles MOCA. Of course, a lot of exhibition ephemera, including posters, postcards and fliers, which are now viewed as art, as well as artists' hand-made furniture, can be considered flukes. If failures are artistic representations that were not received as artistic representations, flukes are nonart representations that are eventually received as artistic representations. There thus doesn't seem to be a conflict between embodied meanings and asymmetries. Working out artists' intentions is just a super-long process (Spaid 2013b).