

# Aesthetic Histories



Evental  
Aesthetics  
Vol. 2 No. 3 (2013)

# Evental Aesthetics

www.eventalaesthetics.net

ISSN: 2167-1931



Vol. 2, No.3 (2013)  
Aesthetic Histories

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# Aesthetic Histories

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Mandy-Suzanne Wong Introduction	4
Prudence Gibson <i>Collision: The House on the Hill: Art Experience and Fictions</i>	7
Jason Hoelscher Autopoietic Art Systems and Aesthetic Swarms: Notes on Polyphonic Purity and Algorithmic Emergence	15
Sarah Snyder Art and the Possibility of Metaphysics: Theodor Adorno on Tragedy as the Origin of Aesthetic Autonomy	40
Joanna Demers <i>Reading: The Novelty of Looking Back: Simon Reynolds' Retromania</i>	53
Theodore Gracyk Music, Indiscernible Counterparts, and Danto on Transfiguration	58

# Introduction

Mandy–Suzanne Wong

**H**istory is a contingent, viscous, noisome, scintillating, vibrating mesh of serendipitous convergences. This issue of *Evental Aesthetics* represents one such unforeseen yet fortunate confluence. Because this journal publishes online, an unexpected surfeit of rigorous and well-crafted submissions does not entail the difficult decision, which is faced by many print journals, of having to reject some of those deserving articles despite their impeccable quality, simply on account of limited page space. On the contrary, because EA is online, open-access, and independent, we can do more than we expect. We editors can adjust our expectations, we can have them changed for us by authors, taking advantage of contingency, opportunity, and inspiration. That is how this issue happened.

Upon our most recent call for papers, we received close to a dozen essays that deserve to be presented to our readership. Our decision was to publish all of them. Instead of the single issue that we had planned for this winter, there will therefore be two wintertime issues of EA. The first is what you see before you, entitled *Aesthetic Histories*. The second, with

a themed section on poverty and asceticism, will appear in January of 2014.

*Aesthetic Histories* consists of several essays that, whilst they were submitted in response to our regular “open” call, share a common interest. That we received them all at approximately the same time is sheer coincidence. Ironically, the last time EA’s authors serendipitously converged around a common intellectual point, the result was an issue on missed opportunity (Vol. 1 No. 2, *The Missed*). This time, our contributors’ shared concern is the inspiring and confounding, healthy and uncomfortable and above all inevitable relationship between history and aesthetic praxis.

Philosophers and scholars of the humanities are careful with history. Historical thinking rarely happens *sans* critique nowadays; and in the wake of Foucauldian archaeology, Agamben’s work on paradigms and signatures, Object-Oriented Ontology, Morton’s thinking on hyperobjects, and far from least of all Arthur Danto’s philosophy “after the end of art,” that is only as it should be. Thinking, and aesthetic thinking in particular, continually interrogates the relationship between current practices and bygone things.

Our contributor Jason Hoelscher offers a model of art history based on biological formations such as swarms. In what might be called an aesthetic historiography, he emphasizes the role of tendency in the development of visual art forms. Using object-oriented ontology, Prudence Gibson navigates the precarious shoals between narration in general and aesthetic experience, between events and tales and ubiquitous, overwhelming aesthetic objects, as she visits a rundown old house that is also a museum, an artwork, and a story full of holes.

Theodore Gracyk is suspicious of the supposedly dependent relationship, championed by the late Arthur Danto, between art-historical knowledge and what Danto calls the transfiguration of the commonplace: the re-envisioning of non-art objects as art. Via several telling examples from popular music, Gracyk refutes Danto’s thesis that artworks are distinguishable *qua* artworks by their recognizable roles in art history. Gracyk further suggests that the concept of “fine art,” an umbrella under which may gather all art forms, is equally unhelpful in determining whether or not a given object constitutes art.

Sarah Snyder examines several reasons why an art form goes out of style. Investigating the demise of Classical-style tragedy, which if it were written today would receive little positive attention, she finds that this art form relies on an assumption of the autonomy of human reason. Although the same assumption led Immanuel Kant to a theory of aesthetic autonomy, Snyder argues that it is no longer viable today. The purview of tragedy is in fact metaphysics, she suggests: another intellectual realm that has fallen out of style.

Finally, Joanna Demers examines new music that attempts to precisely replicate older songs and performances. Her essay consists of thoughts and questions inspired by her reading of Simon Reynolds' recent book, *Retromania*. With this evocative editorial, Demers inaugurates a new component of *Evental Aesthetics* that is provisionally entitled "Reading." Her encounter with Reynolds' book takes the form not of a review but of a launching point for discussion in which reading, as a mutually affective relation with a text, continues long after the last page. In general, the "Reading" section of the journal will consist of question-provoking responses to other academic publications. The particulars of this section will solidify gradually throughout the coming year.

# COLLISION

Vol. 2, No. 3 (2013)  
Aesthetic Histories

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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Gibson, Prudence. "The House on the Hill: Art Experience and Fictions."  
*Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 3 (2013): 7-14.

## ABSTRACT

This Collision explores the relationship between Object-Oriented Ontology theory, the "aesthetic experience" of a contemporary artwork (Iris Haussler's *He dreamed overtime* from 2012) and the creeping hand of fiction. OOO is a useful theory to apply to contemporary art, as it charts a philosophical return to all things as objects, rather than their relations or networks. It is also timely for understanding the changing nature of multi-media art, wherein experience, interactivity, spectatorial agency and contingent narratives are key.

## KEYWORDS

Object Oriented Ontology, aesthetics, art writing, semi-fiction, flat ontology reality

# The House on the Hill: Art Experience and Fictions

Prudence Gibson

This is a rejection of the hierarchy of criticism, as a system of removed expertise or authoritative didacticism. Instead, it is an inquiry into the experience of art and a tendency to lean towards fictional elements, when the aesthetic experience begins to overwhelm. The main tenets of OOO's flat ontology are equality, non-subjectivity and a grasping of the real. Fictive elements may not be true but they are real.

Art has become more participatory and performative. These changes in the fundamental characteristics of art experience mean that an expanded reality, where all objects exist on a flat ontological plane, is evident and writing needs to match this. The main question posed in this Collision, but left unanswered, is whether there is philosophical room for an excursion from art experience into semi-fiction?

## • The House on the Hill •

Recently I disembarked a small ferry and stepped onto the listing wharf of Cockatoo Island, in the middle of Sydney Harbour. I pushed through the rain and wind, struggling to keep control of my flimsy pink umbrella, and headed for a little house at the top of a hill. The house was of white fibre-board with banks of studio windows. From outside, it looked warm and inviting. There was a strong smell of “art” as I sidestepped a man with a heavy Drizabone, in order to cross the threshold. The arty smell was wax, turpentine, paint and paper. The floorboards creaked, the weatherboards sighed, the windows whistled and the dripping taps cried. I had to resist a strong urge to pat the door jamb in sympathy, so unhappy was this run-down house. It was a wrinkled old man of a house, a putrid sickly reminder of unfulfilled love.

The house was an art work.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition was a biennale.<sup>2</sup> The island was the art site. Each room of the house told parts of a story. Strange rock-like relics, found in the caves of the island and first thought to be fossils, were exhibited around the house. Documentary information, lying on a bench, explained (to any spectator willing to fossick) that the relics belonged to a ranger, Ted Wilson, who had fallen in love with the caretaker’s daughter. There were busts of her imagined, re-created body lying on workbenches and a small room was full of wax models ready to be cast up. There were x-rays of a necklace buried beneath an old oak tree outside the house. This, the evidence showed the spectators, was where the couple had to bury a talisman of their love because they were star-crossed and could not be together. There were maps and diagrams of where the couple met for their passionate trysts.

This house, this artwork, was an archaeological shrine to lost love, beckoning the spectator to participate and to make her own narrative. Even though the participants of the story and the ranger were no longer around, the house seemed to live on in a melancholic malaise. It still had a faint pulse. It was a research museum, persistent in its process of becoming and un-becoming. Dusty, old and full of curiosities, it was a cabinet. As spectators arrived and wandered from room to room, hearing half-stories from other spectators and a Sydney Biennale warden, their imaginations were piqued. From its elevated position on the hill, we could

stand on the front verandah and see the many other installations and sculptures scattered across the island for the biennale and notice they were objects too, as were the old buildings, the docking bays, the crumbling wharf and other wandering art lovers, drenched with rain. This attention to the other artworks and other things made clear that this particular object, the house, had morphed into a true story, then into a massively multiplied fabrication, then into a new aggregated truth. This story was outside usual thought because it had launched into fiction, into non-reality, in a collective construction of half truths.

The house on the hill provided a number of object-oriented pluralities. There were the wax body parts, the room of curious collectibles, the casts abandoned in the bathroom: these were the upheavals of lost or star-crossed love. There was also the relationship between the spectators, as they walked furrow-browed around the house, unsure if it was an artwork, a prank, a reality show or just an abandoned home. Even though all these elements or objects were close to one another, they did not touch. OOO theorist Graham Harman explains this as withdrawal, where real and sensual things exist only as they are, irrespective of us.<sup>3</sup> They affect each other but only through vicarious causation, where an effect is caused but without touch.<sup>4</sup>

There were the stories spectators told each other as they came and went, creating new narratives. A man stopped me by placing his hand on my arm and whispering, "ask about the x-ray!" There were the substances of natural origin, such as rock and plant relics from the island which, in an OOO context, exist as objects which might be actants in an event anterior or posterior to human existence.<sup>5</sup> There were the digital documentations, such as a laptop with research information, x-rays and blueprint plans of the island. Then there was the force, the mood of the humans walking within the space. All these elements converged during the time I was there. All these elements were independent entities in an Object-Oriented Ontology.<sup>6</sup>

The most important key was that the artwork functioned without spectators too.<sup>7</sup> It reminded me of Negarestani's oil, described as a sentient lubricant in his philosophical novel *Cyclonopedia*. The vitality of non-human things develops historical and political stories in new ways, tinkering with untruths and playing with complex ethics through para-narrative.<sup>8</sup> The concept of vital non-human objects is where the experience of the art triggers a series of events (causation), even events that occurred in the past.<sup>9</sup> The viewing becomes an event which lasts

throughout an enduring length of time and space, which mobilises fiction (imagination) and provides a view, if not from the outside then at least from the periphery.

In the context of Object-Oriented Ontology, an off-shoot of Speculative Realism,<sup>10</sup> this state of withdrawing is standard.<sup>11</sup> In OOO, the agency and equality of things – all things, including the artwork house, wax models, strange woman, page of poetry, spectators – are massively expanded, democratized and given independence.<sup>12</sup> All interactions are indirect. Relations and networks are becoming ever more complex in this globalised digital age, and there is the danger that they have usurped or eclipsed the relevance of objects. OOO restores an interest in the artwork as a vital object, offering multiple contingent narratives. We already perceive that the world acts upon us. OOO further suggests that the world is acting upon us but also acting independently of us or despite us, with or without us. Even then, there is still room for the human. Lingis' idea of instrumental connections relates to Timothy Morton's causality as aesthetics: the act and action of the event or happening creates an effect.<sup>13</sup> Morton sees aesthetics as a place of real illusions. This is to acknowledge the mystifying nature of things and also to understand the reality of cause and effect as bound up with this. Morton, in *Realist Magic*, sees regular events as aesthetics. He sees the motion of a saw through wood and a worm oozing out of wet soil, in fact any action, as an aesthetic: "the aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension."<sup>14</sup>

As I left the Biennale art house that soaking day, I watched a woman struggle with her umbrella whilst her coat flapped open with each surge of wind. She had dangly earrings shaped like crosses and inlaid with bone, and as she finally conquered her wet weather gear, I saw a sheet of paper fall from her pocket. Even though I called out to her, she couldn't hear, so heavy was the drumming rain by this stage. There was something about that woman. She was a mother, a daughter, a wife, a grandmother. She was one of those people so crippled by love that it snakes away, twisting into a monstrous version of eroticism. I was afraid of her. I stuffed the paper in my pocket, hoping to catch her and return her work, but knowing I wouldn't, because she trotted down the hill and straight onto a ferry bound for the city, even before I had managed to extract my own pink umbrella from the messy pile near the door.

I stepped off the porch and took two steps from the house. I had to push hard against a sucking feeling from behind. A malevolent draught of wind? A strangely specific gust? I soon arrived safely under the wharf

shelter about ten minutes later, waiting for the next ferry to arrive. I pulled from my pocket the piece of slightly wet paper the woman had dropped. It was some kind of prose poem. The style reminded me of the *Site Recite* monologue written by video artist Gary Hill.<sup>15</sup> It read:

The familiar house dampens the day, with mouldy patches of tea-coloured moisture. Stains of past darkness edge through the worm hole up ahead, snake across ceilings and walls. Those red-eyed fiends are always watching me. How can I smell the dankness when I have no nose, no sense of reality? If a tin roof echoes the falling rain and the drum of reverberations travels up from my feet, will you still love me?

Patterns of tomorrow rumble around this house, where passions are stopped by heavy water and the rage of forgetting will never cease. These feelings spread, sensations chase fields of possibilities – memories of the smell of your neck, the soft hair on your thighs. But I can't wait forever and the pain in my side is too sharp. Cross that threshold of queasy fear and take the chance you've always wanted.

Fly to another place where all are the same and everything is different. It's better not to question the contingencies of change for they are weaker than the wind and kinder than the rustling leaves. I can see the fluttering colours of the more-than-human in the long house down the hill but I will never understand the false modesty of a virtual world, where love is only skin deep.

I folded the page neatly and tucked it into my zippered purse. I jumped on board the next tiny ferry and bobbed and scaled and nose-dived the harbour waves, all the way back to Circular Quay, wishing I knew the woman who wrote the prose poem, even though my instinct was that she was dangerous.

## • Notes •

<sup>1</sup> Iris Haussler, *He dreamed overtime*, Cockatoo Island, Biennale of Sydney, 2012.  
[http://www.haeussler.ca/iris/he\\_dreamed.html](http://www.haeussler.ca/iris/he_dreamed.html).

<sup>2</sup> 18th Biennale of Sydney, Cockatoo Island, 27 June - 16 September 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), 114.

<sup>4</sup> Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 91.

<sup>5</sup> This is a development of ancestral things, objects which Quentin Meillassoux discusses in his book, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Graham Harman is the originator of OOO, having coined the term in his 1999 thesis on Heidegger, which was later published as *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002). Graham Harman, Tim Morton (*Realist Magic*), Ian Bogost (*Alien Phenomenology*) and Levi Bryant (*The Democracy of Objects*) have since become some of the major OOO theorists.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008.)

<sup>9</sup> Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 169.

<sup>10</sup> In 2007, Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant participated in a conference entitled *Speculative Realism*, at Goldsmith's College, University of London, April 2007.

<sup>11</sup> This refers to the separation of objects from their qualities: Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, 212.

<sup>12</sup> The capacity of any entity, human or otherwise, to act in the world. This is not moral agency or collective will but a basic instinctual function of all beings, with the result of causing an effect, which is the creation of a new thing.

<sup>13</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *The First Person Singular* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 28.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Gary Hill, *Site Recite* (a prologue 1989), video, 4 minutes. For transcript, see: George Quasha and Charles Stein, *An Art of Limina: Gary Hill's Works and Writings* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2009.)

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Hoelscher, Jason. "Autopoietic Art Systems and Aesthetic Swarms: Notes on Polyphonic Purity and Algorithmic Emergence." *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 3 (2013): 15-39.

#### ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a prolegomenal model for the mechanisms through which new styles and schools of art – Cubism or conceptual art, for example – undergo the catalytic, evental transition from potential to actual. The model proposed herein, of fine art as a complex adaptive system that emerges and grows in a manner analogous to that of certain specific forms of biological organization, is predicated on a shift from the residual traces of Greenbergian disciplinary and mediumistic differentiation – grounded in an *analytic* autonomy – to modes of interaction and aesthetic signal exchange emergent from an *autopoietic* autonomy – a systemic process of autocatalysis and transformation similar to the recursively generative feedback relations seen in cell metabolism and in ecosystems. This conceptual recalibration leads to a model of artistic eventalization and change that algorithmically unfolds from the adjacent possible as an emergent phenomenon, analogous to the aggregative and spontaneous, self-organizational swarm behavior seen in the flocking of birds or the schooling of fish, applied here to schools of art.

#### KEYWORDS

adjacent possible, autopoiesis, complex adaptive systems, emergent phenomena, swarms

# Autopoietic Art Systems and Aesthetic Swarms: Notes on Polyphonic Purity and Algorithmic Emergence

Jason Hoelscher

- Introduction •

**M**odern art is often described as *art for art's sake*, as addressing its own manifest qualities while being largely unconcerned with external considerations — a view that tends toward closed, analytic systems of aesthetic purity. Figures such as Alfred Barr, Clement Greenberg and Joseph Kosuth described a progressive, teleological drive in modern art, implying a final state of aesthetic and mediumistic perfection, a concretized *modernism as being*. I believe, however, that modern art was instead predicated on an open-ended, algorithmic process of *becoming*, a system more akin to biological unfolding than to finalizable processes found in resolvable systems like mathematics. Such an interpretive realignment has major implications for modernism in general, and for our understanding of modernist differentiation and specificity in particular.

The present essay proposes an interconnected model of disciplinary differentiation as a nested aggregate of autopoietic systems, which interact as nodal points in topologically fluid networks oriented toward perpetual boundary exploration and signal exchange. These networks periodically undergo nonlinear, autocatalytic transitions into emergent phenomena known as swarm formations. The formal properties of any given swarm are determined by equilibrical tensions between the swarm's internal properties and the external pressures exerted by temporal and conceptual boundary conditions imposed by the adjacent possible, a kind of map of potentially-realizable "next-step" future conditions.

As we will see, this hybridization of concepts — operating at the intersection of biology, physics, and here, aesthetics — articulates a multivalent modernism that accounts for observed events in art history, while opening new possibilities for interpretation of those events' meaning and of their mechanisms of formal manifestation. The model here proposed has an additional virtue of articulating alternatives to antiquated, hazily defined metaphysical notions of "change" and "progress," offering instead a coalescent read of densely-interlocked, resonating paradigms from contemporary scientific approaches to flux, transformation and ambiguity. While the set of ideas invoked is admittedly complex at times, each concept will be defined as it is introduced. Further, while it is hoped that the ideas presented are robust enough to apply to a range of creative fields like literature and music, the examples herein are drawn from the visual arts, that being the field in which I am trained and with which I am most familiar.

I will establish the framework of modern art to which I am responding — primarily post-war American modernism, but extending briefly to earlier European forms — by considering particular ideas of Clement Greenberg, Joseph Kosuth, Immanuel Kant, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Mikhail Bakhtin and Jack Burnham; reviewing the literature of autopoietic systems by Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, Heinz von Foerster and Niklas Luhmann; and concluding with select contemporary concepts pertaining to eventalization; complex adaptive systems; the adjacent possible and emergent phenomena, developed by John Holland, Alain Badiou, Michel Foucault, Arthur Danto and Stuart Kauffman.

## • Analytic Autonomy: Art for Art for Art's Sake •

The notion of art for art's sake originated in the early nineteenth century; by the midpoint of the twentieth century the idea of artistic autonomy had been concentrated to the point that, ostensibly, any themes or ideas extrinsic to the medium itself were to be purged for the sake of idealist purity. Such a reductive approach to artistic creation led quickly to closed, analytic systems in which the synthetic incorporation of representation, illusionistic picture space or narrative were considered impure – and thus aesthetically taboo.

Writing in 1960, Clement Greenberg claimed that the goal of modernist art was to eliminate from each medium any quality that might be shared with other mediums, and thus

would each art be rendered "pure," and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standard of quality .... "Purity" meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.<sup>1</sup>

Nine years later Joseph Kosuth pushed the idea of purity even further, defining a conceptually ingressive involution that we might call *art for art for art's sake* by writing that "a work of art is a kind of *proposition* presented within the context of art as a comment on art."<sup>2</sup> Kosuth quoted A.J. Ayer's surmise that a "proposition is analytic when its validity depends solely on the definitions of the symbols it contains,"<sup>3</sup> summing up with the declaration that works of art "are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context – as art – they provide no information what-so-ever about any matter of fact."<sup>4</sup>

Through Greenberg and Kosuth we see art presented as *autotelic*, as an object or concept that only has purpose inherent to itself. While such a self-contained, analytic approach shares structural components with the methodology of Immanuel Kant, whom Greenberg describes as the first modernist, there is also a strong current of Hegelian, dialectical progress inherent in such a drive toward purity.<sup>5</sup> Without naming it as such, Greenberg writes of this dialectical drive by describing painting's progressive purging of impurities – in this case of sculptural, spatial

illusionism — that occurred in European painting from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, resulting in a kind of painterly synthesis “so flat indeed that it could hardly contain recognizable images.”<sup>6</sup>

It seems that the eventual goal of such a progression would be the achievement of a point beyond which an artistic antithesis would no longer be possible, having attained a final state of purification and perfection. This long-term teleological drive in modern art is thus predicated on a notion we might call finalizability, borrowing the term from Mikhail Bakhtin: art is finalizable in that it is an endeavor that can be finished, a closed system that can be resolved and considered complete.<sup>7</sup>

Such a model provides a useful framework through which to understand reductivist tendencies in modernism, but it is nonetheless highly problematic. In his *Critique of Judgment*, for example, Kant describes the work of art as operating with a degree of open-endedness, a teleologically ambiguous “purposiveness without purpose” that distinguishes it from resolvable fields of human endeavor such as science or mathematics.<sup>8</sup> An end-game teleological interpretation of modernism — or at least of the modernism espoused by Greenberg et al — would appear to imply its own purpose, that of an eventual conclusion through achievement of a final state. While Greenberg cites Kant with some frequency in order to ground his ideas about art, the kind of teleology his writings suggest is a type that Kant himself reserved for mechanical systems that operate according to a definable purpose, rather than the open, ostensibly endless processes one finds in biological life forms, works of art, and other phenomena not explicitly subsumable by concepts or final causes.<sup>9</sup>

Teleologically finalizable creativity might therefore be considered more akin to the work of a scientist or technician — and therefore perhaps not “art” at all — due to an essential difference

between a work which, once created, can be studied and understood down to its very roots, and a work which provides endless food for thought and is as inexhaustible as the world itself. The steps of scientific progress can be repeated identically.<sup>10</sup> A work of art cannot be repeated, and is always unique and complete.

A finalizable, mechanical teleology of modern art is thus problematic, because art in such a narrative is either incapable of attaining a state of purification – thus failing at what seems a major, if implicit, goal of late modernism – or else it is *not actually art*, being instead only a reasonable facsimile thereof that operates within the purposive, teleological framework of final causes and resolvable systems.

Such a narrow read of modern “art,” then, is predicated on an analytic autonomy, an ingressive dialectical progress toward finality that defines boundaries in order to prevent contamination from impurities like picture space, narrative and other synthetic elements. Although this understanding of modernism appears to align with observed postwar American art history and discourse, it is my belief that modernism was not predicated on a teleologically static and closed *analytic autonomy*, but rather on an emergent, algorithmic process that I will here call *autopoietic autonomy*, a conceptual realignment with important implications for understanding how artistic styles emerge, differentiate and change.

## • Autopoietic Autonomy: Algorithmic Systems Aesthetics •

Autopoietic processes drive bounded, interactive systems like cellular metabolism or ecosystems, capable of high degrees of both self-sustaining autonomy and interactive feedback relations with surrounding systems. An autopoietic model applied to postwar modernism would therefore be predicated less on the creation and reinforcement of boundaries for the sake of preventing impurity, and more on the articulation and maintenance of boundaries in order to distinguish between the system in question and other systems operative within the same context. The difference thus hinges on the distinction between *boundaries for the sake of exclusion* and *boundaries for the enhancement and facilitation of interchange*.

A simple analogy is the difference between a bowl of water and a bowl of ice cubes. While each bowl contains the same substance, the liquid water is in a way incapable of interaction because it is manifest in a single, homogeneous form. The ice cubes, however, possess defined boundaries and can therefore interact with, and be jostled into different configurations among, the other ice cubes. Through the creation of

boundaries by sectioning into discrete units, interaction is facilitated more effectively than by the undifferentiated, ostensibly “purer” liquid form.

The difference between analytic autonomy and autopoietic autonomy thus derives in large part from the functions of the boundaries set in place, including their roles in swarm formation, as will be shown below. *Analytic autonomous boundaries* keep impure elements out; *autopoietic autonomous boundaries* facilitate interaction and hybridization between aesthetic and memetic units. Notable examples include the reciprocal influences of early film on Cubism and of Cubism on stage design, the influence of Jungian thought on abstract expressionism, or Robert Rauschenberg’s frequent interweaving of performance, visual arts and dance. Such syntheses are common in art history but are often excluded from more analytic or formalist narratives of art, perhaps because they do not fit such narratives’ constructed storylines. Among such oft-overlooked models of art is that of systems aesthetics, a relational model proposed by Jack Burnham, which is predicated on the fact that while “the object almost always has a fixed shape and boundaries, the consistency of a system may be altered in time and space, its behavior determined both by external conditions and its mechanisms of control.”<sup>11</sup>

Whereas Greenberg considered the mediumistic differentiation of modernism in a manner appropriate to the Cold War era — as a type of fortification — such medium differentiation may also be considered as an example of boundary articulation wherein a form stakes out a position from which to interact with other cultural forms. This alternative interpretation releases modernism from many of the extraneous discursive limitations that have accumulated over the years. For example, such a multivalent, explicitly interactive modernism not only explains the exploratory drive of the avant-garde, but also allows for the reintroduction of movements and artists once purged as “impure,” such as Francis Picabia’s late work, Surrealism and Art Brut. Further, this reading facilitates a modernism that — as per Jacques Rancière’s aesthetic regime and distribution of the sensible — breaks down the partitions “between works of pure art and ... the decorative arts,”<sup>12</sup> asserting “the absolute singularity of art [while destroying] any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity [and establishing] the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself.”<sup>13</sup> It also accounts for the idea of “many modernisms” noted in recent years: there have always been many modernisms — autopoietic, interactive aesthetic systems operating in resonance — a fact that was obscured by end-game narratives that foregrounded only one specific modernist formulation.<sup>14</sup>

This ability of discretely articulated units to maintain coherence in relation to surrounding units leads to reciprocally defined boundary formation and dialogism grounded in autopoietic process: the boundary of any given self-sustaining system, such as a specific medium separated from others by formalist discourse, is mutually and differentially defined by the surrounding, self-sustaining systems. These relations create opportunities for exchange and interaction, creating a space of dynamic equilibrium in which each component maintains autonomy while also engaging in high-level interaction, much like cells in a body that maintain boundary coherence as individual cells, yet also contribute to the formation of a larger organism.

The term *autopoiesis*, coined by the biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, describes systems in terms similar to Kant's articulation of the qualities of mechanical and biological processes. Here is the definition of autopoietic machine systems used by Maturana and Varela:

[An] autopoietic machine is a machine organized as a network of processes of production of components that produces the components which: (i) through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and (ii) constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in the space in which they (the components) exist by specifying the topological domain of its realization as such a network. It follows that an autopoietic machine continuously generates and specifies its own organization through its operation as a system of production of its own components.<sup>15</sup>

I am combining this definition of machine autopoiesis with the same authors' definition of biological autopoiesis, a "self-asserting capacity of living systems to maintain their identity through the active compensation of deformations" in order to suggest a reading of the art world as an open, rather than closed, system.<sup>16</sup> Considered thusly, the art world operates in a conceptual space somewhere between a mechanical system — because art is, after all, a human-made construct — and a distributed series of feedback relations known as *complex adaptive systems*, conceptual networks incorporating quasi-autonomous agents that operate within loosely defined discursive frameworks.

As noted earlier, Kant posited a difference between a work that "can be studied and understood down to its very roots [and] a work which provides endless food for thought and is as inexhaustible as the world itself."<sup>17</sup> The former resolvable, and hence mechanical, interpretation

applies more readily to a Greenbergian read of modern art: a system with a final cause, possessing an ostensibly understandable and definable endpoint. An autopoietic interpretation of modernism, on the other hand, suggests a reading akin to the latter “inexhaustible” and unfinalizable qualities.<sup>18</sup> An open system of modernism thus operates with what *appears* to be a progressive drive, predicated less on finalizable analytic linearity than on open, lateral exploration.

Does such a model fit the observed, historical facts? Art history shows a series of radical changes from 1860 to 1960, a sequence easily interpreted as analytic, dialectical progress. It’s possible, however, to see these changes as less of a Hobbesian aesthetic battle of all against all, and more as an exploration of possibility, an open system of algorithmic becoming. An algorithm is a sequence of step-by-step instructions that leads to the calculation of a result. Some algorithms reach a defined endpoint — the problem is solved — while others are more open, reaching a series of intermediate conclusions from which additional stages continue. Still other algorithms are endless, such as the Fibonacci sequence or the self-similar algorithmic base of fractals (i.e. “*fractional algorithm*”), an example of which is a repetition of the instruction, *square self + 1*. By the very nature of its instructions such an algorithm is structurally incapable of reaching an endpoint.

The idea of unfinalizable, algorithmic unfolding is relevant because it accounts for the apparent avant-garde progressive drive, while obviating the need of a teleologic endpoint. In other words, modernist formal and conceptual exploration did in fact operate with a certain type of purposiveness, albeit one primed not so much toward analytic purity as toward synthetic interactivity. However, as per Kant this algorithmic progressive drive was a purposiveness without purpose — similar, for example, to the way a Fibonacci or fractal algorithm operates with a directed, yet non-specific purposiveness that differs from the explicitly defined purposiveness of a proprietary algorithm that anticipates and proposes future purchases on a commercial website. An algorithmic, teleonomic model of modern art thus reframes the exploratory, progressive force of modernism, no longer as a linear, dialectical drive toward an endpoint, but instead as a stage-by-stage exploration of adjacent aesthetic possibilities.<sup>19</sup>

Considered as an unfolding series of definable stages — goal-driven in the short term but not oriented toward a conclusion — modernism comes to be understood as a self-amplifying aesthetic cycle of

[.../being/becoming/being/becoming/...], a step-by-step oscillating system of iterative, reciprocally-coded patterns in a state of dynamic equilibrium, which alternately crystallize and disperse in aperiodic aesthetic cycles that manifest as trends, fashions and styles. These cycles of [crystallization/being] and [dispersion/becoming] create what is interpreted as the formation, evolution and dissolution of art movements, systemic input/output composites that explore the local topological semioscape of available communicative and conceptual possibility.

In many ways similar to the nonlinear, unpredictable Kuhnian paradigm shifts that occur when enough incongruities have accumulated in a previously stable discipline, such a model of art is unfinalizable since each exploration opens additional exploratory possibilities. The Cubist exploration of the relationship of picture plane to picture surface, for example, was not an end in itself, but rather opened up a vast range of possibilities and implications that were rigorously explored across future decades.

## • From Art System to Emergent Art Swarm •

In addition to boundary articulation, an equally important feature of autopoietic systems is their self-generative, autocatalytic capability. It can be argued that the art world possesses what is effectively – if only metaphorically – a metabolic system, made up of a dense network of artists, artworks, galleries, museums, theorists, curators, journals, discursive formations and schools, that is by now self-sustaining and self-regulatory. Such an art world operates of its own accord: like cells in a body, artists, critics and galleries may come and go but the system itself continues, sometimes with a slow metabolism – low-innovation periods that produced relatively few well-known innovations in the visual arts – at other times with a fast metabolism – relatively high-innovation periods like the 1890s or 1960s. In this sense too, the art world is autopoietic, a system comprising smaller systems that “generate the elements of which they are composed precisely by means of those very elements,”<sup>20</sup> and in which “art thus becomes a self-determining and self-generating system that regulates itself according to its own internal coherences and contradictions,”<sup>21</sup> an idea that resonates intriguingly with what Hegel called art’s inner necessity.<sup>22</sup> Recall that autopoietic systems emphasize

autonomy and boundary differentiation in order to better define a position relative to which an entity can most effectively interact with other entities in the local environment. This suggests the need to introduce a further definition of autonomy, drawing perhaps on physicist Heinz von Foerster, who defines an autonomous entity as a “recursively computing system [that] regulates its own regulation.”<sup>23</sup>

Visual art, an autopoietic cultural system among other autopoietic cultural systems like literature, film, or music – each of which is embedded within and regulated by still larger systems – regulates itself by way of its own internal, autopoietic subsystems like painting or sculpture. Each of these subsidiary autopoietic systems, while regulated from above, is also to a degree self-generative and self-regulatory according to critical, historical, commercial, and discursive priorities. In a series of metabolic feedback loops, these cumulative effects cyclically and syntagmatically scale up and down, shared by macrosystems and subsystems.

For example, in the “painting” autopoietic system shown in Figure 1 – a subsystem of the “art” autopoietic macrosystem, which is in turn a subsystem of the still larger “culture” autopoietic system – brushstrokes and color choices (microscale) emergently coalesce into individual artworks (midscale), which accumulate to become an artist’s recognizable style (macroscale). This in turn feeds back into the system to influence individual artists (microscale) who interactively coalesce into schools of art (midscale), which contribute to the macroscale art world, which feeds back to influence microscale individual artistic choices in brushstroke, color, and so on.<sup>24</sup>

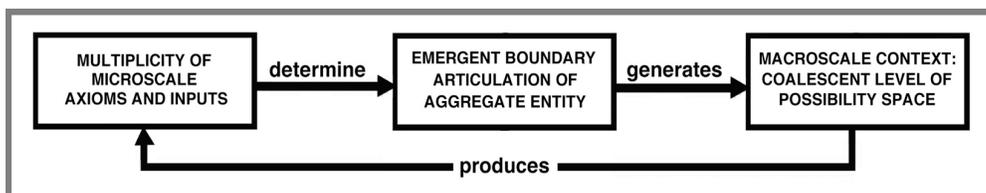


Figure 1: Painting as an autopoietic aesthetic feedback mechanism.  
Image by Jason Hoelscher.

Considered thus, the feedback loops between art practices and art world suggest modernism as a type of complex adaptive system known as an emergent phenomenon. Emergent phenomena are nonlinear integrative effects that arise from a multiplicity of small inputs. “[T]he system is synthesized by combining a simple, fixed set of building blocks: rules, axioms, instructions or elements” which emerge from patterns or properties

that appear under the constraints imposed by the rules of combination. In complex adaptive systems, emergent properties often occur when coevolving signals and boundaries generate new levels of organization. Newer signals and boundaries can then emerge from combinations of building blocks at this new level of organization.<sup>25</sup>

Examples of emergent phenomena include the creation of “wetness” from an accumulation of H<sub>2</sub>O molecules, none of which individually is wet, or of individually non-signifying brushstrokes that coalesce into a meaningful painted image: the aggregate effect creates a quality empirically not present in, or predictable from, any individual component.<sup>26</sup>

The mechanisms of emergent phenomena closely correlate with Alain Badiou’s description of the site in which an event happens, which he describes as

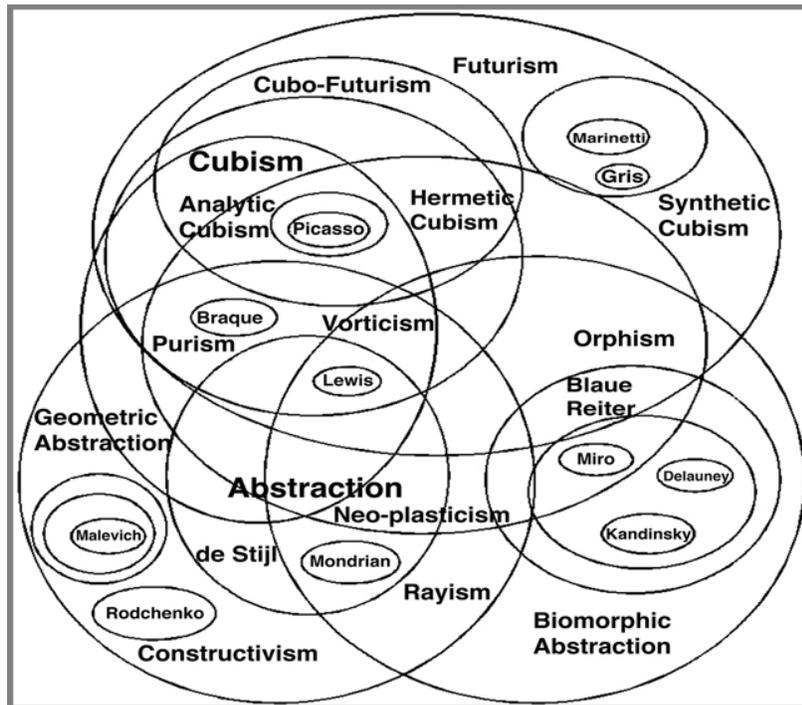
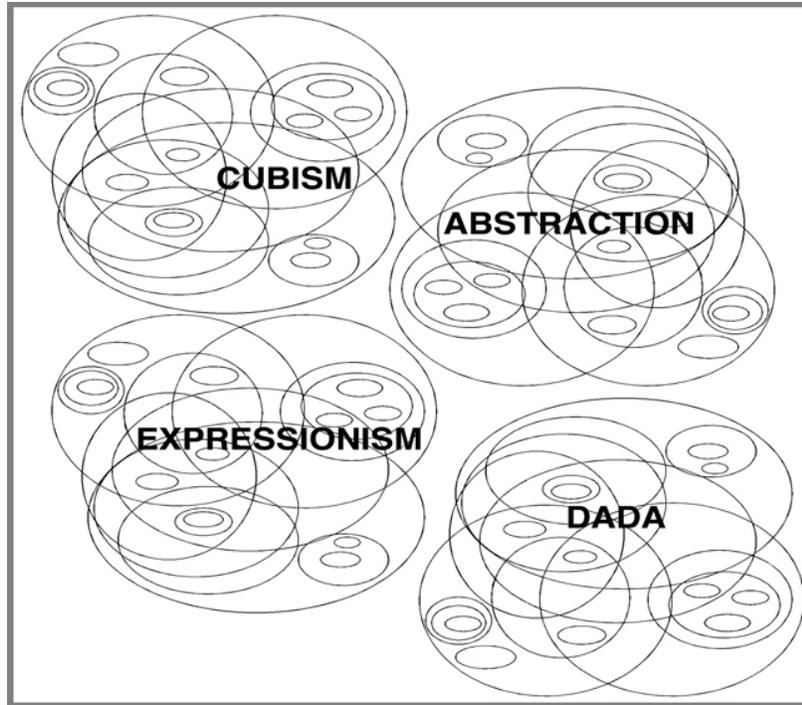
*an evental site X ... a multiple such that it is composed of, on the one hand, elements of the site, and on the other hand, itself .... That is, the event is a one-multiple made up of, on the one hand, all the multiples which belong to the site, and on the other hand, the event itself.*<sup>27</sup>

Such emergent eventalization — correlative both to Badiou’s usage and to a Foucauldian polyhedral causality — can be seen in the schooling of fish: no single fish determines a school’s path, but thousands of tiny, instantaneous behavioral feedback loops between thousands of fish result in what appears to be an intricately choreographed swarm. Such a swarm formation, akin to Badiou’s description of the event as a “one-multiple,” a macroentity made up of multiple smaller entities, arises from a multiplicity of causal inputs that coalesce in a nonlinear fashion: one moment the fish are distributed without apparent order, the next moment they swarm in

response to their internal conditions, inputs from environmental pressures, and the actions of their immediate neighbors. Such a catalytic event reflects more than a simple model of linear cause and effect, reflecting instead what Foucault termed “polyhedral” or multidimensional systemic inputs.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the sudden crystallization of art movements – such as Cubism, abstraction, pop or conceptual art – provides an example of what we might call *aesthetic swarming behavior*. Like schools of fish swimming in unison in response to an aggregation of tiny systemic inputs, schools of art and artists swarm in synchrony if the correct artistic, discursive, social or technological precursor conditions are present. Analogous to biological swarms, such crystallizations emerge by way of nonlinear, multidimensional, polyhedrally causal inputs, forming a “one–multiple” macroentity – a school or stylistic category of art – composed of multiple microentities – artists who share discursive or pictorial concerns.<sup>29</sup> These create “behavioral pathways among the individual agents [that] are able to aggregate into these larger–scale organizations that survive and have behaviors on scales that are completely different from their constituent parts.”<sup>30</sup> The autopoietic nature of such an art swarm emerges from the differential tensions between the relative autonomy of the macrosystem and the relative, relational autonomies of the microsystems from which it forms.

Considering the fact that there are many schools of art, the art world can be seen as a network of nodes, each node an emergent swarm of artists active around a particular idea–complex. A network diagram of European modernism circa 1915 (Figure 2) might include a large nodal swarm around the prompts that constitute Cubism – emerging from the interests, actions, reactions, and feedback loops of Picasso, Braque, Gris, Leger, and others – with peripheral sub–swarms of futurism and orphism (Figure 3). In various degrees of proximity within the network would be other nodal swarms driven by the elements and axiomatic concerns that prompted the emergence of abstraction, expressionism, Dada, and other art schools/swarms of the era. Within this network would be figures like Duchamp, swarming at the peripheries of the Cubist and Dada nodes, and whose systemic inputs would in turn contribute to a later swarm when conditions were right for the emergence of conceptual art in the late 1950s and 1960s.

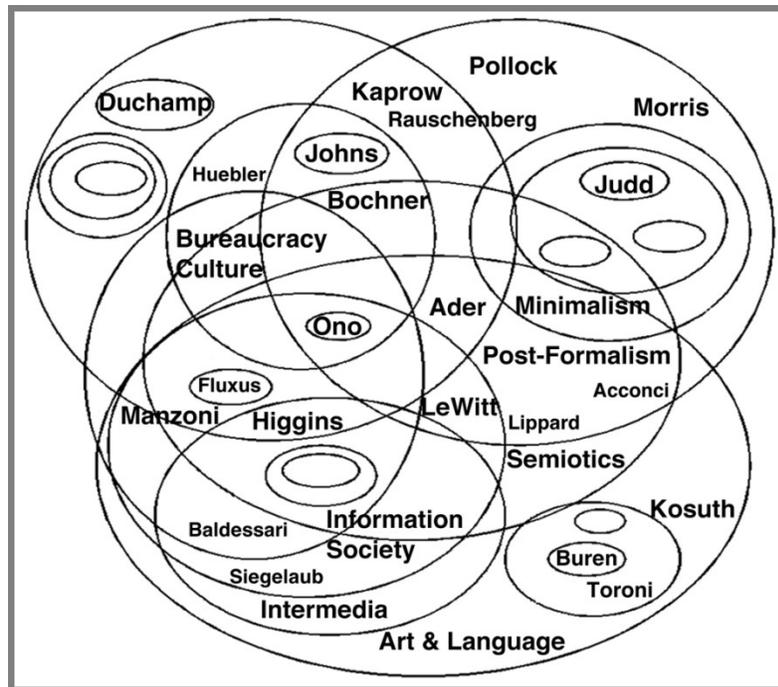


**Figures 2 and 3:** Emergent art swarm networks: European modernism. A model of the macroscale network of the European modernism art swarm ca. 1915, depicting four primary nodes of the era (above), with a detail view of an overlapping swarm node for Cubism and abstraction ca. 1915-1925 (below). Note that all nodal swarm positions and relationships are approximate and in flux. Images by Jason Hoelscher.

This latter quality of art swarms – that they crystallize fully only when the historical and conceptual moment is properly primed – can be clarified by a concept that theoretical biologist and complex systems theorist Stuart Kauffman terms *the adjacent possible*. The adjacent possible is the domain space of potential areas into which a system – whether it is evolutionary, technological or economic – can expand or that it may reconfigure based on current resources and conditions.<sup>31</sup> As applied to art, breakthroughs in the adjacent possible prompt the self-organizational crystallization of new styles, discourses and methodologies, depending on the prevailing conditions of the time – not by way of some type of essentialism or destiny, but rather on the range of possible “next-step” developments opened by previous events. Like the conditions that led to such simultaneous, independent developments as the invention of calculus by Leibniz and Newton; the elaboration of the theory of evolution by Darwin and Wallace; the multiple inventions of the telephone in the 1870s by Alexander Graham Bell, Elisha Gray and others; and hundreds of other examples across nearly all fields of human endeavor,<sup>32</sup> a set of precursor conditions and building blocks – physical or conceptual – become present, suggesting particular “next step” exploratory avenues of the adjacent possible that prompt an event crystallization to occur.<sup>33</sup> Again, note that this is not a deterministic process but an articulation of possibility space in which any given future stage may be more or less likely than others, and subject to the vicissitudes of a range of inputs. Event A does not necessarily cause event B, but rather opens a range of possibilities in which event B might manifest: for example, while the 1960s minimal art of Donald Judd was not “caused” by the development of geometric abstract art circa 1910, it could only have emerged in the space of possibilities opened up by the creation of abstract art in the western tradition.

Swarm formation occurs once a certain density threshold is reached, prompting a dramatic, nonlinear change in the total system: although inputs may have been accumulating for some time, the transition itself appears to be instantaneous. To take pictorial flatness as an example, an increasing flattening of picture space can be detected in many European paintings produced between 1550 and 1850, for example from Titian’s *Venus with Cupid, Dog and Partridge* to David’s *The Oath of the Horatii* to Courbet’s *The Stone Breakers*. From 1850 to 1900 this process of flattening intensifies dramatically, from Courbet to Manet to Cézanne: consider Courbet’s picture space to Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass* or to Cézanne’s *The Bathers (Study)*. From 1900 to 1915, from Cézanne to

Picasso to Malevich, the system changes state drastically, flattening more in 15 years than in the previous 450 by way of a radical surge of formal and material exploration, immediately obvious by comparing Cézanne’s work to Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* of 1907 or to Malevich’s *Black Square and Red Square* of 1915. The necessary ingredients for Cubism and abstraction as large-scale movements – a general turn away from mimetic representation, widespread attention to the material qualities of paints and physical supports, and the trend of flattening picture space – were widely extant in the adjacent possibility space of European painting by 1907 and 1911, respectively; accordingly those movements emerged quite suddenly among multiple practitioners, gaining prominence very quickly in multiple countries.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand Duchamp’s readymades were a few stages past the immediate adjacent possible of their era: while the experimental approaches of the era certainly allowed for the development of the readymade, the precursors and intermediate stages were not yet present for it to have full impact until decades later (Figure 4). In Duchamp’s case the catalyst for swarm formation was present long before the possibility space was conducive to actual swarm formation.



**Figure 4:** Emergent art swarm networks: Conceptual art, ca. 1965-1970.

A model of the conceptual art swarm node, which only fully emerged once precursor conditions such as bureaucracy culture, dawning information society and post-formalist tendencies were present in its local, adjacent possibility space. Image by Jason Hoelscher.

In a compelling example of conceptual resonance, decades before Kauffman gave a name to the adjacent possible, Picasso's and Braque's dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler described the multiple creation of Cubism in the summer of 1907, despite the fact that Braque and Picasso had not yet met and that "no connection existed between the two artists." Kahnweiler wrote:

in the whole history of art, were there not already sufficient proof that the appearance of the aesthetic product is conditioned in its particularity by the spirit of the time, that even the most powerful artists unconsciously execute its will, then this would be proof. Separated by distance, and working independently, the two artists devoted their most intense effort to paintings which share an extraordinary resemblance.<sup>35</sup>

While the mention of "the spirit of the time" can be interpreted in a Hegelian manner, it might be that the concept in fact describes the cumulative sensitivity of an era's participants to the conditions of adjacent possibility inherent to that period. In the case of Cubism, of all the artists then working it was Braque and Picasso who were perceptive enough — not to mention attentive, open to, and sensitive to the possibilities of their surroundings — to take the next step based on art's prevailing post-Cézanne, post-realism, post-Denis conditions.

Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol provide a similar example of adjacent possible emergence over half a century later in 1961. Before either had shown their fine art publicly, they simultaneously and independently began to make — in what at the time seemed a highly unlikely and shocking turn — paintings based on comic strips. When Warhol visited the back office of Leo Castelli's Gallery that autumn, he was so shocked to see Lichtenstein's paintings — nearly identical in style and approach to his own — that he changed his own focus from comic strips to advertisements, soup cans and pop stars.<sup>36</sup>

Such a seemingly unlikely overlap again illustrates how the presence of a specific set of building blocks prompts multiple, simultaneous emergent phenomena that we interpret as a *zeitgeist*: Hegel's "spirit of the time" is perhaps just another term for acute sensitivity to the composite input/output swarm formation potentials of an era's emergent possibility vectors. Here is Kauffman's description of the

adjacent possible. Although this passage describes organic chemistry, it is applicable to art:

Note that the adjacent possible is indefinitely expandable. Once members have been realized in the current adjacent possible, a new adjacent possible, accessible from the enlarged actual that includes the novel molecules from the former adjacent possible, becomes available .... The substrates are present in the actual, and the products are not present in the actual, but only in the adjacent possible .... Other things being equal, the total system "wants" to flow into the adjacent possible.<sup>37</sup>

While Kauffman's quote suggests a teleologic reading, the quotes around his mention that "the total system 'wants' to flow" is more in line with the way water "wants" to flow to the lowest possible point: not because of some deterministic or teleological force but rather due to the way water interacts with physical conditions. If a defining feature of artistic creativity is the exploration of possibility and potential, it is not too big a leap to describe this feature as "wanting to flow" into the adjacent possible. Compare this to Hegel's assertion that "We may rest assured that it is the nature of truth to force its way to recognition when the time comes, and that it only appears when its time has come, and hence never appears too soon, and never finds a public that is not ripe to receive it."<sup>38</sup>

In 1964 Arthur Danto introduced the idea of the art world in an essay of the same name. For Danto the concept of an art world arose from his attempts to grapple with the fact that the art of his era had become difficult to recognize as art without a grasp of the theoretical underpinnings that defined it as such, creating a condition in which a viewer "might not be aware he was on artistic terrain without an artistic theory to tell him so."<sup>39</sup> For Danto the slippery terrain of the art world which is "constituted [as] artistic in virtue of artistic theories," was exemplified by Warhol's *Brillo Box* of 1964.<sup>40</sup> Of the *Brillo Box*, Danto notes that

without theory, one is unlikely to see it as art, and in order to see it as part of the artworld one must have mastered a good deal of artistic theory .... It could not have been art fifty years ago. But then there could not have been, everything being equal, flight insurance in the Middle Ages .... The world has to be ready for certain things, the artworld no less than the real one.<sup>41</sup>

As with Kahnweiler's description of Picasso's and Braque's independent co-creation of Cubism, and Hegel's claim that truth forces its way to recognition when the time is right, Danto's observation that the world is only ready for certain things at certain times provides an additional illustration of adjacent possibility operating at the deepest sublevels of autopoietic, artistic emergence.<sup>42</sup>

The challenge can be raised that an emergent, autopoietic model of artistic swarm formation by way of the adjacent possible undervalues the creativity of the individual, perhaps reconfiguring the role of the artist from that of an independent, creative subject to that of a mere vehicle through which historical forces are deterministically manifest. I believe it does quite the opposite, reframing the "genius" as an individual particularly attuned and perceptive to the undercurrents and subtleties of their era. In the system I describe the artist's creativity emerges not by way of some mysteriously metaphysical, vaguely defined "gift of creativity," but through a heightened sensitivity to the prevailing intertextual and intersubjective conditions at play within the cultural moment. This process does not just happen, but can be cultivated through education, training and practice. Anyone who has taken studio courses in art school will recall the emphasis on paying close attention to one's surroundings, training that perhaps goes beyond sensitivity to visual stimuli to include sensitive observation of possibility space as well.

Far from a deterministic model that robs the individual of agency, or an analytic autonomy that denies interactivity and dialogism, an autopoietic art emerges from the interplay among and feedback loops between every individual within a given sociocultural system: individual style arises because the patterns of possibility reveal themselves in different ways to different individuals. Art spreads and changes across time and space – in response both to external events and to internalized, inherited techniques, ideas and concerns that have developed over centuries – by way of what we might consider memetic, aesthetic, and discursive evolutionary selection pressures. These pressures contribute to swarm emergence on a macro level of discourse by way of the limits and precursors of adjacent possibility, and at the micro level by way of the competition, cooperation and interaction between individuals that is facilitated by autopoietic boundary differentiation. Such a seemingly minor shift from an analytic to an autopoietic autonomy thus results in an intertextual, intersubjective system of considerable explanatory and exploratory power.

## • Conclusion •

The model of modernism here proposed — a system of pluralistically autonomous swarms with interactive, permeable aesthetic information boundaries — argues against an interpretation of modern art as a closed form of analytic autonomy and hegemonic purity, describing instead an open modernism of autopoietic autonomy and interaction. More than just a flight of fancy, this reformulation is testable in that it can account for such aspects of modernism as avant-garde exploration, the simultaneous, multiple emergences of key movements and trends, and the differentiation and specificity of disciplines and mediums.

Further, by deprioritizing artistic purification, an autopoietic and emergent model reconfigures artistic change from a goal-directed teleological progress — *finalizable analytic autonomy* — to a perpetual exploratory drive predicated on an open-ended algorithmic process — *unfinalizable autopoietic autonomy*. In effect dependent on interaction and feedback relations, art is thus seen to be an emergent, adaptive system driven not toward purified stasis, but by the polyphonic, algorithmic interplay of its components in a state of perpetual aesthetic and conceptual signal exchange, in pursuit of a goal that is by definition unattainable, but that is worth pursuing precisely because of its very lack of finalizable attainability.

## • Notes •

<sup>1</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 86.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Kosuth, “Art after Philosophy,” in *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Greenberg, 85.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>7</sup> While I am not aware that writers such as Greenberg and Kosuth explicitly prescribed an ideal artistic end-game, the sequence of artistic purges and purifications they describe — which are in fact illustrated by comparing Greenberg’s essay at the beginning of the 1960s with Kosuth’s even more stringent advocacy of purification at the end of that decade — seems to me to imply a direction toward an endpoint, a final resolution when a state of purity will be attained.

<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicholas Walker, trans. James Creed Meredith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71.

<sup>9</sup> Kant’s consideration of differing types of teleology takes place in the second half of his *Critique of Judgement*.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Kant*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Ralph Manheim, from *The Great Philosophers*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1957), 81. It might be argued that mechanical or digital reproduction of a work of art contradicts Kant’s assertion vis-à-vis repeatability. I would argue, however, that what is repeated is not the art itself but rather *the delivery device for the art experience*. Artwork multiples, such as Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* or Donald Judd’s serial cubes, are not diluted into magazine pages or furnishings simply by being available as multiples; rather each individual manifestation maintains and delivers coherently unfinalizable artistic qualities that just happen to be available in more than one space at a time, like multiple windows open to the same scene.

<sup>11</sup> Jack Burnham, “Systems Esthetics,” *Artforum* VII, no. 1 (1968): 32.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York, NY: Continuum Books, 2006), 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> See for example the following: Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Edward Winters, *Aesthetics and Architecture* (New York: Continuum Books, 2007); Katy Siegel, *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Humberto S. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Boston, MA: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980), 78-79.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>17</sup> Jaspers, 81.

<sup>18</sup> Of additional interest here is Eco’s notion of the open artwork, a work that, though complete, remains open “to a continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in his act of perceiving the totality of incoming

stimuli.” See Umberto Eco, “The Poetics of the Open Artwork,” in *The Open Artwork*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Harvard University Press, 1989), 21.

<sup>19</sup> In a similar vein, such a model of art allows for the reinstatement of something akin to a Lyotardian metanarrative, but without the imposition of constructed belief systems and other ideological baggage that tends to accompany notions of metanarrativity.

<sup>20</sup> Niklas Luhmann, “The Work of Art and the Self-Reproduction of Art,” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 1077.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1078.

<sup>22</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Volume I*, trans. T.M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 55.

<sup>23</sup> Heinz von Foerster, *Understanding Understanding: Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition* (New York and Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2003), 226.

<sup>24</sup> This process can be further understood as one wherein the content that flows through a system modifies the formal parameters of that system, and in which the formal parameters in turn loop back to modify the content further, creating a recursive cycle of mutual and differential content/form reconfiguration. Such reciprocal influence contributes to the formation of specific art styles: the differential form/content relationship of the stylistic system known as “abstract expressionism” exists in a different state of tension than does the form/content relationship of the stylistic system known as “neo-plasticism,” for example.

<sup>25</sup> John H. Holland, *Signals and Boundaries: Building Blocks for Complex Adaptive Systems* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 108, 114.

<sup>26</sup> A consideration of Jürgen Habermas’s writings on intersubjective communication and meaning formation in terms of emergent swarm phenomena — as a semiotic swarm aggregate, perhaps — would seem a potentially valuable enterprise. Similarly, his assertion of modernity as an incomplete project, vis-à-vis attempts at the reintegration of Enlightenment and modernist specialization, might benefit from the framework proposed in this paper as well. Unfortunately both ideas are beyond the scope of the present essay.

<sup>27</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York, NY: Continuum, 2006), 179. Emphases in original.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, “Questions of Method,” in *Power*, ed. by James D. Faubion, trans. by Robert Hurley and Others, vol. 3 of *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, NY: The New Press), 227. See for example, “As a way of lightening the weight of causality, ‘eventalization’ thus works by constructing around the singular event analyzed as process a ‘polygon’ or, rather ‘polyhedron’ of intelligibility, the number of whose faces is not given in advance and can never properly be taken as finite ... the further one breaks down the processes under analysis, the more one is enabled and indeed obliged to construct their external relations of intelligibility.” While Foucault is writing of the multiplicity of events that lead to the use of incarceration and prisons, the basic idea itself — of causatively complex, multivalent input/output matrices — seems of potential relevance to the development of artistic discourse as well.

<sup>29</sup> Admittedly at the risk of mixing metaphors, the earlier mention of an art world metabolism provides a way to think of an art swarm, given that the constituent components of an art world “metabolism” must work in concert to crystallize a possibility into a movement or school. An artist working alone in a studio achieves little if the network of galleries, critics and patrons do not amplify her or his creative input across and through the pathways of the system, setting up conditions for the possibility of emergent swarm behavior.

<sup>30</sup> John H. Miller and Scott E. Page. *Complex Adaptive Systems: An Introduction to Computational Models of Social Life*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 49.

<sup>31</sup> Stuart Kauffman, *Investigations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 142.

<sup>32</sup> William Ogburn and Dorothy Thomas, "Are Inventions Inevitable? A Note on Social Evolution," in *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 1 (March 1922), 83.

<sup>33</sup> While beyond the scope of this paper, it might be fruitful to consider the florescence of such philosophical "golden ages" as classical Greece, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, and post-World War II France through the framework of the adjacent possible and the attendant precursor conditions amenable to emergent swarms. Similarly, the relationship between Kuhnian paradigm shifts and emergent, spontaneous self-organizational conceptual systems would seem to be a strong avenue for study as well.

<sup>34</sup> This could be seen as a model that affirms a previous state of affairs, thus contradicting Badiou's description of an event as a disruption of the order that supports it. My intent here is to argue a variation of this idea, in which the new "event" of a swarm emerges from a recalibration — inherently neither precisely an affirmation nor a disruption while perhaps a bit of each — of the order that supports it, pushing the boundaries of its local possibility space and recrystallizing into a new state not predictable from the earlier state of affairs.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, "The Rise of Cubism," in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 210.

<sup>36</sup> Tony Scherman and David Dalton. *Pop: The Genius of Andy Warhol* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010), 70.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Kauffman 142-143.

<sup>38</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (New York: Dover, 1807/2003), 42.

<sup>39</sup> Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," in *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*, third edition, ed. Stephen David Ross (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 471.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 479.

<sup>42</sup> Such overlapping manifestations of the adjacent possible are the subject of a follow-up to the present essay, titled *Complexity Aesthetics: Recursive Information, the Adjacent Possible and Artistic Emergence*.

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Snyder, Sarah. "Art and the Possibility of Metaphysics: Theodor Adorno on Tragedy as the Origin of Aesthetic Autonomy." *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 3 (2013): 40-52.

#### ABSTRACT

In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno remarks that "tragedy, which may have been the origin of the idea of aesthetic autonomy, was an afterimage of cultic acts that were intended to have real effects." This statement and its Kantian undertones are the basis for this essay, which will take up the question of the origin of the idea of tragedy in order to elucidate the basis for Adorno's thinking on aesthetic autonomy. I will discuss Kant's concept of human reason and its relationship to the autonomous will and the concept of necessity in order to show that the notion of humanity grounds the idea of tragedy and that without a focus on the human in matters of autonomy, tragedy is a lost art form. Finally, I will undertake to tease out the metaphysical and aesthetic aspects of tragedy in a discussion oriented towards Adorno's relationship with metaphysics and the possibility of removing the Kantian block. The essay will conclude with a reflection on the mourning character of reason and its relation to Adorno's "principle of Auschwitz" with a view to examining the metaphysical grounds for the tragic in modernity.

#### KEYWORDS

Adorno, Kant, metaphysical longing, aesthetic autonomy, self-conscious reason, sacrifice and tragedy

# Art and the Possibility of Metaphysics: Theodor Adorno on Tragedy as the Origin of Aesthetic Autonomy

Sarah Snyder

Why should art reinforce a thesis which it is the business of deterministic philosophy to advance? The only philosophical laws which have any place in the work of art are those which refer to the meaning of existence.

- Walter Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*<sup>1</sup>

Theodor Adorno's definition of the autonomy of art comes to us, in part, from three moments in intellectual history: Hegel's world-spirit, Kant's concept of formal autonomy, and Marx's historical materialism. Adorno retains Hegel's idea that spirit expresses itself in the artwork, contributes Kant's use of reason and autonomy in art's presentation, and fuses these with Marx in order to provide artworks with a social character: "The freedom of artworks, in which their self-consciousness glories and without which these works would not exist, is the ruse of art's own reason."<sup>2</sup> This relationship between freedom and reason in particular is derived from Kant's concept of *human* reason, which for Kant is what makes a human being an end in himself. Kant's description of us as reasoning creatures is predicated on the idea of human

beings as entities possessing an absolutely free will, or autonomy.<sup>3</sup> For Kant, reason allows us to recognize autonomy in others as we assume their assertion of their autonomy *qua* their very existence – to put it another way, we recognize our humanity in them. It is thus our reason that allows us to imbue art with its own claim to autonomy and give to it its own reason in contrast to our own; the possibility of art's autonomy is rooted in the anthropomorphization of art, both as an expression of spirit and as an object for aesthetic contemplation. For Adorno, the artwork also has within its form, in its character as the expression of history and culture, the mediations, or spirit, of the socio-historical past.

In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno remarks that "tragedy, which may have been the origin of the idea of aesthetic autonomy, was an afterimage of cultic acts that were intended to have real effects."<sup>4</sup> This phrase has been essential to my attempt to draw together the various critical projects that motivated his thought because it offers several ideas with which to work. However, it is not immediately clear how tragic artworks, which art historians have traditionally considered in terms of their relationship to their viewers, might be the origin of aesthetic autonomy, especially when one keeps in mind Adorno's prior assertion that the autonomy of art is predicated on its form; in other words "aesthetic form [is] sedimented content."<sup>5</sup> In this essay, I will focus on the Kantian underpinnings of Adorno's concept of autonomy and apply the Kantian notion of the sublime to the form and content of tragedy in order to illustrate the complex relationship between freedom and necessity that is crucial to explicating reason's correspondence to the human and the tragic in both aesthetic and, I will argue, metaphysical spheres.

Adorno's reference to "cultic acts" indicates that, for him, the tragic was essentially a representation of sacrifice. Particularly in the Odysseus chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the processes of individuation and sacrifice take center stage.<sup>6</sup> In this chapter, Adorno and his longtime collaborator Max Horkheimer highlight the process of social mediation within individuation and show that the individual's consciousness of autonomy is only to be gotten with self-sacrifice, the sacrifice of one's unblemished creaturely nature, and so the self-consciousness required to cognize autonomy is already a form of unfreedom.<sup>7</sup> This is contrary to Kant's idea of civilized man, but for Adorno, the figure of Odysseus and the Kantian concept of mind are similarly handicapped by their confrontations with nature, with the difference being that the experience of Kant's transcendental subject is wholly internal to the mind because the experience of sublimity (which, for Kant, is an experience of nature that

causes us to reflect on our own abilities) is only a matter for pure reason. Elucidating the tragic character of reason's limitation is central to understanding artworks and life as *metaphysically* tragic because the so-called purity of form (of artworks and of reason), when considered critically, expresses in fact the absence of organic reconciliation and untrammelled unity within the content.<sup>8</sup>

The process of self-sacrifice is modeled in tragedy, in which what is sacrificed by the drama's own reason is a hero condemned by his inner drive to confront a force beyond his reckoning.<sup>9</sup> The tragic hero's individuation is part of his or her entity just insofar as he mirrors the physiognomy of the culture that sacrifices him as an exemplar of its own contradictions; the hero in tragedy generally embodies the elements of his or her culture that have become useless for self-preservation and are superfluous or even dangerous to the functioning of the whole society.<sup>10</sup> The hero's will is the catalyst for the dramatic conflict, and the expression of his independence from social expectations is what ultimately dooms him. The hero in the drama takes on the form of the intractable, pure will of primal, animal nature within society and is thus purged from organic nature's civilized counterpart in the name of teleological progress and the corresponding providential view of history.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, I would rephrase Adorno's thesis in the following way: "Because it was the afterimage of cultic acts that were intended to have real effects, the idea of tragedy is the origin of aesthetic autonomy." In its character as a purgative, sacrificial act — intended for an audience from the start — tragedy expresses the power of political reconciliation to the status quo more powerfully than any other art form.<sup>12</sup> The explicitly political content of tragedy, which is reconciliation itself, becomes so solidified in the form of tragedy that the *idea* of tragedy is an unerringly specific one. The idea of tragedy is also expressive of the double character of art insofar as the tragic form can provide a cipher for its own social, moral function, and may be seen to concretize the problem of art's self-consciousness in its claim to true autonomy.<sup>13</sup>

We may glimpse the import of tragedy in its formal characteristics — particularly in the dramatic collision and the unity of time and place. The doctrine of the unities, as it is typically called, is instructive for thinking about the action's claim to necessity: that the collision takes place at just the correct moment, in just the right space, and has the appropriate heft to its destructive power expresses the formal dimension of the artwork's absolute domination of its contents. The formal characteristics fully encircle what may take place and thus lend the action the further weight of

a claim to total import. Tragic art's plea for aesthetic autonomy in spite of its clearly tendentious social meaning expresses the crucial element of its historical decline: as art began to rebel against illusion, the formal elements of tragedy held it fast to an antiquated claim to realistic representation and an uncomfortably close relationship with the ethical sphere.<sup>14</sup> From its initial appearance as relatively straightforward sacrifice to its expression of the social purgation of qualities countenanced by the victim, tragedy assumed a metaphorical character that never fully divorced itself from social function in aesthetic theory because of the general misapprehension of Aristotle's *Poetics* within art criticism. In particular, Enlightenment-era misinterpretations of his idea of catharsis, such as the theory of Gotthold Lessing, doomed tragedy to obsolescence and veiled its social import, for the theory of catharsis leaves it to the audience to determine an artwork's "weight" or "depth." The problem here is that when any audience member lays claim to a meaningful aesthetic experience, it is impossible to know whether this experience was a reaction to the presented artwork or to something else. Adorno shone light on this aspect of tragedy by referring to its truth content, and following his lead, I would assert that the fact that tragedy in the classical sense has gone out of style as an art form might suggest that the relationship of form and content within it engendered its own social irrelevance and thus cleared the way for the concept of tragedy's own autonomy *outside the aesthetic sphere*. Tragic artworks may not be autonomous in their character as artworks, but the concept of tragedy itself transcends its aesthetic bounds and instead takes on a metaphysical character when tragic artworks (and the tragic character of all art) are understood with respect to their cultic function and their correspondence to philosophical contemplation.<sup>15</sup>

I want to flesh out why metaphysics is the proper home of tragedy, and again to have recourse to Kant in order to show the relationship between the autonomy of art and the autonomy of the human. This partially entails restating what Adorno does with Kant's idea of reason in attributing it to artworks. The Kantian idea of autonomy is not specific to an artwork's "purposive purposelessness" — in Kant's work, the original designation for something that exists as an end in itself is mankind; only because man has reason can he self-legislate.<sup>16</sup> For Kant, man's autonomy creates necessity in his actions, conformable to an objective moral law because, Kant writes, humankind recognizes the autonomy of others in that they have no price but dignity, which does not allow for exchange or commensurability.<sup>17</sup> Kant believed that as society became more and more constraining, legislative necessity took on an external

character and was no longer a matter for reflection in the life of the private individual.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, because the concept of autonomy itself became dubious, and not in a progressive sense, the reconciliation between individual and society proffered by modern capitalism can be related to tragedy's aesthetic decline. As *Dialectic of Enlightenment* alleges, this skepticism towards freedom did not occur because of an enlightened mankind, fully aware of the contradictions within civilization that are also present in tragedy, but rather because the concept of necessity became absolute in historical-political narratives and eclipsed its own prerequisite, the concept of individual freedom.<sup>19</sup> One need look no further than an American elementary school history textbook to see the evidence of this occurrence – the idea of manifest destiny is perhaps the most poignant example. If we were to encounter a modern Antigone, there would be nothing noble or heroic in her perseverance against the state because our idea of catharsis requires an absolutely innocent victim, or at least one who means well. One might say that we no longer need to purge the absolute human will as first nature from society, that ideology and semblance are now not disparate from what actually is the case.<sup>20</sup> In other words, people today are rarely conceded their individuality or even allow themselves an ontological existence deeper than their primary social roles.

Considered aesthetically, art history's focus on catharsis and the didactic quality of tragedy robbed it of its own ability to self-determine and experience organic growth in much the same way that man must sacrifice his inner nature and most intimate desires for social and material self-preservation. Even though tragedy failed to self-preserve, we can see how the art form tried to attain autonomy by turning against itself – most notably in modernist plays, such as those of Samuel Beckett, which Adorno engages with at length. The claustrophobia in Beckett's *Endgame* is a potent reminder of the death of the imaginative play quality of pre-modern theatre. To my mind, in no other art form can we see so clearly how the "other world," which the particular artwork claims to present, both critiques and fails to escape our own reality.<sup>21</sup> Catharsis in particular is not simply reconciliation to what empirically exists but also indicative of the instrumentalization of art as a whole. The cultic function of tragedy never left it but became explicit in a perverted sense when tragedy became codified as an art form, as a cultic object itself, when art as a whole became the locus for catharsis and reconciliation and tragedy lost its specially delineated function.<sup>22</sup>

In order to explain how, precisely because of its artistic obsolescence, tragedy has managed to become so prevalent in the modern vernacular, it is useful here to return to Kant's concept of autonomous aesthetic experience, particularly his description of the sublime. The possibility of tragedy is directly tied to its character as an object of sublimity: "The paradox that genius is born in moral speechlessness, moral infantility, is the sublimity of tragedy."<sup>23</sup> The sublimity of tragedy, for Kant, would be the fact that it evokes in us an idea of itself. This is an idea of which we recognize our own reason as author and that is related to the form of the tragic drama, which is driven by absolute unity and necessity, as well as to the suffering and punishment that constitute its content. The experience of the sublime gives the receiver a kind of feeling for his own reason in its creation of the Ideas — but only if the moral feeling that derives from an awareness of the autonomy of reason is already present. Presumably, it takes a certain amount of personal culture and education to recognize tragedy, and so something has already been sacrificed in the viewer if he or she has a cathartic experience. Thus, for Kant, the moral feeling instilled by education is heightened by the experience of the sublime and enables one to reflect upon the pseudo-supernatural (*a priori*) manifestation of the mind's own abilities that constitutes the sublime experience. Theorists of catharsis claim that something similar occurs in tragedy, insofar as the audience is made to feel as if an experience of fear and pity has given them fortitude. Another layer to this is that the sacrifice of the hero within the play has presumably purified his or her polis, so the audience absorbs the propaganda content along with the aesthetic experience. Adorno goes a step further and shows how, art-historically, the doctrine of catharsis was absorbed into the concept of art, thus art as a whole became a force for purification and reconciliation against its will: "However tragic they appear, artworks tend *a priori* toward affirmation."<sup>24</sup>

For Adorno, the Kantian treatment of metaphysics expresses human reason's mourning for its own inadequacy.<sup>25</sup> Adorno locates the concept of reason in artworks in the concept of Kantian autonomy, and shows that artworks may lay claim to autonomy just insofar as they are limited by their own form, since, as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* shows, autonomy only acquires meaning for the self-conscious entity. Art wills itself to become first nature, and instead becomes second nature by virtue of its own representational character. Analogously, the bounds of reason are not aided by autonomy but rather circumscribed by it insofar as the human mind cannot recognize what is outside its own posited unity.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the "other world," that which reason cannot quite reach but may glimpse in

art, reflects not some mystical otherness but a *posited* beyond. And so the world from which art appears to come to us is in fact always an expression of the mind's dissatisfaction with its ability to reach unequivocal truths. According to Adorno, humans require metaphysics because our reasoning faculties always seek beyond themselves. For the same reason, therefore, we require art. In turn, art requires metaphysics in order to appear to us as coming from this posited beyond. However, in the modern positivist worldview, the possibility of metaphysics has become antiquated. The particular claims of tragedy, in its unity and necessity, have become dead to us because on the one hand, these claims are absorbed into the movement of art itself, and on the other, because tragedy expressed a unity based in part on the concept of the autonomy of the hero as evidenced by the inevitability of his fate, which is not a tenable perspective in a worldview suspicious of the possibility of metaphysics. The doctrine of catharsis gave art scholarship a way out of the problem posed by tragedy insofar as it required tragedy to retain its explicitly political character only for the audience and not in itself. Thus tragedy may have the most to teach us about the potential of autonomy, but it is unable to do so. This is because tragedy was forced to renounce its claims to autonomy by the spurious doctrine of catharsis while absorbing into its form a specifically cultic content-function: as tragedy became art, it became another sort of cultic object under commodity fetishism. Tragedy was once a directly metaphysical ritual undertaking, and has become an expression of what we have attempted to discard as a culture. Tragedy is also a cipher for the problem of human experience both ontologically and also in a way compounded by the over-influence of second nature in the alienation of human beings in late capitalism. Thus, in a certain sense, tragedy itself became a sacrifice to modernity and its ills.

Because artworks relinquished their cultic functions as they became ever more cultic objects, tragedy's import became facile with the banishment of the straightforward in art. This is why an understanding of tragedy is crucial for critical theory. Tragedy, as the expression of sacrifice, retains always in its idea the overt manifestation and implicit glorification, even in the most grotesque of dramas, of second-nature and social custom. Its reconciliatory character is obvious, and so it contains the truth that human beings and social nature are incomplete: culture and society are not hardened totalities but dynamic processes. That a sacrifice is necessary for the drama to be complete expresses the disunity of the world which views it. As a reified aesthetic convention, tragedy tries to lay claim to realism, which expresses the tension between first and second

nature. Kant makes a telling remark on first nature and naïveté in the third critique: “naïveté [is] the eruption of the sincerity that originally was natural to humanity and which is opposed to the art of dissimulation that has become our second nature.”<sup>27</sup> In its naïveté, tragedy could very well break the spell of semblance. However, it is prevented from doing so by the forced unity of its formal dimensions. The artwork’s own reason thus rebels against its estrangement from metaphysical truth, an estrangement that results from the tragic artwork’s own form.

The will we possess as human beings is of course the progenitor of our idea that the artwork has an ability to rebel at all. Central to Kant’s idea of human reason is this ability: “the will is a faculty of [thought] determining itself to action in accordance with the conception of certain laws.”<sup>28</sup> That man might possess the ability to will something is fundamental to the concept of autonomy for Kant, Adorno, and tragedy. Kant and Adorno share an overall belief in the project of enlightenment as the only path to universal human freedom and happiness. Adorno’s summary of his own teachings is telling: “the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again .... The single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, if I might use the Kantian expression: the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating.”<sup>29</sup> Adorno goes much further than Kant and demands that enlightenment make good on its promises by cognizing the sacrifice that has been required in the name of progress. To this end he employs his vast intellectual resources in social critique, and it is in this arena that the practical force of his philosophical argument takes shape.<sup>30</sup> I do not think I am remiss in postulating that Adorno did not want the principle of Auschwitz to be understood *tragically*. Certainly, there is an element of his work that seeks to show that social forces produced the events of WWII and that necessity of a certain kind in fact directed history; however this necessity did not originate in the autonomy of individual reason but rather in collective unreason.<sup>31</sup> Offering a kind of update to Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?,” Adorno states the following:

All political instruction finally should be centered upon the idea that Auschwitz should never happen again. This would be possible only when it devotes itself openly, without fear of offending any authorities, to this most important of problems. To do this education must transform itself into sociology, that is, it must teach about the societal play of forces that operates beneath the surface of political forms. One must submit to critical treatment – to provide just one model – such a respectable concept as that of “reason of state”; in placing the right of the state over that of its members, the horror is potentially already posited.<sup>32</sup>

The idea of tragedy, having been hypostatized in the demand for catharsis as constitutive of sublime aesthetic experience, would be inadequate to the principles that underlie the events of Auschwitz. Tragedy as art provides moral tuition in sublimated form, but it is insufficient and platitudinous to say that we must “learn from” the Holocaust. The idea of historical reason and the concept of purification that led to the barbarism of the Holocaust cannot be used to explicate the horror of the events; these ideas must be critically reflected upon, just as the Kantian sublime incites self-reflection. If Auschwitz were to be described tragically, this description would amount to the aestheticization of the actual Holocaust victims’ suffering, turning their suffering into an object for reflection as opposed to an impetus for self-reflection. The reasons for the Holocaust are thereby veiled to thought, for the *idea* of tragedy, having been stripped of its relationship with autonomy, does not lead the mind to reflection on itself, on thought’s complicity in what has taken place.

To attribute any but critical meaning to the Holocaust is to express only the reified semblance of the mind’s necessary inability to partake in metaphysical contemplation, not the possibility of a world in which reason would be able to transcend itself. In a sense, tragedy *is* the “Kantian block.” That tragedy is meaningless to us today suggests a great deal about what kind of creatures we are and what we find worth striving for. Tragedy is not the origin of the idea of autonomy but of *aesthetic* autonomy. In fact, tragedy is based on the idea of autonomy. The possibility of aesthetic autonomy depends on the possibility of tragedy, which depends on the self-conscious recognition of reason’s autonomy, since tragedy is the embodiment of what was sacrificed in man’s acquisition of self-reflective reason.

In this sense we may describe all autonomous actions as tragic expressions. When human agency finds it necessary to *will*, in other words to express the desire that reason should have a stake in objectivity, this is tragedy. And so the Holocaust was not tragic, because even as a reified aesthetic object it fails to demonstrate any concept of necessity, even a hollow one bereft of autonomy. The project of critical theory, on the other hand, expresses the idea of autonomy and necessity immanent to each thinker’s own being and grounds itself in a metaphysics that resists subjectivity as the basis for all actions. In this sense, art and Adorno express an “elective affinity” with reason’s own hopefulness in its orientation towards metaphysical truth.<sup>33</sup>

Art is tragic because it takes on, sacrificially, the qualities of nature that have been expunged from the reality of human life in modernity, and so seems to be asserting itself from a place beyond the standardization of society. Its function for criticism is thus its autonomy, understood as its own metaphysical guilt. After Auschwitz, the "guilt context" of the living is manifest in art's bad conscience because even though nothing can be seen as fated or necessary anymore, the promise of this severance from the false demands of historical progress has not been realized: "fate is the guilt context of the living. It corresponds to the natural condition of the living — that semblance [*Schein*], not yet wholly dispelled, from which man is so far removed that, under its rule, he was never wholly immersed in it but only invisible in his best part."<sup>34</sup> Tragedy requires the idea of autonomy, which only comes by way of the renunciation of the unreflective illusion of necessity, not from the expulsion of necessity and objectivity from thought. Adorno's lesson is that reason is not to be taken as the only thing there is, therefore reason must continue to yearn for metaphysics, for the possibility of truth.<sup>35</sup> The concept of autonomy in human beings would have to be redeemed before tragedy can acquire a new significance, and thus reason's ability to identify a metaphysical "kingdom of ends" for itself is a prerequisite for any autonomy in art. Better still would be the empirical realization of this kingdom of ends, this "other world" that art claims to hail from and that ultimately motivates reason to seek a home beyond dialectics, where the human, the whole, and the real have meaning in the absence of these concepts.

## • Notes •

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998), 129.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and "What is Enlightenment?"* trans. Lewis W. Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 51.

<sup>4</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin S. Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 43.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>8</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 115.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, "Oedipus, or Rational Myth," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 1913-1926*, Vol. 1., eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 84-85.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 210.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 107, 115.

<sup>12</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> György Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 179.

<sup>15</sup> Chris Thornhill, "Adorno Reading Kant," *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 1, no. 12 (March 2006): 98-110, 107.

<sup>16</sup> Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 53.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Adorno, "Philosophy and Teachers," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 34.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin, "Trauerspiel and Tragedy," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 1913-1926*, Vol. 1, 55.

<sup>20</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 240.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, "Oedipus, or Rational Myth," 579.

<sup>24</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Thornhill, "Adorno Reading Kant," 103.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>27</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 206.

<sup>28</sup> Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 45.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno, "Education After Auschwitz," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, 195.

<sup>30</sup> Adorno, "Philosophy and Teachers," 35.

<sup>31</sup> Adorno, "Education After Auschwitz," 193.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>33</sup> Thornhill, "Adorno Reading Kant," 109-10.

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin, "Fate and Character," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 1913-1926*, Vol. 1, 204.

<sup>35</sup> Adorno, "On Subject and Object," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, 250.

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# Reading



Reading is an affective and reflective relationship with a text, whether it is a new, groundbreaking monograph or one of those books that keeps getting pulled off the shelf year after year. Unlike traditional reviews, the pieces in this section may veer off in new directions as critical reading becomes an extended occurrence of thinking, being, and creation.

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Demers, Joanna. "The Novelty of Looking Back (Editorial): Simon Reynolds' *Retromania*." *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 3 (2013): 53-57.

## THE BOOK

*Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*  
by Simon Reynolds  
New York: Faber and Faber, 2011.

# The Novelty of Looking Back

Joanna Demers



**Simon Reynolds.**

*Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past.*  
New York: Faber and Faber, 2011.

**Y**ou couldn't hope for a better vindication of Simon Reynolds' *Retromania* than the release of David Bowie's 2013 album *The Next Day*. Its track "Where Are We Now?" is an understated reminiscence of life in Berlin, obliquely referring to Bowie's own time there in 1976. Its tone is muted and mournful although not longing for a return; it rather suggests that there may not be anywhere to return. The past is indeed a foreign country, Bowie has us understand, inaccessible to returns. *The Next Day* features a cover photo that reproduces the cover of Bowie's 1977 album "*Heroes*," one of the products of Bowie's Berlin residency.

The “*Heroes*” photo is one of a kind – a close-up of Bowie decked out in a black jacket and miming a strange, hieratic gesture – and *The Next Day* trumps it by blocking out Bowie’s face with a white square inside which the words “The Next Day” appear in nondescript black font. Near the upper right corner where in the original are written the album title and Bowie’s name, a black marker line crosses out the word “Heroes”. Bowie quite literally invokes the Stranglers’ punk anthem “No More Heroes”.

The anticipation and acclaim for *The Next Day* is understandable if we keep in mind the vigor of retromania. Reynolds charts this fatal love for all things nostalgic and historic in Western popular culture – if by historic we understand cultural phenomena that are perhaps a few decades old or even only three years old. Retromania is an inevitable aspect of contemporary culture, an ouroboros that eats the old to create the old. It resuscitates the careers of performers long past their prime; just witness the reunion tours of every group from the Rolling Stones to My Bloody Valentine to Gang of Four. Retromania also restages pivotal concerts – here Reynolds dazzles with descriptions of the Forsyth/Pollard reenactments of The Cramps’ 1978 concert in the Napa State Mental Institute, or the Smiths’ last concert in 1987, or Bowie’s 1973 killing-off of his Ziggy Stardust persona – with painstaking attention to the finest details of costuming, lighting, and song sets. Fans of obscure or overlooked pop can become entrepreneurs who carve out new markets by creating nostalgia for music hardly noticed its first time around; here Reynolds makes sense of everything from the enduring Northern Soul phenomenon to newfangled genres like minimal-synth, cold wave, and cool wave. Revivals of styles are common of course, but so too are revivals of styles that were never recognized as such in their heyday. In this context, Bowie’s first album in over a decade struck all the right notes even as its content itself was conventional.

We are so inundated with proof that pop culture is inherently a retro-culture that it becomes easy to become inured to it. But trecento Italy or 1920s Japan were not especially inclined toward the past. Why are we?

Pop culture is simultaneously a culture of excess and of unfulfilled desire: the two are dialectically related. Bataille and Adorno and Žižek and Deleuze have all said as much, but the most succinct articulation of the principle comes from Don Draper, the self-made ad executive of *Mad Men*:

But what is happiness? It’s a moment before you need more happiness.

Draper speaks here of the consumer's unquenchable thirst but also of his own inability to be satisfied with his wife, his job, his life. Post-Fordism creates the sense of lacking and then inculcates the belief that there is surfeit available to fill that void. Pop consumers depend on two types of excess: financial excess in the form of disposable income and temporal excess in the form of free time, time not earmarked for work or familial obligation or worship. Pop culture is a culture of addiction where we are all junkies with enough money and time to score again and again.

The "again and again" part, Reynolds proves, is not only characteristic of our need for pop titillation but has been assimilated into the substance of pop culture. Preservation technologies such as the phonograph and video mean that we can capture and re-experience that which used to be ephemeral – a song, a birthday party. Capture and preservation used to be the purview of the producers but today are integral to consumer experience, meaning that the very distinction between production and consumption is blurred. DJs sample to remember, to pay homage, to steal. Hegel's diagnosis has been confirmed literally: art for us is a thing of the past because we (like Jimmy Stewart's character Scottie Ferguson in *Vertigo*) repeat the erotic and emotional experiences foundational to our personalities. We know that the past is a foreign country, and this only enflames our desire.

Fine; this too is retro, a retro-cultural theory that we've all heard before. What are our options now? There is "hauntology", the electronica-based hazy reminiscence of 1970s and 1980s music made popular by Boards of Canada, Oneohtrix Point Never, and Ariel Pink. Reynolds ends *Retromania* with a tepid endorsement of hauntology, a subgenre that is melancholic but at least does something creative with its old parts rather than merely rehashing the past. Or there is the tack of acknowledging our collective anxiety of influence, of owning up to the fact that it is impossible to create without forbearers in mind. This is the tactic of hip-hop and other sample-based artforms. We should just accept our retromania, in other words, and go on, because everything that can be said has already been said.

Or there is the Realpolitik tack. The terms of our existence, not only of our art, have not sufficiently changed.

I'll end with this third possibility. Anything that is imaginable has already been done in retromaniacal art. We must bank only in that which we can't imagine. This is no call for a new art or more original art or any

type of art in particular. History shows that those who worry about what art should be are usually not the ones making interesting art. This is instead a call to fix our attentions on what sort of society, of existence, we wish to put in place as the one we've known since the early twentieth century passes away. Excesses of time and money that conspired to create narratives first of progress and then decay are bound to change – perhaps even disappear or then again perhaps be coupled with other excesses, liberties, liabilities. Art will sort itself as it always does to make sense of that new situation. We should instead figure out our new definition of happiness.



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Gracyk, Theodore. "Music, Indiscernible Counterparts, and Danto on Transfiguration."  
*Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 3 (2013): 58-86.

#### ABSTRACT

Arthur C. Danto's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* is one of the most influential recent books on philosophy of art. It is noteworthy for both his method, which emphasizes indiscernible pairs and sets of objects, and his conclusion, which is that artworks are distinguished from non-artwork counterparts by a semantic and aesthetic transfiguration that depends on their relationship to art history. In numerous contexts, Danto has confirmed that the relevant concept of art is the concept of fine art. Examples of music that are not fine art demonstrate that semantic and aesthetic transfiguration does not require a relationship to art history or art theory. Appropriate interpretation and individuation of a great deal of music can be achieved by listeners who do not grasp art theory and who do not guide their interpretation by reference to the concept of art.

#### KEYWORDS

Danto, music, indiscernible counterparts, defining art, interpretation

# Music, Indiscernible Counterparts, and Danto on Transfiguration

Theodore Gracyk

The method of indiscernible counterparts is intended to serve as a kind of philosophical prism, separating out the various components of experience, even if these are indissolubly mingled in the act of experience.

• Arthur C. Danto<sup>1</sup>

If we are asked whether ... the pop song *Rock Around the Clock* is art, we are most likely to respond that we neither are sure nor care.

• Anita Silvers, 1975<sup>2</sup>

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# 1.

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**A**rthur C. Danto's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* is one of the most influential recent books on philosophy of art. Its argument proceeds, as Danto summarizes it, from the question, "Given two things which resemble one another to any chosen degree, but one of which is a work of art and the other an ordinary object, what accounts for this difference in status?"<sup>3</sup> Pairs and groups of indiscernible objects play a pivotal role in generating his argument that artworks are individuated by their relationship to art history and, thus, that every work of art is the work that it is by reference to historically situated art theory, and hence any artwork is art only by virtue of some surrounding art theory.<sup>4</sup> Although Danto succeeds in demonstrating that indiscernibles can only be individuated by reference to their historical contexts, I am not persuaded that he offers us any reason to conclude that distinct but indiscernible *musical* works are only individuated by their place in art history.<sup>5</sup> History and theory? Yes. *Art* history and theory? Not necessarily. The essential difference in Danto's pairs of indiscernibles is that one carries meanings that the second one lacks. In some cases, the former is a semantic "transfiguration" of the latter, where the difference requires knowledge of the historical provenance of each item. In the following, I argue that Danto fails to establish that semantic and aesthetic transfiguration requires an art-historical context or that it requires the concept of art. Over the years, Danto has repeatedly emphasized the concept of fine art, a concept underlying the modern unification of visual art, music, literature, and several other cultural practices.<sup>6</sup>

In response, I contend that the appropriate interpretation and individuation of a great deal of music can be achieved by listeners who do not grasp art theory and who do not guide their interpretation by reference to the concept of art. Musical works can be successfully individuated by their place in a relatively localized *music* history, without connecting music to other kinds of art, as is required to arrive at a concept of fine art.<sup>7</sup> In short, transfiguration does not require a concept of art that brings music, visual art, and literature together as species of a common genus. Although I grant that Danto's pairs of indiscernibles give us reason to agree that an individuating "transfiguration" of sound requires a historically sensitive interpretation, they do not demonstrate that either art theory or artworld

concepts are necessary elements of the requisite historical setting for interpreting and thus identifying musical works.

Danto notes that the concepts of music and art are only contingently related. Not all music is art, and not all art is music.<sup>8</sup> If this position seems in any way odd, remember that Immanuel Kant offers theoretical reasons why instrumental music is fine art, and then reasons why it is not fine art.<sup>9</sup> In the end, Kant does not decide the question. So it is not far-fetched to say that a piece of Baroque *Tafelmusik* is music but not art, perhaps for the very same reasons that a child's song is music but not art. Corresponding to what Danto says about a child who produces something indiscernible from a visual artwork, the object may *appear* to be just the same, but the child's achievement lacks properties that belong to the indiscernible artwork.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, the child doesn't know enough about art history to embody the same statements that an adult artist would convey by making an indiscernible thing.<sup>11</sup> My argument is that the lack of art-historical knowledge in musicians and listeners does not generate a corresponding incapacity with respect to sounds transfigured into meaningful musical gestures.

Although there is increasing willingness to treat popular music — or at least very good popular music — as art, not all popular music is so easily moved into the artworld. There are many borderline cases. Furthermore, Anita Silvers is right to remind us that most of the popular audience has no reason to wonder if pop songs are art. If a piece of popular music does the job of transfiguring sonic properties without requiring any reference to the concept of art, then why is a reference to the concept of art required to bring about a text's differentiation as a literary work, a bodily movement's differentiation as choreographed dance, or a three-dimensional object's differentiation as a piece of sculpture?<sup>12</sup> Isn't the historically contextualized creative act sufficient?

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## 2.

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Specifically, I contend that the method of indiscernible counterparts does not support Danto's position that there is "a special aesthetics for works of art and indeed a special language of appreciation, and ... both seem to be involved with the concept of art."<sup>13</sup> Here, and elsewhere, Danto claims that an appropriate response to artworks is not available to those who lack the concept of art.<sup>14</sup> I am especially concerned about the implication that responding to semantically-rich popular music requires some degree of involvement with this concept. Although Danto says next to nothing about music in *Transfiguration*, he elsewhere claims that "[t]he distinction between music and noise" is precisely parallel to the distinction between one of Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes and its model, a commercial Brillo box. As in *Transfiguration*, he asserts that the concept of fine art is part of the difference.<sup>15</sup> In order to challenge him on this point, I will provide four examples of popular music that display semantic and aesthetic transfiguration. In each case, the transfiguration of sound into music can be accounted for by appeal to appropriate facts about local music traditions that play an essential role in arriving at plausible interpretations of that music and, thereby, recognition of its relevant rhetorical and aesthetic properties. But if audience comprehension and appreciation of sophisticated work-differentiation can succeed in popular music culture in the absence of reference to the concept of art, then we have little reason to think that that concept plays an essential role in musical culture.

My method, then, is as follows. What happens if we construct a series of indiscernibles by locating musical counterparts for Danto's visual and literary counterparts? We can then compare the parallel series. One series will involve artworks (Danto's own various sets of indiscernibles) and the other series will involve musical works. However, pairs of indiscernible sound sequences – where one is an identifiable musical work and the other is not – do not require us to bring art theory or art history to bear in constructing the differentiating interpretation. Comparing Danto's examples with parallel examples of music, we can see whether they reflect important differences beyond the bare fact that Danto's involve works of fine art while mine involve music that is not necessarily art.<sup>16</sup> For many musical examples, reference to their location in a particular music culture will be sufficient to support a "transfiguring" interpretation.

A likely objection to my argument will be the rejoinder that Danto's references to art-historical context are simply references to cultural provenance. On this reading of Danto, I am merely endorsing his view when I contend that the phenomenon of transfiguration supports a historicity requirement, which may include a background of historically situated theory.<sup>17</sup> However, Danto clearly holds that the historicity condition is meant to capture the insight that the eternally unchanging concept of art is historically revealed, so that a thing "accorded the status of artwork in 1965 could not have been accorded that status in 1865 or 1765."<sup>18</sup> He invokes this thesis in order to explain why certain artifacts achieve the status of an artwork when others do not. He does not offer it to explain how artifacts embody meanings or why they fall into other sorts of categories that may be relevant to their interpretation.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, if Danto is offering a weaker historicity requirement (that is, one that does not include reference to the concept of art), then he is mistaken to contend that there is "a special aesthetics for works of art."<sup>20</sup> According to his theory, an artwork's semantic dimension provides an objective ground for its possession of aesthetic properties that do not belong to the uninterpreted perceptual façade of the object created (or, in some cases, appropriated) as the embodiment of an artistic gesture.<sup>21</sup> To take an obvious example, Duchamp's *Fountain* has an ironic humor that is utterly lacking in an indiscernible "real" urinal. I endorse the thesis that perception alone will not yield up all of an artifact's aesthetic properties, a variant of which is independently defended by Kendall Walton:

certain facts about the origins of works of art have an essential role in criticism [because] aesthetic judgments rest on them in an absolutely fundamental way. For this reason ... the view that works of art should be judged simply by what can be perceived in them is seriously misleading.<sup>22</sup>

In Danto's version of the same point, "the aesthetic qualities of the work are a function of their own historical identity."<sup>23</sup> Consequently, "aesthetic appreciation of artworks" is "a function of interpretation."<sup>24</sup>

Against Danto, I propose that the "special aesthetics" to which he refers is not actually "special for works of art." It is a consequence of the semantic transfiguration in light of a cultural context, even if the transfigured phenomena under consideration are not necessarily works of art.<sup>25</sup> The method of indiscernible counterparts yields a historicity

condition that is only contingently related to the history of the extension of the term "art."

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### 3.

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Here is an initial set of musical indiscernibles. I do not see why their interpretation requires any reference to art theory, art history, or the concept of art.

The compact disc player in my living room holds multiple discs. Selecting some music to accompany my Saturday household chores, I load it with four discs and go about my business. The music drifts in and out of my hearing as I move around the house. Taking laundry to the basement, I can only hear the dull thud of the bass and drums. Taking some kitchen scraps to the compost pile at the far end of the yard, I can no longer hear the music at all. After a while I lose track of time. I lose track of which disc is playing. Walking back through the living room on my way to answer the telephone, the music draws my attention with a soaring, searing burst of electric guitar. A languid sequence of notes suspends time. I recognize the opening phrase of the first of two extended guitar solos of Pink Floyd's "Comfortably Numb." The song is a highlight of the group's harrowing concept album, *The Wall* (1979). When I'm talking on the telephone in the kitchen, the music fades into an indistinct wash of background sound. The music proceeds through another sung verse and chorus. When I hang up, I notice that the song's second guitar solo is just beginning.

What is this music, and what does it convey? When I loaded the disc player, I put in the two discs of Pink Floyd's *Is There Anybody Out There?*, a live recording of the group's staging of "The Wall Show" (as they called its theatrical performance). I also put in a recording of a live performance by David Gilmour, recorded in Manchester, England, during his 2006 summer tour. Finally, I put in a recording of a live performance by Roger Waters, recorded in Italy during his 2006 summer tour. For those not familiar with these musicians, Waters and Gilmour were Pink Floyd's bass player and guitarist, respectively, when the group was at the height of its fame and commercial fortunes. They are the co-composers of

"Comfortably Numb." Waters quit the band in 1984. He subsequently sued the remaining band members in a vain attempt to prevent them from continuing the band in his absence. He lost the lawsuit and Pink Floyd carried on. Gilmour now led the band, which continued to perform Waters' songs during several financially lucrative tours. Twenty-two years after Waters' departure, Gilmour and Waters simultaneously launched solo tours. Both performed many of the same Pink Floyd songs each night. More to the point, both performed meticulously faithful recreations of the musical arrangements on *The Wall* and other Pink Floyd albums. Pink Floyd fans dominated the audiences, and they came to the concerts expecting to hear what they heard on the records. Waters and Gilmour obliged. In terms of the manifest sonic properties of the performances, there are no discernible differences between the musical performances during the guitar solos of "Comfortably Numb" during Pink Floyd's live 1970s performances, Roger Waters' 2006 performances, or David Gilmour's 2006 performances.

Returning to my three discs with their three recorded performances of "Comfortably Numb," the extended instrumental passages are sonically indiscernible. (If there are differences, they are as trivial as the differences between Warhol's Brillo boxes and actual Brillo cartons.) Despite their striking similarity, very different interpretations of the music are appropriate, depending on which disc is playing.

First, consider the Pink Floyd performance. As I enter the room at the beginning of the first distinctive, melodic guitar solo that Gilmour wrote for "Comfortably Numb," Pink Floyd's performance expresses the narrator's detachment. The second solo expresses his free-floating disassociation as an injection of drugs takes effect.

The second case is Gilmour's solo performance in Manchester. The first guitar solo expresses the narrator's detachment. The second solo expresses the narrator's free-floating disassociation as an injection of drugs takes effect. But the two solos call for an additional layer of interpretation. Knowledgeable fans understand that these passages eloquently express the guitarist's pride in having composed the musical highlight of *The Wall*. Waters may have regarded Pink Floyd as his band, but Gilmour's nightly solos remind the nostalgic fans that the group's distinctive electric guitar work had nothing to do with Waters.

In the third case, suppose I enter the room at the beginning of "Comfortably Numb" from the Waters solo performance in Verona. Again,

it expresses the narrator's detachment and the second solo expresses free-floating disassociation. But, again, the two solos call for an additional layer of interpretation. Knowledgeable fans understand that the music defiantly expresses Waters' belief that *he* was the genius of Pink Floyd. Hiring an unknown guitarist to replicate Gilmour's solo work demonstrates that Gilmour, who was not a founding member of Pink Floyd, was brought in as a replacement musician and so he was always dispensable.

Those who know the arguments of Danto's *Transfiguration* should be reminded of three indiscernible paintings, "Kierkegaard's Mood," "Red Square," and "Nirvana."<sup>26</sup> Each is a square of red paint, but each has a distinctive interpretation that accounts for why it looks as it does. By understanding how various non-manifest properties explain the look of each painted canvas, a viewer gains access to their very different metaphorical, expressive, and stylistic properties. Although *Transfiguration* says almost nothing about music, it has had considerable influence on the philosophy of music. Danto's method of comparing indiscernibles has become a staple in debates about the essence of music and the identity conditions for musical works.<sup>27</sup> In this respect, I am not saying anything original when I suggest that we should view the three performances of "Comfortably Numb" through the prism of Danto's three red paintings. My auditory examples are like his visual examples in that listeners and viewers who are aware of unexhibited properties are able to consult differences in their circumstances of production in order to grasp that in the embedded metaphors: "the structure of [each] metaphor has to do with some features of the representation other than content."<sup>28</sup> This insight is particularly welcome for suggesting how instrumental music becomes rich in meaning despite its seeming lack of content.

A disanalogy might be brought forward as an objection. Danto's red paintings are works of art. The same is not so obviously true about guitar solos performed at rock concerts in huge stadiums. That, of course, is the very disanalogy that interests me. In a passage that I quote as an epigraph, Silvers points out that interpretation and enjoyment of the 1950s rock and roll hit "Rock Around the Clock" is independent of its status as art. (If anything, the original audience for rock and roll viewed the music as antithetical to art.) But if unexhibited properties have the same transformative effect on non-art as they do on art, then art-historical contexts are not necessarily the contexts that matter for the generation of metaphorical meanings.

Another objection is that another disanalogy undercuts my proposal to align three indistinguishable paintings with these three musical performances. According to standard ontologies of art, the three paintings are three distinct works of art, but the three performances are merely three embodiments of a single work, the song “Comfortably Numb.” Furthermore, it might be noted that something is lacking. What is missing is the fourth case, the “mere real thing” with which any of the three works might be confused. It is extremely difficult to imagine a set of non-musical sounds that would sound just like a performance of “Comfortably Numb” without being an instantiation of “Comfortably Numb.” It is then tempting to reply that standard ontologies of music deny that recorded music is anything other than a mere real thing, a representation of a performance of the music. In the same way that a representation of a work of art is not itself a work of art (e.g., a forgery of it represents it closely and thus allows the forger to pass the non-artwork off as the artwork), a recording of “Comfortably Numb” might already count as a representation of music without being music – just as Erle Loran’s diagrams of the formal structures of Paul Cézanne’s paintings are mere representations and not artworks.<sup>29</sup> Although that is an overly-simplified position concerning the relationship of recordings to the musical works featured on those recordings, I will not pursue that issue here. Instead, we can take the sting out of the objection by introducing cases of ordinary sounds that are indiscernible from an aural sequence that is intentionally produced while performing a particular musical work. This sort of example provides the same theoretical leverage that Danto obtains from Robert Rauschenberg’s painted bed and the piece of chain on the statue of a cat at Columbia University.<sup>30</sup> The chain might be part of the statue, entering into its interpretation, or it might be a chain securing the statue, in which it does not enter into the interpretation. The fact of the matter makes an ontological difference even if we are never in a position to know which of those two relationships is historically accurate.

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## 4.

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In order to complete my argument that the concept of art and references to art history are not generally required to distinguish between a particular

musical work and an indistinguishable counterpart, we need a case of music where the music might be confused with a "mere real thing." The most obvious candidate is John Cage's *4'33"* (1952), which notoriously instructs the performing musician to refrain from playing. Attending a concert of twentieth-century music, one might neglect to study the concert program and, wondering why the pianist is waiting so long to begin the next piece, might confuse the sonic richness of the performance with ordinary whispering, squeaking chairs, and rustling programs. But is *4'33"* even music? Stephen Davies argues that it is not. I am inclined to accept his argument, which hinges on the premise that a musical composition necessarily organizes sound. However, one does not really organize sound unless one prescriptively excludes "some sonic possibilities" from correct performances of the music.<sup>31</sup> Since Cage's instructions for *4'33"* fail to provide for any distinction between performance sounds and ambient noise, no sonic possibilities are excluded. So it cannot be a musical work.<sup>32</sup>

Based on Cage's music philosophy and various interviews, many critics have claimed that *4'33"* is music that is composed entirely of silence.<sup>33</sup> On this reading, it is the musical analogue of a primed but otherwise unpainted canvas that is displayed as an artistic comment on the art of painting. But Davies offers evidence about the piece's history and Cage's philosophy of music that together point in a different direction. *4'33"* is a work for performance, with a fixed duration, during which the audience is to attend to any and all sounds that occur. Ordinary sounds become the object of interpretive focus. However, the audience is not to regard the sounds as "aspiring to the conditions of music (traditionally conceived)."<sup>34</sup> Cage is calling attention to art-historically informed sonic properties. On this reading, the piece is more like exhibiting an empty picture frame than a primed but unfinished canvas or a uniformly white painting.

Danto's fingerprints are all over Davies' analysis. *4'33"* is certainly an artwork, argues Davies, for it has the requisite "aboutness" and point of view. Rather than a musical composition, it is a piece of conceptual art about music.<sup>35</sup> It transfigures whatever sound is heard during a performance of it on this reading of *4'33"*. Cage's transfiguration of ordinary sound requires reference to the concept of art, for it requires an understanding of conceptual art. It also requires an understanding of, and contrast with, music as music is traditionally conceived. However, on this reading of Cage, it is an artwork but not a musical work. As such, it does not advance my argument.

Of course, Davies' reading is not the standard line on Cage. Many well-informed music theorists regard *4'33"* as music that expands the sonic resources of music. As such, its performance is not analogous to hanging an empty picture frame on a museum wall. It is not a silent piece, but rather a response to the impossibility of silence.<sup>36</sup> On this reading, Cage was priming listeners to recognize that he was transfiguring "natural" sounds into music. On this account, a successful performance would be one that encouraged some listeners to become aware of their own capacity to control the transfiguration process by deciding what merits listening, and so to control which sounds enter the music. Although this reading of Cage and his achievement has the advantage of underscoring the degree to which audience reception is central to successful transfiguration, it does not support my argument against Danto. For it does not establish that Cage's intended sonic transfiguration in performances of *4'33"* are independent of a surrounding artworld (in Danto's sense of 'art' as bound up with the historical unfolding of fine art). Many readings of the transfiguring principle behind *4'33"* cite Cage's reliance on conceptual connections to developments in the visual arts, especially Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951).<sup>37</sup> If a properly informed response to Cage's achievement requires grasping its relationship to Rauschenberg and other parallel developments in a proto-minimalist art movement, then it is embedded in an art-historical moment, in Danto's preferred sense of "art."<sup>38</sup>

So, again, the Cage example establishes nothing about the degree to which listening to and interpreting a musical work requires reference to the concept of art. *4'33"* leaves us without direction on the issue of whether all music must be related to the concept of fine art in order to semantically transfigure sounds into meaningful music.

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## 5.

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"Comfortably Numb" is a musical work. But it does not follow that it is art in Danto's sense of the term. There is no consensus that rock music is art, and some philosophers of music argue vigorously against their linkage.<sup>39</sup> To move this argument forward, we need a case of indiscernible, non-artwork counterparts involving the boundary between organized sound and

ambient sound. Here is a plausible case. In the spring of 1965, a British rhythm and blues quartet enters a London recording studio and records a pop song written by the group's guitarist. When the producer of the recording session sends the tape to the record company for pressing as a single, the engineers at the record label hear that the recording has been spoiled by feedback leakage onto the tape. The high-pitched, wailing sounds are the result of the electric guitarist holding his instrument at the same level as the speaker through which the volume is amplified; when the sound waves are captured by the guitar's electric pickup, it "feeds" information back into the amplification process, producing feedback. In short, a mere real thing – a sonic malfunction – has intruded on the aural properties of the musical performance. It is as if someone searching for the lavatories in the theater has mistakenly walked onstage during the performance of a play. The engineers at Decca Records return the master tape to the record producer, requesting a new recording session.

In this example, real life collides with the musical performance. Tellingly, a three-minute rhythm and blues song recorded in 1965 is no more a work of art than would be a tie painted blue by Cézanne's repeatedly wiping his brush on it.<sup>40</sup>

Now imagine that it is the spring of 1965, and a British rhythm and blues quartet enters a London recording studio and records a pop song written by the group's guitarist. During recent live performances, the guitarist has been experimenting with the "found" sound of feedback after accidentally unleashing it one evening by raising his guitar's pickup to just the right level to record the sound of its own amplification. (Although the Beatles have recently used a short burst of feedback at the start of their recording of "I Feel Fine," there are to date no recordings of feedback used as integral embellishment of a musical composition.) The quartet plays the song in standard fashion, after which the guitarist overdubs extensive feedback over the music. When the engineers at Decca Records hear the finished tapes, they return the tapes to the record's producer because the session has been ruined by a sonic malfunction. Bursts of guitar feedback saturate portions of the tape. However, the producer returns the tape to the engineers, explaining that the feedback is intended because it is one of the hallmarks of the young guitarist's performance style.

In this second case, the quartet is The Who, the recording is "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere," and the story is true.<sup>41</sup> The music "has all the subtlety of a mackerel thrown in one's face."<sup>42</sup>

Unlike Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, there is no plausible story according to which "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" counted as an artwork (i.e., as fine art) when it was recorded and released.

Decca released The Who's record, feedback intact, once they understood that the feedback was an integral part of its musical fabric. The feedback is part of the musical gesture. Originally mistaken for a mere real thing (an accidental intrusion of an equipment malfunction), we have a genuine example of the indiscernibility of musical sounds and non-musical sounds. The concept of fine art plays no role in accounting for the difference that explains why one recording features music plus non-musical intrusion, while the other features only music, where the two recordings are indiscernible with respect to their manifest properties. To explain this difference, we need something that the ear cannot hear. However, we merely need a theory of music as a historically evolving "language" of rhetorical communication.<sup>43</sup> We do not need a theory of art, and we do not need the context of art history. We do not need to know why music is one of the fine arts, nor why this particular piece is a case of fine art.

Perhaps this pair of indiscernibles is unconvincing. Someone might object that in Danto's examples something that is not at all a work of art is transfigured into a work of art, whereas in the "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" example a piece of music plus something that is partially not music is then transformed into a piece of music *simpliciter*. But Danto's example of the painted ties provides a parallel case to "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere." When Danto denies that the tie painted by Cézanne is an artwork, it is because Cézanne is a historical juncture where the tie is the problem, not the paint. Had that very same patch of paint been applied by Cézanne to a stretched canvas instead of a tie, it would have been a monochromatic work of art. After all, Danto is intent on denying that the act of painting is sufficient to transform a tie into an artwork.<sup>44</sup> At this historical juncture, the stumbling block is the incorporation of the ordinary object. Likewise, when the Decca engineers rejected The Who's recording, they responded to the gulf between what was acceptable (the rhythm and blues performance) and what made no sense (the feedback, which constituted the intrusion of non-musical sound). As luck would have it, the Decca engineers were presented with "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" at the moment in the history of popular music where the two could be brought together into a single thing, a musical performance of a work designed to include feedback.

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## 6.

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Although “Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere” parallels the case of the painted ties, I have not yet offered a case where the totality of a musical work could be mistaken for ordinary non-musical sounds. The argument might be advanced by fabricating examples. However, as Danto suggests by choosing to emphasize Warhol’s Brillo boxes, stipulated “facts” in thought experiments do not confirm the necessity of an appropriate confluence of historical events. Psychologically, if not logically, real cases are needed to demonstrate the importance of the “atmosphere” of history and culture. So here are two examples of actual acts of interpreting sound that allow us to postulate and contrast a fabricated indiscernible.

In August 1971, former Beatle George Harrison organizes two benefit concerts to aid famine victims in Bangla Desh. The concerts open with a sitar and sarod duet featuring improvisation by Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan. As can be heard on the album assembled from the shows, *The Concert for Bangla Desh* (1971), Shankar is introduced and he asks the crowd to refrain from smoking and to listen respectfully. His words are followed by about thirty seconds of sound from the four instruments on stage. The audience applauds with enthusiasm. Shankar tells them that he hopes they enjoy the music as much as they've enjoyed the tuning. Contrast this event with a second (fabricated) case. Amused by the ignorance and arrogance displayed by Americans as they appropriate “world” music, a pop musician scores a work for sitar, sarod, tabla, and tamboura. She calls it “The Complete History of the Music of India.” The piece lasts about thirty seconds and it reproduces, note for note, the sounds made by Shankar and the other three musicians as they tuned up in front of the audience at Madison Square Garden that day in 1971.

At the benefit concert, the sequence of sounds produced by Shankar and his accompanists was not music, yet many members of the audience believed that music had been performed. “The Complete History of the Music of India” is sonically indiscernible, but it is music. Shankar’s tuning has no subject and the sounds are not about the world in any way, and it adopts no attitude or point of view by means of rhetorical ellipsis.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, “The Complete History of the Music of India” transfigures those sounds into a complex musical allusion that elliptically conveys the naivety with which Americans have enthusiastically treated music as a

universal language, as mere sonic wallpaper that can be consumed for enjoyment without concern for its originating cultural location. Popular culture is sufficiently rife with parody and complex allusion that this musical work need not be a case of *artistic* allusion in order to succeed as a musical allusion.<sup>46</sup>

My fourth and final example goes in the opposite direction, from an actual piece of music, copyrighted in 1969, to imagining a set of identical sounds that are not music. At the end of 1969, the Grateful Dead released the double album *Live Dead*. (The two vinyl discs now fill one compact disc.) As the title suggests, the album presents concert performances of their music. Presenting several extended improvisations selected from three different 1969 concert performances, *Live Dead* is regarded as one of the best live rock albums ever assembled. One of the seven pieces is a free improvisation, and all seven performing musicians receive equal composing credit. The title, "Feedback," gives a good description of the piece. Where The Who's "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" embellished a song with electronic feedback, the Grateful Dead developed the practice of using feedback as the basis for group improvisation. As bass player Phil Lesh makes clear in his autobiography, the Dead's interest in sounds that were traditionally excluded as unmusical did not arise from their theoretical awareness of similar trends in art music. Lesh points out that they only "later learned that this approach was a fundamental tenet" of the work of John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen.<sup>47</sup> Although some of this art music was known to Tom Constanten, one of the Dead's two keyboardists at the time, Constanten seems to have played no special role in their improvisational practices, which were already well developed before his brief time with the group. However, with their roots in blues and jazz performance practices, the Dead were aware of the British rock musicians who had begun incorporating feedback into rock performance. The *Live Dead* performance of nearly eight minutes of feedback seems to have been a natural outgrowth of the Grateful Dead's collective interest in improvisation, electronic instrumentation, and democratic musical processes.

Interpreted as music, "Feedback" progresses from spiky dissonances that recall the music of Béla Bartók to a gentler ebb and flow that recalls the pastoral charm of Ralph Vaughan Williams' *The Lark Ascending*.<sup>48</sup> This progression of feeling is probably the organizing principle understood in advance by the participating musicians, for the Dead had established a practice of ending the evening by transitioning from feedback into an a cappella rendition of "And We Bid You

Goodnight," a traditional song they found on an album of "folk" field recordings, *The Real Bahamas* (1965).

Contrast the Grateful Dead's "Feedback" with a second, indiscernible sequence of sounds. Some rock musicians are testing the sound levels of their instruments during the sound check before a concert. The drummer determines whether his trap set meets his needs. He hits the snare drum a few times and then taps each of his cymbals. He makes a few adjustments and then does the same thing again. Meanwhile, the guitarist loosens up with some bluesy single-string note runs. The bass guitarist plucks a few isolated notes. The pianist is not heard because the piano is being tuned. The organist eventually tests his sound volume with a handful of sustained chords. As this is taking place, the sound technicians bring a series of electric guitars and bass guitars to the stage. They connect each one and make sure that it has a live feed into the amplifier. All the while, one of the unused vocal microphones has been left on and it produces "extremely loud distorted tones wrenched from the speakers by electromagnetic interaction between the musical notes perceived by the pickups and the magnetic fields of the pickup, speaker, and amplifier."<sup>49</sup> These tones vary as the sound technicians test the guitar feeds to the amplifiers.

Recorded, these sounds would be indiscernible sonic counterparts of the Grateful Dead's "Feedback." However, they are not music. In contrast, "Feedback" is a musical gesture that can be interpreted as addressing a subject: collective processes. The unplanned, uncoordinated feedback lacks the narrative structure built into "Feedback," lacks its overarching tension and release, and lacks its anarchistic critique of the repressive forces that undermine the American experiment of democracy. At any rate, that's how I hear the contrast, listening as someone for whom it is the "local" music of my own youth. All the same, my interpretation could be thoroughly misguided. Music listening has an element of subjectivity that cannot be eliminated, and that we have no reason to *want* to eliminate. At best, the Grateful Dead's placement of "Feedback" between "Death Don't Have No Mercy" and "And We Bid You Goodnight" is a clear indication that they are asking me to treat it as music, inviting me to seek an interpretation, however speculative that may be. Because there is a display of human intention, my interest in what the music "says" should not be dismissed as *merely* subjective.

Normally, feedback is not music, yet "Feedback" is music. It transfigures various sonic properties by virtue of its musical-historical

context. In the late 1960s, Grateful Dead fans did not need to think about Cage and Stockhausen in order to “get” what the Dead were doing. Nothing I have come across about the band and their processes suggests that they had a collective intention to make art in any but the most catholic sense of the term. (Their collective intention to make rock music that parallels jazz seems to have been unrelated to any interest in art history or the nature of art.) In contrast, the feedback made during the sound check is not music. Similarly, Shankar’s tuning process does not instantiate a musical work. Yet a piece of pop music that sounds exactly like it might be a musical work. What it is about, and how, will require interpretation relative to a musical–historical context.

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## 7.

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Why, exactly, does Danto build the requirement of an art–historical context into his analysis? Again and again, he proposes that statements that would be false as statements about a non–art object become true when said about the same object as a work of art. Therefore the ability to recognize that any otherwise false statement about the ordinary object is a true statement about a work of art requires awareness that we “make different statements depending upon a variety of contextual factors.”<sup>50</sup> In some cases, an apt interpretation requires awareness that an artist is making a statement that is informed by the artist’s knowledge of “artistic themes and the history of art.” This “atmosphere” or context of interpretation allows the artist to make a statement about “art objects.” In short, knowledge of art theories and art history is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for an artwork to make a statement or express an attitude about art. Therefore, “to see something as art at all demands nothing less than this, an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art.”<sup>51</sup>

My four examples demonstrate that the transfiguration of the commonplace (when that involves something over and above mere representation) does not require reference to art theory, to art history, or to the concept of art. Statements that would be false as statements about a non–musical sound become true when said about them as music. Yet music need not be art, nor understood as such, for the transfiguration to

occur. Said of a recording of feedback generated accidentally at a sound check, "Those sounds are a collective process coming to terms with dissonance" means something very different from the same sentence said about the feedback improvisation on *Live Dead*. "That's feedback" said by the Decca sound engineers rejecting the tape of "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" has very different implications than the same sentence said by a Who fan. For knowledgeable listeners, The Who's feedback and the Dead's feedback invite interpretation. But there is no need for the musicians, record producer, and sound engineers to share a theory of art. Some agreement about music will be sufficient.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the method of indiscernible counterparts does not establish any direct linkage between a musician's ability to "make different statements depending upon a variety of contextual factors" and the music's status as art.

If recontextualization transfigures sounds and yet the appropriate interpretation can be grasped by thinking about music without reference to any theory of art, then reference to a theory of art or to art history is only relevant when the work in question is making a statement about the art status of works of art.<sup>53</sup> So the atmosphere of art history and theory is not a necessary condition for accomplishing what Danto finds non-aesthetically remarkable about art, namely that false statements are true when said about the artifact in its historically contextualized, rhetorical use. As Noël Carroll observed some years ago, we may need a historicity requirement, but the version presented in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* is far too exclusive.<sup>54</sup> But where Carroll offers a counter-example in order to show that Danto's formulation is too exclusive for conferring the status of art, I have offered examples that do not presume that we are attempting to confer the status of art. I have argued that Danto fails to establish that semantic and aesthetic transfiguration requires either an art-historical context or the concept of art. In contrast, Carroll argues that the conditions that an object must satisfy in order to be considered an artwork are mistakenly identified in Danto's account.

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## 8.

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My examples of popular music demonstrate that the work of transfiguring the ordinary into meaningful and thereby different things can be independent of awareness of art theory and art history. I will conclude with some brief reflections on the contingent relationship between music and fine art.

The relevant historical context for most art involves a wide range of concepts. There are concepts about media and their appropriate uses, and then there are concepts and themes that furnish content for artistic embodiment. A great deal of art challenges or subverts both sets of concepts. As Danto observes, many works of art raise questions about the philosophy of art.<sup>55</sup> Presumably, most of them interrogate the concept of art by responding to specific philosophies of art (e.g., some to mimetic theory, others to expression theory) rather than by addressing the very general concept of philosophy. Yet Danto says that it was only in the latter half of the twentieth century that the interpretation of fine art “had to turn to philosophy.” The purpose for doing so was “to find out what art was.”<sup>56</sup> Given post-Kantian philosophical interest in the concept of art, this development is not unexpected. What was unexpected was the identity of the artist who instigated this philosophical turn, and his selection of media. Warhol’s turn from painting to *sculptural replication* in order to explore the concept of art in the late twentieth century is not an historical or conceptual inevitability any more than was the appearance, in the fourteenth century, of epic poems to explore the concepts of love and salvation – in Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*, most notably. But, given Dante’s historical context, it is not unexpected, either.

Setting aside the identities of those two artists and their selection of particular media, are we tempted to say that vernacular writing *had* to become philosophical about prevailing religious doctrines in the same sense that Danto says that the sculptural interpretation of art *had* to turn to philosophy? Despite the prevalence of philosophical content in art, Danto never promotes the parallel thesis that the interpretation of every artwork must refer to a philosophical theory of some kind. This result is not surprising, for it would be a hasty generalization: only some works of art require such reference in order to be correctly understood. Furthermore, it would not differentiate fine art from other kinds of things

in the many cases where it does occur, for philosophical references and allusions are found in popular culture, too.<sup>57</sup> Despite these many references to philosophy, no one is tempted to conclude that reference to philosophical context is a necessary condition for being fine art, popular art, or “small-a” art. We can derive the important result – that only one of a pair of indiscernible objects embodies a particular reference to philosophical content – by introducing a historicity requirement: the identity conditions of any interpretable artifact include conventions established by its originating cultural-historical context. In some cases that will include reference to a particular development in the history of philosophy. In other cases, it will not. Why, then, does the self-referential nature of Warhol’s Brillo boxes lead Danto to conclude that a thing cannot be an artwork unless it can be interpreted in light of an *art*-historical context?<sup>58</sup> It can only be because of the particular question embodied in Warhol’s boxes. Yet that question, in turn, arose only because Warhol happened to be in a time and place where art was routinely opposed to craft and commerce, and his success as a painter and sculptor required him to distance himself from his past as a commercial artist.<sup>59</sup>

Far from being “eternal,” as Danto claims, the unification of the arts under the concept of fine art is a modernist project.<sup>60</sup> It appears to be an interesting accident rather than a historical progression or a revelation of an unchanging essence of art. I grant that it would be disingenuous to deny that a great deal of recent popular music has been caught up in this modernist project.<sup>61</sup> Pink Floyd may have been caught up in it, too. But I’ll wager that many of the millions who love *The Wall* have understood, and some have had their perspective on life altered by, “Comfortably Numb,” without the slightest concern for its status as art. Before that, The Who and then the Grateful Dead transfigured feedback without concern for Cézanne, Warhol, or Cage.

Danto’s analysis of indiscernible pairs presupposes rather than supports the position that there is an eternal essence of art with a historically evolving extension. Nonetheless, in *What Art Is*, Danto returns again to the example that inspired his analysis, Warhol’s Brillo box. He emphasizes the point that Warhol was exploring the concept of fine art by calling attention to its opposition to commercial art.<sup>62</sup> Both The Who and the Grateful Dead were engaged in a context of commercial entertainment rather than fine art when they transfigured noise into music. Danto would say that they fall on the wrong side of the line for their historical moment. Yet nothing interesting is lost on account of their merely being music. Generalizing more broadly, it is one thing to suppose that I cannot

aesthetically appreciate Ludwig van Beethoven's symphonies unless I understand that they are music, that they are symphonies, that they are tonal works of a particular era, perhaps even that they are all the works of the same pupil of Joseph Haydn. But if I know all of that, what more do I gain by interpreting them in light of the concept of art, or in light of the historically situated art theory of Beethoven's place and time?

To summarize, if my sonic counterparts do not rely on the modern concept of art as an element of their relevant historical context, then most of Danto's examples do not, either. I conclude that, aside from a few very special cases such as Warhol's Brillo boxes, Danto's method of aligning indiscernible counterparts does not invite reference to a grand narrative that invokes – even in nascent form – the concept of fine art.<sup>63</sup> Art theory is not the theory that must be brought to bear whenever we properly attend to the transfiguration that occurs in works of art. In the vast majority of cases, local histories of creative production will supply all of the "theory" that is required to permit audiences, viewers, and readers to attend to the transfiguration that occurs in performances, galleries, and literature. The concept of art is a modern concept for unifying these related but distinct activities, but we do not need it to transfigure sounds into music or strings of words into literature, and so there is no special aesthetics for works of art.<sup>64</sup>

## • Notes •

<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. Danto, "Replies to Essays," in Mark Rollins (ed.), *Danto and His Critics*, 2nd edition (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 289.

<sup>2</sup> Anita Silvers, "The Artwork Discarded," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34 (1976), 448.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur C. Danto, "Art and Meaning," in Noël Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press 2000), 131. However, Danto's summary is not quite accurate. He does not always oppose artworks and ordinary objects. Several of Danto's most important comparisons are between two visual works or two literary works that no one would confuse with an ordinary object (i.e., with non-art). For example, Danto offers the contrast of a segment of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Pierre Menard's graphically indiscernible literary text. (Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1981], 33.) Darren Hudson Hick offers an example that is not merely imagined, in "Ontology and the Challenge of Literary Appropriation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013), 155-165.

<sup>4</sup> Despite Danto's very clear language at many points in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (e.g., 135), Noël Carroll argues that Danto might not really mean art theory. He might only require "that artworks must be subtended by some artworld concepts." Noël Carroll, review of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace; The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art, History and Theory* 29 (1990), 115.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 134.

<sup>6</sup> By appealing to both visual and literary examples, Danto demonstrates that his recurring references to "art" presuppose a sense of "art" that references a historically-recent unified system of the arts; no particular definition of art or philosophy of art is presupposed. For an account of the cultural and intellectual history that serves as the background to the assumption that literature, painting, and sculpture are arts, see Paul O. Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 (1951): 496-527, and 13 (1952): 17-46, and Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> In addition to Danto's own arguments, provenance-relative ontologies are defended by Kendall L. Walton ("Categories of Art," *The Philosophical Review* 79 [1970] 334-367), and Gregory Currie (*An Ontology of Art* [London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989]).

<sup>8</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 78.

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 199-200. In Danto's most recent writings, it appears that his position on music might be closely aligned with Kant's view (Danto, *What Art Is*, 116-134).

<sup>10</sup> Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> On the assumption that "art-making is pan-cultural and historically ancient," fine art must be distinguished from art, broadly conceived: a "small 'a' notion of art." Popular art falls more obviously into the category of "small-a art" than fine art. (Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], 50-51.) Following Ted Cohen's argument that some films are simultaneously popular art and fine art, it is likely that some popular music has achieved fine art status. (Ted Cohen, "High and

Low Art, and High and Low Audiences,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57 [1999]: 137–143.) However, extending Cohen’s analysis from an Alfred Hitchcock thriller to rock songs does not undercut the point that work-identity remains independent of the concept of “art.”

<sup>13</sup> Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 95.

<sup>14</sup> In his most recent book, Danto continues to maintain that it is important that Warhol’s boxes are to be classified as fine art, whereas the visual design of their model is not. Danto, *What Art Is*, 115.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 35.

<sup>16</sup> If all music is art, it is the pan-cultural, “small-a” notion that predates the modern system of the arts. See Davies, op. cit., and my *On Music* (New York: Routledge, 2013), chapter 1.

<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Danto is widely understood to hold that one necessary condition for being an artwork is that its interpretation “require[s] an art-historical context (which context is generally specified as background of historically situate theory).” Noël Carroll, “Essence, Expression, and History: Arthur Danto’s Philosophy of Art,” in Mark Rollins, *Danto and His Critics*, 119. Danto endorses Carroll’s formulation of the definition of art as articulated in *Transfiguration*, saying, “it is to Carroll’s text that I would send anyone who sought a statement of what I might have achieved.” (Danto, “Replies to Essays,” 300). Elsewhere, Danto says that engagement with theory is not required, but some engagement with art history is essential: “Art is essentially art historical” (*What Art Is*, 134). Given the opportunity to reply to Carroll’s observation that Danto’s shift in emphasis abandons his “greatest” hypothesis (Carroll, “Danto’s New Definition of Art,” 146), Danto does not respond to Carroll’s point (Danto, “Replies to Essays,” 300–302).

<sup>18</sup> Danto, *After the End of Art*, 195–196.

<sup>19</sup> Danto confirms this point when he contrasts his historicity condition with those of Heinrich Wölfflin and Ernst Gombrich (*After the End of Art*, 196).

<sup>20</sup> Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 95.

<sup>21</sup> In his most recent publication on the topic of defining art, Danto speaks of “my definition” of art (*What Art Is*, xii). Yet Danto restricts himself to offering several necessary conditions for art. He is primarily concerned with excluding certain properties (e.g., mimesis and beauty) from the list of necessary conditions. He implies that he has abandoned the search for a set of sufficient conditions (*What Art Is*, 134). However, if Danto intends to offer sufficient conditions while jettisoning the requirement for art theory (suggested, *What Art Is*, 149), his definition appears to endorse the art status of virtually any “embodied” communication, a point made by Carroll in “Danto’s New Definition of Art and the Problem of Art Theories,” in Rollins, *Danto and His Critics*, 148.

<sup>22</sup> Walton, “Categories of Art,” 337.

<sup>23</sup> Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 111.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 113. Danto has now made it explicitly clear that he rejects the thesis that two indiscernible objects must have the same aesthetic properties if they are “perceptually alike” (*What Art Is*, 146).

<sup>25</sup> For an extended example, see my discussion of Jaco Pastorius in *On Music*, 19–20.

<sup>26</sup> Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> In particular, see Jerrold Levinson (*Music, Art, and Metaphysics* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990]), and Stephen Davies (*Musical Works and Performances: A Philosophical Exploration* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001]).

- <sup>28</sup> Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 175
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13 and 102, respectively.
- <sup>31</sup> Stephen Davies, "John Cage's 4'33": Is it Music?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1997), 458.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 460.
- <sup>33</sup> See, for example, Douglas Kahn, "John Cage: Silence and Silencing," *The Musical Quarterly* 81 (1997), 560-563.
- <sup>34</sup> Stephen Davies, "John Cage's 4'33": Is it Music?" 450.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 460.
- <sup>36</sup> Kahn, "John Cage: Silence and Silencing," 583.
- <sup>37</sup> Cage discusses Rauschenberg's influence in "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," *Metro* (Milan) 2 (May 1961), 36-51; reprinted in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), 98-108.
- <sup>38</sup> This reading of Cage is advanced by Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4-5, and extended to other visual artists by James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 116. Another emerging interpretation locates Cage in the movement toward sonic art that is not music, but essentially aligned with the visual arts; see Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 16-21.
- <sup>39</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 157 and 502.
- <sup>40</sup> Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 46.
- <sup>41</sup> Dave Marsh, *Before I Get Old: The Story of the Who* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1983), 173.
- <sup>42</sup> Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 44.
- <sup>43</sup> Although there may be cases of music that invites no interpretation, I endorse Eduard Hanslick's view that it is difficult to see why music is an important human activity if we adopt a "pathological" theory of music, according to which it is primarily an instrument for arousing emotions. (Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, trans. Geoffrey Payzant [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986], 60.) For an extended discussion of how an occasion of performance can enrich a musical work's meaning, see my "Meanings of Songs and Meanings of Song Performances," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013), 23-33.
- <sup>44</sup> For example, Danto explicitly distinguishes between the history of visual representation and the history of art, in *After the End of Art*, 196.
- <sup>45</sup> This formulation is from Carroll, "Essence, Expression, and History," 119.
- <sup>46</sup> Theodore Gracyk "Allusions and Intentions in Popular Art," in William Irwin and Jorge J.E. Gracia (eds. ), *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Pop Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 65-87, and Gracyk "Meanings of Songs and Meanings of Song Performances. "
- <sup>47</sup> Phil Lesh, *Searching for the Sound: My Life with the Grateful Dead* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), 71 n.4.
- <sup>48</sup> Granted, these are aesthetics properties of the music, and Danto denies that aesthetic achievement is a necessary condition for being an artwork (Danto, *What Art Is*, 144). Since I am not maintaining that the stretch of feedback is art, Danto's point makes no difference

to this argument. At the same time, the Dead's experiments with feedback might be interpreted as an anti-aesthetic gesture, in which case the feedback is embodied meaning in just the way that Marcel Duchamp's readymades inform Danto's argument (Ibid., 25).

<sup>49</sup> Lesh, *Searching for the Sound*, 71.

<sup>50</sup> Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 133.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>52</sup> Given the argument of section 8, I allow that there are cases within popular music where feedback is presented and is properly understood only if we think of it as fine art that is opposed to commercial product. Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music* (RCA, 1975) is a plausible candidate.

<sup>53</sup> This formulation derives from Carroll's explication of Danto's account of embodiment in "Essence, Expression, and History," 119.

<sup>54</sup> Carroll, "Essence, Expression, and History," 141.

<sup>55</sup> Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 56.

<sup>56</sup> Danto, *After the End of Art*, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Steely Dan's "Bodhisattva" (1973) is an obvious example. For an extended defense of this point, see Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Philosophy and the Probable Impossible," in Irwin and Gracia, *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Pop Culture*, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Reaffirmed, as I have already noted, in Danto, *What Art Is*, 134. Subsequently, he clarifies his argument by saying that he means the concept of fine art (146).

<sup>59</sup> In keeping with his general position, Danto denies that Warhol's boxes are to be understood in biographical terms; see Arthur C. Danto, *Andy Warhol* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 2-3.

<sup>60</sup> "I am committed to the view that art is eternally the same." Danto, *After the End of Art*, 95. I am using "modernism" to indicate a strain of thinking that came to fruition in the Enlightenment, as opposed to the view that it is a more recent development (e.g., Danto, "Art and Meaning," 130; Shiner, *The Invention of Art*, chap. 14)

<sup>61</sup> Bernard Gendron, *Between Monmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>62</sup> See note 62.

<sup>63</sup> Danto offers his extended reading of the emergence of the concept of art in *After the End of Art*.

<sup>64</sup> I extend my thanks to the anonymous referees of this journal, who pushed me to clarify and expand my argument, and to Brian Soucek, Jonathan Neufeld, and Michalle Gal, who encouraged me to contribute an early version to the online conference *Arthur Danto's Transfiguration of the Commonplace – 25 Years Later* (2007).

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