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Danto's Embodied Meanings: Artworks as Morphemes

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May 2007

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Prior to the self-consciously "difficult" artworks of the 20th century, common sense more or less held that the job of artists was to create beautiful things, and the job of art was simply to be beautiful. The inadequacies of this conception were thrown into sharp relief by a number of subversive figures, Marcel Duchamp foremost among them, at the century's outset; in the wake of such wildly unusual sorts of artworks such as Duchamp's readymades, it became obvious that the standing definition of art was hardly applicable to a great many artworks being created. Of the many philosophers who attempted to reconstruct a philosophical definition of art, Arthur Danto perhaps accomplished the most. Danto recognized that artworks, far from serving merely as vessels for beauty, are the sorts of things which inevitably possess meaning; his definition, which I have dubbed "the embodied meanings" definition, states simply that works of art (1) inevitably possess meanings and (2) embody those meanings. Over the course of this paper, I have attempted to sketch the roots of this definition, to provide an account of its development, and to illustrate its shortcomings. Additionally, I have addressed Danto's enormously uneven stance concerning the proper place of aesthetics in a philosophical definition of art; Danto's ultimate conclusion is that aesthetics should be excluded from the concept of art, but I have argued both that incorporating aesthetics into the definition of art is necessary to save the embodied meanings view from a number of crippling difficulties and that incorporating aesthetics into the concept of art is necessitated by the embodied meanings definition.

-Alexander Douglas Coon

Danto's Embodied Meanings: Artworks as Morphemes

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I. Introduction

The task of giving a satisfactory definition to the concept of art, much like performing a similar task with the concept of knowledge, has historically proven to be a rather slippery endeavor. Of the many philosophers who have attempted such a laborious chore, however, I believe Arthur Danto has charted the most progress; although his definition as it stands is relatively problematic, it provides successors with a unique philosophical foundation on which to build. Beginning his tenure as a philosopher of art in the 1960s, as artworks were beginning to exhibit a sort of self-consciousness theretofore unseen, Danto was in a uniquely privileged historical position insofar as thinking critically about art is concerned; a great deal of the art being made in Danto's early years as a philosopher aimed to rattle the cage of traditional philosophies of art, and cried out for a radical rethinking of the concept of art itself. Danto's reconstruction of the definition of art, beginning in 1964 with his article "The Artworld," spans over four decades across a series of essays, articles, and critical pieces. However, his definition remains – by his own admission – sadly unfinished. Boiled down to its essence, Danto's definition of art, to which he refers as the embodied meanings view, can be stated as such: (1) artworks indelibly possess meanings, and (2) artworks embody these meanings. Unfortunately, such a definition is rather open-ended, owing in no small part to the imprecision of the verb "embody." Danto perhaps recognizes this vagueness to the extent that he remains curiously silent throughout his

work on *how* exactly works of art embody their meanings, instead opting to delegate this task to the respective intuitions of his readers.

Both this ambiguity of the embodied meanings view and Danto's continued professions that the embodied meanings view remains incomplete comprise the bulk of my impetus for writing this paper, one of whose aims is to make plain the evolution of Danto's definition of art over the course of its nascent stages in 1964's "The Artworld" to its most recent exposition in his 2003 *The Abuse of Beauty*.[1] I also intend to pay special attention to the distance Danto manages to place between his own embodied meanings view of art and the Institutional Theory of Art, a problem-laden view advanced by George Dickie as a logical successor to Danto's. Ultimately, it seems that Danto's embodied meanings definition, left as it stands, is susceptible to the same sorts of worries as the Institutional Theory of Art, although the embodied meanings definition is far more easily reparable than Dickie's view. I argue that the embodied meanings view places works of art in a similar position to the utterances of a spoken language, specifically, that both are the means through which a meaning is communicated. I also claim that this analogy helps in giving some clarity as to how artworks embody their meanings; insofar as we understand the meaning of morphemes – the basic units of meaning, or words – to be dependent upon their constitutive phonemes – the basic units of morpheme construction, or letters – we must

[1] Furnishing a new definition of art is only one of Danto's major philosophical projects within the field of the philosophy of art; he also has developed a view concerning the historical hostility of philosophy towards art (advanced primarily in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*) which, although interesting in its own right, is separate from the concerns of this paper.

also understand works of art – which function as morphemes – to have their own phonemes – formal elements – which play no small role in determining their meaning. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, I argue that just as we understand properties of utterances such as intonation to play a significant role in determining their meaning, we must account for a similar element which plays such a role in works of art. I contend that this burden falls upon the shoulders of aesthetic properties. Danto, however, ultimately wishes to distance the embodied meanings view from aesthetics, although I believe that the incorporation of aesthetics into his definition is both mandated by its beginning premises as well as the only method by which the definition's slide into the same worrisome pit as Dickie's Institutional Theory of Art might be halted. Ultimately, I believe that insofar as we accept the first two conjuncts of the embodied meanings definition, we must necessarily incorporate aesthetic considerations as its third.

II. Danto and the Artworld

Danto's first foray into the realm of the philosophy of art is his hugely influential 1964 article "The Artworld,"[2] whose central concern is one which would continue to fascinate Danto throughout his philosophical career. Specifically, "The Artworld" is Danto's initial attempt to answer the following question: how is it that one object could be classed as a work of art when an object perceptually identical to and indistinguishable from that art object is classed merely as a real thing. That Danto began posing this question precisely in 1964 is no historical accident. He was prompted both by the appearance of Roy Lichtenstein's *The Kiss*, a replication of a pulp comic strip panel, and by Andy Warhol's exhibition at New York's Stable Gallery earlier that year wherein Warhol exhibited exact facsimiles of numerous consumer products, the most famous among these being his painted plywood sculptures of Brillo boxes.[3] Although it may initially seem that Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* were nothing new – Zeuxis' grapes were plucked at by Grecian birds two-odd millennia prior – these sculptures were the first artworks that possessed no clear perceptual distinction from commonplace objects. Even the master Michelangelo at the height of his powers was unable to fool onlookers so completely; for all of *David*'s grandeur, it remains obviously a piece of sculpture to all those who behold it. Danto, then, is quite naturally curious as to what exactly keeps *Brillo Boxes* from falling through the

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[2] Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61.19 (November 15th, 1964), pg. 571-584.
[3] Arthur Danto, "Contested Territories." Speech presented at the Tate Britain, London, United Kingdom, February 2nd, 2006, http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/arthur_danto (accessed February 10th, 2007).

ontological category of artwork into the class of real things, for the two objects are utterly identical insofar as perceptual characteristics are concerned. If, we see that a Brillo box, not a work of art, is indiscernible from *Brillo Box*, which is a work of art, then we must also see that perceptual qualities alone are insufficient to make a work of art; were this not the case, both a Brillo box and *Brillo Box* would be of the same ontological category.

This observation is Danto's earliest major contribution to the philosophy of art, and one whose importance to his developing philosophy is impossible to overstate. What Danto aims to accomplish in "The Artworld" is the tearing down of conservative philosophies of art which began and ended with the works themselves. If perceptually indistinguishable objects can be ontologically distinct in the sense that one is an art work while the other is not, then it becomes readily apparent that we must look outside the boundaries of an artwork if we are to formulate successfully a definition of art. "The Artworld" really offers very little in the way of constructive theory; rather, its reputation stands upon its efficacy as a sort of slate-cleaner, although Danto does offer a few tentative suggestions as to where exactly a definition of art might be found.

Foremost among these is his assertion that artworks are only possible in light of a so-called artworld, a term which Danto never defines explicitly but which certainly minimally includes artists and philosophers of art, for Danto sees the very creation of art as an impossible endeavor if no

philosophical framework exists to classify it as such.[4] Works of art, Danto claims, are capable of ascending to that category only insofar as certain theories of art exist; without philosophies of art, he contends, art itself ceases to exist. Thus, we have discovered another necessary condition for an object to be considered a work of art: it must stand in the correct relation to a proper theoretical backdrop, or, in other words, must be enfranchised by the so-called artworld, the members of which are uniquely privileged with regard to their ability to use what Danto refers to as "the *is* of artistic identification." The *is* of artistic identification is unique insofar as it elevates its subject into the ontological category of art; that is to say, a Brillo box may be granted the status of artwork through an artworld member's declaration of "this Brillo box *is* a work of art," but not through the identical declaration of a non-member. This owes to the fact that artworld members stand in the proper way to a body of artistic theory which endows them with the ability to grant objects the status of art as they see fit. The idea that art is inextricably bound up with the philosophy of art is Danto's second observation of note in "The Artworld," although it recurs far less frequently in his following work than the aforementioned question of indiscernibles.

The notion of the artworld, however, attracted a few notable supporters whose expansion on Danto's philosophical foundations caused the philosopher to sharpen drastically his philosophy of art; perhaps the most

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[4] Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61.19 (November 15th, 1964) The relevant passage reads: "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." Pg. 581.

zealous of these supporters, and certainly the most fervently repudiated by Danto, is George Dickie, whose self-christened Institutional Theory of Art uses the theory of "The Artworld" as groundwork and extends its theories to their logical extreme. Danto's response to the institutional theory is less than favorable, so let us cast an eye upon this framework in hopes of bringing into sharper focus Danto's desires for his own philosophical project.

III. Dickie's Institutional Theory of Art

Dickie was clearly quite optimistic about the capability of Danto's artworld theory to accommodate successfully the avant-garde at the time, as his institutional theory of art, whose exposition occurs within his *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*[5] represents a furtherance of Danto's idea of the artworld to absurd extremes. An examination of the institutional theory, problem-laden though it is, however, will prove to be most useful in highlighting the difficulties inherent to Danto's nascent philosophy of art. Dickie, obviously influenced by Danto's notion of the *is* of artistic identification, splits into three categories the *is* of the sentence "this *x* is a work of art": classificatory, derivative, and evaluative. The most pertinent of these categories is the classificatory *is*, for it is this *is* which creates the ontological barrier between artworks and mere real things; for the classificatory *is* to be used, Dickie holds that two necessary and jointly sufficient conditions must be met.

The first of these is that the object in question exhibits artifactuality, which is simply to say that it evidences the expenditure of human effort. A plain comb, then, can be said to possess artifactuality while a beautiful sunset does not. Although we might be tempted to remark "that is a work of art!" when beholding the sunset, Dickie holds the *is* in the preceding utterance is the derivative *is*, which we might think of as a sort of placeholder for "reminds me of" or "is like," so that we are *really* saying of the sunset "that

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[5] George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).

reminds me of a work of art" rather than positing an ontological barrier between the sunset and real things. Dickie's second condition for an object to become a work of art is somewhat more vague; specifically, Dickie claims that a work of art – in the classificatory sense – must have conferred upon it the status of being a candidate for appreciation by an agent acting on behalf of the artworld. This distinction serves to distinguish the classificatory and evaluative senses of *is*, as the latter is used when an object displays artifactuality but has not been conferred the relevant status by an agent of the artworld. An example of an artwork in the evaluative sense would be a beautifully wrought iron gate; though this object exhibits artifactuality, it fails to meet Dickie's second condition and is hence inadmissible to the category of art.

Although Dickie's theory is heavily reliant upon the notion of an artworld, he is fortunately far more explicit than his forbearer in explaining exactly of what such an entity is comprised. For Dickie, the artworld exists only insofar as a minimum core personnel requirement is satisfied; this core consists of artists, exhibitors, and audiences, although he is initially conservative regarding exactly which members of the audience qualify as members of the artworld. Simply attending an event, Dickie claims, does not automatically grant one an artworld membership; rather, an audience member must exhibit familiarity with art history and criticism in order to be considered as a member of the artworld.[6] Of similar importance to Dickie's institutional theory is his notion of conferral. The conferring the status of candidacy for

[6] Ibid., pg. 36.

appreciation on an object, he claims, works much like the conferring of the status of legally married couple onto two individuals during a wedding ceremony; the two newlyweds are perceptually identical before and after their legal marriage – rings notwithstanding – but are related in a radically different way. So the story goes with the art object; it is identical before and after the status of candidate for appreciation has been conferred upon it, but becomes ontologically distinct from its former self. Works of art, then, are so only in virtue of their status as artifacts and their conferred status of candidates for appreciation.

Although Dickie's theory is fairly problematic as it stands, his continuing explanations render the institutional theory profoundly implausible. Perhaps attempting to compensate for the vagueness with which he explains the criteria for entry into the artworld – what exactly constitutes displaying the right sort of knowledge of art history and theory? – Dickie continues his discussion of the artworld with the unfortunate declaration that individuals become agents of the artworld simply through seeing themselves as such. In other words, one is a bona fide, card-carrying representative of the artworld simply through a personal declaration, thereby making the artworld an entirely non-exclusive entity with no relevant distinctions between members and nonmembers. If, after all, a simple shift of self-appraisal is all that is needed to become a member of the artworld, the artworld becomes a necessarily open body, thereby allowing anybody who so wishes to confer the status of candidate for appreciation upon any artifact an individual might

choose. This is certainly troublesome enough; for surely we would like to limit the set of artworks in such a way that it cannot be potentially identical with the entire set of artifacts.

Any worries raised by Dickie's overly liberal criteria for entry into the artworld, however, appear as anthills next to the mountainous difficulties brought about by his next assertion. Although Dickie earlier opened the gates of the artworld far too widely, he at least had in place a limit as to what could be counted as artworks by members of the artworld; specifically, only artifact objects were potentially admissible to the category of art. Dickie, having defined artifacts as objects resulting from human labor, then, at least had a limited, albeit intuitively too large, set of objects – the set of all artifacts – which could potentially be counted as artworks. This already too-slight barrier, however, is completely eradicated with Dickie's assertion that the status of artifactuality itself is conferrable upon objects. That is to say that any object, regardless of whether or not it has been labored upon by human hands, is able to be declared an artifact by an agent of the artworld. Coupling this admission with Dickie's claim that the artworld is open to any individual who sees themselves as a member, we quickly arrive at the conclusion that the set of artworks is potentially limitless. Any individual, at any time, and for no reason other than personal whim, can declare himself to be an agent of the artworld; this individual then might claim – again without needing to furnish a reason – that any object whatsoever is an artifact, and thereby confer the status of candidacy for appreciation upon it. In other words, any object that one

might think of is potentially an artwork for the simple reason that anybody might say so. Such an unnecessarily liberal definition of art, although it certainly succeeds in accommodating for the avant-garde, essentially demolishes the concept of art by making it entirely unrestricted.[7]

Having seen that the institutional stance adopted by Dickie is far from unproblematic, we must now ask ourselves whether or not Dickie's theory is consistent with Danto's as espoused in "The Artworld," whose primary assertions were as follows: firstly, artworks cannot be artworks solely on the merits of their exhibited properties, and secondly, objects must stand in relation to a body of art theory, history, criticism, etc. in order to assume the status of artworks. Dickie's institutional theory certainly meets both of these conditions, as Dickie claims the essence of art to be distillable to the jointly sufficient conjunction of artifactuality as well as conferral of status. Danto contends simply that the properties which elevate mere real things to the status of art cannot lie in perceptual traits; rather, art-making qualities are optically indiscernible and result from an object's standing in the proper relation to an artworld. The institutional theory is hardly inconsistent with the criteria laid out by Danto, for Dickie claims that real things become art in virtue of status

[7] Ibid., 42.
Also of some interest is the apparent incapacity of Dickie's theory to account for art criticism of any sort; once an object is admitted into the category of artworks, it seems, it is potentially just as aesthetically valuable as any other member. Condensed, the relevant passage reads: "it seems unlikely…that some object would not have qualities which are appreciable."
Also, one might – I believe justifiably – criticize Dickie's view here as being myopically slavish to aesthetics in the same vein as traditional theories of art: he essentially claims that the point of artworks is to instantiate some "appreciable" aesthetic property or another, a claim strikingly similar to the traditionalist claim that the point of art is simply to be beautiful. So for all of its talk about breaking new ground, it seems, the Institutional Theory of art is simply a thinly disguised – and unduly permissive – reformulation of conservative definitions of art.

conferral, a property which he is adamant about being imperceptible. It would seem, then, that Dickie has constructed a view consistent with Danto's emerging philosophy of art, albeit one laden with numerous and profoundly undesirable pitfalls. The remainder of Danto's project, then, must be judged in light of Dickie's failures, for if Danto is unsuccessful in placing substantial philosophical distance between his theory of art and the institutional theory of art, both will fall together.

IV. Danto's Transfigurations

Fortunately, Danto recognizes that the ideas espoused in "The Artworld" hardly constitute a comprehensive philosophy of art, but rather a valuable and hitherto unthought-of foundation for the construction of one. After breaking ground with "The Artworld," however, Danto appeared to let this project lay dormant for nearly a decade before publishing "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace," his next major addition to his philosophy of art, in 1974.[8] Given both the article's agenda as well as the fact that its publication follows Dickie's *Art and the Aesthetic* by mere months, it is difficult to read as anything but a cursory attempt by Danto to shake off the problems of Dickie's institutional theory from his own project, although the problems with Dickie's account are not explicitly addressed until Danto's 1981 work which grew out of his 1974 article, the unsurprisingly titled *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. In this work, Danto consciously places distance between his ideas and Dickie's, voicing many complaints echoed above. Primarily, Danto is dissatisfied with the institutional theory's inability to erect a barrier between the ontological categories of artworks and real things.[9] His designs to liberate his theory from a doomed association with the institutional theory first manifest themselves in the initial "Transfiguration," so let us examine the ideas contained therein.

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[8] Arthur Danto, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33.2 (Winter, 1974), pg. 139-148.
[9] Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pg. 95-99.

Much as in Danto's "Artworld" article, "Transfiguration" reveals Danto's deep fascination with indiscernibles. However, instead of asking us to consider the problem of *Brillo Box* versus a stack of Brillo boxes, Danto instead asks us to entertain the possibility of three square canvases, all of identical size, primed in an identical color, and perceptually identical in every conceivable way. As it happens, only two of these canvasses happen to be artworks, the latter of the three being simply a primed canvas. The difference between the two artworks, although indistinguishable to the eye, is actually quite considerable; namely, one of the works is said to be about nothingness, while the other work is said not to be about anything at all. The third canvas, it seems, cannot help but be neither about nothing nor not about anything; insofar as this canvas is not an art object, its capacity for having aboutness of any sort is effectively eviscerated. The fact that the second artwork, which is not about anything, absolutely does not entail that it is categorically identical to the mere, non-art primed canvas. The not-about-anything artwork, being an artwork, is entitled to possess a sort of aboutness in a way that non-art objects are not. The primed canvas is not *not* about anything not due to any of its perceptual qualities; rather, it lacks meaning vis-à-vis its not standing in a relevant relation to "certain art-historical presuppositions."[10] Danto's assertion here is twofold: firstly, two perceptually identical artworks might possibly possess two radically different meanings; secondly, an object might

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[10] Arthur Danto, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33.2 (Winter, 1974), pg. 140.

be perceptually identical to an artwork yet not be endowed with any meaning whatsoever.

Initially, these might strike one as being rather strange contentions, for they aim somewhat to divorce meaning from content. Let us, then, examine Danto's point here a bit more closely through analogy. Insofar as artworks can be said to possess meanings and aboutness, we might rightly expect them to have certain parallels to language, so let us begin there. Taking the first portion of Danto's claim, that two identical artworks might have vastly discrepant meanings, there seems to exist a clear parallel between this case and the case of humor. Oftentimes, two identical statements can be seen to have quite different uptakes – one humorous, the other simply descriptive – depending entirely upon the context in which they are uttered. For example, were one to walk into a gathering of friends during the harsher bit of a Syracuse winter, half-covered in snow with my cheeks scarlet from gale-force winds, and utter "what lovely weather we're having," this utterance would be seen as having an intended bit of humor, however slight. Contrast this with an identical utterance made to an identical group of friends during a pleasant stretch of spring, during which the sun is shining and a light breeze moderates the temperature to an optimum 70 degrees. Were one to make the exact same utterance of "what lovely weather we're having" at this juncture, it would be taken as a purely descriptive meaning with no humor whatsoever. Regardless of how funny joking about the weather may or may not be, however, is entirely beside the point; rather, the mere fact that the utterance would be

taken as a joke, however unfunny, bears significance. We can see clearly, then, that Danto's point concerning the possibility of different meanings across seemingly identical artworks is not quite as odd as one may initially think.

We must also, however, discuss Danto's second, perhaps slightly more controversial, conjunct, which claims that a mere real thing might be indiscernible from a work of art and yet not be a work of art at all. Again, let us consider the utterance of "what lovely weather we're having" as spoken by an individual walking in from extraordinarily inhospitable climatic conditions. Let us further imagine that, in the company of this individual's friends, a young child, who has not yet evidenced the capacity to use language, is sitting, and, upon overhearing this utterance, spits out his own inchoate mimic. Upon hearing this, it is possible that we might laugh at how charmingly the child has imitated what it overhears, but any laughter which might occur would not be for the same reasons as any laughter at the original utterance; as spoken by an individual coming in from the cold, "what lovely weather we're having" functions as a potentially humorous quip, although spoken by a young child, "what lovely weather we're having" is simply a bit of pre-verbal sounds which happens to resemble exactly an utterance with meaning. It seems entirely implausible to think that the child either intended to make a joke or attempt to describe his environs, for his utterance is not of the right sort to have a literal or ironical meaning. With this example, we see that two otherwise indiscernible objects might belong to two entirely different

ontological categories – in this case, meaningful sentences versus mere utterances.

At this point, we would do well to bear in mind that Danto does not conceive of his project in the *Transfigurations* to replace the assertions made in "The Artworld," rather, they are intended to add on to that article's foundation. For if we took the claim that the ontological barrier between artworks and non-artworks is that the former possesses the quality of aboutness lacked by the latter as a sufficient condition, we would end forced to admit all sorts of intuitively non-art objects into the sphere of art. The most immediate example which I can conjure up would be that of a traffic signal; certainly, traffic signals possess meanings insofar as they command us to stop at, slow down at, or drive through, an intersection; but the proposition that traffic signals count as art objects vis-à-vis that fact undoubtedly strikes us as being patently absurd. Rather, the claim that art objects are separated from mere real things through possessing aboutness is to be joined with Danto's earlier assertion that artworks are so in virtue of their relationship to the artworld.

We would also do well to examine Danto's success in emancipating himself from the difficulties inherent to Dickie's institutional theory. As noted above, Dickie claims that any object might be considered an art object – for any reason – by any individual as long as the individual claims to be acting on behalf of the artworld – an act with no real prerequisites whatsoever. It would seem as though Danto has succeeded in placing a fair deal of ground

between his own theory and Dickie's, although this may not be the case upon further reflection. For if, as Danto claims, an object might be both a work of art and be not about anything in particular,[11] one might simply declare any object to be a work of art upon a whim, and, if pressed to reveal the work's meaning, dismissively claim that the work is really not about anything. Although Danto has been successful in discovering an additional barrier between artworks and mere real things, his theory as it stands is still not free from the devastating problems of the institutional theory of art.

[11] Danto explicitly allows for this possibility in the opening pages of the "Transfiguration."

V. The "End of Art"

Aware of the potentially pyrrhic ramifications of admitting into the ontological class of art objects whose perceptual characteristics were identical with mere real things, Danto began, perhaps somewhat cheekily, to refer to the 1960s as "the end of art," owing primarily to the fact that this decade saw the artistic enfranchisement of indiscernibles such as Warhol's *Brillo Box*. Although one might read this moniker as a conjecture that new art will no longer be produced, or as accepting the erasure of the boundary between artworks and real things, Danto's own view of the end of art is actually markedly different, and far less pessimistic, than one might initially guess. A close examination of Danto's concept of the end of art proves to be rather helpful in assembling his philosophy of art, for in asserting that art has come to an end, Danto also provides a positive definition of what exactly he takes art to be.

Danto's first invocation of the end of art emerges in *After the End of Art*, wherein Danto contends not that art as a concept has ceased, or will cease, to exist, but that art has cast off its former myopic, beauty-centered chauvinism, and in so doing has radically expanded its conceptual boundaries. Crucially, though, Danto does *not* claim that the end of art entails the destruction of a conceptual boundary between art and reality; rather, the end of art is simply art's coming into self-consciousness and the broadening of its stylistic boundaries, being pushed into expansion from within by such philosophically-motivated artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol,

whose respective ready-mades and indiscernibles explicitly raised the question of what entitled them to the status of artwork.[12] The contribution of these and similar artists was to redefine the concept of art in such a way that our intuitive grasp on the concept of art was substantially loosened. Prior to the artistic enfranchisement of works perceptually identical to mere real things, a philosophical definition of art was thought by many – notably William Kennick[13] – to be a superfluous theoretical entity, for we can, or so the story went, immediately and intuitively apprehend whether or not an object in front of us was an artwork. However, when artworks began to become identical with real things, these intuitions became obsolete, owing to the fact that, as mentioned above, for any artwork or non artwork, we could imagine a perceptually identical counterpart belonging to the opposite ontological category. To Danto's credit, he recognized that the problem of indiscernibles effectively obliterated the defensibility of holding this conception of art, and instead opted to begin sketching a conceptual definition of art rather than throwing his hands up in frustrated resignation.

The end of art on Danto's view, then, does not mean that art's ascent to self-consciousness has rendered the production of art impossible; rather, he claims that the end of art is in effect a liberation of sorts, "an enfranchisement of what had lain beyond the pale."[14] Prior to the so-called end of art – an

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[12] Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).
[13] William Kennick, "Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?," *Mind*, New Series, 67.267, (Jul., 1958), pg. 317-334.
[14] Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) pg. 9.

event which, as Danto recognizes it, preceded him by a great many years – the concept of art was considered to be coterminous with that of beauty and then aesthetics; a work of art was previously confined to striving towards beauty, or at least being aesthetically interesting, insofar as it was blatantly distinguishable from a mere real thing. After such works as *In Advance of a Broken Arm* and *Brillo Box*, however, the option of a sort of aesthetic mundanity became viable for artworks to possess insofar as they could visually parallel mere real things. When Danto speaks of the end of art, then, he speaks of a sort of revolution within the artworld that engendered the possibility of artworks whose visual qualities are not particularly noteworthy to the extent that they might be identical with mere real things. Certainly, such an expansion of art's boundaries allows for the possibility of a great many more objects to be admitted to the class of artworks; however, the question we must ask is whether or not the "end of art" is simply the harmless broadening of horizons Danto would have us believe or if it is the sort of absolute destruction of the ontological barriers between art and reality we presumably wish to avoid.

Danto unfortunately offers no positive additions to his definition of art within the pages of *After the End of Art*, but does tentatively claim that a definition of art must necessarily exclude the consideration of aesthetics, an assertion he makes following Marcel Duchamp, whose ready-mades of the early 20th century Danto believes effectively divorced aesthetics from the

concept of art.[15] Danto argues that since we would not take objects such as urinals or snowshovels to possess the sort of aesthetic qualities inherent to so many artworks, they cannot possibly be enfranchised as art objects on aesthetic grounds. If these objects crossed the border from mere real thing to artwork in spite of their aesthetic blandness, a definition of art with a focus on aesthetics would be unable to account for indiscernibles such as these. This unfortunate contention on Danto's part appears to demolish any progress his theory had made in developing a closed definition of art free from the difficulties raised by Dickie's institutional theory; if the aesthetic properties of artworks are discounted, it appears that admission to the class of artworks is in fact even easier than on Dickie's view. Dickie, at least, held that works must be candidates for appreciation, although he somewhat foolishly claimed that the set of objects which could not potentially be appreciated was empty, even including such bland objects as thumbtacks and combs. On Danto's revised view, however, for an object to enter the category of art, it just must be about something and embody whatever it is about, and the relevance perceptual properties has simply been tossed to the wolves. This assertion tragically leaves Danto's theory in roughly the same sort of pit as Dickie's; both leave entryways into the ontological category of art open far too widely, and are essentially unable to discriminate between art and non-art.

Fortunately, Danto remains dissatisfied with the incompleteness of his definition for art, as he makes clear in his "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense," published a scant one year behind *After the End of Art*. In this

[15] Ibid., pg. 84.

article, Danto both explicitly avows his essentialist aim in constructing a definition of art and acknowledges the inadequacies of his theory thus far, likening it – rightly so, on my view – to the relative inability of two millennia's worth of epistemologists to deduce a satisfactory definition of the concept of knowledge. The concept of knowledge, Danto claims, has been fairly stagnant nearly since Plato's time, when Socrates – at the conclusion of the *Theatus* – argues that knowledge cannot be reduced to justified true belief, but is unable to pinpoint an additional stipulation.[16] Although many problems have been noted regarding the insufficiency of the definition of knowledge, the definition itself remains woefully incomplete. Similarly, providing a complete definition of art has proved to be an elusive endeavor for Danto, who admits that while the quality of aboutness advanced in the *Transfiguration* is useful in distinguishing art from non art, it is by no means sufficient as a standalone definition. Danto, however, again waving the banner of Duchamp and his ready-mades, continues to claim that the conceptual definition of art must remain divorced from aesthetics, a move which, as noted above, open's Danto's theory to a whole host of complications.[17]

Danto's reasons for wanting to exclude aesthetics from his philosophy of art have thus far been *prima facie* purely professional, premised upon the

[16] Arthur Danto, "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense," *History and Theory* 37.4, Theme issue 37: Danto and His Critics: Art History, Historiography, and After the End of Art (Dec. 1998), pages 127-143. pg. 130.
[17] The relevant passage reads "…Duchamp was endeavoring to exclude aesthetics from the concept of art, and, as I think he was successful in this, I have followed his lead." Ibid., pg. 133.

idea that indiscernibles render irrelevant the question of aesthetics to the concept of art. Immediately following his avowal to exclude aesthetics from art, however, Danto makes a rather revealing concession; it appears that his exclusionary agenda for aesthetics is rooted in personal concerns as well. Danto evidently feels that in excluding aesthetics from the philosophy of art, the latter discipline gains a bit of respectability within the realm of analytical philosophy. Danto's wish to exclude aesthetics, then, is best read not as having arisen from purely philosophical considerations, but as having a noted political bent as well. Evidently fearing that aesthetics, with all its talk of whimsical concepts like beauty and sublimity, would be snickered at by those situated within the realm of analytic philosophy, Danto sought to place as much distance between the fields of aesthetics and the philosophy of art as he was able, although the consequences of this seem to be philosophically quite dire, as we have seen. It fair, then, to assume that this aspect of Danto's theory, given its overtly political motives, is perhaps his least tightly held on to, and the most ripe for revision.

Danto's discussion of the end of art serves as a self-appraisal of sorts, in which the philosopher justly notes the contributions he has made towards developing a conceptual definition of art while at the same time admitting that his efforts have been insufficient in establishing a comprehensive account. What we are then left with is a set of conditions necessary for incorporation into a complete definition of art coupled with assorted desires of Danto's regarding the construction of such a definition: specifically, Danto, as an

explicit essentialist, wishes for the definition of art to encompass the concept's entire history; as Danto is a long-time art critic, it seems intuitive to believe that a framework for differentiating good and bad works of art – in short, a critical framework – must be allowed for as well. Let us proceed to examine Danto's account of art criticism in the hopes of discovering some foundation upon which the rest of his definition might be built.

VI. The Role of Aesthetics in Art

Although Danto seems determined to shove aesthetics out from under the conceptual umbrella of art, there are a number of points in his later works wherein he seems to champion aesthetics as playing a still-significant, albeit lessened, role in the concept of art. However, at nearly every juncture where Danto discretely suggests that aesthetics play a role in the concept of art, he immediately turns round and calls for its exile. I believe that part of this confusion results from his rather slippery use of aesthetics; Danto appears to employ a less than rigid use of the term, at certain points positing a whole host of aesthetic qualities that works might embody, while at others equating aesthetics with beauty, the same false identity which he accuses many of his forbearers of embracing. This is not to say that at any point Danto claims that beauty should be cast out of the realm of aesthetics; rather, the claim is that the aesthetic properties a work of art might possess are not strictly limited to beauty. An additional confusion that arises with Danto's work is his unwillingness to settle on *how* aesthetics might be included in art. At times, Danto appears perfectly open to the suggestion of accepting aesthetics as playing a weakened role in defining art; at others, he seems to assume that incorporating aesthetics into art has the necessary consequence of making the ultimate goal of art merely the pursuance of aesthetic properties. In making this claim, I believe Danto establishes a false dilemma between his embodied meanings view and aesthetics, for it seems perfectly plausible, indeed

necessary, to incorporate aesthetics into the embodied meanings view, albeit as a means and not as an end.

We might find evidence that Danto himself is in favor of lending some weight to aesthetic considerations in certain discussions of individual artworks, as well as in his retrospective pieces which find Danto writing in a more self-evaluative mode. In the brief introduction to his *The Madonna of the Future*, for example, we glimpse a bit of Danto's wrestling with aesthetics, alternately granting them a place within art's definition and wanting to cast them aside entirely. One discrepancy immediately visible is Danto's discussion of a supposed counterexample to his view, wherein an objector claims that abstract art, the sort which consists only of formal elements such as line and space, is *prima facie* devoid of content. Although Danto refuses to deal with every hypothetical example of abstract art that he might concoct – understandably so, considering that he might easily imagine an infinite set of these – he does claim that he would be able to deal with any concrete example furnished by an objector.[18] How, then, does Danto propose to evaluate the meaning of such ostensibly meaningless things? In his own words, he "would want to know if it had geometrical forms, non-geometrical forms, whether it was monochromatic or striped or whatever – and from this information it is a simple matter to imagine what the appropriate art criticism would be, and to elicit the kind of meaning the work would have." Danto here claims, and in

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[18] Arthur Danto, *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).
The relevant passage reads "Give me a challenge, and I will deal with it. Without some specificity, the game of counterinstances gets pretty tiresome." Pg. xx.

no uncertain terms, that the formal elements of a given work have a considerable impact upon that work's meaning. Immediately after making this assertion, however, Danto claims that "it [is] quite out of the question that one identify the content of works of art on the basis of their visual qualities," a statement which nakedly contradicts his declaration stated above.[19] Here I do not intend to posit an identity between an artwork's formal elements and its aesthetic properties, but it certainly seems intuitive to think that a work's aesthetic properties must necessarily result from that work's formal elements being arranged in a certain way; hence, if we are to make the case that aesthetic properties affect a work's meaning, it must certainly be the case that that its formal elements – the work's having "geometrical forms or non geometrical forms…[being] monochromatic or striped or whatever" – contribute in some way to a given artwork having the meaning that it does. It seems to be clear that Danto in fact does believe, in spite of his occasional insistence to the contrary, that formal elements are a crucial part of a work's meaning. This point comes out clearly in Danto's discussion of how Steve Harvey's Brillo boxes – the actual boxes which sat upon the supermarket shelves of the 1960s, embody their meaning. It is important to note here that Danto ultimately considers the actual Brillo boxes to be works of art, albeit commercial art, insofar as the Brillo boxes are about something – Brillo pads – and embody their meaning in a certain way. How exactly does the Brillo box embody its meaning of Brillo, on Danto's view? Through an arrangement of its formal elements, such as color, space, line, etc, which coalesce to

[19] Ibid., xxi.

convey “excitement, even ecstasy” over the prospect of Brillo pads themselves.[20]

So it would seem that Danto at least must hold that the formal elements constitutive of a work of art have considerable weight insofar as the meaning of that work is concerned, as the model he consistently deploys for explaining the meaning of artworks unfailingly makes recourse to their visual properties. The other intriguing feature of the *Madonna* is the extent to which it makes visible the oddity of the dichotomy between meaning and aesthetics which Danto – on my view unjustly – establishes. In the closing sentence of the *Madonna*’s introduction, Danto claims that, upon adopting the embodied meanings view, meaning not only supersedes beauty, a claim which I would readily accept, but rather serves to *replace* it.[21] If beauty and meaning are indeed exclusive in the way conjectured here by Danto, it would seem to follow that beauty and meaning are necessarily separate from one another. That is to say, the meaning of an artwork would necessarily persist regardless of whether or not the artwork was in possession of beauty. Danto, however, blatantly contradicts this claim with his discussion of the work of Mark Rothko in claiming that Rothko’s works, in their beauty, are actually *about* beauty itself; given this, we can see clearly that the gap Danto wishes to place between an artwork’s having meaning and its instantiation of aesthetic properties is largely fictitious.[22] Indeed, in the case of Rothko’s work, they would have failed to embody the meaning they do – beauty – were it *not* for

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[20] Ibid., xxv.
[21] Ibid., xxx: “Contemporary art replaces beauty, everywhere threatened, with meaning.”
[22] Ibid., 342.

their aesthetic properties – being beautiful; in light of this, it becomes apparent that there is perhaps a closer link between Danto's embodied meanings theory and aesthetics than he is willing to admit. Lest we be hasty in establishing a relationship between Danto's view and aesthetics, however, let us search for additional points in his texts at which he claims artworks' aesthetic properties to bear some of the burden in their embodying of their respective meanings.

Examples of this sort can be found throughout Danto's 2003 *The Abuse of Beauty*, perhaps his most candid work; however, in spite, or because, of this fact, it is certainly neither the most steadfastly informative nor centrally focused of his texts. Despite its occasionally scattershot nature, we can still glean from *The Abuse of Beauty* a much sharper picture of Danto's internal conflict over the incorporation of aesthetics into the concept of art. As one might quite naturally expect from a work titled *The Abuse of Beauty*, his discussion opens with works of art thought to be beautiful: cathedrals. Here Danto, in faulting his predecessor-critic Roger Fry for assuming that the embodiment of aesthetic properties was the sole suitable pursuit of artworks, comes to a sort of epiphany which he immediately and inexplicably shoves aside. The beauty of the ancient cathedrals, Danto contends, should not be viewed as their end, for this would be a rather perverse view of religious architecture, the stated intentions of a great many cathedral architects being to humble man before the grace of God almighty with their churches or bring in

would-be worshippers on the strength of a cathedral's facade.[23] The beauty of the cathedrals is thus a secondary feature, albeit one inextricably tied to the meaning of the churches themselves; beauty is the means by which the cathedrals' ultimate messages are articulated.

Danto holds a similar view of Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, selected during a competition whose ultimate prize was installation upon the National Mall in Washington, DC. The *Memorial*, Danto claims, is irrefutably beautiful, so much so that he believes it will be seen as beautiful even after the scars left by the Vietnam War itself have largely faded from American national consciousness. Moreover, Danto claims that the *Memorial* would simply not possess the meaning it does, or at least not have been nearly so effective in communicating its meaning, had it failed to be beautiful.[24] This again is a clear example of Danto establishing a rather close link between a given artwork's beauty – doubtlessly an aesthetic property – and its meaning; in light of these discussions, it is rather confusing and more than a bit frustrating to see Danto make claims such as these in the wake of determinedly claiming that aesthetics has no necessary part in the concept of art.[25] Asserting this logical separation between art and aesthetics is even *more* puzzling given his earlier declaration; recognizing the shortcomings of traditional definitions which claimed the pursuit of beauty to be the ultimate

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[23] Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2003), pg. 45.
[24] Ibid., pg. 109-110; 132.
[25] Ibid., 94-96.
Here Danto discusses Marcel Duchamp, whom he believes to have been successful in producing artworks which embody meanings irrespectively of any aesthetic properties they might be said to have. I believe Danto's view here is mistaken, and I will discuss this further below.

end of art, he claims that the falsity of this definition in no way entails that aesthetics need to be divorced from the concept of art entirely.[26] However, Danto makes this exact mistake in his discussion of Duchamp! Claiming that Duchamp's *Fountain* embodies its meaning irrespective of any beauty it might be said to have, Danto makes the enormous leap from this claim to the claim that *Fountain* embodies its meaning independently of *any* aesthetic properties the work might be said to have. Since we have thus far seen clear cases in which Danto believes that the beauty of certain works play decisive roles in the embodying of their respective meanings is concerned, it seems perfectly intuitive to believe that Danto holds aesthetic properties do indeed partially determine the meanings of works, although perhaps he believes that only *beauty* can have an impact upon a work's meaning; that is to say, while other aesthetic properties may be possessed by works, beauty is the only aesthetic property which has any bearing upon a work's meaning. If this was the case, we might be able to square Danto's seeming inconsistency, granting it a bit of cohesiveness it otherwise lacks. Danto, however, furnishes numerous examples to the contrary; it seems he *does* believe, at least on occasion, that the aesthetic properties which a work might have are not strictly limited to beauty, and that these alternative aesthetic properties are equally important in a work's embodiment of its meaning.

This attribution is in no way too hasty or unwarranted, as we might see after scrutinizing some additional discussions of Danto's on how a number of non-beautiful works embody their meaning. A number of these occur in rapid

[26] Ibid., 59.

succession within *The Abuse of Beauty*, beginning with Danto's brief reflection on the Dada movement. The works of the Dadaists, argues Danto, are utterly misread if one gleans from them beauty; in other words, if one reads beauty into Dada, one misses its meaning entirely.[27] This admission alone, however, is certainly insufficient to establish Danto's belief that non-beautiful aesthetic properties affect meaning; the furthest we can reach from his discussion of Dada is that beauty certainly affects meaning insofar as one would miss the point of Dadaist works were one to find them beautiful. That Danto posits some efficacy concerning meaning in beauty, however, should be uncontentious at this point, given the above examples. In his discussion of Dada, he never explicitly states any aesthetic properties aside from beauty – unless one were to count ephemerality as an aesthetic property, a description which seems to miss the mark somewhat – which have an effect upon the Dadaist works' meanings.

However, a clear-cut example can be found in the immediate wake of this discussion when Danto discusses the work of Damien Hirst, a contemporary British artist whose reputation rests in no small part on the relatively putrid quality with which his more notorious pieces are endowed. *A Thousand Years*, for example, is partially comprised of a cow's head, severed, rotting, and brimming with maggots (fortunately contained within a glass case, although whether Hirst made this decision was out of compassion for his audience or in conformity with public sanitation codes is probably a matter of some debate); indeed, the work is a paradigm of disgustingness. Danto again

[27] Ibid., pg. 49.

claims that reading beauty into such a work annihilates its intended meaning; grasping the point of *A Thousand Years*, he claims, depends upon the viewer seeing it as disgusting.[28] Danto makes a similar claim regarding *The Prince of the World*, a sculpture of a man, fully clad and welcoming when viewed from the front, naked and ridden with maggots when viewed from behind. The meaning of the sculpture is the reinforcement of Christian morality, a reminder of the sinfulness of presenting one's naked flesh; *The Prince of the World*, says Danto, would simply fail to embody this meaning had it lacked its disgustingness. Also, discussing the works of mixed media artist Andres Serrano and performance artist Paul McCarthy, Danto explicitly states that the "disgust elicitors" omnipresent within the work of the two artists are central to whatever interpretation they might be given, which is to say that any meaning attributed to such works which fails to take into account their disgustingness will necessarily be off point.[29] It would seem obvious at this point, then, that Danto enfranchises a host of aesthetic qualities with the ability to affect the meaning of a given work of art, not simply beauty.

However, at this point one might object to our characterization of Danto by claiming that disgustingness is simply the inverse of beauty, not an entirely separate aesthetic property altogether. So although we might have shown that Danto believes that the property disgustingness affects the meaning of works which possess it, this switch from beauty to disgustingness is simply a sleight-of-hand; talk of disgustingness, one might claim, is simply

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[28] Ibid., 50.
[29] Ibid., 53-56.

a cleverly disguised way of talking about a warped species of beauty. Although I think such a claim would be radically mistaken, it is not of particular importance to address, for we can grant this point and still fairly establish that Danto grants meaning-affecting efficacy to a host of non-beauty aesthetic properties: he explicitly tags the properties of cuteness and eroticism as aesthetic properties, and claims that such properties will inevitably affect the meaning of a work which possesses them.[30] Given these claims, it should be fairly incontrovertible that Danto indeed claims that the meanings of artworks are malleable at the hands of a bevy of aesthetic properties aside from beauty; let us now attempt to discern exactly what role a work's aesthetic properties play in determining its meaning.

[30] Ibid., 59.

VII. Art as a Language

Insofar as we accept the claim that artworks are the sorts of things which indelibly possess meanings, we might best think of them as a sort of morpheme or bearer of meaning; conceived as such, we might then discern a number of revealing parallels between artworks and words – the morphemes of languages. Just as we cannot imagine a word about which we could not ask "what does that mean?", we similarly cannot imagine an artwork to which the same question does not apply. How is it, then, that words come to have meaning? Intuitively, it seems as though words come to be engendered with meaning by a sort of consensus on behalf of speakers of that language, a process with certain obvious similarities to an artwork's being enfranchised by an artworld. So we might say that a word could not exist as a word were the speakers of the language to which it purports to belong did not recognize it as such; without the approval of language speakers, a would-be word would simply exist as a nonsensical utterance.

Crucial to this discussion is the concept of phonemes, which function as the basic, atomistic units of morpheme construction. When discussing verbal languages, the distinction between morphemes and phonemes is simply the distinction between words and letters, respectively. Just as we could not imagine a word being a word without meaning, we are equally incapable of imagining a word without any letters. This is to say that any definition of what a word is must take into account the fact that words necessarily are composed of arrangements of letters, and that a word without letters is a sort

of analytic impossibility in the same vein as the round square. This is not to say that any arrangement of letters whatsoever is necessarily a word, for we might imagine all sorts of garbled nonsense which, although comprised of an arrangement of letters, possesses no meaning whatsoever. Although an arrangement such as "blaft" might appear to be a word at least to the extent that meets the condition of being comprised of letters, its utter lack of meaning within the language quickly disavows this possibility. So any proposed definition of words which makes no reference to the fact that words necessarily possess meanings or which fails to account for the fact that words are necessarily comprised of letters is a rather lacking one indeed.

Also of note is the fact that the meanings of words are inextricably linked to their constitutive letters, which is to say that words may not simply be cobbled together at random and still retain their meaning. For if one wished to use the word "car," one would be limited strictly to arranging the letters c-a-r in that particular way; certainly, one might express the same concept with a different word, such as "automobile," but one cannot wantonly throw together any arbitrary combination of letters and engender it with a meaning synonymous with that of "car." Although we might often use different words to refer to the same concept, we are still constrained to expressing ourselves within the confines of language itself; simply because there might exist a bevy of words referring to the same concept, it certainly does not follow from this that any arrangement of letters that one might concoct functions as a word referring to that concept. Given this, it would

seem that words embody their respective meanings in virtue of being composed of certain letters arranged in a particular way insofar as an alteration of either of these characteristics necessarily leads to either an alteration in or complete erasure of a word's meaning.[31]

Additionally, we might pick out another factor which exerts a substantial influence upon the meanings of words, that of intonation. Unfortunately, the efficaciousness of intonation vis-à-vis meaning is far more readily illustrated through verbal communication; however, sufficiently explanatory demonstrations can be given in writing. For more or less any word in the English language, it is possible for a speaker to shift its meaning from declarative to interrogative by speaking it with a rising intonation; thus, a simple word like soda can be made by a speaker to have the same uptake as an interrogative phrase such as "would you like some soda?" simply by the speaker's voicing the word soda with a rising intonation. Although nouns such as soda are generally spoken without an interrogative intonation, it does not follow from this that they are spoken without any intonation whatsoever; rather, they are commonly spoken with a regular declarative intonation which carries with it no special meaning.

Equally important is the idea of homonyms, two words with different meanings which, through whatever linguistic-historical coincidence, happen to share the same spelling. For example, were one to say the word "caliber" in isolation, its intended meaning would be wholly ambiguous, referring either

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[31] To illustrate this point more concretely with the "car" example, altering the sequence to a-r-c produces a word with an entirely different meaning, whereas a-c-r produces a mere meaningless amalgam of letters.

to the measure of a circle's diameter or to a thing's degree of excellence. When properly contextualized within a sentence, however, the initially unclear meaning gains a great deal of clarity; placed within the sentence "this tubing is of a two-inch caliber," we readily understand the "caliber" to be picking out its former meaning. When used within "her essay was of the highest caliber," we quickly comprehend "caliber" to be picking out its latter definition. Since contextualizing words with ambiguous meanings helps to clarify their respective meanings, it would seem that a dismissal of a decontextualized word as meaningless would be rather premature; rather, one ought to withhold judgment on meaninglessness until one encounters the word embedded in its proper context.

Returning to the subject of art, we can plainly see a number of important parallels between the concept of words and the concept of art: both words and artworks unfailingly possess meanings, and both words and artworks embody their respective meanings. However, there is a rather noticeable gap in continuity when comparing the two, for while we noted that both words and artworks can be said to derive their meanings from the enfranchisement of the relevant groups – language speakers and the artworld, respectively – we also noted that words, being morphemes within the linguistic system, must necessarily be comprised of letters, or phonemes, an analogue which has been sorely lacking in our discussion of art thus far. Given what Danto has said concerning the effects of the formal elements of

artworks upon their meanings,[32] it seems natural to claim that formal elements serve as the phonemes to the morphemes of artworks themselves; that is, formal elements are the atomic units from which artworks are constructed. Imagining an artwork utterly devoid of formal elements is an impossibility in the vein of imagining an unlettered word, for even the most minimal sorts of artworks – color fields or blank canvases – exhibit the formal element of space.

However, we have also seen that the meaning of a given word can be altered substantially given differences in intonation. Insofar we conceive of artworks as morphemes, we might expect them to exhibit a similar phenomenon; that is to say, a sort of expositional variable, similar to intonation, which partially determines the ultimate meaning of a given artwork. Given Danto's aforementioned discussion of the impact aesthetic properties have upon the uptake of artworks,[33] it seems quite intuitive to assume that aesthetic properties would serve the same function vis-à-vis artworks as intonation serves vis-à-vis words. To the extent that Danto has rebuilt the definition of art so that artworks are embodied meanings rather than merely objects of beauty, he must accept the philosophical ramifications of doing do by answering *how* it is that artworks embody their meanings, a question which makes inevitable reference not only to a work's formal elements, but to its aesthetic qualities as well. Why exactly Danto is so quick

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[32] Arthur Danto, *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), pg. xx.
[33] Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2003), pg. 50-59.

to dismiss aesthetics from the concept of art is a mystery well beyond my grasp; indeed, his defining of artworks as embodied meanings necessarily entails talk about their aesthetic properties in such a way that divorcing aesthetics from the concept of art leaves the concept of art rather lacking. By refusing to incorporate aesthetic properties into the embodied meanings definition, Danto's view loses much of its capacity to discriminate between art and non-art, the same problem faced by Dickie's institutional theory. The embodied meanings view, it seems, *must* incorporate aesthetics as a condition if it is to have any efficacy to identify art and non-art. The way in which the embodied meanings view should incorporate aesthetics, however, breaks from tradition in a non-trivial way; that is, the embodied meanings view employs talk of aesthetics as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. To clarify, to claim that the embodied meanings definition must incorporate aesthetics is *not* to claim that it must recognize aesthetics as the end purpose of art; rather, it is to claim that aesthetics must be recognized as having a strong bearing upon the respective meanings of different artworks.

Danto repeatedly states that his primary motivation for scrapping aesthetics – aside from his noted political considerations – as a possible condition for separating art from mere real things is the work of Marcel Duchamp, whose series of readymades were not only identical to mere real things, they *were* mere real things. The series of readymades, among them a grooming comb for dogs, a bicycle wheel attached to a barstool, and a snowshovel, were, according to Duchamp, intended to dismiss aesthetic

conditions from the concept of art by virtue of their extraordinary blandness. It was thought that only the most paramount of fools could legitimately speak of good and bad taste insofar as dog combs or snowshovels were concerned; these intentions make plain the reason for Duchamp's discontent when a number of his readymades were acclaimed for their beauty.[34] Danto appears to be wholly convinced by Duchamp's program, and, believing the artist to be entirely successful in his anti-aesthetic agenda, claims to follow it, divorcing aesthetics from the concept of art, an action which leads to the philosophically unfortunate end of the destabilization of the boundary between artworks and real things. I believe that Danto's removal of aesthetics from the concept of art, however, has the additional unfortunate consequence of inconsistency; for Danto to maintain his view that artworks are embodied meanings, he must invariably include aesthetics among the conceptual umbrella of art.

Let us return to Danto's method of art criticism, in which works of art are evaluated as embodied meanings. Artworks are not merely evaluated on whether or not they possess meanings, for all artworks do this, but *how* they embody their respective meanings; if a singular commonality is found in how artworks embody their meanings, it would seem intuitive to include this commonality in a definition of art. After all, in our above discussion of words, we noted that words without letters cannot be words; we are now in search of an element similarly constitutive to works of art. I believe that this element is that of aesthetics insofar as any reference to how a work embodies

[34] Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pg. 84.

its meaning must invariably make reference to aesthetic properties, thus, loathe as Danto is to incorporate aesthetics into his definition of art, it appears to me as though he must do so in order to maintain consistency. I would be quite lazy, however, were I simply to demand the reader's unqualified acceptance of this point, so let me further elaborate. Insofar as Danto believes that Duchamp's readymades were triumphant in their quest to dislodge aesthetics from the concept of art, it would follow that the readymades would be the very paradigm of art without aesthetics. That is to say, one would be fully able to discuss them in Danto's terms – as embodied meanings – while making no reference whatsoever to their aesthetic properties. But is this possible? I venture to say no; talk about artworks as embodied meanings, specifically talk about the *how* of artistic meaning, must inevitably make reference to an artwork's aesthetic properties, suggesting a deep an inextricable link between aesthetics and the definition of art.

Insofar as Duchamp's readymades are concerned, and, for purposes of this discussion, let us consider *Comb* – composed simply of a metal grooming combs for dogs – as our exemplar, one might initially be confounded as to how exactly *Comb* means anything at all, much less how its aesthetic properties play an inalienable role in bringing about that meaning. Indeed, one might even be tempted to snort derisively at *Comb* and deny altogether its status as a work of art. However, for ease of discussion, let us be consistent with art history and grant that *Comb* is indeed a work of art, one whose intended meaning was divulged in an uncharacteristic bit of clarity on the part

of its creator; namely, the meaning of *Comb*, or at least the thesis which it sought to affirm, was simply that artworks need not possess aesthetic qualities. How does it embody this meaning? One might adopt an extension of Dickie's view and claim that *Comb* embodies its meaning on the basis that Duchamp, its creator, says it does; however, this leaves us with the previously stated conclusion that anything might come to embody any meaning whatsoever, an absurd state of affairs that even Duchamp would vehemently reject. Duchamp, after all, was far from lax concerning which objects he used as readymades; rather, each readymade was selected for the purpose of advancing the thesis that the concept of art need not be entwined with aesthetics.[35] Again, the question arises of *how* these readymades embodied their meaning, for they cannot have simply done so on the whim of their creator. Were this the case, Duchamp could have exhibited a replica of something almost universally considered as beautiful, such as *David* – perhaps hypothetically entitling it *Divad* – and claimed that the meaning of *Divad* was that art need not be bound up with aesthetics. This seems to be quite impossible, however, as the beauty of *Divad* – it after all being a replica of *David* – would get in the way of its possessing that meaning; intuitively, it would seem as though an artwork claming to distance the concept of art from aesthetics must necessarily not be beautiful. In this regard, *Comb* is rather apt, for beauty would perhaps be the last property one would ascribe to a metal grooming comb; but the mere fact that *Comb* is far from beautiful does not

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[35] Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2003), pg. 18.

entail that its meaning is utterly independent from its aesthetic properties. Rather, *Comb* embodies its meaning in virtue of its aesthetic properties, namely, its property of being incredibly bland in an aesthetic sense. In this fashion, *Comb* stands in a similar relation to its fellow art objects as zero stands to its fellow numbers; just as zero is a number whose value is absolutely nothing, *Comb* is an artwork whose aesthetic properties are absolutely neutral. To say that the concept of value is entirely removed from the number zero would be wholly incorrect; in the same vein, talk about *Comb* being art without aesthetics is misguided, albeit understandably so.

Claiming that the definition of art must exclude aesthetics is self-undermining in the way skeptics about knowledge are often characterized; the skeptic about knowledge, in asking her audience to believe that they can know nothing, is in effect claiming to know *something*, specifically the proposition that nothing can be known. Advancing the position that artworks are both embodied meanings and not necessarily related to aesthetics lands one in a similar question-begging quandary. If artworks invariably embody their meanings vis-à-vis their aesthetic properties, how is a definition of art which shoves aesthetics to the side ever to be successful? It would seem that incorporating aesthetics into the definition of art would be far from inconsistent with the embodied meanings approach advanced by Danto; in fact, the addition of aesthetics to Danto's definition of embodied meanings appears to be implied by his discussion. But how are we then to interpret *Comb*, if not as an artwork which divorces aesthetics from the concept of art?

Here Danto's notion of a so-called "style matrix" is particularly useful.[36] Artistic breakthroughs, Danto claims, occur when an artist successfully broadens the horizons of possibility in art through their work, which, to invoke his language, means adding rows to the style matrix; a historically lauded example of this would be Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*, which enfranchised the emerging, albeit then-unnamed, style of Impressionist painting as a possible mode of artistic production. Duchamp's actual contribution can then be read similarly to his intended one, albeit less drastic in scale. While *Comb* did not – and on my view, *could* not – succeed in removing aesthetics from the concept of art, it certainly constituted an artistic breakthrough on Danto's view by simultaneously opening doors for aesthetically bland artworks and artworks indiscernible from mere real things.

At this point one might balk on the grounds that if we allow that *Comb* possesses aesthetic properties, specificially that of blandness, we might attribute aesthetic properties to any object whatsoever and thereby elevate it to the category of art. This objection, if accurate, places the revised embodied meanings definition of art in the same leaky boat as Dickie's institutional theory; both, the objector contends, utterly eradicate the barrier between artworks and real things insofar as neither is able to discriminate between the two. However, the objection misses the mark in a rather important way; specifically, it takes the possession of aesthetic properties to be a sufficient condition for inclusion in the category of art. The revised embodied meanings

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[36] Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61.19 (November 15th, 1964), pg. 583.

definition, although claiming aesthetics to be a necessary condition for artworks, does not hold the possession of aesthetic properties to be solely sufficient condition. Rather, it states that artworks necessarily possess aboutness, and that this aboutness is inextricably bound up with an artwork's aesthetic properties. This theory does not preclude the application of aesthetic predicates to non-art objects; indeed, we might speak about a beautiful bit of scenery – such as the popular example of a sunset on the beach – without in the least implying that the scenery is a work of art, the reason for this being that however beautiful a natural landscape might be, to say that a natural landscape is *about* anything would be rather nonsensical. A landscape, in full possession of aesthetic properties but wholly lacking insofar as aboutness is concerned, fails to qualify as an artwork under the embodied meanings view.

Having said that the possession of aesthetic properties alone does not qualify an object for entry into the ontological sphere of artworks, it will perhaps be useful at this point to introduce a distinction between incidental and intentional aesthetic properties. Insofar as I take the division between the two to be fairly intuitive, I shall not expound upon them at great length, except to say that objects with incidental aesthetic properties, such as the piece of driftwood discussed by Dickie,[37] *happen* to possess those properties whereas objects with intentional aesthetic properties were *made* to possess those properties. This helps in seeing plainly the division between naturally occurring scenery, objects, etc. with aesthetic properties – such as the above

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[37] George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), pg. 24.

example of a sunset – and artworks such as *Comb* which appear considerably less aesthetically rich. It would seem that objects with incidental aesthetic properties, possessing those properties through mere coincidence, cannot function as artworks to the extent that it is logically impossible for them to have been imbued with meaning. Having seen this, we might rightly inquire as to whether the converse of the preceding statement is true; specifically, we might ask whether or not an object in possession of intentional aesthetic properties is necessarily a work of art. I believe that I can safely respond in the negative to this question, for it seems quite feasible that an aesthetically rich object might have been made with no intended meaning whatsoever; rather, its aesthetic properties, while undeniably the result of intention, do not serve to advance any meaning. We might introduce a further distinction here between two types of intentional aesthetic properties: decorative and artistic. Objects possessing aesthetic properties in the decorative sense possess these properties simply to please onlookers, not to contribute to the embodiment of any sort of meaning. Deocrative objects, although they might be aesthetically as rich as any artwork one cares to imagine, fail to count as art objects on the grounds that they fail to be about anything, a necessary condition for art; artworks have meanings dependent upon their aesthetic property. This distinction will perhaps be useful in delineating between works of art and works of craft, a rather cumbersome endeavor made all the more difficult given the absence of a clear distinguishing factor between the two sorts of objects.

Before becoming too excited about the practical ends to which this theory might be applied, however, we must first ascertain whether or not the revised embodied meanings theory succeeds in sufficiently distancing itself from the problematic trappings of its unrevised forbearer. Prior to the addition of aesthetics as a third condition, the embodied meanings theory was unable to discriminate between art and non-art insofar as it failed to explicate clear criteria for *how* works of art were to embody their meanings. This led to the rather unsavory conclusion that any object might embody any meaning simply based on an individual's whim; in providing no grounds on which to dismiss potential artworks as non-art, the embodied meanings theory was unsuccessful in distinguishing itself from the difficulties of the institutional theory. I believe that through adding the condition of aesthetics, the embodied meanings theory is able to overcome the problems that plagued its precursors, for although it opens the entrance to the artworld widely enough to allow for a great many possibilities, it also ensures that objects cannot ascend to the status of art solely upon the basis of individual whim. The problem with the institutional theory is not so much that it permits so many objects to potentially enter the ontological sphere of art, but that it allows these objects to enter for any reason whatsoever, a problem that fails to arise with the revised embodied meanings theory.

On the revised embodied meanings view, it does indeed seem to be true the set of possible art objects is almost limitless; in allowing that artworks such as Duchamp's readymades possessed aesthetic properties which

contributed to their meaning, it seems as though we might attribute aesthetic properties to just about anything. However, we would do well to note here that works such as *Comb* are not artworks on basis of their aesthetic qualities alone – in this case, on the basis of its blandness – but are artworks vis-à-vis the way in which their aesthetic qualities contribute to their meaning. Insofar as *Comb* is about expanding the boundaries of art from within, it can be said to be a work of art; however, if *Comb* had been claimed by Duchamp to have a meaning entirely unrelated to its aesthetic properties – such as if the artist had earnestly asserted that the work was instead about the food of ancient Greece – it would have failed to count as an artwork on the grounds that it failed to answer the *how* of artistic embodiment discussed above. The institutional theory of art, lacking the machinations to make such exclusions possible, can thereby be seen to be far more indiscriminate in its admissions policies than the revised embodied meaning theory. Although the revised embodied meaning theory can successfully accommodate the sorts of self-consciously "difficult" works that sent philosophers of art into such an uproar during the twentieth century, it accomplishes this task without the ramification of erasing the barrier between art and reality.

One might here remark that although this talk about a revised embodied meanings view, however well-intentioned, still ultimately has as its end the unfortunate consequence of completely opening the category of artworks in such a way that claiming an object is an artwork becomes essentially meaningless to the extent that anything whatsoever might be

considered as such. Although it does appear that the class of artworks is potentially open on the revised embodied meanings view, this is perhaps not nearly as problematic a feature as the objector claims. Consider our above discussion of words, which contained, among other things, a loose definition of what it is to be a word: to be a set of letters arranged in such a way that is commonly believed to possess a uniform meaning among a group of language speakers. This definition seems to leave the set of words as potentially quite open in the same way that the revised embodied meanings view of art leaves the set of artworks open, and, although very few balk at this feature of the former definition, it is seen as a potentially crippling flaw in the latter. Simply because a definition for a type of thing is conceptually open does not automatically entail an instant infinitude of tokens; were this the case, I would be able to throw together any combination of letters – such as "sklort" – and declare that combination to be a properly enfranchised English word, albeit one used by a narrow range of speakers. Insofar as we accept this as insufficient grounds for inclusion into the class of words, however, we see that simply because the definition for words is conceptually open, it is not thereby infinitely permissive. So it is with the revised embodied meanings definition of artworks: although the definition allows for a seemingly infinite multitude of objects to be potentially counted as art, this mere potential alone does not instantly enfranchise every possible art object as an actual one. As we have seen above in the discussion of the readymades, the revised embodied meanings view is capable of excluding objects from the sphere of art on the

grounds that an object's aesthetic features fail to embody its intended meaning. Insofar as we accept the revised embodied meanings definition to be capable of discerning art from non-art, we can see that it is free from the sort of pyrrhic permissiveness so troublesome to Dickie's institutional theory of art.

VIII. Concluding Remarks

Despite the difficulties that arise when discussing Danto's work, his contributions to the philosophy of art in the wake of such challenging artistic era are irrefutably invaluable. His re-evaluation of the definition of art certainly redrew the conceptual map for many, in the process providing an entirely new way to think about and to criticize art. However, in spite of my admiration for Danto, I by no means believe that he succeeded in furnishing an adequate definition of art – a claim to which he would agree readily – nor have I attempted to prove this. Rather, his accomplishment lies in laying the foundations for an entirely new way of discussing art – the embodied meanings view – one which would have admittedly been quite inconceivable to his predecessors insofar as they were incapable of encountering the philosophically rambunctious works of the twentieth century. To the extent that I find Danto's claims that works of art are necessarily about something and aim to embody what it is they are about to be quite intuitive, I have not made a sustained attempt at defending these claims. Rather, I have attempted to take these premises, the two major constants of Danto's writings on art, and explore how they might be added to in the interest of developing a clearer picture on what exactly artworks are at their core. The major addition to Danto's embodied meanings theory, the condition of aesthetics, is admittedly somewhat at odds with his own views on aesthetics; however, insofar as Danto admits that he cast aesthetics aside for political reasons, and given the fact his opinions on the importance of aesthetics to art are in constant

fluctuation throughout his oeuvre, I believe that this addition is warranted. Additionally, while I believe that aesthetics must necessarily be incorporated into a definition of art, I have neither claimed that the revised embodied meanings definition is sufficient nor attempted to defend it as such.

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