

I N T E R V I S T E

# CONVERSATION WITH ARTHUR C. DANTO

by Tiziana Andina

*1. Professor Danto, you are one of the most prominent American analytical philosophers of our time. In spite of this, your intellectual profile is quite atypical for the American tradition: you have written books on Nietzsche, Sartre, and philosophy of art, starting your inquiry from conceptual art. It really seems that you are been intrigued by exceptional cases (as Warhol's art and Nietzsche's philosophy in different ways are). Have you ever thought about this?*

AD. Well, it is true that for a while, I wanted to be just a philosophers' philosopher, but from the beginning, the things that really interested me were pretty marginal to mainstream philosophy, like the philosophy of history, for example. Still, there was enough connection between it and the philosophy of science, that I could write it in a way that did not alienate mainstream philosophers. I was able to introduce things that no one else was interested in – like narratives – and show how they related to things that philosophers were interested in – like explanation. And I thought that what I called “narrative sentences” opened up a wide

class of issues about truth and knowledge, past and future, explanation and predication, and how history was an autonomous discipline, not reducible to a social science. I always carried with me, into my various explorations, a lot of philosophical equipment. So I could do what interested me, but in a way that mainstream philosophers could accept. They trusted me, you might say. I really felt, after all, that analytical philosophy had made immense contributions to thinking, and that it would be insane not to use that. At the same time, it was clear to me that Nietzsche, Sartre, and many Asian philosophers had a lot to contribute, and I tried to show my colleagues just how interesting they were. I did begin as a philosopher of science, and that was my general model for thinking about anything, especially the philosophy of art. Analytical philosophy provided an atmosphere that enabled me to survive. It was like a space-suit. Protected by a space suit, one could walk on the Moon.

*2. When you wrote the book on Nietzsche – Nietzsche as Philosopher, MacMillan, 1965 – he was almost unknown inside analytic tradition and, above all, he was discussed almost exclusively from a political point of view. You were the first who discussed Nietzsche in a completely theoretical way, using a strong meta-idea about the nature of philosophy as a science: philosophy is a science so – like in all other sciences – all philosophers work in a sort of community, discussing common problems and common ideas. If we have to work on Nietzsche's ideas, we have to remember this nature of philosophy. This is an important difference from the Heideggerian approach to Nietzsche: you did philosophy on Nietzsche without upsetting his system.*

AD. That is very well put. For the most part, mainstream philosophers thought Nietzsche was too much a poet to take him seriously as a philosopher, while Continental philosophers thought he was too deep to have anything to say to mainstream philosophers. When I started to read him seriously, I found that he was talking about all the things that my colleagues were interested in – language, truth, and logic; mind and the world order; knowledge and action. I thought he was unbelievably modern, amazingly ahead of his time. I think I can claim to have given Nietzsche a sort of credibility in Anglo-American philosophy. Once my book *Nietzsche as Philosopher* appeared, philosophers here could treat him as a brilliant colleague. You could read him without giving up anything you believed in. If

you were an avant-garde analytical philosopher, Nietzsche was on your side. You were the kind of thinker he was writing for. That was very exciting to me. Up to then, he was considered an opponent to tough logical thought. Now everyone could see that he had discovered what tough logical thought was like. And the great thing was that he wrote like an angel! He didn't write like an accountant, the way most analytical philosophers did.

*3. From Nietzsche to Warhol and philosophy of art. Almost during the same years of your Nietzsche book, "The Artworld" appears in the "Journal of Philosophy" (1964), an article that changed the aesthetics debate on art. In that article Testadura – the protagonist of your paper that has curiously an Italian name– was unable to understand the conceptual art without the help of the art world. Are you still of the same opinion even today? There is no art without an art world? Are the art objects social objects that depend almost completely from the art world? This way it seems that almost any object could be an art object. Art – in the end – depends on the activity of interpretation of the art world. To say it in Nietzschean terms: not the art objects, but only the interpretations exist, made by the art world, art-critics, philosophers, and so on. Do you think this at all, that within the art world is just a problem of interpretation?*

AD. For a while, when I was a soldier in Italy, I had a girlfriend from Calabria. People warned me that Calabrese were "testadura" – stubborn. Later, I invented a character, Testadura, who only believed what he could see. He was very hard-headed, or "tough-minded." If Testadura could not see a difference, there *was* no difference. For him, if two things looked alike, they were the same. How could Warhol's Brillo Box and the commercial Brillo box be different if they looked the same! I felt my task was to prove to Testadura that they were different, however much alike they looked.

By "The Artworld," I initially meant: the world of art works. My question was how something gets to belong to the art world. It was a question of enfranchisement. To be an art work was to have a lot of respect, a lot of rights and privileges that ordinary things lacked. Why was Warhol's Brillo Box an artwork while its look-alikes in commercial life were just containers? George Dickie thought I meant, by "art world," a network of experts - critics,

collectors, art historians - who *decided* when and whether something was an artwork. My question was this: did they have grounds for this? If they did, then being an artwork depended on those grounds. It was objective. Otherwise, it was entirely arbitrary.

What I did learn from Dickie was that it was crucial that we find a definition of art. In “The Art World,” I realized that there had to be a difference between art and everything else. I thought you had to have a theory of art – but at the time I had no theory. So I raised some questions in that essay, but had no good answers. I did not have answers until I wrote the *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, published seventeen years later. The task of that book was to provide the missing definition. “Why is it art?” is always a good question. The answer cannot simply be – “Because I said it was.” Reasons have to be given, grounds have to be found. What Dickie called “The art world” – those who decided what is art and what is not - have to be able to justify their answers. That is where art criticism enters the picture. Critics have to explain what makes something art, if there is a question of whether it is.

*4. In 1981 you published “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace”, the most ontological among the books that you devoted to the philosophy of art. In “The Transfiguration”, while criticizing the most important aesthetics theories of the history of philosophy, you outlined a philosophy of art without aesthetics (at least as a theory of perception). In “The Abuse of Beauty” (2001), it seems that you have at least partially changed your opinion about aesthetics. Do you still think that aesthetics is almost useless in order to understand art? Does Arthur Danto see a future for the aesthetics?*

AD. The *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* formulated a definition of art. Art works have to be about something – have a meaning – and, unlike sentences, they *embody* their meanings. Aesthetics is not a separate condition, though it can be part of how a meaning is embodied. But I felt that it was quite possible that something could be a work of art without having any aesthetic qualities at all. I think that was true of Duchamp’s ready-mades. If there can be artworks that are not aesthetic, then being aesthetic is not part of the definition of art. But when aesthetic qualities are present, they have to contribute to the meaning.

There has to be a reason why the work is beautiful. When Fra Angelico paints human beings dancing with angels, the assumption is that they are joyful because they are going to heaven. The painting is beautiful because Fra Angelico want his viewers to desire to go to heaven. So the beauty contributes to the painting's meaning. Last year Cy Twombly showed some paintings of peonies in Avignon. A young woman kissed one of those paintings, and got into trouble with the law. The paintings caused her to want some closer connection than just to look at them. She said "It was an act of love." She wanted to possess that beauty, contrary to what Kant says about the perception of beauty. Looking out of my window this morning, I am moved by the beauty of the fall foliage. If someone painted it, the painting could be saying: take care of the world. Don't let this beauty disappear. But beauty is not the only aesthetic quality. I think beauty has a special value, but there are countless aesthetic qualities, which mean or can mean different things. I was once charmed by a Japanese print in which a man is trudging through the snow. I thought: how charming! But then I realized that the man must be freezing. In fact it was a picture of one of the great Buddhist thinkers, Nishiren, martyred on this freezing island. We are supposed, to feel compassion for him, not to be charmed by the pretty snow!

*5. Which are the differences between Arthur Danto as philosopher and Arthur Danto as an art critics? I think that your philosophy of art is a beautiful descriptive metaphysics of the art world that you see from your home in New York and from your University: you don't judge, you describe. And the critic of "The Nation", does he judge or describe the works he sees?*

AD. As a critic, my main effort is to explain what the work is about: I try to give the reader a piece of thought to carry into the gallery. It is not the way it used to be, when a critic could get the information he or she requires just by looking at the work. Contemporary work is usually somewhat cryptic, and one has to do some reading or talking with the artist to get some idea of what the work is about and what it means to achieve. The definition of art that I use – that a work is the embodiment of a meaning – also formulates the task of the critic: find out what it means, and how it embodies that meaning. Of course, one does not usually write jut about single pieces, but exhibitions. So one aims to get some sense of

what the artist is aiming at in a body of work. Judgments tend to emerge in the course of gaining an understanding. It usually takes me at least a week to write a review, and I usually need 2500-3000 words.

*6. The Italian translation of “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace” appeared for Laterza last year, “The Abuse of Beauty” was also translated into Italian by Postmedia books, and a new edition of “The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art” appeared with Aesthetica edizioni. The “Rivista di Estetica” has also devoted a special issue to your philosophy of art, and the University of Turin has granted you with the laurea Honoris Causa in philosophy. So, it seems a gold moment for your philosophy in Italy, despite the little attention that analytic aesthetics receives within the Italian tradition. Is this a sign—as you told me on another occasion – that good philosophy can go across the differences of traditions?*

AD. It really is a golden moment for my philosophy in Italy! Naturally, it means a great deal to me to see this happen. Italy has after all been such an important center both for art and for philosophy – for civilization, really – and one naturally would like to become part of the discussion. American art has made its way in the contemporary world, and I like to think that my work has been a response to what has taken place, artistically, over the past half century, and especially in the 1960s in New York, where I have been fortunate to be part of it. But my ambition has been not just to compose a philosophy for my times, but to hammer out a philosophy of art that applies everywhere and always – to art wherever and whenever it exists. It is true that my philosophy comes out of the analytical movement. But I don’t think of it as just a piece of analytical philosophy. It is intended for everyone. When I published the *Transfiguration*, I wanted it to be read by the artists, since the questions arose in the art world itself. Sooner or later, I knew it would reach the philosophers. Sooner or later, I felt, everyone would have to read it, whatever their philosophical affiliations.

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