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SYMPOSIUM Danto's The Transfiguration of the Commonplace Twenty-Five Years Later

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Danto's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* Twenty-Five Years Later

SYMPOSIUM

Presented at the 2006 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics

The papers that follow were all given at the 2006 annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics that was held in Milwaukee as part of a symposium in honor of the 25th anniversary of the publication of Arthur Danto's *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. The idea for the symposium first occurred to me while I was teaching a seminar on *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* in the fall of 2005. Arthur Danto's book had an enormous influence on me and many other philosophers of art. The idea of assessing the viability of some of its main theses in light of the quarter of a century that had passed since its publication seemed timely. When Danto agreed to comment upon the papers, the stage was set for an interesting intellectual conversation.

When the papers were actually presented in Milwaukee, it was to an overflow crowd, with many eager listeners in the hallway straining to hear what was being said. Partially as a result of this interest, it seemed appropriate to publish the papers given on that occasion in written form. Although there have been some alterations to the papers, they remain in much the same form in which they were given orally.

My own contribution to the symposium focuses on the question of whether a work of art can count as (a work of) philosophy. The issue of the relationship between art and philosophy as forms of knowledge was raised by Hegel, a philosopher who has exerted a great deal of influence on Danto. After discussing the differences between Hegel's view and Danto's, I ask whether the presence of competing interpretations of a "philosophical" artwork doesn't undermine the thesis that art can be philosophy.

In her contribution, Cynthia Freeland examines the relationship between Arthur Danto's philosophy of art and his practice of art criticism. From the time of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto is known at least as much for his art criticism as for his philosophy of art. But Freeland argues that Danto's practice of art criticism is an inadequate model for understanding the point of art criticism. In place of Danto's notion that art criticism should provide an interpretation of a work's meaning, Freeland argues that more of a place must be made for the critical evaluation of the value of a work.

Ivan Gaskell examines Danto's distinction between artworks and "mere real things" in an innovative manner in his contribution to the symposium. Taking a real thing — an eighteenth-century tool for sifting grain (a riddle) as a case study — Gaskell examines it in three different contexts — the home of its first known owner, a museum exhibition, and the world of the Nipmuc Indians, its presumed makers. He asks whether the distinction that Danto makes so much of in his work between artworks and mere real things has any

pertinence when artifacts can be used or regarded so variously in the course of their existence.

In his reply, Danto explains that *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* was essentially a contribution to the ontology of art, in which two necessary conditions emerge as essential to a real definition of the art work: that an artwork must (a) have meaning and (b) must embody it meaning. After presenting an account of his first viewing of *Brillo Box* and how that affected his understanding of the philosophy of art, Danto responds to some of the criticisms made by the symposiasts. Contra Freeland, he claims that a valid critical practice can be derived from his two necessary conditions and attempts to draw a distinction between works of art and artifacts that Gaskell had questioned.

Thomas E. Wartenberg