

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 3 *Volume 3 (2005)*

Article 4

2005

Living Art, Defining Value: Artworks and Mere Real Things

Serge Grigoriev
sgrigoriev@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Grigoriev, Serge (2005) "Living Art, Defining Value: Artworks and Mere Real Things," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol3/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts Division at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive) by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeli@risd.edu.

[About CA](#)

[Journal](#)

[Contact CA](#)

[Links](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Search Journal](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Permission to Reprint](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Publisher](#)

[Webmaster](#)

Living Art, Defining Value: Artworks and Mere Real Things

Serge Grigoriev

Abstract

In this essay I examine the conceptual difficulties generated by drawing a distinction between artworks and mere real things. I argue that the distinction is an unfortunate one, requiring for its operation an assumption of possibility of an objective value judgment with regard to aesthetic productions, which, in reality cannot be defensible on purely philosophical grounds. The distinction, in fact, may be useful in describing the interactions between the artworld, *qua* a cultural institution, and the socio-economic environment in which it is situated; yet, it proves misleading when introduced into discussions about the nature of artworks and the nature of our interactions with art. I also recommend, in passing, that our understanding of art may benefit from embracing a more holistic approach to construing the relationship between artworks and human agents within a culturally constituted space of the artworld - an approach, perhaps, along the lines resembling those suggested by Margolis' historicized relativism.

Key Words

artwork, commodity, contextualism, empiricism, intersubjective value, objective value, reductionism, speculative value, symbiosis, aesthetics theory

1. Challenges to Common Sense: "Contextualism" Versus Culturally Enriched Consciousness

Starting in the 1960s, an entire cohort of aspiring theorists of art set out to reinvent aesthetics by providing a constructive critique of the then-dominant academic trend that was later aptly dubbed by Gregory Currie "aesthetic empiricism."^[1] They were largely successful in this enterprise, and today their names appear as a part of the established canon of contemporary philosophy of art: Danto, Wollheim, Levenson, to mention just a few. What motivates this paper is an attempt to offer a retrospective interpretation of the significance of their success, as well as its implications for the way we approach and discuss artworks today. More specifically, I am interested in addressing in some detail the distinction between artworks and "mere real things," originally introduced by Danto in his landmark paper "The Artworld"^[2] a distinction that was destined to play a pivotal role in the development of the new "contextualist," as David Davies calls them, theories of art^[3]. The reason for my curiosity on this score is supplied by the fact that yet another prominent aesthetician, Joseph Margolis, has been insisting for quite some time that the renowned distinction may not be a happy one.^[4] For my own part, I find the distinction philosophically suspect, because it appears to presuppose a possibility of making a value judgment mediated by some sort of objective criteria, such as those derived from art theory, without supplying any reason to think that such a judgment could possibly be made on purely philosophical

grounds without invoking some kind of discursive privilege.

The empiricist attitude, which Danto and those of similar conviction intended to confront, possesses a good deal of intuitive appeal. In fact, as Davies points out in his recent book, it more or less coincides with a common-sense view of the arts.^[5] In a nutshell, the empiricist maintains that experiencing an artwork is tantamount to being affected by its manifest and objectively verifiable properties. Thus, considerations pertaining to the historical and cultural contexts in which the work was produced, as well as the intentions of the work's author, may be of interest in and of themselves; however, they have no essential bearing on the reception and evaluation of an artwork *qua* aesthetic product. The advantages of such a view are obvious. First of all, it enables us to treat artworks in the same way that we treat ordinary physical objects or events; just like the warmth we feel when standing near a hot stove can be directly attributed to the properties of the heated metal, the aesthetic pleasure we experience in encountering an artwork can be unambiguously traced to certain properties of an artwork analyzed *qua* a physical object. This sense of objectivity, in turn, gives us a certain hope of solving some age-old puzzles related to art, such as questions pertaining to the standard of taste or the doubts about the precise nature of aesthetic attraction. The formalist-inspired determination to restrict one's attention to the surface properties of an artwork, then, holds a great promise, a promise of possibility of a science of aesthetics; hardly a negligible gain in an age obsessed with its own epistemological prowess.

On the practical side of things, the empirical attitude in aesthetics draws attention to the artwork itself, *qua* an accomplished product, making it the focus of aesthetic sensibility. Artwork itself is understood primarily as a well-crafted thing. The artist, then, is recognized as a master craftsman, on par with an engineer who succeeds in designing a functioning engine. The measure of the craftsman's achievement in both cases is the same and is entirely objective: namely, the practical yield of the desired effect. In this way, the empirical attitude advocates an objective, rather than subjective, standard of value: an artwork is good insofar as it works. The virtues of this particular stance can be best expressed in an idiom of somebody like Benjamin, who stubbornly maintains that our nostalgia for the holy ghost of an artwork, the longing for auratic properties that transcend the immediate functionality of an object, is best seen as a carry-over of idle bourgeois mentality conditioned to concoct a mythical speculative value where no empirical value can speak for itself.^[6]

An empiricist approach to art, of course, has a few notable shortcomings. For instance, it places very strict and narrow-minded constraints on interpretation as a component in the appreciation of artworks, practically reducing the hermeneutic aspect of the audience's involvement with the artwork to a nil. Thus, if the Romantic age of theory was obsessed with psychology of the artist, the empiricist approach appears to have an opposite predilection for the psychology of the viewer, with the viewer understood as a generic a temporal subject with a properly functioning perceptual apparatus. What the

empiricist view, then, actively precludes is the understanding of art as a kind of dialogue between the artist and the appreciative public, a dialogue conditioned by specific historical and cultural circumstances. The work of art is thereby placed in an ideal space outside of time and severs its conventional bond with its origin in a particular configuration of prevailing human interests and goals. In this way, it comes to stand on par with a natural object, i.e., a mere physical thing. The empiricist strategy, then, effectively amounts to deriving a procedure for establishing an I scale for artworks at the price of excluding all possible considerations of their intersubjective value.

From an art-historical perspective, the empiricist stance is guilty of ignoring properties that an artwork may acquire by virtue of its placement in a particular context; i.e., it underplays the semantic properties of the work in favor of physical ones. An empiricist, therefore, fails to account for the fact that aside from generating perceptual experiences an artwork also, and perhaps, primarily, generates a certain meaning, conveys a certain message, the actual content of which depends on and is necessarily mediated by the cultural historical circumstances of the work's emergence and presentation. In fact, as theorists of Danto's ilk would be likely to point out, the empiricist stance must be flawed even in its treatment of the spectator's relation to the artwork's surface-properties, since the selection of the surface properties which a given spectator is likely to find worthy of attention may itself depend on cultural knowledge that does not patently display itself as one of the perceived aspects of a work *qua* physical object. A painting by Rothko, for example, may look very different when surrounded by works of Titian and Rubens, instead of hanging alongside the paintings by Newman and de Kooning. Goya's work from the *Disasters of War* series may lose quite a bit of its despairing eloquence unless one can contrast its style with that of his earlier paintings depicting the august persons of the Spanish royal family.

While conceding the validity of these concerns, I intend to argue that Danto's radically counter-empiricist contextualist strategy developed on the basis of observations such as these itself yields a solution that cannot fail to be perceived as somewhat artificial, while leaving intact the rather questionable assumption that founds the empiricist theory: namely, that it is, in fact, possible to devise a reductive criterion for determining objective value of artworks. Of course, in Danto's case, the only objective difference in value that remains standing is the one between artworks and mere real things, making, therefore, for a somewhat more modest proposal with regard to the prospects of objective evaluation.

But first I would like to adumbrate a possibility of an alternative approach to the treatment of artworks, one that parts ways both with the perceptualism of the empiricist and the contextualism of Danto, a possibility which could give us a sense of measure in assessing Danto's philosophical strategy. The possibility I have in mind is largely inspired by the work of Joseph Margolis and focuses on the prospects of thinking about art in semiotic terms, describing our interactions with artworks in the context of a functioning living space, a semiosphere. Such an approach would have the particular merit of enabling

us to recognize the identity of artworks *qua* things, without thereby obscuring the contribution of their signifying, meaning-generating properties. From the perspective of a semiotized living environment, an artwork appears as more than a merely passive thing: as an active participant in a certain kind of exchange, a certain type of social discourse; as a thing that is capable of posing questions, challenging norms, deceiving, opposing other artworks, and providing a sarcastic commentary. Things here behave like they would in the semi-magical world of Borges, like legendary weapons of murder endowed with inscrutable wills of their own, forever finding new contexts and new sets of duelists to test their mettle against each other. To act in this manner, artworks (things that they are) would have to enter into a symbiotic relationship with the cultural agents who wield them and fuse their own human destinies with the destinies of the things they value and trust, as the usually silent nature enters into a symbiotic relationship with a scientist in the context of a laboratory, giving rise to the cultural discourse of *Naturwissenschaft*. Danto's mechanistic contextualism patently falls short of yielding a possibility of such symbiotic relationship.

What is called for here is an intuitively simple recognition of the artworld *qua* a particular *Lebensform*, a particular ecological system productive of its own specific forms of relationships reflected in the discourse of the arts which it generates. It is a less Platonic and a more Aristotelian vision. It is in this "ecological" spirit, I believe, that Margolis proposes to treat artworks as culturally emergent persons, ontologically similar to those culturally emergent human persons of educated sensibility who participate in the creation of artworks and arrange the settings for the course of the artworks' historical career.^[7] Importantly, by entering into a such a system of symbiotic relationships constitutive of the artworld, the artwork's physicality does not become erased; no more so, at any rate, than does the physicality of a human agent who is transformed by a culture's educative practices into an agent of the artworld: i.e., a person who looks a certain way, talks in a certain way, has certain peculiar interests and sensibilities, all the while remaining an ordinary biological organism. Thus it isn't altogether clear why, if recognizing someone as a person doesn't necessarily depend on explicitly imputing to them some set of unperceivable properties, we should feel obliged to demand, as Danto does, that recognizing something as an artwork should depend on the imputation of a certain theoretical significance or intent. The notion of a symbiotic relationship advocated here would seem, instead, to imply a kind of informal familiarity that enables one to forgo explicit theoretical justification of one's judgments.

It is true, on the other hand, that traditionally reductive rationalistic analysis tends to strongly resist introduction of any such informality. On the premises of a reductive rationalistic discourse, a rational agent, to begin with, is best represented by the sum-total of his or her statements, especially those statements that appear to give rise to a logically coherent whole. It would, then, only make sense to represent artworks accordingly: as a sum-total of coherent statements made about them; statements that would hopefully add up to an orderly theoretical picture.

This is the approach explicitly favored by Danto, who, in fact, opposes the extremes of reductive empiricism with a version of radical reductive rationalism. In this sense, the drift of his argument asymptotically approaches the somewhat extreme vision defended by Baxandall^[8] who claims that our relationship to artworks is *always* mediated by a verbal description. In replying to Margolis' criticism, for instance, Danto plainly insists that his primary interest is "in the analysis of cultural language . . . in truth conditions"^[9]; and the analysis of truth conditions, of course, usually implies a concern with statements and descriptions, rather than, say, sensations and things. Despite its counter-intuitiveness, such an approach can boast of at least one major gain: namely, it enables us to preserve a sense of objectivity with respect to judgments about art, while letting go of the empiricist dogma. In other words, it succeeds in replacing "naturalistic" objectivity of the empiricist with the objectivity of an analytically structured theoretical discourse.

2. Artwork and "Mere Real Things"

Danto's argument for excluding the physical perceivable properties from the definition of artworks relies chiefly on a simple observation that two perceptually identical things may turn out to be different artworks; in fact, one of them may not be an artwork at all but a mere real thing.^[10] Thus, in "The Artworld" paper, Danto asks us to imagine two identical paintings: two white rectangular canvases each traversed by a single black line in the middle. One of the canvases is titled "Newton's First Law," and the second "Newton's Third Law." While the two paintings are perceptually identical, the way in which we view and interpret them, according to Danto, changes depending on the title. In one case, we're supposed to see two white masses colliding along a straight line; in the other, a lonely particle traveling in a straight endless line through a white emptiness. Thus, while the perceptual properties of the two paintings coincide, the paintings are different; and their differences emerge only once we take into account the knowledge of art theory and the atmosphere of the artworld.

Along similar lines, one could argue that a urinal found by Duchamp was perceptually indistinguishable (aside from the signature) from the urinal that he later presented to the artworld public, yet one was just a common discarded urinal, while the other was (and is) *The Fountain*, a venerable work of contemporary art, subject to maintenance and historic preservation. On the basis of cases such as these, Danto famously concludes that being a work of art - and being this or that particular work of art - does not depend on the way in which the artwork spontaneously enters our perceptual field but instead on the way its description is positioned within the space of reasons pertaining to the history and theory of art. Ultimately, then, an artwork acquires its identity *qua* artwork in virtue of something that an "eye cannot descry."^[11]

To draw on Danto's idiom, when we say what an artwork is, we are using the "is" of *artistic identification*, the use of which is governed by rules having little or nothing to do with the properties of an artwork *qua* a physical object; dealing instead with the properties of the theoretical locus corresponding to

this physical object in the discourse of the arts. An artwork, then, is different from a "mere real thing,"^[12] because the latter exists in a physical space or in the space of pragmatic reasons, whereas the former has its true existence only in the space of reasons and statements concerned with the theory and history of the arts.

Danto's theory then, if I understand it correctly, asks us to envision a rather odd scenario, in which a thing's meaning is radically separated from its identity *qua* a physical thing and requires that we accept this scenario as *always* obtaining in the case of artworks. Accepting Danto's proposal on this score must also entail endorsing some questionable possibilities with regard to identifying artworks; thus, there seems to be no reason why an artwork could not be created by gratuitously imputing theoretical significance to any old thing that happens our way or, conversely, why someone should have as much as an inkling of recognition when confronted with a traditional masterpiece belonging to one of the conventional genres. These possibilities, of course, while entirely legitimate on Danto's terms, appear to not only contradict the dictates of the abominable common sense, but also disagree with much of what has been said about art throughout history by theorists and chroniclers as well as by artists themselves.

Margolis, in fact, is inclined to pursue the issue further and claims that, since the artwork emerges, on Danto's account, only as a result of rhetorically imputing certain indiscernible properties to a physical object, it must necessarily follow that nothing really exists as an artwork!^[13] Considerations of indiscernibility that Danto cites in support of his position have, at best, only a tangential bearing on this argument since, as Margolis points out, the answer to the question of what it is to be a certain kind of thing doesn't, generally, depend on first answering the question about the circumstances in which a thing of a particular kind may be indistinguishable from some other kind of thing.^[14] Some works of art may be indistinguishable, under certain circumstances, from things that are not works of art or from forgeries; however, these special occasions are best understood as interesting exceptions to the rules rather than the bone fide cornerstones for erecting a new set of rules. One cannot base a theory describing an entire set of entities on considerations pertaining exclusively to the marginal members of this set. A voice saying "Thank you" on an answering-machine recording may belong to a real person expressing gratitude or to a parrot expressing nothing at all; yet the possibility of the latter scenario doesn't constitute a good reason for thinking that the way we understand the meaning of a "Thank you" has nothing to do with the physical properties of the sound.

In fact, Margolis does find the analogy with language particularly revealing in this regard: We do not hear a mere sequence of sounds to which we then impute a particular meaning; we hear meaningful speech or utterance in which the physical form is fused with the intentional content. The distinction between expression-form and expression-content can be made *a posteriori*, and may prove to be a fruitful one; however, insofar as this distinction is itself a product of analytic abstraction, it would be wrong to describe the process of understanding itself in terms of a synthesis between the

perceived form and the rhetorically imputed content. Which is not to say that such synthesis is not implied in the process of articulation that leads to the production of an utterance.

Thus, sometimes, we pay special attention to the way in which meaning elaborates itself in overt speech; to the way in which an artwork emerges from its medium. Theorists like David Davis, moreover, believe that attention to this dialectic of meaning and form constitutes the true focus of aesthetic appreciation, which dwells in each case on the creative performance of the artist, on the workmanship that displays itself in the product.^[15] Yet, nothing of the sort can be feasible on Danto's account, whereby the audience is presented on the one hand with a physical object and on the other with a theoretical description of its role in the public life of art. The body of an artwork, with such a view, serves merely as a token in a *game* of art, a token which, in itself, is not likely to possess any special value or be an object of interest and scrutiny.

Perception, says Danto, is like digestion: It remains constant and unchangeable regardless of the cultural experiences to which an individual is subjected and, consequently, regardless of the meaningful impressions that it may end up delivering.^[16] There must be, then, no such thing as perceptual education and culture, no such thing as a connoisseur's eye trained to closely follow the performance. Everybody sees everything that's there to be seen; a person versed in art theory merely knows why some of the things seen matter and others don't.

Naturally, to construe the performative spontaneity of aesthetic perception on the analogy of proficiency in one's native language, as Margolis does, one would have to grant that perception itself must be a culturally and theoretically freighted affair.^[17] The sensory organs of an art connoisseur, then, must undergo a kind of transformation similar to the one that the hands of a pianist undergo with years of practice. One would have to stipulate, then, that in virtue of their cultural experience, certain individuals are transformed in a way that enables them to effortlessly perceive the features of artworks meaningfully, ensuring that the process of speculative interpretation always begins with a meaningful substratum already supplied by the spontaneous operation of a culturally elaborate perceptual experience. As more theorists begin to recognize this possibility as a legitimate one,^[18] it may only suffice to add that an account construing recognition of artworks as a spontaneous process resulting from certain training or enculturation has, at the very least, the merit of being a simple one.

This simplicity, however, can only be gained at a price of a theoretical concession that some may find it difficult to make. Margolis' claim, of course, doesn't simply amount to saying that some of us acquire such expertise in placing artworks within a theoretical context that there's no longer any point in distinguishing between perception and theoretical explanation that immediately follows. As Danto correctly points out, Margolis is talking about a much larger issue: that of the limits of perception itself.^[19] In Margolis' view, it seems, differently educated people -- people with different cultural histories --

must literally see slightly different things. We may be able to calibrate our culturally induced differences in a discussion that follows the encounter with an artwork, yet what really counts in the *enjoyment* of art - the spontaneous perception - may be entirely different for representatives of different cultural milieus. What follows from this is that there can be no single privileged account of the definition of artwork or of artistic value. If spontaneity of aesthetic experience results from a kind of symbiotic relationship between artworks and human agents, different and potentially incompatible forms of such symbiosis would be possible, with each alteration in cultural context giving rise to a new distinct set of possibilities. What appears lost in such a picture is the possibility of an objective criterion for judging what is an artwork and what is not, a possibility of a "correct" assignment of a truth-value; since, on Margolis' terms, objectivity is only gained *a posteriori*, in virtue of an empirical consensus that may be useful in its own right but cannot claim any special legitimacy and cannot exhaust the meaning of a genuine experience of art.

A well-chosen word, a humorous remark, strike immediately and strike true; they do not allow for separation between form and content. Intuitively we know this and often refuse to repeat a clever phrase to someone who missed it the first time around. One can explain a joke or paraphrase a meaning of a metaphor, one can give synonymous expressions for a carefully chosen word, but the effect is destroyed in such a transition. Understanding what it means to see and appreciate something is not tantamount to seeing or appreciating it. Theoretical knowledge, no matter how well rehearsed, only enables us to understand what somebody else sees. Seeing itself, however, requires something an eye cannot decry: an experience of enculturation that molds one's sensibilities on the level that often bypasses self-conscious intellection. The pleasure one derives from something following an explicit theoretical explanation is a vicarious pleasure, because the real pleasure consists in getting it right without explanations.

The effortlessness that I speak of and the richness of the understanding that results do not come from knowledge of theory; they come from experience and practice. One doesn't speak a language simply by knowing the rules of grammar and having meaningful equivalents assigned to most of the vocabulary items. One begins speaking a language precisely at the moment when one can stop translating. The same is likely to hold true of artworks.

Someone who looks appreciatively at a painting by Debuffet is much less like a new-fangled Champillion in front of a Rosetta stone and is much more like a man who's just met an old acquaintance on the street. Appreciation of art must be a habit like any other; it comes from repeated encounters with works of art, from talking about art, reading about it and thinking about it in private. Like any habit, it is largely automated. We can indeed say that a connoisseur transfigures a real thing into a work of art by applying his or her knowledge of theory and history, but only if we mean it as a reductive metaphor of the same ilk as the one we employ when we say that a baseball player calculates the trajectory of the ball. We see hammers in paintings because we've seen them sitting in our father's toolbox; and for the exact same reasons we see Puvis

de Chavannes in a Picasso painting and Vitebsk outside the window of a painting by Chagall.

The difference between a culturally enriched experience valorized by Margolis and the theoretically reprocessed understanding advocated by Danto corresponds roughly to the difference between the spontaneous enjoyment of a connoisseur and a labor-intensive performance of a dedicated student who tries to match the description supplied by a famous art critic to a perceptual surface that melts into indifference before the student's myopic gaze. On the surface, at least, Margolis' account appears more attractive. The question is how realistic such a scenario would appear on pragmatic terms. As Lamarque points out in a recent paper, it is entirely reasonable to think that existence of artworks depends on the existence of a certain cultural milieu capable of giving rise to audiences that appreciate them.^[20] As Lamarque explains, objects may possess different properties when viewed *qua* different things.^[21] It is entirely conceivable, then, for a block of marble to possess certain qualities when viewed *qua* a work of art which it doesn't possess when viewed *qua* a paper-press. Thus, if populations capable of viewing objects *qua* artworks cease to exist, the physical objects that we treat *qua* works of art may endure, but they will cease to exist *qua* works of art.^[22]

This argument can be pushed a little bit further. If we imagine the artworld public as a population of cultural agents who are at liberty to see every artwork now *qua* an artwork and now *qua* a physical object devoid of artistic merit, we may well end up with a minimally revised version of Danto's stance. While, as Lamarque points out, even the most devoted art aficionado must be capable of imagining a possible world in which all things that s/he considers art would not be such, it is more difficult to imagine a connoisseur of the arts who can convince him- or herself, even for a moment, that s/he is living in one of those possible worlds.

It is not clear that someone who stands before a work that they consider a masterpiece could really learn to see it as a mere physical object devoid of any special value. For instance, I am not sure that one would have an easy time convincing someone like Danto to cut up Cezanne's *Bathers* while viewing it *qua* a mere physical object. It seems more reasonable to think that a symbiotic relationship with an artwork, even one of a merely cultural symbiosis understood as a particular type of *Lebensform*, or more precisely as a form of "living together with," would impose stronger ties on its constituents than those that would allow for gratuitous switching of perspectives. Superman and Clark Kent, in Lamarque's example, possess different properties; yet it is very likely that a child who had seen Superman will never be able to look at Clark Kent the same way as before. Conversely, someone who sees a painting by Rembrandt is not thereby precluded from seeing the canvas, the paint and the wooden frame; yet this recognition that a painting is composed of real things doesn't diminish the admiration one feels for it.

What I'm trying to say, then, is that as long as we preserve in some form the distinction between artworks and mere real things, we will always gravitate towards some variant of

Danto's argument concerned with the imputation of theoretical properties to an indifferent object. Moreover, I'm inclined to argue that there's no good philosophical reason for preserving the distinction; yet a number of bona fide philosophical reasons, such as the ones cited by Margolis, for dropping it. Artworks *are* mere real things. The distinction between an artwork and a mere real thing can only become operative at the periphery of the artworld where it makes sense to start distinguishing between inside and outside; which is not to deny that people whose life is bound up with the fortunes and larger destinies of art treat artworks in ways that people who have no special interest in the arts cannot even begin to understand. Thus there's no reason to think that for somebody who is involved in the artworld an artwork ceases to be a real thing; on the contrary, it would make sense to assume that it should be seen as the ultimate real thing, of more immediate interest, more comforting and more familiar than a pit bull, a cell-phone or a sports car.

Where a layman sees a piece of metal, a car-mechanic may see a well-designed part, and s/he may treat it with the special attention and interest it deserves in his or her eyes even if s/he has no immediate practical use for it. For the mechanic, this thing exemplifies what it means to be a real thing. There's no reason why a specialist in arts should think any differently about artworks. A meaningful difference between an artwork and a mere real thing emerges only when we are confronted with a cultural specimen who for the life of it cannot see a difference between what we regard as a work of art and what s/he regards as piece of sanitary equipment. But that scenario may be better served by a straightforward distinction between a work of art and a commodity rather than the theoretically freighted distinction between mere real things and artworks that somehow transcend them.

There was a time in history when artworks were commissioned by wealthy patrons and executed according to their wishes. On the one hand this arrangement restricted the artist's freedom; on the other it ensured that the artist operated outside the regular market conditions - the work was produced on demand. The modern artist finds him- or herself in an altogether different position: free to paint what s/he pleases, but then obliged to peddle his or her wares in the manner of a lowly craftsman. Thus, the modern capitalistic society, as Greenberg recognized in his famous essay, on the one hand creates the conditions for autonomous development of art, of art for art's sake, and on the other threatens to subject artistic practice to the demands of uncultivated taste of the average moneyed bourgeois. Art, then, ends up facing a difficult task of attempting to serve no interests but its own without simultaneously severing the "umbilical cord of gold" which it requires for prosaic sustenance. [\[23\]](#)

The solution to this problem is offered by the modern economy of value itself, in which the most lucrative value a thing can possess is speculative value, a value projected onto its surface by various political and commercial institutions employing, respectively, propaganda or advertising. In such an economy, the mere physicality of a thing can only be of interest in the calculation of the shipping costs. Whether the actual commerce is conducted in symbols of prestigious consumption

or in regalia of redemptive political struggle, the value of a thing ultimately derives from the place it occupies within the narrative that generates a particular hierarchy of values, that is, a theory of value, setting the dimensions of a given exchange sphere. By inscribing itself within the terms of either political or consumer-oriented exchange sphere, an artwork gains circulation value but compromises its identity *qua* an artwork, thus degenerating into kitsch. In order to retain its cultural autonomy, then, an artwork needs to exist within its own sphere of circulation, a sphere that could only be constituted by a value-theory derived from the history of art itself.

The role of the art critic, then, is to shield the autonomous and self-centered life of the arts from the subjective judgments and whims of those who provide artists with the necessary financial support through an appeal to an historical, intra-theoretical standard of value. The critic succeeds in this task by serving as a liaison between the artworld and its patrons, as a guarantor of the objective value of art before the paying public which is thereby disenfranchised from deciding whether something is, in fact, a work of art (worth paying for). Greenberg's genius consisted in realizing just how easily such a setup could be brought about. In other words, Greenberg realized that people would much rather own art, sponsor art and know about art than actually look at artworks. An encounter with an actual artwork may be, in fact, undesirable; it may engender doubts about its value, lack of comprehension and even aversion. It is best, then, to assure the public that the value of the work of art on which it spends money and time does not depend on such uncertain factors as a personal reaction to displayed properties, but is secured in an objective and impersonal fashion by the place the artwork occupies within the theoretical space of reasons.

An art critic *qua* a master of theory, then, becomes a kind of glorified investment advisor who assures the buyer of the enduring value of the piece s/he is buying; a public funding board of the enduring cultural value of the show for which the grants are allocated; the reading public of the immense significance of the show they're attending; and a cultural parvenu of the wisdom of his or her borrowed opinions. On the revised terms of the game, one can become quite proficient at discoursing on the subject of art without seeing a single artwork and without possessing any kind of special sensibility or talent. If we trust Shusterman, one can even do philosophy of art construed purely as a kind of metacriticism.^[24] All the while, the actual artists can continue their work without paying much heed to the changing whims of the public, under the rhetorical foil supplied by aesthetic theory.

This account, of course, is somewhat of a caricature; however, it succeeds in suggesting a striking similarity between Greenberg's artwork/commodity distinction and Danto's distinction between artwork and mere real thing. Greenberg's distinction, of course, relies on an implicit value judgment; and Danto's, I think, cannot fail to do so as well. The point I am trying to make is that insofar as the distinction between artwork and mere real thing implies a value judgment, supposedly mediated by the objective criteria supplied by aesthetic theory, the distinction cannot be defended on purely

philosophical grounds without invoking some sort of cognitive privilege. Any attempt to elevate such a distinction to the status of a philosophically justified strategy will necessarily founder in virtue of considerations cited by critics like Margolis and briefly rehearsed in this essay. Hence it may be best to abandon the distinction altogether; in the process, sidestepping the danger of convincing ourselves that the primary function of art is to advance aesthetic theory rather than to provide meaningful experiences of enjoyment and appreciation.

3. Conclusion

For quite a number of years Margolis had argued that Danto's distinction between artworks and mere real things generates insoluble paradoxes related to phenomenology of aesthetic perception and ontology of artworks. Yet the distinction has continued to resurface on a regular basis in philosophical literature. To this day, it seems to be implied in the background of many discussions that make no explicit reference to Danto's work, such as those that assume a principled theoretical distinction between artistic and non-artistic uses of modern technology, etc. Danto's own reply to Margolis has been that his theory is not concerned with the phenomenology of perception but only with the analysis of truth conditions obtained in cultural language. In this essay, I argued that the distinction cannot be defended even on these grounds without assigning an unwarranted discursive privilege to certain critical and art-historical practices.

I would further like to suggest that instead of thinking that our discussions of art are ultimately grounded in the terms of one or another normative rational framework, we should view them as historically conditioned productions of certain discursive practices that arise in response to diverse social and cultural demands of their time, providing their participants with opportunities for productive and meaningful exchanges. At the time when Danto first introduced the distinction between artworks and mere real things, this distinction enabled theorists of art to engage certain artworks, most notably the works of pop-art, in new and largely unexpected ways. Artists in the first half of the twentieth century showed a sustained interest in addressing theoretical problems related to the exercise of their craft. Pop-art, on the other hand, can be seen as redirecting attention from the questions of theory to the appreciation of the everyday, mundane mere things of contemporary culture. Danto's ingenious theoretical maneuver enabled philosophers to eliminate this apparent discontinuity and consequently to see the work of Warhol as a logical culmination of the artistic tradition rather than a radical break with it. That in and of itself was a very interesting move.

However, it had the unfortunate upshot of convincing a number of people in the philosophical profession that since artworks are essentially about theory, one should be justified in discussing theory without discussing art because in the end it is theory that makes an artwork out of the mere real thing. It is only natural, of course, that participants in any meaningful cultural discourse should pay closer attention to the founding texts or artifacts that belong to their own field of play; that artists would be more interested in artworks while

philosophers may be more interested in scholarly papers on the subject of art. The problem is, rather, one of emphasis. Thus, we can either view the landmark works in our own field of inquiry (philosophy) as opening up new possibilities for constructive dialogue with the work done in other fields (art) or we can interpret them as endowing us with a license to insist that this dialogue should be conducted exclusively on our own terms which are understood to be dialectically superior.

My intuition is that whenever we opt for this second alternative, whether we construe it as a final dialectical *Aufhebung* or as an analytic reduction, we sooner or later end up generating complex and rather technical puzzles, the resolution of which oftentimes remains a matter of utmost indifference to anyone outside our own narrowly focused profession. Danto's theory, in my view, started off as an interesting way to engage artists in a new kind of dialogue, as well as a way of radically altering the terms of the then-current philosophical discussions. Further down the road, it ended up being a locus of specialized philosophical quarrels. My intention, accordingly, was to review the current state of the argument, as I see it, so as to suggest that we are now in a position to move past it.

Endnotes

[1] Gregory Currie, *An Ontology of Art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p.19.

[2] Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *Journal of Philosophy*, 61, 19 (1964).

[3] David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 77.

[4] See, for instance, Joseph Margolis, "Farewell to Danto and Goodman," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 38 (1998), pp. 353-374, and Joseph Margolis, "A Closer Look at Danto's Account of Art and Perception," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 40 (2000), pp. 325-339.

[5] David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 7.

[6] See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

[7] Joseph Margolis, *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?* (University Park: The Penn State Press, 1999), p. 136.

[8] Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

[9] Arthur Danto, "Indiscernibility and Perception: A Reply to Joseph Margolis," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 39 (1999), p. 329.

[10] *Ibid*, p. 324.

[11] Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *Journal of Philosophy*, 61, 19 (1964).

[12] For a detailed account of the distinction, see Arthur

Danto, "Works of Art and Mere Real Things," in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

[13] Joseph Margolis, "Farewell to Danto and Goodman," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 38 (1998), p. 365.

[14] Joseph Margolis, "A Closer Look at Danto's Account of Art and Perception," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 40 (2000), p. 326.

[15] David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 53-56.

[16] Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 49.

[17] Joseph Margolis, "A Closer Look at Danto's Account of Art and Perception," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 40 (2000), p. 339.

[18] Peter Lamarque, "Work and Object," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, p. 141.

[19] Arthur Danto, "Indiscernibility and Perception: A Reply to Joseph Margolis," *British Journal Aesthetics*, 39 (1999), p. 329.

[20] Peter Lamarque, "Work and Object," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 102 (2002), 141-162.

[21] *Ibid*, p. 148.

[22] *Ibid*, p. 154.

[23] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 3-21.

[24] Richard Shusterman, *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 26.

Serge Grigoriev

2003 Chestnut St., Apt. 208

Philadelphia, PA 19103

sgrigoriev@hotmail.com

Published December 7, 2005