

What Art Could Be: Tracing the Later Steps of Danto's Search for a Definition

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Introduction

For over two millennia, philosophers have been captivated by the question, "What *is* Art?" Attempts at defining art go back to Plato and have continued until the present day. In the last century, while doubts about the possibility and/or fruitfulness of such definitions have been raised, the enterprise continues to captivate philosophers, artists and even playwrights. In her entertaining exploration of the topic in the play *Art* (1994), Yasmina Reza dramatizes these concerns in regards to modern, abstract painting. Can a canvas painted entirely white be a work of art? How? Plato's classic definition that art is mimesis, an imitation of reality, seems obsolete in such a case. As Arthur Danto observes: "Plato had had an easy run, from the sixth century BC until AD 1905-7, with the so-called Fauves – Wild Beasts – and Cubism," after which his definition became increasingly questionable in the face of such painting.¹

As for Danto, once a painter himself, it was the modern art of Andy Warhol that in 1964 woke him from his 'dogmatic slumbers'. Strolling through the Stable Gallery in midtown New York, he happened upon Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, a pile of plywood boxes that looked uncannily similar to the containers of Brillo Pads, the commercial steel wool and soap scouring pads sold to clean blackened cookware.² It was this similarity that raised for him the question: What properties differentiate artworks from mundane objects (events, states of affairs)? His early, more analytic attempt at answering the question began with his article 'The Artworld' (1964) and

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¹ Arthur Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven, CA: Yale University Press, 2013), p. xi.

² See Sarah Boxer, 'Non-Art for Non-Art's Sake', *The New York Times*, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/06/books/non-art-for-non-art-s-sake.html>. Accessed 11/11/2016.

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culminated in his most influential book, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.³ However, almost two decades later, he revisited the question in his essay ‘Art and Meaning’, a definition he continued to develop until his last book, *What Art Is*.⁴ It is this later attempt at defining art that I want to consider here. While the issue of how the early and later definitions relate is certainly interesting, it will not be something I explore in this article.

I begin by considering the first two properties that Danto proposed in ‘Art and Meaning’: content and embodiment. That is to say, art is necessarily *about something* (unlike mundane objects) and it must be manifested physically (unlike Platonic forms or disembodied ideas). While this explanation is well motivated in some respects, I maintain that it is problematic. I next consider a third condition that Danto introduces in his last book, that artworks are “wakeful dreams”.⁵ Although underdeveloped, I offer a way of fleshing out the metaphor through what I dub ‘aesthetic force’. I conclude by explaining this notion and using it to address the problems that I raise for Danto’s account.

Danto’s First Two Conditions: Content and Embodiment

Among the cornerstones of Danto’s philosophy of art is his claim that artworks have intentional content. Unlike chairs, mountains or shooting stars, artworks are *about* things (objects, events, states of affairs, and so on). For example, Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* depicts a female prostitute reclining on a bed to whom a servant is bringing a bouquet of flowers. Of course, the painting is about more than just that: it is surely also about the hypocrisy of a nineteenth century art-going bourgeoisie, the role of spectatorship in art, and, by likening a Parisian prostitute to Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, the gradual empowerment of women.

It is noteworthy that, according Danto, non-representational as well as representational artworks have content. Despite the fact that the major works of Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg, among countless other abstract artists, do not *depict* material objects, this does not imply that they

³ Arthur Danto, ‘The Artworld’, *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61 (1964), pp. 571-584 and *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁴ Arthur Danto, ‘Art and Meaning’, in *The Madonna of the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), pp. xvii-xxx.

⁵ Danto, *What Art Is*, p. 48.

are not *about* anything. For example, Pollock's splash and drip canvases are about, among other things, movement and color and Rauschenberg's three-paneled *White Painting* (1951) is about shadows and the changes of light that register on its surface. In fact, even an artwork about nothing has content. As Danto is apt to observe, a distinction must be recognized between "not being about anything and being about nothing".⁶ A painting about nothing still has content. The type of intentional content Danto believes that all artworks have seems to be Fregean in character.⁷ This is suggested in several ways. First, artworks that lack reference (for example, those about nothing) have content.⁸ Second, an artwork's content is something that can (at least in part) be expressed descriptively. One of the central goals of art criticism, according to Danto, is to make explicit an artwork's content (meaning),⁹ and this, of course, is what the critic does through descriptions. In fact, the critic's role in expressing the artwork's content is especially required in the case of contemporary art, which is commonly not only non-representative but about the concept of art itself.¹⁰ A critic's knowledge of the various social, political, historical, etc., conditions of the artwork's creation, possession and consumption thereby helps her to express the work's content because, in general, a work does not wear its meaning (content) on its sleeve. In effect, this suggests Danto's utilization of a Fregean notion of content as well. Content, after all, is considered by him to be a non-perceptual (abstract) property: "what makes something art is not something that meets the eye".¹¹

It should be mentioned that while all artworks, according to Danto, have content, this does not imply that an artwork's content must remain invariable over time or that it must have one content (whatever that could mean). (This could be regarded as a departure from a strictly Fregean model of content [thought], one that identifies meanings with Platonic

⁶ Danto, 'Art and Meaning', p. xx.

⁷ Gottlob Frege, 'On Sinn und Bedeutung', in *The Frege Reader*, ed. M. Beaney (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), pp. 151-171.

⁸ I recognize that this is put rather quickly and requires a more substantial defence. But, it nevertheless strikes me, as I know it did Danto, that reference-less terms and concepts (or sentences and mental states) continue to be a basic problem for Referential Theories of Meaning and Content.

⁹ Danto, 'Art and Meaning', p. xxviii.

¹⁰ Danto, 'Art and Meaning', p. ix.

¹¹ Danto, 'Art and Meaning', pp. xxvii-xxviii.

entities.) While there are better and worse interpretations (art criticisms) of an artwork's content (dependent on such things as its coherence and how well it accounts for biographical details of the artist and the social, economic and political conditions of its creation, possession, and consumption, among other things), the postmodernist's claim that meaning (content) is highly sensitive to context and ever-changing is consistent with Danto's claim that all artworks have content. In short, by insisting that artworks have content one need not be insisting that they have the same or a single content in different contexts or at different times.

Danto's second condition for art is material embodiment, or just 'embodiment'. As he observes, this brings his notion of an artwork into conflict with Hegel's notion of symbolic art, the content of which is external to rather than embodied by the object.¹² Similarly, the embodiment condition also distinguishes Danto's notion of art from Benedetto Croce's.¹³ For Croce, art is ultimately a mental state or event (an 'intuition'), one that can be expressed or embodied materially but need not be. By contrast, for Danto embodiment is an essential condition of an artwork, something without which an object (event, state of affairs) could not be a work of art.

The embodiment condition serves to do several things. For example, in addition to distinguishing Danto's notion of art from both Hegel and Croce's, it enables one to distinguish different kinds of artworks with the same contents. For example, it is conceivable that a painting and a piece of music could have the same content, e.g. that both could be about nothing. Without the embodiment condition, there would be no way of distinguishing them as different artworks. For if contents are indeed non-perceptual (abstract) properties, then there would not be a way of distinguishing works based on their distinct material embodiment (in this case an object of canvas and paint vs. an event of tones and tempo), let alone based on their unique spatiotemporal presence (embodiment).

Moreover, the embodiment condition enables one to distinguish a piece of art criticism from the artwork it is a criticism of. If indeed the goal of an art critic is to make explicit the content of an artwork, a good piece of

¹² Danto, 'Art and Meaning', p. xx. See also G. W. F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. B. Bosanquet (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 82.

¹³ Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic: A Science of Expression and General Linguistic*, trans. D. Ainslie (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), pp. 13-14.

art criticism, one that succeeds in this task, might be taken to have the same content as the artwork it is a criticism of. Without the embodiment condition, there may not be a way of distinguishing the piece of art criticism from the artwork itself. Of course, this may already suggest a problem for Danto's characterization of art. If indeed a piece of art criticism and an artwork are embodied and have content, then is not a piece of art criticism also an artwork? I will return to this question momentarily.¹⁴

The two conditions certainly differentiate artworks from many non-artworks. Without the content condition, Danto would be unable to distinguish certain kinds of artworks from objects that closely resemble them, e.g. Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* from commercial Brillo boxes or John Cage's *4'33"* from the ordinary clattering and chattering of a group of human beings seated in a concert hall. He also would not be able to distinguish two artworks that closely resemble one another, such as Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* from the appropriationist artist Mike Bidlo's *Not Warhol*. On the other hand, without the embodiment condition, Danto would be unable to distinguish artworks from mental states and, for that matter, from one another. Any two objects, events or state of affairs with the same content (whether it is generally considered an artwork, non-artwork, or mental state) would effectively be the same without the appeal to embodiment.

The Inadequacy of the First Two Conditions

While these first two conditions are relatively well-motivated, they do not appear to be sufficient. The problem is that many things besides artworks meet these conditions, things we would not generally consider art. For example, a billboard, a street sign and a soup recipe each have content and are embodied. A billboard may be about the luxury and gas mileage of an automobile, a content (message) that it materially embodies on poster sheets glued to a large wooden or metal frame. A stop sign is about stopping and is materially embodied on an octagon shaped piece of

¹⁴ The embodiment condition, it should be noted, is or at least should be more flexible than Danto intimates. For example, works of film, music and photography (especially in digital formats) suggest that embodiment cannot require that a work be instantiated in a particular material substratum. This leads to the question, "How must it be instantiated?" It seems clear that in the case of film, music and photography that the identity of the work is not dependent on a token material embodiment, though perhaps it is dependent upon a type of material embodiment. But even this might be questioned. If Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* were never performed again, many would nevertheless admit that it still exists.

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aluminum painted red and white. And a recipe is about the ingredients and the making of a kind of soup, a content which is materially embodied on the pages of a cookbook or on a website.

Or consider a rather different example; human action. An action such as George's lifting his arm is distinct from mere bodily movement in that it involves (essentially) his wanting to lift his arm, an intentional state with content. (Note the parallel between an action and artwork on the one hand and a mere bodily movement and mundane object on the other). Moreover, without being embodied, without a body or at least an arm, George could not perform such an action. In this way, actions have both content and are embodied. However, while some actions may be parts of or may themselves be artworks, most are not.

The same might be said about a piece of art criticism. Like actions, art criticisms have content (they are, among other things, about artworks and presumably attempt to make explicit their meanings) and are embodied on the pages of a magazine like *The Nation*. But is it not far-fetched to presume that all pieces of art criticism are themselves artworks?! It is noteworthy that appealing to the possibility that, in this day and age, anything could be an artwork, that any billboard, street sign, soup recipe, human action or piece of art criticism could be a work of art, is beside the point. The fact is that most billboards, street signs, soup recipes, human actions and pieces of art criticism are not artworks despite the fact that they meet Danto's two conditions for art. This is the problem.

In 'Art and Meaning', Danto is not unaware of the problem, which he observes was raised to him as a friendly criticism by Noel Carroll.¹⁵ But his discussion of the matter seems beside the point. He recognizes that the original Brillo boxes, designed by the commercial artist James Harvey, have content and embodiment just as both Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and the appropriationist artist Mike Bidlo's *Not Warhol* do. However, he also recognizes that Harvey's Brillo boxes are artworks themselves – works of commercial art, to be sure, but artworks all the same! The problem he addresses in the latter half of 'Art and Meaning' is the problem of how to distinguish the contents of these three works, something he believes art criticism is well suited for. Despite being almost indistinguishable to the eye, the contents of the works of Harvey, Warhol and Bidlo are distinct,

¹⁵ Danto, 'Art and Meaning', p. xx.

which he illustrates characteristically with wonderful adeptness by showing that the art criticism appropriate to one is not appropriate to the other. While much of his discussion is convincing, it does not speak to the problem concerning the inadequacy of his two conditions of art. Short of accepting the rather implausible view that all billboards, street signs, recipes and so on, are (rather than simply could be) works of art, what appears to be needed is a third condition.

A Third Condition: Wakeful Dreams

In the opening chapter of *What Art Is*, Danto eventually proposes such a condition through a metaphor. He suggests that in addition to content and embodiment, artworks are wakeful dreams. While he admits that the metaphor is only one he has just begun thinking about, he offers a few clues as to what he has in mind.

First, like the content of dreams, the content of artworks are not necessarily true.¹⁶ I might dream that there is a snake before me or that I am flying a plane but there may be no snake and I might not be piloting a plane. Now, it is not just that dreams can be false, the way assertions and beliefs can. It seems plausible that Danto was looking for a more fundamental distinction, viz. that artworks do not have truth conditions intrinsically as assertions and beliefs do. When I assert that it is raining, I am making a claim about what the weather is like. As such, my assertion is either true or false. To suggest the artworks do not have truth conditions is to maintain that they cannot be evaluated as assertions can, viz. as true or false.

Second, by comparing artwork to dreams, Danto attempts to emphasize what he calls the “universality of art”¹⁷ – after all, everyone dreams! Here again it is not entirely obvious what he means by the “universality of art”. Is art universal in that anyone, anywhere can experience something as art? This seems plausible. Or is it universal because anyone, anywhere can produce art? This might also be the case. These questions naturally arise given that we, as dreamers, both produce and experience our dreams. In fact, it could be argued that we *simultaneously* produce and experience our dreams, we are both artist and audience at once! This might be stretching Danto’s analogy too far

¹⁶ Danto, *What Art Is*, p. 48.

¹⁷ Danto, *What Art Is*, pp. 48-49.

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however, given that the artist's production process and the audience's experiences of the artwork are generally not only distinguished but not simultaneous.

Third, while dreams *per se* are private experiential events, artworks are shared.¹⁸ Both dreams and artworks are "made up of appearances", as Danto puts it, the appearances of the former can be experienced only while asleep, while the appearances of the latter require that we are awake. This, of course, helps to explain why audiences of, say, plays, movies and works of dance and music can laugh, scream or cry together. It is unclear to me, however, whether the metaphor of a "wakeful dream" in this sense is doing anything more than restating the embodiment condition. For by insisting that artworks must be embodied, does not this already ensure that artworks are public and thus shareable?

But, there may be something else Danto has in mind. The appearances that we have in dreams while sleeping can often be mistaken for real things. I might dream that I see a snake or that I am flying a plane and actually believe that there is a snake before me or that I am piloting a plane. This does not seem to be the case when experiencing artworks. While they can closely resemble real things, "Art always stands at a distance from reality".¹⁹ For example, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* are very similar to Brillo boxes; John Cage's *4'33"* can be indistinguishable from the ordinary clattering and chattering of a group of human beings in a concert hall; or a modern dancer might be mimicking someone ironing a skirt or playing football. But, as wakeful dreams, experiencing art requires not only that an audience recognize the similarity that these works have to the mundane aspects of reality they are about (e.g. that Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* are in some sense about commercially sold Brillo boxes) but that we distinguish the artwork from the non-artwork.

At first glance, this might appear to be question-begging. After all, in assuming that an audience is able to distinguish cognitively an artwork from what it is about – particularly in cases where the visual or sonic appearances closely resemble one another or are altogether perceptually indistinguishable – would not Danto be assuming the very distinction he sets out to explain? This need not be the case. It may be that this part of his definition of art is relying on a response-dependent framework. So, just as

¹⁸ Danto, *What Art Is*, p. 49.

¹⁹ Danto, *What Art Is*, p. 49.

one might characterize secondary qualities response-dependently (e.g. x is red if and only if x looks red to a standard observer in standard conditions, where ‘looks red’ denotes a subjective response rather than the property of redness), perhaps one could state this aspect of Danto’s wakeful dream metaphor along similar lines: if x is an artwork, then x is *recognized as an artwork* by a standard observer in standard conditions.²⁰

As I mentioned above, this is largely speculative on my part given how little he says about wakeful dreams. Nevertheless, it may be enough to start fleshing out these observations through a notion I dub ‘aesthetic force’.

Aesthetic Force

Where there is content, there is force. In fact, the three properties – content, embodiment and force – are recognized and distinguished by linguists as well as philosophers, especially of language and mind.²¹ For example, consider an utterance such as ‘John is at home.’ The utterance’s meaning or content (its semantics) concerns its aboutness, the fact that it is about John being at home. The way this meaning is embodied in the utterance is unique, given the distinctive syntax (lexicon and grammar) of English. But semantics (content) and syntax (linguistic embodiment) are not the only properties that the utterance possesses. It also has illocutionary force or use (pragmatics). (In the case of sentences, we might instead speak of mood, e.g. indicative, interrogative and optative.) For example, the utterance ‘John is at home’ can be used as an assertion, a question or even a wish. In other words, while its content and linguistic embodiment remain the same, it can have different uses (forces).²²

²⁰ For a discussion of response-dependence, see Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 108-139.

²¹ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) and John Searle, *Expression and Meaning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

²² Obviously, more can be said about the relation between these three properties. For example, an utterance’s translation from one language to another illustrates a change of linguistic embodiment but a preservation of content and force. An ambiguous utterance illustrates a possible change of content and perhaps even of force but a preservation of linguistic embodiment. A conversation in which one interlocutor remarks, “John is going to the store.” and another responds with “John is going to the store?!” reflects a change of force but a preservation of content and linguistic embodiment.

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What is true of utterances and sentences, I suggest, is likewise true of works of art. In much the way that contents can be linguistically embodied in different languages, they can be artistically embodied in different media, for example, film, painting, music, and sculpture. But if artworks have both content and embodiment, then surely they also have force: aesthetic force. Elsewhere I argue that aesthetic force is not the same as linguistic force, as the force of mundane utterances and sentences.²³ Where an assertion commits the speaker to the truth of a content and a question requires that the speaker intends for the hearer to answer, artworks have a function without a function. In some respects, this idea is related to Kant's claim that an artwork "is a way of presenting that is purposive on its own and that furthers, even though without a purpose".²⁴ My suggestion, however, is fundamentally semantic-pragmatic rather than practical in spirit. In claiming this, I am not suggesting that artworks lack a function – this would be equivalent to saying that they lack force. Rather, my suggestion is that there is a distinctive way in which the contents of artworks are presented, that is, functionlessly.

To clarify this, it is instructive to consider contemporary discussions of imagination, as varied and complex as they can be.²⁵ Imagination is commonly distinguished from belief in that the latter is governed by the norm of truth while the former is not. In believing that *p*, an individual commits herself to the truth of *p*, which is not the case when she imagines that *p*. While my belief that John is home requires a commitment to John's being at home, my imagination that John is at home does not. Furthermore, the content of my imagination, unlike my belief, seems to have a phenomenological or 'quasi-sensory' component to it. My imagination that John is at home, for example, might involve images of John sitting in a chair reading or the sound of his voice in the shower singing, which is not something required in the case of a belief. In this way, imagination is informed or even constrained by what Danto would call 'appearances'.

I suggest that the same is true of aesthetic force. The contents an artwork bears are not presented as true to an audience – we might say that

²³ York Gunther, 'The Ineffable in Art' (currently under review).

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. Phuhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1987), p. 173.

²⁵ See Tamar Gendler, 'Imagination', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/imagination>. Accessed 11/11/2016.

an artwork's content lacks such normative conditions. And like imagination, the artwork must present its content through some kind of sensory medium. However, unlike imagination and for that matter the dreams we have while asleep, aesthetic force is borne by objects, events and states of affairs that are public rather than private.²⁶ Or to put it differently, aesthetic force only presents embodied contents.

This is not to say that an artwork's force is transparent. One might not recognize the fact that the object before one has a function without function. But this just illustrates that aesthetic force is not a perceptual property – an artwork does not wear its force on its sleeve either. This, of course, is true of utterances as well, e.g. to recognize that “Do you have a dollar?” is a request (and not just a question), we need to appeal to something external to it, viz. a speaker's intention. Of course, the difference in the case of an artwork is that this non-perceptual, external component need not be fixed by the artist or performer's (conscious) intentions or mental states. Just what, then, might fix an object's aesthetic force? This all depends on the theory of art one endorses. For example, aesthetic force might be fixed external to the artwork by appealing to the artist's unconscious mental states, the social conditions of the work's origin, the audience's acceptance and/or experience of the work, the art community's reception of it, and so on. (We might regard these as varieties of ‘aesthetic pragmatics’). For my purposes here, it is not necessary to decide between these theoretical options. But, what is necessary is that there is someone able to *recognize* that an object has aesthetic force if that object is to be considered a work of art. In other words, there must be a response-dependent aspect to aesthetic force.

In this way, aesthetic force is an essential property of all artworks, whether verbal or nonverbal. Their function without function helps to distinguish them from other content-bearing media such as billboards, street signs and soup recipes. A billboard serves to solicit or entreat, a street sign functions as an order or command, and a soup recipe presents its content as a directive or suggestion. And a piece of art criticism has the role of

²⁶ Kendall Walton actually defines dreams as “spontaneous, undeliberate imaginings which the imaginer not only does not but cannot direct (consciously).” See *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 16. He also suggests that imaginings can be social (pp. 18-19), which may begin to approximate what I mean by aesthetic force, although I will not attempt to investigate this here.

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describing, questioning and/or criticizing an artwork. Thus, each has a set of normative conditions, which artworks do not intrinsically have. Of course, this is not to say that artworks themselves cannot entreat, command, suggest, request and criticize. We see, for example, paintings, films and sculptures used for the sake of propaganda, works meant to *persuade* audiences of something. But, this is not their primary function – this is not what makes them works of art. Once an object, event or state of affairs becomes an artwork, its previous linguistic and non-linguistic functions are superseded (though not necessarily abandoned) by their aesthetic force. In other words, like Duchamp's *Fountain* which, as an artwork, no longer functions (primarily, at least) as a receptacle for urine, any linguistic or non-linguistic function an object once had is superseded by its role as an artwork, as an embodied content with aesthetic force.

Conclusion

Obviously, much more needs to be said. An argument is required for why non-artworks that have content and are embodied never have it. A more careful explanation of what determines aesthetic force is also needed. And an account of the relation between aesthetic force as a primary force type and secondary, linguistic force types (for example, assertions, questions, commands) must also be given. For now, however, I hope to have suggested how it, as a condition for art, can serve not only to flesh out Danto's own later attempts at defining art but to enrich our understanding of what art could be.