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Danto: The Transfiguration of the Commonplace / Wollheim: Art and Its Objects

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zero after the Revolution. Final shots of consumer products on the lawn seem as studied as a French parterre. The direction of Godard's career will be toward "research."

Notes

1. In his preface Guzzetti extends his gratitude to several of his teachers, including the late Professor Heuben A. Brower (who studied with L. A. Richards) and two of Brower's students, Richard Polier and Anne Ferry.

2. "In A Chinese Jean-Pierre I Échoué, after a declamatory statement. 'We need violence,' says (evidently to Godard), 'You're laughing; you think I'm showing off for the camera not at all!' Whereupon Godard cuts to a reverse angle, showing the enormity of the camera. In Godard's Far from Vietnam, we see him delivering a monologue while standing next to a 35-mm Mitchell. Paraphrasing Vertov, he titles this film Camera-Eye, which, in conjunction with the imagery, expresses a distinction as much as an identity. In light of this it cannot be surprising that his post-1968 filmmaking collective should be named 'the Dziga-Vertov Group' and that its films should, like Vertov's, take pains to show, and account for the role of, the apparatus" (p. 236).


Reviewed by David Carrier
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Aestheticians study in the abstract questions that art critics study in the concrete: what is art? why has it value? how do we interpret it, and why do we disagree about such interpretations? These books — two of the three great recent ones in aesthetics — both start with ontological questions: to decrismo art we must first determine what artworks are.

Consider visual artworks only. Obviously — someone carrying a Marden would certainly agree — they are physical objects. But if paintings are physical objects, why do we disagree about their interpretation when we don't ordinarily disagree about descriptions of objects? We agree about the shape and weight of this journal, but not, probably, about how to describe the art illustrated in it. Interpretation of art is complex in part because sometimes facts previously unnoticed or dismissed as irrelevant, can suddenly be seen to pertain to the work" (Wollheim). Interest in broken brush strokes leads to admiration for Guardi; and we see Louis's color, "embedded in, or pressed down upon, the surface" as strikingly like Goya's. Restorations also raise such questions. If the painting Bacchus and Anadyne is a physical object made by Titian, then how can we object — and many people did — to cleaning it? When that physical object darkens, the painting darkens also. If we prefer the restored work, perhaps it is because we think of the painting as an arrangement of colors embodied only contingently in that object. The painting is incorruptible.

Even if artworks are physical objects, how we interpret them is based upon beliefs about qualities with which we can't see just by looking at them. Danto has a wonderful example. The same color pattern, a red square, could represent the Israelite crossing the Red Sea just when Pharaoh's army drowned; express Kierkegaard's mood; consist of the ground for an unrealized Giorgione; or be a non-representational, non-expressionist minimalist work. Analogously, we call The Polish Rider expressive because of how we think Rembrandt made it. An identical-looking object made by spinning paint in a centrifuge might not be expressive. Also, how we interpret a work depends upon when and by whom it is made, features often not determinable by visual inspection alone. Thus, a Morris hemp pile could not have become an artwork in the seventeenth century "because the concept of art had not then evolved in such a way as to be able to accommodate it" (Danto). And a depiction of a subway station anticipates the later motifs of Rothko if it were made by him, but not if it were made by Hopper.

Why do we value art? Saying "art is expressive" could suggest that it merely gives experiences we might have had in a world without art. Seeing a sunset, I may feel a Watteau-esque sense of transience. The advantage of Turner's paintings, Ruskin said, is that seeing them lets us easily view scenes which appear only rarely in nature. Danto and Wollheim find this view unsatisfactory. It is because the materials of art present unpredictable "difficulties that can be dealt with only in the actual working of them," Wollheim says, that "they are so suitable as expressive processes." Imagine how differently we would see paintings if we thought that paint never dripped or smeared. Artistic representations, Danto argues, are not just substitutes for what they represent. Lichtenstein's painting of Loran's diagram of a Cézanne portrait is, unlike that diagram, an artwork: "It is a transfiguration of the portrait. The viewer must know the portrait, know the Loran diagram, accept certain connotations of the content of the diagram and infuse the portrait with those connotations." Saying an artwork expresses a feeling is not to imply that the feeling can be identified independently of the work. But though we can't paraphrase the feeling, we can use criticism or other possibly contrasting works to help someone "get it." "We can compensate for how little we are able to say by how much we are able to do" (Wollheim).
To follow these arguments about particular aesthetic issues we must see how these books are parts of different philosophical frameworks. As Danto has said, study of individual philosophical issues in isolation isn’t interesting: all important philosophy is systematic.

Danto’s account of representations describes visual images, sentences, and artworks as both things and symbols. Seeing a poinciana, I have a mental image which refers to that animal. A depiction of Christ is both just brown pigment and a representation of Him. His name, that black ink on this page, denotes Ilim. Even Fountain is both a material thing and something different from other identical-looking fixtures. They are only urinals; Fountain is an artwork.

Matching representations to the world always leaves room for skepticism. I see Sharon wearing a new coat and so believe she has purchased it. I am right, but my belief is not justified by what I see. Her coat is being hemmed, and she is wearing Barbara’s. I flick the light switch and the lights go out. But I have not turned them off. The electrician is changing the fuse. Detesting a dirty room divider, a Japanese aesthetic replaces it with a landscape: “The same distribution of grays and blacks may be found that defaced its merely domestic predecessor. These blacks are mountains.” Our earlier remark that you can’t tell the properties of an artwork just by looking at it can be generalized. Beliefs, actions, and artworks are identifiable only when placed in relation to the system of our beliefs, actions, and artworks.

This metaphysics is philosophically controversial. Danto talks of “the space between language and the world,” a vivid metaphor emphasizing how representations are both things in the world and symbols for things which may not even exist (We can depict or talk about unicorns.) Naturalists deny that there exists anything outside the world. There is no space between representations and the world, and so such skepticism is impossible. Moral and aesthetic values, too, are only in the world. The value of art is rooted in nonartistic experience. For example, enjoyment of beauty is perhaps sublimated sexual pleasure, as Stendhal hinted: “Beauty is the promise of happiness.”

Wolffheim is a naturalist. Showing how aesthetic and moral values derive from certain more primitive feelings, he describes “psychic flaws, such as the reparative drive or the desire to establish whole objects, without which art and its value would be barely comprehensible.” This is not to say that art merely reproduces these infantile states. Freud’s analysis of Leonardo’s paintings as if they were dreams is deficient precisely because it makes that error. “No artistic impulse,” Wolffheim notes, “can be identified independently of the institutions of art.” But we cannot comprehend art properly without noting its primitive roots.

These brief, therefore necessarily crude remarks characterize positions which call for more analysis.

Calling Wolffheim a naturalist and Danto an antinaturalist is useful if we remember that subtle naturalists and equally subtle antinaturalists may not be all that far apart. The naturalist who connects development in the baroque with those early states in which the child cannot yet distinguish self from other acknowledges that in the baroque those states acquire new meaning, that only then are they aesthetically significant. Conversely, Danto reads sympathetically Nietzsche’s speculations about the origins of representation, at the distant epoch when representations were transformed from “magical incantations”—the actor imagined becoming the god—to “mere symbols,” the actor now only representing that deity. Danto’s statement that “we are representational systems,” containing within ourselves representations of the world, echoes Wolffheim’s note that what counts about our childhood experiences is how they “represent themselves to us.” When Danto says that “the greatest metaphors of art [are] those in which the spectator identifies himself with the represented character,” we might develop his idea by appealing to Wolffheim’s detailed description of the mechanisms of imagination.

Certainly these philosophical problems are fascinating and complex. But what is the nonphilosopher to make of this? Wolffheim imagines an interlocutor who, comparing the exciting but brief conclusion of his book with the earlier “dry and pedantic arguments,” exclaims: “this is more like aesthetics.” But hardly any Artforum article or review avoids making claims about the value of art or the nature of criticism which ultimately can only be justified by appeal to such “dry” arguments.

If the distance between criticism and philosophy appears so great, that is partly—to the detriment of both aesthetics and criticism—because there has been too little work done on bridging that gap.

Style, Danto says, is “what remains of a representation when we subtract its content.” Wolffheim adds: “style resides in what happens to the content.” The style of those books is part of their content. Their dense, deeply personal, almost Jamesian prose is not just decoration which more austere architects would eschew. Art is like philosophy when occasionally artworks seem almost diagrams of philosophical theories. A Johns flag illustrates one theory of self-reference. But philosophy, also, can be artlike. These reflections on, among other topics, style are themselves in a style that exemplifies the theory discussed. In this welding together “form and matter” so that they present “one single effect to the ‘imaginative reason,’” philosophy, like art, “aspires toward the condition of music.”
Notes

1 The third great book is discussed in my article in the October 1979 Antitorum.
2 Danto's metaphysics is presented in his Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge and Analytical Philosophy of Action, and summarized in his What Philosophy Is. Wolheim's naturalism is discussed in his "On Persons and Their Lives" in Amélie Rorty, ed., Explaining Emotions, and in his British Academy lecture, The Good Self and the Bad Self. Some of his essays on imagination and art history and criticism are collected in his On Art and the Mind. The personal relation of these textual relations to art is discussed in Danto's memorial to Munch and, in Wolheim's account of his great friend, the critic Adrian Stokes, in PN Review 15, 7(1) (1980); and in Wolheim's novel A Family Romance, and his account of the implicit social background to that novel, "Babylon, Babylone," Encounter, May 1962.


Reviewed by Wilbur Zelinsky
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Only once in a long while is cartographic literature enriched by a work that challenges the reader's critical faculties or asks interesting new questions. This is one of those rare occasions, for P. D. A. Harvey has done both. The author, professor of medieval history at the University of Durham, has provided us with the first detailed history of topographical maps from prehistoric times up through the sixteenth century (when they become recognizably modern); and, at the same time, he has proposed a theoretical framework to accommodate the available facts, one that compels us to wrestle with several basic issues in symbolic communication. Despite my reservations about his hypotheses, we have here a document I must strongly recommend to any serious student of visual communications, and not just cartography.

Before I begin jousting with some of Harvey's notions, let me offer the kindest of kind words about the book as an example of the art of bookmaking and for its packaging of a considerable mass of data. It is a lavishly volume in terms of page design, typography, paper, dust jacket, and, especially, the 106 illustrations, some of them in color. Moreover, Harvey's lucid prose and avoidance of jargon or intellectual posturing make this a work that can appeal to the greenest of novices as well as the most advanced of specialists.

It is essential to note the limits in coverage. Harvey has tried to concern himself solely with topographic maps, that is, schematic representations at a large scale of segments of the earth's surface small enough to lie within connotory range of their inhabitants. In their modern form, such maps are drawn to scale and combine the skills of surveyor and cartographer. They stand in contrast to "geographic," or small-scale, maps that cover much larger tracts far beyond the ken of any single observer—a species of cartography much better documented and researched than the subjects of this study. Despite the practical and theoretical importance of the distinction between the two genres, the author is obliged, on occasion, to treat some aspects of small-scale mapping, for its evolution was not entirely unrelated to the development of topographic mapping.

In his Introduction and 11 chapters that pursue a rather elastic chronological sequence, Harvey presents and interprets what appears to be every available scrap of evidence. (One can only marvel at his zeal and erudition.) And, until late medieval (or early modern?) times, the surviving examples of topographic mapping are scrappy indeed. With the utmost catholicity, the author reviews such aboriginal items as we have recovered to date that seem to be wholly or largely free of European influences and maps from the early Far East, India, Mexico, the Near East, and medieval Europe as well as ancient Greece (a grand total of one Hellenic artifact!) and Rome. They exist in a variety of physical media, including sticks, sand, clay, stone, metal coins, and mosaic tiles as well as the more familiar parchment and paper; and Harvey has reviewed a variety of representational forms bearing directly or indirectly on the matter at hand: building plans, elevations, aerial photos, legal documents, cadastral surveys, diagram maps, bird's-eye views, picture maps, landscape paintings, itinerary maps, and nautical charts. I do regret his saying so little about landscape painting and its connections with map-making, especially in the exuberant artistic traditions of China, Japan, and Western Europe; the topic is pregnant with unrealized possibilities.

All of this evidence is arrayed so as to support the basic argument of the book, as suggested in its subtitle: that there has been a progression from an initial primitive phase, in which highly abstract symbols prevailed, to the next, in which landscape details are rendered pictorially as they might be seen laterally or in diagonal perspective from above, and that the picture-map is succeeded by a culminating form, the survey map, in which the results of methodical survey are drawn more or less true to scale using abstract conventions and only a few vestigial pictorial symbols. One wonders whether a similar eschew might be suggested for other modes of communication.