

WHY THE BRILLO BOX? THE RECOVERY OF THE AESTHETIC

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*Why live with dull anesthetic objects?
Why not objects as beautiful as Brillo Boxes?*
Arthur C. Danto

“beauty is not the default condition for art”

The crucial development of the concept of art in the mid-eighteenth century was establishing that art is organised around the beautiful. This point of view can also be seen in the naming of art in those times: beaux-arts, fine arts, belle arti, szép művészetek, arte frumoase.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century it was widely accepted that the beautiful (the aesthetic) belongs to the essence of (fine) art, art philosophy was thought to be a sub-category of aesthetics, and the “artistic” was studied as one of the cases of the aesthetic.

The artistic and philosophical developments of the twentieth century questioned these theses as self-explanatory. Decisive in this respect was Arthur C. Danto’s position who became an art philosopher influenced by Andy Warhol’s 1964 *Brillo Box* (Danto, 2009). Arthur Danto thinks that Andy Warhol reformulated the main question of art philosophy by exhibiting the *Brillo Box*, which seemingly is not different in any regard from the Brillo boxes found on the shelves of supermarkets. Thus, art philosophy primarily has to answer the question of how it is possible in the case of two perceptually indistinguishable items that one of

them can be a work of art while the other is just a simple object. Andy Warhol did not change the way we look at things, but the way we think about them. That is, the key innovation is not a new kind of aesthetic experience, but a new philosophy of art.

Starting out from Warhol's case, Danto reaches two conclusions: the first is that perceptual features do not play a part in the defining of an object as a work of art. The second one is that works of art are made possible by theories of art. „What 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” (Danto, 1964, 582). The theory of art is, similarly to religion, that which ensures the transfiguration of everyday things into works of art. Just as the act of baptism does not only give a name, but regenerates the person, so the object changed by art theory also has a new ontological status.

“a fairly hostile position on the aesthetic”

In the first half of the twentieth century the generally accepted view was that the artistic value is none other, and no more than the aesthetic value. Formalism, structuralism, and anti-intentionalism all thought of the aesthetic as the essential feature of art. Therefore, they insisted that the direct encounter with works of art, the aesthetic experience cannot be substituted with anything else. Because judgements about art are judgements of taste, they can only be based on direct experience and are embodied in statements operating with aesthetic terms. The important properties of works of art are formal properties, whose reception happens through the irreplaceable, direct aesthetic experience. As a result of Clive Bell's, Roger Fry's, and Monroe Beardsley's influential writings it has become established that works of art are defined by the “significant form”. Studies focused on structure, the peculiarities of medium, and the “how” of art. In the fine arts the lines, the colour, the composition, in literature the sound of words, the rhythm, the rhetorical figures, in music the sound, the rhythm, the tone of voice, the architectonics, etc. became important. Asking questions like “what is the work about?”, or “what is the message of the author?”, dealing with the contents of the works, with their aspects outside of art seemed dated and wrong. This theoretical framework, which saw the essence of autonomous art in the significant form, took shape in American art in abstract expressionism by the middle of the twentieth century. Abstract expressionism, with effective help from Clement Greenberg, achieved

artistic monopoly in the fifties, displacing representation. Thus art turned into itself, as Bourdieu puts it, it became not simply *l'art pour l'art*, but *l'art pour les artists*. Jackson Pollock's dripped canvases, or Barnett Newman's large-scale metaphysical pictures were not about everyday life either, nor for everyday people. They are part of high brow culture.

The power of abstraction was broken by pop-art in the middle of the sixties, primarily through the works of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol. The theoretical and critical tools so successfully used before proved impotent when pop-art appeared, specifically Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*. It was impossible to argue that the normal Brillo box does not have significant form, but Warhol's *Brillo Box* does. It has become obvious that the supermarket Brillo-boxes are not distinguished from Warhol's work by aesthetic properties. The so far well-serving theories focusing on the aesthetic had to be replaced by ones that could prove why the *Brillo Box* is a work of art, as opposed to its common counterpart. Thus, the literature started to sever the aesthetic from the body of art.

Arthur C. Danto admits that his main work, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* "took a fairly hostile position on the aesthetic" (Danto, 1993, 175). The anti-aesthetic message that often occurs in different writers' work, has two well-defined meanings:

- a. The fight against the beautiful, moving the beautiful out of the centre of art.
- b. The exclusion of the aesthetic from the definition of art.

In its first meaning, the anti-aesthetic is characteristic of the Dada movement, unfolding in the context of the First World War. Danto calls this attitude kalliphobia (Danto, 2004): the artists sacrificed beauty, in which they saw the symbol of the culture and perceptions of the ruling classes. They answered the cynical attitude of the ruling classes with the symbolic sacrifice of beauty, when they sent the young to a war waged in the name of civilisation in a hypocritical manner. In protest, art ceased to be the art of beauty, presented the ugly social phenomena with the help of ugly art. Hal Foster, the editor of the *Anti-Aesthetic*, issued in 1983 notes that this "surrealist revolt" is returned in postmodernist art, meaning that the rejection of the beautiful is just as characteristic of the postmodernism of resistance that he also promotes, as of the "pure" artistic efforts of modernism. (Foster, 1983)

The anti-aesthetic in its second meaning soon grew into a dominant theory, owing to Arthur C. Danto. This theory, often called contextualism, could be summed up in the following way: works of art are

not different from everyday things through their perceptual traits, but through their art historical context. Whether something is a work of art is decided along a theory of art. With this we reached the end of art, when anything can be art if the right art theory is available. Following Hegel, art has reached its end, it has become one with its own philosophy.

Danto's complex theory has much simpler versions. These are set along a scale where from the simple sharp separation of the "artistic" and the "aesthetic" (Best, 1982), we reach the influential institutionalist theory. George Dickie, who signs institutional theory, defines the work of art the following way: "a work of art in the descriptive sense is (1) an artifact (2) upon which some society or some sub-group of a society has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation" (Dickie, 1969, 254), noting that it all depends on the institutional setting. The problem with institutional theory is on the one hand, that it is circular—it defines the "agent" of the artistic world and the work of art with each other, on the other hand, it lacks any quality criteria, while common sense suggests that the status of candidate for appreciation has to be earned somehow. We can meet this type of simplifications in Timothy Binkley's 1977 writing, which states that art need not be aesthetic. On the other hand, he protests against the kind of perception of "artwork" that expects of the work of art to be an aesthetic object, which has such aesthetic qualities as beauty, repose, expressiveness, unity, liveliness. As opposed to this, he comes up with a very modest proposal: he calls the work of art a "piece", and states that "to be a piece of art, an item need only be indexed as an artwork by an artist" (Binkley, 1977, 272). Anybody can be an artist if they use the conventions of art, states Binkley, and aesthetics has nothing to do with art. The question does not arise whether there are quality criteria of art or of the definition of the artist. Binkley's disarming example is Duchamp's "piece" called *L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved*, where a common postcard, with Mona Lisa's portrait, becomes a work of art when Duchamp, without changing anything on it, names it *L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved*, referring to his previous work entitled *L.H.O.O.Q.*, where he drew a moustache and beard on one of the copies of the incriminated Mona Lisa postcard. *L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved* is a work of art while not being perceptually different from the common postcard.

The recovery of aesthetic

It seems that Arthur Danto definitively resolved the question of identification of works of art. A work of art is differentiated from its

perceptually indistinguishable pair by the art historical and theoretical context, and these differences are not visible properties of the work. There are some signs, however, suggesting that it would not be salutary to resign ourselves to having bleached out the aesthetic from the artistic. The troubling aspects are linked to the phenomenon which meant the end of art: the *Brillo Box*.

Reading Danto's great book on Andy Warhol, we learn that "Since the cardboard cartoons actually used by the Brillo company (...) were not capable of achieving the visual effect at which he aimed, Warhol decided that the grocery boxes had to be made of wood, and fabricated by wood craftsmen, who were trained in cutting and fitting pieces of wood together according to specifications given them". (Danto, 2009, 53). So in this case, not only the thought is important, for example, "let's exhibit something that is confusingly similar to the product made in mass production, suggesting a radical art-philosophical question", or, "let's exhibit something that really reflects contemporary American society", or "let's exhibit a work that will be the most decidedly opposed to the abstract, spontaneous gesture-painting of abstract-expressionism", etc., but its appearance too, the aesthetic experience which the *Brillo Box* makes possible. Andy Warhol thought about the way he would exhibit the Brillo boxes, building them on each other, and the sight was not satisfying, insofar as the edges of the cardboard boxes may dent, or be pushed in, not bringing out the perfect cube shape. The author— Andy Warhol— who, publicly known wanted to become a machine, calculates exactly the aesthetic aspects of his works, which should definitely make us think. Another puzzling question is, why does Arthur C. Danto not see the end of art in Marcel Duchamp, while Duchamp's work is perhaps more suitable for this? Duchamp's ready-mades are at least as suitable to change the way we think about art as the *Brillo Box*. Duchamp's *Fountain* is equally indistinguishable from its ordinary pair as the *Brillo Box* from Brillo boxes. Danto gives quite an unexact answer to this question, which covers two aspects. One is, that Duchamp could not, in principle, have made his readymades, while Andy Warhol did. This cannot justify Danto's preference, since Duchamp's gesture announces "the end of art" more radically: it is not only about the difference between the work of art and the ordinary object, but the difference between the artist and the ordinary factory worker as well. The second part of the answer sees Duchamp's stipulation unfounded that the ready mades can only be objects which are aesthetically indifferent, (but why do that unless someone has some animus against retinal art?) and closes the answer with the rhetorical

question: “Why live with dull anesthetic objects? Why not objects as beautiful as Brillo Boxes?” (Danto, 2009, 66).

It seems that in Andy Warhol’s paradigmatic case, which proves that the difference between ordinary objects and works of art is not perceptual, and “highlighting” the works of art among everyday objects is not based on aesthetic criteria, the aesthetic qualities still count, as much in Andy Warhol’s artistic experience, as in Danto’s art theoretical point of view. Is it possible to win back the aesthetic for art (philosophy)?

The recovery of the aesthetic is hard to achieve by returning to “significant form” as a principle. This requires the presence of the beautiful or some other positive aesthetic quality, which was problematic already in the case of Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, not to mention Duchamp’s *Fountain*. On the other hand it presupposes the identification of works of art by significant form, lacking any theoretical mediation. This is hard to achieve not only in the case of the *Brillo Box*, but also in the case of such concept works as Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs*, or Roman Ondák’s *The Loop*. Thus Lind’s attempt, who wants to put back the aesthetic object and the aesthetic experience in the centre of art philosophy, is not very convincing (Lind, 1992).

Danto’s argument that art theory is “so powerful a thing as to detach objects from the real world and make them part of a different world, an *art world*, a world of *interpreted things*” (Danto, 1981, 135) is completely acceptable. “Transfiguration” happens to a common object through the effect of art theory; it only becomes a work of art in the context of the art world. However, this does not mean that “aesthetics hardly touches the heart of art and certainly not of great art, which is certainly not the art that happens to be most beautiful” (Danto, 1981, 173). I would like to oppose a critical comment and a proposal to this conclusion.

The critical comment is about that in this passage Danto, who in other instances deals with the difference between the aesthetic and the beautiful so scrupulously, here confuses these terms. Indeed, great art is probably not the most beautiful art, but we cannot state that it could not hold aesthetic value (even such that Danto lists in connection with the *Fountain*: ugly, surprising, daring, outrageous, witty etc.)

And the proposal is to accept that aesthetics does belong to the essence of art, namely, the essence of art constituted by art theory. The aesthetic quality of works of art could generically be called “artistic”, and by this we mean the aesthetic mediated by art theory.

Conclusion

Arthur C. Danto convincingly argued that works of art are not differentiated from common objects by aesthetic properties. With this he broke down the system of aestheticism, which discussed art as a sub-category of the aesthetic experience, looked for the universal, historically and culturally unconditioned significant form in works of art. At the same time, Danto's theory can also be read as one considering the aesthetic point of view irrelevant for the essence of art. The paradigmatic starting point of Danto's theory is Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*.

In this text, it was the *Brillo Box* that created the opportunity for the questioning of this anti-aesthetic consequence: both Andy Warhol, when he created the *Brillo Box*, as well as Arthur C. Danto, when he chose it to be the starting point of his art philosophy, were driven by aesthetic motives.

This inconsistency can be resolved by accepting that common objects are "transfigured" in the framework of an art theory, while adding that from the moment they have transfigured into a work of art, their (new) aesthetic properties become substantial.

Above proposal keeps the independence and primacy of art philosophy over aesthetics, on the other hand it solves the paradox that art becomes its own philosophy without being identical with philosophy. Joseph Kosuth raises the philosophical question of the modes of existence in *One and Three Chairs*, similarly to Plato. Still, it is not philosophy, because it does not approach the question in a discursive manner, but makes it possible to be aesthetically experienced. Firstly, we need an art theoretical framework to decide that the chair in Kosuth's work belongs to a different rank of existence from the chair to be found next to it, on which the guard rests. But starting from this, such classical formal points of view become relevant as form, proportion, structure, colour, etc., which represent the traditional points of view of aesthetics.

The aesthetics mediated by art theory explains why the *Brillo Box* is chosen as a paradigmatic work of art.

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