

How to Reform Danto's Vehicle Fetishism

John Dilworth
Western Michigan University

Vehicle fetishism is a near-ubiquitous cultural attitude in theorizing about the arts. It commonly occurs as a background assumption, if not an explicit belief, that the physical vehicles, by means of which the artistic meaning or content of artworks is communicated, must somehow *themselves* be integral parts of the relevant artworks. Of course, such a primitivist or magical view about the power or centrality of vehicles has long since been abandoned in connection with linguistic communication. No one thinks that linguistic words or sentences, whether construed as types or as tokens, are somehow integral parts of the meaningful propositions that they are used to express. Their purely symbolic or representational role in communication is obvious to all. Yet, by contrast, virtually everyone who theorizes about the arts assumes that concrete artistic vehicles, such as painted canvases or musical performances, are either identical with artworks, or at least that they are *integral parts* of the relevant artworks. Thus is artistic communication *fetishized*, via a belief in obscure artistic powers of concrete vehicles themselves, mysteriously independent of their legitimate representational roles in expressing artistic meanings.

Arthur Danto's view, as expressed in his classic book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*¹, is no exception. Danto has a mixed view of artwork ontology. A painting includes both a canvas and an interpretation of it. Without the interpretation, the canvas is only a "mere real thing". But without the canvas, the interpretation would, Danto apparently assumes, be just an interpretive idea for a picture, rather than actually being a picture. As a result, Danto seems to be opposed to any art ontology, such as some variety of type theory, or a propositional theory, either of which would identify artworks exclusively with non-concrete items of some kind.

However, arguably Danto's contextualist views about the logical status of artworks, according to which they have their artistic, intentional and historical properties essentially, are more fundamental to his overall conception of art than is his mixed ontology. Indeed, I shall argue that his contextualism *entails* that artworks cannot be, or include, physical vehicles such as painted canvases.

1. Necessary versus Contingent Properties of Artworks

Danto's contextualism may be succinctly expressed as the claim that any artwork possesses some necessary relational properties associated with its artistic history and aboutness. For it is integral or *essential* to the identity of an artwork such as a painting that it has a given artistic history, and that it is *about* something in Danto's sense. One

¹ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981).

familiar Danto-esque doctrine follows immediately, namely that an artwork may be indiscernible from a non-artwork, since the relevant necessary properties are relational rather than intrinsic. Danto's contextualism arguably also entails his characteristic doctrine that artworks are never identical with "mere real things", such as the concrete vehicles which artists interpret. A quick proof may be given as follows. A vehicle such as a painted canvas, as with any purely physical object or "mere real thing", has all of its relational properties only contingently. But since artworks have some of their relational properties necessarily, no artwork is identical with a "mere real thing" such as a physical vehicle.

One can see both the contextualism and non-identity entailment at work in Danto's discussion of indiscernible red paintings, some of which are nevertheless distinct artworks, in Chapter 1 of *Transfiguration*. The merely contingently distinct relational properties of each of the physical red squares could not by themselves ground an *ontological* distinction between the physical squares and the corresponding artworks.

However, these central Danto-esque views also create problems for his mixed ontology. If an artwork is a vehicle plus an interpretation of it, one standard construal of that ontology would be that the interpretation is a *contingently acquired relational property* of the vehicle. To interpret the vehicle is to bring it about that it acquires the relational property of having been interpreted as an artwork by the artist. However, by hypothesis, any physical vehicle has all of its relational properties only contingently. As an illustration of this point, an artist can freely choose to interpret a vehicle A as an artwork, but she need not do so. Hence the vehicle cannot acquire any *necessary* relational properties in virtue of its being thus artistically interpreted. It follows that this procedure cannot transform *the physical vehicle* into an artwork that possesses necessary relational properties. So some other construal or modification of Danto's ontology must be sought, in order to render it consistent with his contextualism.

2. An Artwork as an Ontological Structure?

To be sure, Danto might object in any case that treating an interpretation merely as a relational property of a vehicle somehow distorts or weakens his ontological intent. An artwork is a vehicle *plus* an interpretation, or the vehicle *embodies* the interpretation, or it is *part* of an artwork.²

Hence his intent would seem to be that both a vehicle and an interpretation are *integral parts or factors* in a complete ontological structure. So a somewhat broader argument is required to show that a particular vehicle could not even be *an integral part* of an artwork, in order to supplement the above demonstrations that artworks could not be identical with vehicles having purely contingent relational properties.

² For these and other alternatives see Danto's "Responses and Replies" in ed. Mark Rollins, *Danto and his Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell 1993), as well as *Transfiguration*.

As it happens, a slightly more complex argument to this conclusion is available, which is based on another aspect of the contingency of association between a given vehicle, such as a particular canvas A, and an artwork X. Just as it is contingent whether a particular vehicle A is interpreted as an artwork X or not, so also it is contingent, for a given interpretation that would generate an artwork X, whether that interpretation is applied to vehicle A, or to some other relevantly similar but numerically distinct vehicle B. To say that such a relation is a contingent one is to say that *the very same* artwork X, that contingently has object A as its vehicle, ontologically *could have had* as its vehicle some other, numerically distinct object B.

An argument in support of this contingency requirement is easy to provide. Visual artists, who presumably typically purchase canvases and paints in large amounts, care not at all as to *which particular* canvas or paint samples they use in creating a given artwork, as long as they are of the right types to conform to their artistic intentions. So from the artist's point of view, the very same artwork would result, no matter which canvas--whether canvas A, canvas B, etc.--or which particular paint samples of a given type she happened to interpret as an artwork X during a given artistic project.

However, the resulting problem for Danto is that--whether an artwork is explained as a vehicle having a contingent relational property, or as an ontological structure having a contingent vehicle as a part--the *identity-conditions* for artwork X have now been violated. Vehicles are not properties, but instead physical objects, each of which has its own distinctive numerical identity. So any artwork that ontologically included vehicle A would be an *ontologically distinct entity*--no matter what its internal structure might be--from any artwork that instead included a numerically distinct vehicle B. But this violates the initial assumption that *one and the same* artwork X could be contingently associated with distinct particular vehicles under counterfactual conditions.

For those who are wary of arguments involving counterfactuals or possible worlds, a structurally similar problem for Danto is provided by any artwork having multiple *actual* copies, such as the print run for a given particular etching or photograph. Each of the prints is a print of one and the same artwork, but that could not be so if the distinct physical vehicles--the prints themselves--were each an ontological constituent of the relevant etching or photograph. The only way for Danto to restore consistency to situations such as these is for him to *repudiate* his mixed ontology--or more specifically, its vehicle-fetishist assumption that a vehicle is any kind of ontological part or constituent of an artwork.

Here again linguistic cases of communication provide a useful point of comparison. It is utterly trivial that any number of distinct linguistic tokens of the same sentence type can express one and the same proposition, because vehicle fetishism for linguistic expressions of propositions is obviously unacceptable and believed by no one. It should be equally trivial that there can be any number of (artistically authorized) distinct prints of the same photograph or etching for the same reason. And it is only a short extra step, involving some simple counterfactual reasoning, to the conclusion that unique artworks such as paintings also cannot ontologically include their vehicles either, because of their

contingent association with some particular potential vehicle. The moral for Danto is that, if he wishes to preserve the most central elements in his theory of art, namely the necessity of contextual and aboutness conditions for a given artwork, along with the non-identity of artworks with physical vehicles, *then he must abandon his vehicle fetishism*. For his contextualism entails the falsity of that view.

3. How Should Danto's Theory be Reformed?

The remainder of this short essay will be devoted to showing how the rest of Danto's powerful and compelling philosophy of art can be significantly improved by adopting a pared-down version of his mixed ontology. To begin, in my view the best way to reform Danto's theory is to view artworks as being proposition-like *interpretations* only, rather than as interpreted vehicles.³ On such a view, just as any of the tokens of a sentence type can express the same, language-independent proposition that is true or false of the world, so also can any (artistically authorized) tokens of an artistic vehicle type express the same, vehicle-independent artwork that correctly or incorrectly represents the world. On this view, propositions and artworks are meaningful, broadly semantic or content-based *intermediaries* that are distinct both from the vehicles that express them, and from the world that they correctly or incorrectly represent. So in Dantoesque terms, artworks should be identified exclusively with the artistic *interpretation* that an artist applies to a vehicle, rather than with the ontologically mixed 'vehicle plus interpretation' as in his official position. For as argued here, in specifically ontological terms the vehicle itself is just fetishistic baggage--and moreover, baggage that must be discarded in order to restore consistency to Danto's contextualism.

To be sure, this is not to deny that artistic vehicles play an ineliminable *epistemic* role in the acts of artistic interpretation that create artworks. Just as we could not express propositions without uttering or writing the appropriate sentences that express them, so also we could not create or experience artworks without perceiving some relevant, appropriately structured artistic vehicles. But as Danto the analytic philosopher himself would insist, we must sharply distinguish such vehicle-dependent *epistemic* aspects of artistic perception and cognition from issues about the *ontology* of artworks.

Fortunately, this reformed and pared-down ontology is still consistent with, and indeed fully supportive of, the rest of Danto's theory of art--including his insistence in *Transfiguration* that there could be no artworks, ontologically distinct from "mere real things", without artistic theories that make possible the relevant kinds of artistic interpretation. To quote from chapter 5 of *Transfiguration*, "... it is essential to our study that we understand the nature of an art theory, which is so powerful a thing as to detach objects from the real world and make them part of a different world, an *art world*, a world of *interpreted things*." It is theoretically supported artistic acts of interpretation alone that enable those objects, thus detached as expressed meaningful contents, to

³ Elsewhere I have attempted to provide a general theory of art along related lines. See, e.g., my book *The Double Content of Art* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005) and my forthcoming article "In Support of Content Theories of Art", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.

function autonomously as items in an artworld, just as it is acts of linguistic expression that enable meaningful, autonomous propositions to be expressed. Consequently, since Danto was one of the first philosophers of art to stress the importance of propositionally expressed artistic theories in understanding the autonomy of artworks, he may appropriately be hailed as a prominent early--though nascent--prophet of a fundamental future reunification of propositional and artistic kinds of meaning.

To conclude, here are some other theoretical benefits that a pared-down, interpretation-only ontology would confer on Danto's system. In Chapter 6 of *Transfiguration* Danto expresses a desire to extend his theoretical treatment of paintings to apply to artworks generally. However, as noted with the discussion of artistic prints in section 2, his initial mixed, vehicle-including ontology inevitably must cripple any attempt to explain how a single artwork could have multiple copies. But if instead he were to invoke autonomous interpretations, as meaningful, proposition-like intermediaries, then immediately all multiple artwork cases, covering miscellaneous printmaking, literature and general performing art categories, would become theoretically within reach for him. For in any one of these cases the relevant multiple vehicles--whether copies, performances and so on--could be *interpreted as*, or express, a single artwork of the relevant kind, whether a print, film, novel, play, musical work or dance.

Another theoretical benefit of the pared-down ontology is connected with its potential power to clarify the heart of Danto's expressivist view of art, as laid out in the concluding chapter 7 of *Transfiguration*. The current, broadly propositional model of artistic content distinguishes artwork content as such--as expressed in an interpretation of a vehicle--from what worldly items that artwork in turn represents. This distinction of two fundamental levels or kinds of artistic content could help to theoretically clarify Danto's distinction between an artist's expressive style in creating an artwork, and the manner in which that stylistic level of content can metaphorically enrich its more prosaic representational content. This clarification is needed because Danto's initial concept of an interpretation by itself does nothing to explain why there should be the complex and complementary kinds of richness of interaction of an artist's style with her particular subject matter, as discussed so perspicuously in this final chapter by the author. Only a theoretical framework which can clearly distinguish stylistic and other purely artistic kinds of content from worldly representational content could provide the overarching theoretical structure needed to more perspicuously illuminate the relevant issues.⁴

As a further theoretical improvement in Danto's system made possible by the current ontological paring-down, the important test case of literary artworks should be mentioned. Any theory of the arts would be incomplete without an adequate account of literature. But works of literature are themselves *linguistic* works, whose meaningful contents presumably must be predominantly propositional in character. So any adequate theory of art must be at least consistent with a broadly propositional theory of the literary arts. Hence it is a significant advantage of the current, pared-down Danto-esque theory that the propositional contents of literary works can, of course, themselves provide paradigm cases of kinds of artistic content--since on the current approach all meaningful

⁴ See Ch. 5 of my book *The Double Content of Art* for more details.

artistic contents are conceived of as being broadly propositional in structure. This approach also has the advantage that literary artworks such as biographies would receive exactly the same kind of analysis, whether viewed linguistically as a group of related propositions about the world, or aesthetically as a literary historical artwork.