



Can Art Change the World? On the Political Dimension of Danto's Philosophy of Art

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ABSTRACT

This paper scrutinizes Arthur C. Danto's commitment to justice, equality, and all-inclusiveness as manifested in his activism and philosophy of art. Following Lydia Goehr's arguments in her book *Red Sea–Red Square–Red Thread*, I focus on Danto's understanding of the pluralistic artworld and his prediction that pluralism in arts is a precursor of political changes that are going to affect society. I argue that Danto believes a pluralistic society will be free from oppressive narratives, as is the post-historical artworld. In the final section, I address the role Danto ascribes to art in society's transformation to all-inclusiveness. I demonstrate that Danto privileges art over non-artistic representations because art enables us to feel the suffering of others.

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Don't take it as a matter of course, but as a remarkable fact, that pictures and fictitious narratives give us pleasure, occupy our minds.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 524

Arthur C. Danto stands as one of the most prominent philosophers of the Anglo-American tradition. His writings on art considerably shaped how we understand artworks and their essence and historicity. Besides being a philosopher and later an art critic, Danto also served as a board member of Amnesty International USA and was engaged in campus activism at Columbia University. Danto's social and political engagement was not very well known to a broader audience until recently, when Emma Stone Mackinnon published her study 'Amnesty International and Human Rights'.¹ Mackinnon rejects the view that Danto's involvement in Amnesty should be read as a practical extension of his philosophy; however, she claims that we should not treat Danto's politics and philosophy as separate territories either.² Besides Mackinnon, Lydia Goehr has, in her extraordinary book *Red Sea-Red Square-Red Thread*, convincingly demonstrated that Danto was politically committed to equality and all-inclusiveness, and this commitment is especially explicit in his philosophy of art.³

I am very sympathetic to this reading. Following Goehr's argument, I scrutinize Danto's belief that the pluralistic state of the artworld is a harbinger of the future pluralistic society, that is, a society where everyone is respected and has the same rights despite their gender, ethnicity, social class, and so on. I lay emphasis on the structural similarities between the post-historical artworld and pluralistic society consisting of the absence of oppressive narratives. In the paper's final section, I outline the role Danto ascribes to art in society's transformation to all-inclusiveness.⁴

II. GOEHR ON DANTO'S COMMITMENT TO HUMANISM

Regardless of my admiration for Goehr's entire project, in which she traces the motif of crossing the Red Sea in philosophical, ecclesiastical, religious, and historical writings and art, I will limit myself to what she says about Danto and his commitment to humanism. Goehr explicitly states that she aims to 'expose a red thread of humanism, a political commitment to an equality and all-inclusiveness that wove itself through

1 Emma Stone Mackinnon, 'Amnesty International and Human Rights', in *A Companion to Arthur C. Danto*, ed. Jonathan Gilmore and Lydia Goehr (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2022), 301–8.

2 Mackinnon compares Danto's activism and his view on the philosophy of history. She argues that, for both domains, 'not-knowing', that is, 'lack of knowledge that defines the experience of acting in history', is typical. *Ibid.*, 303.

3 Lydia Goehr, *Red Sea-Red Square-Red Thread* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 5.

4 In order to avoid misunderstanding, it is helpful to clarify several points: I do not claim that Danto prescribed that art has to have a political agenda, or that he believes that art should always convey a political message. If Danto assigned art a specific goal, he would – in reality – contradict his thesis on pluralism. I am also uninterested in whether Danto's adherence to defining art should be read as a political gesture. See Jane Forsey, 'The Disenfranchisement of Philosophical Aesthetics', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (2003): 581–97.

[Danto's] philosophy as a whole, coming fully to the fore in his philosophy of art'.⁵ Despite the book's clear-cut objective, the thesis's exposition is rather vague.

First, Goehr does not define what she means by humanism, human rights, freedom, democracy, and the like. These terms admit various interpretations depending on our historical location or political beliefs. Goehr is, of course, well aware of this pitfall. Still, she insists one can make sense of what she means by these terms as one reads on. Considering Danto's life-long commitment to humanism, Goehr emphasizes notions such as equality and inclusiveness, as opposed to intolerance, dogmatisms, and exclusion.⁶

Second, Goehr's account includes not only Danto's philosophy but also the activities and activism he was involved in as a historical figure:

From his 1949 master's thesis on violence in the work of Georges Sorel, through his amnesty letters sent to world leaders in defense of civil rights, through his critical engagement with analytical philosophy and modernist art history, through his monographs in the 1960s and 1970s on Nietzsche, Sartre, and Buddhist philosophy, to his end of art thesis in the early 1980s, and all that followed: he was driven to refuse an exclusionary narrative.⁷

The exclusionary narrative is a story designed or used to limit rights, whether it applies to artworks or people. Goehr argues that Danto rejects this kind of exclusion theoretically (in his philosophy) and practically, that is, in his activities and involvement in the human rights movement. Danto was a member of the Amnesty Executive Board and was responsible for the prisoners of conscience section.⁸ Moreover, in addition to his personal engagement, he reflects on the social role of activism in his writings on art. He also recollects several actions and campaigns from the 1960s and links them to happenings in the artworld.⁹

Third, although Danto endeavours to find a definition of art, Goehr insists that his philosophy of art is still democratic and inclusive. In her view, there is no tension between all-inclusiveness and defining art because Danto does not delimit a material embodiment of artworks. I will return to this point later in the section on parallels between the pluralistic artworld and a multicultural (pluralistic) society. For now, I am more interested in Goehr's implicit understanding of the relation between deeper structures determining the state of society and the place of art within our society.

Let me consider the following extract from Danto's *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*:

[C]alling woman the fair sex is an institutional way of putting woman on the [...] moral pedestal which extrudes her from a world it is hoped she has

5 Goehr, *Red Sea–Red Square–Red Thread*, 5.

6 Ibid, 8.

7 Ibid.

8 Mackinnon, 'Amnesty International and Human Rights', 302. Apart from Mackinnon's study, the primary source of information about Danto's activism remains his 'Intellectual Autobiography', in *The Philosophy of Arthur C. Danto*, ed. Randall E. Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 2013), 3–70. For a detailed account of founding Amnesty International USA see: Sarah B. Snyder, 'Exporting Amnesty International to the United States: Transatlantic Human Rights Activism in the 1960s', *Human Rights Quarterly* 34 (2012): 779–99.

9 Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 126.

no longer any business in [...] So the metaphysical pedestal upon which art gets put – consider the museum as labyrinth – is a political translocation as savage as that which turned women into ladies, placing them in parlors doing things that seemed like purposive labor without specific purpose.¹⁰

Women's oppression results from the systematic effort to define their roles. This effort has countless facets and is deeply rooted in the social structure. It starts by telling women what their job should be and what they should do in their free time and ends by telling women what to wear. Women do not wait happily in the parlour because they are the fair sex but because other places are hostile towards their abilities and ambitions. Danto's formulation thus suggests that turning women into ladies is a political (and social) decision that curtails women's rights.

One might read this passage as a diagnosis of the current state of society and as a confirmation of Goehr's claim that Danto systematically opposed any exclusion. Although Danto discusses the situation of women in the analysed passage, he is aware that other marginalized groups face discrimination daily. In *After the End of Art*, he expresses an appreciation not only for feminism but also for the civil rights movement's effort to abolish institutional racial segregation, which he views as the two most prominent liberation movements of the 1960s.¹¹

Furthermore, Danto considers art's translocation into museums to be discriminatory in a similar way as women's and other groups' removal from the practical sphere of life. He even employs the term segregation for this translocation.¹² This comparison is essential for my purpose because it illustrates that Danto associates the same or similar characteristics with both the artworld and the real world. The passage on translocation shows what Danto believes is wrong with an exclusion, whether it involves philosophical disenfranchisement of art or discrimination of people. Art, however, escaped from oppression with the end of art.

III. PLURALISM AND THE END OF ART

Danto has claimed on several occasions that art has come to an end,¹³ and his formulations and interpretations of art's end¹⁴ vary to a certain extent. He introduces

10 Arthur C. Danto, 'The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art', in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 12–13.

11 Danto, *After the End of Art*, 126.

12 Danto, 'Philosophical Disenfranchisement', 12.

13 The very first articulation of the thesis is from the eponymous article 'The End of Art', later republished as Arthur C. Danto, 'The End of Art', in *The Death of Art*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Haven Publications, 1984), 5–35, and 'The End of Art', in *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, 81–115. I will refer to the version from *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. Danto further revisited the thesis in the following texts: Arthur C. Danto, 'Approaching the End of Art', in *The State of Art* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987), 202–18; 'The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense', *History and Theory* 37 (1998): 127–43; Danto, *After the End of Art*.

14 For a discussion of Danto's version of the end-of-art thesis within the context of alternative formulation of the end of art, see: Katharina Bahlmann, *Arthur C. Danto und das Phantasma vom 'Ende der Kunst'* (Paderborn: Fink, 2015); Brigitte Hilmer, 'Being Hegelian after Danto', *History and Theory* 37 (1998): 71–86. For the criticism of the thesis, see: Sondra Bacharach, 'Can Art Really End?', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 57–66; Noël Carroll, 'The End of Art?', *History and Theory* 37 (1998): 17–29. Stephen Snyder, *End-of-Art Philosophy in Hegel, Nietzsche and Danto* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) combines historical perspective and criticism.

the idea of the end of art in his famous essay 'The End of Art', in which the end of art comes about as a result of the activities of artists who ask what art is, thereby opening the way to philosophers, who are equipped to answer such questions.¹⁵ In *After the End of Art*, Danto proposes a more elaborate version of his thesis and places the end of art into the broader context of the historical and narrative understanding of art and history.¹⁶ For art history, Danto holds that there were master narratives determining what art should be and excluding the rest. Moreover, each narrative advanced its conception of art as the only one conceivable and strove to beat its peers in the battle over the imaginary essence of true art. From the 1960s on, Danto claims, the artworld changed so profoundly that narrative thinking had to be abandoned. No leading theory told us what art was but several independent ideas coexisted peacefully in the artworld. And this is where pluralism comes onto the scene.

In the final paragraph of 'The End of Art', Danto concludes: 'The age of pluralism is upon us. It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means. When one direction is as good as another direction, there is no concept of direction any longer to apply.'¹⁷ Danto articulates the same point in 'Approaching the End of Art': 'the old puritanism and intolerances – the charge that everything other than what one was doing was *not really art* – gave way to a sort of pluralism, which itself is a concession that one no longer believes in a truth of art [...] Anything was permitted.'¹⁸ The phrase 'Anything was permitted' means an artist can choose from diverse options, and there are no media and material restrictions. Ontologically speaking, painting is no more art than photography or a readymade object. Pluralism enables artists to create as they please. If there are several conceptions of art, they can freely choose one, or, if existing theories do not fit their intention, they are allowed to create new ones. The competition characteristic of historical art – epitomized by the outbreak of isms at the beginning of the twentieth century – was replaced by the peaceful coexistence of versatile beliefs about art. Post-historical art, as Danto terms the art made after the end of art, is essentially pluralistic, which can serve as an inspiration for society at large.

When explaining the narrative ending of art, Danto reflects on inequality, hatred, and what, if anything, we can learn from pluralism in art:

Of course, there are two ways for there to be freedom from conflict. One way is really to eliminate whatever does not fit one's manifesto. Politically, this has its form in ethnic cleansing. When there are no more Tutsis, there will be no conflict between Tutsis and Hutus. When there are no Bosnians left, there will be no conflicts between them and Serbs. The other way is to live together without the need for cleansing, to say what difference does it make what you are, whether Tutsi or Hutu, Bosnian or Serb. The question is what kind of person you are. Moral criticism survives into the age of multiculturalism, as art criticism survives into the age of pluralism.

To what degree is my prediction borne out in the actual practice of art?
Well, look around you. How wonderful it would be to believe that *the*

15 Danto, 'The End of Art', 111.

16 Danto introduces his philosophy of history in *Analytical Philosophy of History* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968) and further develops it in *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

17 Danto, 'End of Art', 114–15.

18 Artur C. Danto, *State of Art* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987), 204.

In Danto's view, competition is something unequivocally negative, not a beneficial agent contributing to better performance. In art, the master narrative, the theory that has beaten the competition, oppresses every work that does not fit its scope. And the same is true for political geography and our understanding of human rights.

Regarding the Rwandan Civil War, the Hutu enforced a narrative that could not accommodate the Tutsi. But, as Danto's formulation on ethnic cleansing suggests, there is always a second option: peaceful coexistence. Ethnicity, gender, and social class do not matter, as the 'question is what kind of person you are'. Both conflicts Danto touches upon happened in the mid-nineties when he was working on *After the End of Art*. I do not think Danto merely wanted to comment on the contemporary situation. Instead, an ongoing ethnic conflict served to prove his thesis, that is, that society is not as pluralistic as it should be. Compared with the post-historical artworld, society still struggles with injustice, prejudice, and discrimination. In his book *The Madonna of the Future*, Danto addresses the link between the pluralistic artworld and society anew and claims: 'The art world is a model of a pluralistic society, in which all barriers and boundaries have been thrown down.'²⁰ The future society should (will) work on principles of the current post-historical artworld: discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, class, and so forth, will be a thing of the past; it will be replaced with respect.

Danto does not develop his assertion about the artworld as a model of the pluralistic society, leaving us with several pressing questions rather than answers and conclusions. The crucial question is in what respect(s) and to what extent the parallel between the artworld and the society can be drawn. In the following section, I scrutinize the possibilities of how one can grasp this parallel. First, I take the end of art as a *structural* change in the artworld and explain the structural difference between historical and post-historical art. Second, I systematically consider the notion of social equality as outlined by Danto and specified by Goehr. I show that Danto ties it with the legal dimension and that this equality before the law (broadly construed) defines pluralism in the artworld and also in the real world.

IV. STRUCTURAL SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE POST-HISTORICAL ARTWORLD AND EQUAL SOCIETY

As mentioned above, Goehr links the all-inclusiveness of the post-historical artworld mainly to the fact that Danto does not restrict the material embodiment of art. But she also adds in passing that the freedom of choice applies to art's meaning as well.²¹ And this brief note is crucial for my argument. In this section, I show that this freedom of choice is a consequence of a more profound transformation of the artworld and that the transformation affects not only embodiment but artmaking as a whole.

The end of art brought a *structural* change to the artworld in that there are no master narratives determining what art is. In comparison, disenfranchising theories

19 Danto, *After the End of Art*, 37. Italics mine.

20 Arthur C. Danto, *The Madonna of the Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 431.

21 Goehr, *Red Sea–Red Square–Red Thread*, 26.

(master narratives) oppressed the development of historical art. Danto retrospectively distinguishes two phases of historical art corresponding with two leading narratives: the Vasarian narrative (also called a model of optical duplication) and the Greenbergian narrative. Regarding the Vasarian narrative, an artist was supposed to duplicate reality. This narrative expected linear development: artists keep improving their technical skills to capture reality as we perceive it. Experimenting with colour, chiaroscuro, and perspective is integral to this framework. The Greenbergian narrative gave artists another objective: it forced them to speculate about the essence of art. In both cases, there was no alternative: one had to yield to the prescribed goal, otherwise, one's work could not be accepted as art.

In addition, the philosophical disenfranchisement of art was so deeply rooted in the atmosphere of the artworld that it did not occur to the artist to break its rules. If she violated them, her work would be excluded from the artworld. In a nutshell, the historical artworld was tied with rigid rules (prescribed by master narratives) and was therefore far from being democratic and all-inclusive. In comparison, the post-historical artworld is pluralistic and all-inclusive since there are no master narratives but coexisting art theories enfranchising miscellaneous artworks.

The absence of master narratives does not mean that there are no definitions of art but that any definition must respect the artworld's pluralistic nature. Philosophers cannot set goals for artists or prescribe what can be an artistic medium. Danto commits himself to offering such a definition and claims that artworks must be about something and embody their meanings.²² This definition enables us to tell art from non-art without restricting the artist's options. Leaving aside the additionally formulated condition of wakeful dreams,²³ Danto stipulates two necessary conditions for art to exist, and both have to respect the pluralistic character of the artworld. According to the first condition, art must have some content, but it can be about anything. And the same holds for the second condition: the meaning has to be embodied in a material basis (medium) but an artist can let her imagination run riot without worrying that her piece might not qualify as art.

From what I have set out so far, it follows that the most significant feature of the pluralistic state of the post-historical artworld is the absence of disenfranchising master narratives. In my opinion, one has to think about a pluralistic society along the same lines.

Consider Danto's characteristics of the pluralistic society from *The Madonna of the Future*: that it is the society 'in which all barriers and boundaries have been thrown down'. One might wonder what barriers Danto has in mind. Or, to put it in the form of a question: what is responsible for these barriers? The answer suggests itself: disenfranchising narratives. A genuinely pluralistic society has to be free from such disenfranchisement. The pluralistic artworld, with its peaceful coexistence of all miscellaneous artworks, is a suitable model of an egalitarian society. In the case of art, there are no oppressive theories, only those respecting the specificity of each artwork; in the case of a pluralistic society, there will be – Danto hopes – laws and regulations protecting the marginalized from discrimination.

22 Danto, *After the End of Art*, 195.

23 The condition of wakeful dreams is supposed to capture an artist's skill to produce appearances that might differ from what we believe is true in our everyday lives. In addition, appearances can be shared so they are – in principle – accessible to any spectator. Arthur C. Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 47–49.

Underdetermining the concepts of freedom and of art was how he granted all artworks, and by extension persons, their right to stand in the world equally before the law. His end of art thereby became a logical thesis of art's freedom after the law with all laws of the wrong restrictive sort removed.²⁴

The legal dimension of the problem is also embedded in the language Danto uses. Although he ponders the philosophical disenfranchisement of *art*, the term disenfranchisement originates in politics and refers to the deprivation of certain rights, especially the right to vote. Moreover, in his *What Art Is*, Danto explicitly addresses the disenfranchisement and social inequality in the USA and outlines the social development regarding equality of the marginalized:

Blacks and women in America were long prohibited from voting, hence they were disenfranchised. Unquestionably this was grounded in a wide belief in their inferiority. But in fact it rested on racism and sexism [...]
In 2008 the contest for the Democratic nomination for president was between a black man and a woman. Race and sex had become legally irrelevant.²⁵

In this passage, Danto predicts that the artworld's pluralism anticipates happenings in the real world only at the *legal* level. This reading of Danto's position corresponds with the emphasis on the *political* things to come. These political things might be political decisions, that is, laws based on the principle of equality and all-inclusiveness. For example, it is necessary to change the law or possibly the constitution to enfranchise people from oppressed groups with the right to vote. In the USA, anyone can be a presidential candidate regardless of race and gender, as Danto's example of the 2008 election illustrates. Nevertheless, while race and sex might indeed be legally irrelevant, being legally irrelevant is different from being *de facto* irrelevant.

There are groups of people with no or only limited access to the rights of the majority and people who face discrimination despite legally prescribed equality. Our society also operates on unwritten rules determining the role and position of any citizen. Some of these rules are not made fairly but stem from prejudice and beliefs that one group of people is superior to another. In the just-quoted passage on prohibiting certain groups of people from voting, Danto claims that the legal disenfranchisement was *grounded in* the belief in their inferiority and in racism and sexism. Hence, the disenfranchising laws were passed because of the prejudice on the part of the society, and changing the law might not be enough for more profound social change.

In addition, a passage on ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and Bosnia complicates the matter further. Danto states that the alternative to ethnic cleansing 'is to live together without the *need for* cleansing' (italics mine). The need for something cannot be reduced to what is permitted and prohibited by law. Of course, the system of law defines the framework in which one has to act: one must respect the law; otherwise, one will face punishment. But still, the legal dimension is just one part of a more complex issue or the first step. In other words, a pluralistic society based on the

24 Goehr, *Red Sea–Red Square–Red Thread*, 25.

25 Danto, *What Art Is*, 32–33.

pluralistic artworld model does not depend solely on a change in the law but more on the shift in mindset.

The post-historical artworld came into existence because of the end of art. Recalling Danto's understanding of this claim, art asked the question about its essence and role itself, and, later, it transmitted the task of defining art to philosophers. Regarding the pluralistic society, does this mean marginalized groups should do the same? Or, more importantly, does Danto expect that an occurrence analogous to the end of art is about to happen in the real world? Danto's philosophy does not offer any clues to answer these questions. Personally, I do not think Danto was awaiting an event that would have profoundly changed society worldwide.²⁶ Instead, he was hopeful about continuous social transformation.

My question for the two final sections of this paper is whether, in Danto's view, art plays any role in this transformative process. I aim to demonstrate that Danto believed that engagement with art might change an individual's life and has the potential to make us more sensitive to the suffering and discrimination of others. I do not, however, claim that art is the only means to learn about injustice and inequality, or that Danto supposes it is. My goal is to show that he ascribes to art a privileged position in this process.

V. THE AUDIENCE'S EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

The viewer's role in Danto's philosophy of art is relatively neglected in scholarly literature.²⁷ Attention is focused on the semantic dimension of the definition of art and the historical conditions of artistic creation. However, since publishing *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto has linked the essence of art to one other capacity. In his view, artworks are about something but also engage a viewer's self.

In *The Transfiguration*, Danto compares artworks to metaphors and rhetorical figures in terms of the audience's emotional engagement. They engage the audience because of their incomplete structure, which invites viewers to fill gaps left in the piece by the artist²⁸ (and similarly in the case of rhetorician and listener). A spectator

26 Danto continuously criticized the so-called substantive philosophy of history and all attempts to draw conclusions about ongoing events and prophesy the future. According to Danto, a philosopher can predict future happenings since any prediction is based on verifiable evidence; however, she cannot prophesy these happenings. A historian who prophesies the future makes a significant mistake since she treats the future as if it is already decided. But the future is open, and nobody is in a position to foretell the outcome of all events. For this reason, I doubt Danto could have wanted to forecast an event transforming society. See Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*; Lydia Goehr, 'Afterwords: An Introduction to Arthur Danto's Philosophies of History and Art', *History and Theory* 46 (2007): 1–28.

27 The significant exceptions are Noël Carroll and Diarmuid Costello. Carroll stipulates the condition of the audience's engagement in his reconstruction of Danto's definition of art (based on *The Transfiguration*). Carroll, however, regards this engagement as part of the interpretation and does not consider the audience's emotional response. See Noël Carroll, 'Essence, Expression, and History: Danto's Philosophy of Art', in *Danto and His Critics*, 2nd ed., ed. Mark Rollins (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 118–45. Costello discusses Danto's thoughts on aesthetics and metaphor. Diarmuid Costello, 'Kant and Danto, Together at Last?' in *New Waves in Aesthetics*, ed. Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson-Jones (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 244–66; 'On Late Style: Arthur Danto's *The Abuse of Beauty*', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 44 (2004): 424–39; 'Whatever Happened to "Embodiment"? The Eclipse of Materiality in Danto's Ontology of Art', *Angelaki* 12 (2007): 83–94.

28 Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 171.

does not complete the work arbitrarily; she follows the clues an artist encoded in it. If an audience member succeeds in filling in the empty spaces, she grasps the true meaning of the piece in question. Under ordinary circumstances, an artwork offers us limited options for completion, given that the context of the work guides our imagination.

In addition, the incomplete structure of the artwork is responsible for the viewer's emotional reaction because she – at least temporarily – accepts the author's perspective.²⁹ When employing the term 'author's perspective', I do not have in mind the attitudes and beliefs the author holds as a historical individual but the views she thinks are appropriate and necessary for a concrete artwork.

In *The Abuse of Beauty*, Danto addresses the spectator's engagement with artworks anew. He links his position to the early theory of signs, specifically to Charles Morris's distinction between semantical and pragmatic properties.³⁰ Although Danto has emphasized the importance of the meaning of art in his definition, that is, semantics, he leans towards the conclusion now that pragmatics is also significant for art.³¹ In Danto's view, 'pragmatic properties are intended to dispose an audience to have feelings of one sort or another toward what the artwork represents'.³² Danto believes that artworks force the viewer to take a certain attitude towards the given content, which is possible because of how the piece is made. Danto introduces 'inflectors' as a notion replacing the 'pragmatic properties' to eschew terminological confusion. Inflectors are properties of artwork, often but not necessarily aesthetic qualities such as beauty, the sublime, disgust, and so forth. Artists use these qualities to impact viewers: make them adopt certain positions towards artworks and feel appropriate emotions. I argue that Danto's inflectors aim to explain the very same principle as metaphors did in *The Transfiguration*.

Danto believes that the state of the human mind can be altered: 'the image really does move the mind of the viewer, as metaphors are literally supposed to do when they are successful. [...] Metaphors exist because of the truth that the mind is moved by representation.'³³ Because Danto employs the term representation in this context, it is necessary to clarify the difference between artworks and mere representations. Non-artistic representations are complete and do not engage the mind so intensively.

Danto does not specify the link between filling in the gaps and the arousal of emotions. It seems he believes emotions naturally arise when one succeeds in completing the work. However, one can assume the process of completing the work and emotional response are somehow intertwined. Noël Carroll provides a more sophisticated account of the emotional response towards works of art in his notion of criterially prefocused film text. Carroll claims that a film text is so structured to activate our subsumption of events depicted under categories 'that are criterially apposite to the

29 For a similar account, including filling the gaps in the artwork, see Jenefer Robinson. *Deeper than Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), especially the chapter 'The Importance of Being Emotional'.

30 Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), xv.

31 Ibid, 121.

32 Ibid, xv.

33 Arthur C. Danto, 'Metaphor and Cognition', in *Beyond the Brillo Box* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 78.

emotional state in question'³⁴ and argues that an appropriate emotion arises if one recognizes an object under the criterially relevant category. As Carroll puts it, 'the criterially prefocused film text embodies a conception of a situation from an emotively relevant point of view'.³⁵

However, the criterially prefocused film text cannot be the whole story. There has to be an activity on the part of the audience. Carroll explains that a viewer should be concerned about how the events depicted in fiction are or are not evolving and she is supposed to adopt a *pro* or *con* attitude toward depicted happenings. These attitudes are part of what Carroll calls *emotive focus*, the viewer's emotional state that fixes and shapes her attention.³⁶ Accordingly, in Carroll's view, there has to be an interaction between the criterially prefocused film text and the viewer's *pro* and *con* attitudes toward depicted situations, and this interaction results in the emotional engagement of the audience.

Carroll discusses only narrative fiction and mainly film, and therefore employs the term criterially prefocused *film text*. For my purpose, I believe it useful to widen the scope of Carroll's analysis to include all artworks and not only cinema. Thus, I suggest a terminological adjustment: instead of criterially prefocused film text, one can – regarding Danto's position – use the term criterially prefocused artwork structure. Accordingly, Carroll's formulation reads as follows: artworks are structured to activate our subsumption of the content of the piece under criterially apposite categories, which leads to the emotional reaction on the part of the audience. Although Danto is predominantly interested in the emotional engagement of an individual, he also reflects on the possible impact of engagement with art on society. In the following section, I will address his somewhat provocative idea that art can change society.

VI. CAN ART CHANGE THE WORLD?

Danto raises the question of whether art can change society explicitly in *The Abuse of Beauty*. In this book, he considers political art and the possibility of the transformative power of art in general. In this section, I will follow Danto's thoughts and arguments and show why I believe Danto indeed supposes that art has a transformative capacity.

Let me start with Danto's comment on feminist art:

A feminist work is not intended to secure our admiration for itself, but to compel a change in the way women are thought about and treated in our society. If it has that effect, if it makes viewers see injustices where before they were blind or indifferent to them, it is artistically excellent [...] The work is meant to change the way those who view it view the world. To see the world as a scene of injustice is *ipso facto* to be moved to change it.³⁷

Danto's intentionalism intersects with the artistic quality of the piece here. In Danto's view, an artwork is successful if and only if it makes viewers accept its perspective. In the case of the feminist artwork under discussion, it is successful if it makes us see

34 Noël Carroll, 'Film, Emotion, and Genre', in *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 69.

35 Ibid, 70.

36 Ibid.

37 Danto, *Abuse of Beauty*, 107–8.

injustice where we cannot see it – probably because we are so used to it – in real life. However, one might demur that we do not need art to learn about injustice since scholars map it systematically, and the media provides us with the results of their research.

Moreover, in his *Intellectual Autobiography*, Danto summarizes his path to feminism in the following words:

In many ways Beauvoir's book [*The Second Sex*] opened my eyes to certain assumptions I, like everyone else, had in regard to women. I remember having been impressed by a painting called *Hemlock*, by the second generation abstract expressionist Joan Mitchell. Part of the reason I gave up art was that I knew I could not match Joan Mitchell's work – and *she was a woman!* I realized how afflicted by the machismo of the New York artworld I had been. Another book that caused me to see women in a new light was Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*.³⁸

For an ambitious artist – which Danto had been – nothing could be worse than lagging behind a woman. Beauvoir's book was an eye-opening work that enabled Danto to realize his prejudice and reevaluate his perception of women. And *The Second Sex* is undeniably an academic work, not a piece of fiction! However, Danto adds that Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* also caused him to see women in a new light. And *The Golden Notebook* is a psychological fiction, a work of art. Danto does not deny the benefits of scholarly works; however, he insists that the role of art is different and, in a way, irreplaceable. Art's uniqueness in changing our views is that art invites a specific type of engagement. As described in the passage on metaphor and rhetoric, artworks are not complete entities but require viewers to fill in the gaps the artist left in them. In doing so, viewers take on the perspective the artist considered appropriate for the piece in question.

Moreover, an emotional response accompanies the process of completing the work. As I have already stated, for Danto it is crucial that one not only sees the content of the work in a certain light but also feels a particular emotion vis-à-vis it. Thus, the emotional response is responsible for the work's impact on the individual and differentiates the engagement with art from engagement with non-fiction or media.

In this context, it is helpful to return to the notion of criterially prefocused artwork structure. To recall Carroll's position, the artwork is so construed to elicit certain emotions; there is a bond between criterially structured artwork and the emotive focus of the audience. This bond is, I argued, essential for Danto's philosophy of art. Getting back to the example of a feminist work, it makes us see injustice not because we have learned something so far unknown but because we *feel* what it is like to face discrimination. And if we feel it for ourselves we might be more willing to change our behaviour.

However, having such transformative *power* does not mean that artwork always influences us to the degree we abandon our beliefs and adopt a new perspective. Usually, we adopt the artwork's perspective only temporarily, that is, during the course of engagement with the work. Long-term impact on the life of an individual is relatively rare.³⁹

38 Danto, 'Intellectual Autobiography,' 40.

39 Danto, *Abuse of Beauty*, 133.

But, although art has the above effect on an individual only occasionally, it is a shared and not unusual experience. This experience is so common that writers describe it effortlessly in their oeuvre.⁴⁰ If we read a passage describing emotional engagement with an artwork in fiction, we can easily relate to it since we usually remember artworks that profoundly impacted our lives.⁴¹

Danto even insinuates that the need for transformation might be why we encounter artworks.⁴² In *The Abuse of Beauty*, Danto opens the passage on art's transformative power with a brief analysis of Barbara Kruger's famous work *Untitled (Why Are You Here?)* from 1991. In the image, we can see a screaming figure resembling the figure from Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. However, compared to Munch's silent figure, Kruger's addresses the audience and asks visitors why they are in the gallery. Kruger gives them hints as she questions whether it is because they want 'to kill time', 'to get cultured', 'to widen their world', or 'to improve their social life'. Danto keeps asking and suggests that 'it would be wonderful if we could in honesty respond to Kruger's questions by saying: We are here to be transformed. We have come here to become different persons'.⁴³

One might claim that this formulation of Danto's is rather expressive and that he does not aim to assert that art makes us different people. However, I believe we should interpret the above passage literally. In Danto's view, our previous experience with art motivates us in further engagement with artworks. If we have gained something meaningful from past exposure to art, there is a possibility that it will happen again. As I have outlined, the transformation goes hand in hand with the emotional response. Or, better, the emotional reaction precedes the more complex conversion. Thus, in Danto's view, the expectation of the emotional experience is also a stimulus for visiting galleries or reading.

I argue further that Danto was fascinated by the very possibility of artistic conversion, that is, by the idea that engagement with art might be comparable to divine inspiration. This assertion of mine might sound provocative at best, but several passages in Danto's philosophy confirm my reading. First, there is the recurring motive of Adam Verver's story. The art collector and businessman Adam Verver is a fictional character from Henry James's novel *The Golden Bowl*. Danto describes Verver as someone who had been transformed by artistic beauty and, therefore, decided to establish a museum to provide citizens with similar experiences.⁴⁴ Of course, Verver's endeavours were somewhat utopian, and he could not succeed in his plan. Although Danto considers Verver's vision unrealistic, he also thinks it is enthralling. In *After the End of Art*, Danto links Verver's engagement with art to an existential or transformative experience with artworks. Transformative experiences are the experiences providing 'a vision of the world and of the meaning of living in the world'.⁴⁵ Even though Danto believes Verver

40 Ibid, 132–33.

41 For a more detailed account of this phenomenon, see Hans Maes, 'Existential Aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 80 (2022): 265–75.

42 Danto, *Abuse of Beauty*, 131.

43 Ibid. For an account of what it means to be moved by art, combining phenomenological interviews with museumgoers and philosophy, see Simon Høffding, Carlos Vara Sánchez, and Tone Roald, 'Being Moved by Art: A Phenomenological and Pragmatist Dialogue', *Estetika* 59 (2022): 85–102.

44 Danto, *Abuse of Beauty*, 105.

45 Danto, *After the End of Art*, 176.

underwent such a transformation, he insists that one can find a better description of the experience in John Ruskin's correspondence. In a letter of 1848, Ruskin confides in his father why he decided not to convert to the Waldensian faith. In Danto's interpretation, Ruskin was so enraptured with a Veronese painting that revealed the substance and love that he reassessed his relation to the faith.⁴⁶ These experiences are undeniably extreme and rare. However, in Danto's view, we should pay attention not only to these exalted and existential experiences but to art experiences as such. In Danto's words,

I think it is the possibility of such experiences as those I have described that justifies the production, the maintenance, the exhibition of art, even if the possibility, for whatever reason, is unactualized for most persons. Experiences of art are unpredictable. They are contingent on some antecedent state of mind, and the same work will not affect different people in the same way or even the same person the same way on different occasions. This is why we go back and back to the great works: not because we see something new in them each time, but because we expect them to help us see something new in ourselves.⁴⁷

In light of this passage, Danto's claim about the transformative power of art, illustrated with Kruger's piece, seems more acceptable. Moreover, Danto even declares that we have art in the first place because 'as human beings, we are driven by our feelings'.⁴⁸ This statement seems surprising given the broader context of his philosophy, especially his adherence to representational materialism. Danto holds the view that people represent the world and, in the opposite direction, learn about the world through representations. In *The Body/Body Problem*, Danto even characterizes human beings as *ens representans*, that is to say, as beings who relate to and experience the world due to their ability to represent (and interpret representations).⁴⁹ I do not aim to go into particulars of Danto's representational materialism here;⁵⁰ nonetheless, I have introduced this topic because I believe it helps to illuminate the specificity of art in Danto's account of representations.

Danto characterizes representations as semantical vehicles – vehicles with a representational property and capacity to bear semantical values. He classifies sentences, pictures, charts, stories, theories, names, concepts, and ideas as representational entities.⁵¹ In *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge*, Danto claims that semantical vehicles must have meaning.⁵² He regards artworks as representations too,

46 Ibid, 177.

47 Ibid, 178.

48 Ibid, 122.

49 Arthur C. Danto, *The Body/Body Problem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), ix.

50 The notion of representation is deeply rooted in Danto's philosophical system. Danto touches upon the problem in nearly all his texts; he offers the most systematic account in his *The Body/Body Problem*. See Danto, *Body/Body Problem*. For a detailed interpretation of Danto's position, see Stephen Snyder, 'Artistic Conversations: Artworks and Personhood', *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 19 (2019): 233–52.

51 Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of Action* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 4.

52 Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 161.

which is crucial to my point: Danto's declaration that human beings value art highly might be read as meaning that art is superior to other (non-artistic) representations. The reason for the superiority stems, on the one hand, from the human's emotional nature and, on the other hand, from the criterially prefocused artwork structure. To sum up, in Danto's view, compared with non-artistic representations, art has transformative power and can potentially change an individual's life and, by extension, society. And for this reason it is worth engaging with artworks.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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