

IS THERE A PROBLEM OF INDISCERNIBLE COUNTERPARTS?*

Arthur Danto places the problem of indiscernible counterparts at the center of his argument in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*.¹ He begins with a striking thought experiment designed to illustrate the problem: an exhibition of seven identical painted red rectangles, framed and hanging on the wall. In the course of *Transfiguration*, these canvases are joined by several other similar red rectangles, as well as by dozens of other examples of indiscernible pairs of objects illustrating different aspects of the problem. Danto establishes several claims about the seven red rectangles: (a) that five of these red squares are artworks; (b) that these five artworks are not only numerically different from each other, but also are in different genres, such as landscape, historical painting, and abstraction; and (c) that two of the rectangles, while of historical (a red ground applied by Giorgione) and philosophical interest (a mere artifact), are not artworks at all. Possibilities such as these generate a *problem of indiscernible counterparts* (PIC), which can be given this preliminary formulation:

(PIC) What theory of art can adequately explain the possibilities illustrated in this thought experiment?

Danto uses PIC in several different ways. Critically, he uses it to argue against a number of theories of art, most notably the institutional theory (the view, as Danto describes it, "that something is art when declared to be art by the art world"²). More positively, he uses it to argue for his own account, which I shall label *contextualism*.

Despite its broad appeal and the considerable discussion it has generated, however, no adequate formulation of the problem of indiscernible counterparts has been developed. Moreover, neither in his critics' nor in Danto's own work is there any analysis of indis-

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¹ Cambridge: Harvard, 1981. Hereafter referred to as TOC; parenthetical page references are to this edition.

² "The Art World Revisited," in his *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1993), p. 38.

cernibility, its extent, and the forms it may take.³ In this paper, I propose to remedy these problems by, first, spelling out an adequate formulation of PIC. In the process, second, I shall differentiate it from a problem with which it has been confused: the problem of the material counterpart. Next, I shall distinguish an attenuated from a general version of the problem.⁴ Doing this, finally, will enable us to see that the general version constitutes a genuine theoretical problem for aesthetics because the answers so far mooted address only the attenuated version.⁵

I. INDISCERNIBLE COUNTERPARTS AND THE BROAD THESIS

Danto clearly thinks his thought experiment is an example of a general problem about art. But exactly how should this problem be formulated, how should the examples be generalized? The proposal I make in this section is, I believe, in the spirit of Danto's discussion.

First I define the relation of being an "indiscernible counterpart" this way:

X is an indiscernible counterpart (IC) of Y if and only if X and Y share all manifest properties.

Note that this relationship does not require *absolute* indiscernibility, that is, the sharing of *all* properties, both relational and nonrelational, because such a requirement would mean that any claims to find indiscernible pairs of items would founder on the principle of identity of indiscernibles.⁶ Rather, all that Danto requires is that the two items share nonrelational properties that are of typical interest for an item of a given type. Thus, two pennies made in the same mint at the same time might be indiscernible counterparts

³ As Joseph Margolis notes: "If we insist on testing sensory indiscernibilities, we should, relevantly, ask ourselves *what things* are indiscernibly different; *and...we* should ask ourselves what we *mean* in saying that these things are indiscernibly different under the circumstances posited. There is no developed discussion of this matter anywhere in the body of Danto's work"—"Ontology Down and Out in Art and Science," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XLVI, 4 (1988), p. 452.

⁴ Hereafter I shall often shorten "the problem of indiscernible counterparts," sometimes called PIC, to "the problem."

⁵ Commentators on Danto's theory of art have tended to regard his use of indiscernible counterparts as illustrating a method rather than as positing a fundamental metaphysical problem for aesthetics. Even as method, it now seems to need serious investigation. Mark Rollins, the editor of a recent anthology of articles on Danto's philosophy, *Danto and His Critics* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993) (hereafter DAC), says of the method: "the more general issue concerns the significance and effectiveness of the method of indiscernibles" (p. 2).

⁶ Most commentators seem to appreciate this point. But both R.A. Goodrich, "Danto on Artistic Indiscernibility, Interpretation and Relations" *British Journal of Aesthetics*, XXXI (1991): 356–57, and David Carrier, "Danto as Systematic Philosopher," in DAC, pp. 13–27, appear to assume Danto's notion of indiscernibility involves Leibnizian generality.

even though they are distinct objects occupying distinct spatial positions. The same will be true of the seven red rectangles: as individual material objects they are clearly discernible from each other, but as items of aesthetic appraisal or interpretation their manifest attributes, the perceptual pattern of colors and textures we generally think of as defining a picture's visual content, are similar or identical.

In an age of mass production, we have countless examples of indiscernible counterparts that are physical objects. For Danto's purposes, absolute perceptual equality is not required. It is enough to have two items that are nearly qualitatively identical but with one regarded as a very different thing or as having a very different value from the other. Danto's main point is that two items can have all the same surface properties and yet belong to two radically different categories of object or of value.

Clearly, all physical objects can have indiscernible counterparts (ICs). (Of course, they are *unlikely* to have any actual ICs; but an IC of the Grand Canyon, for example, is imaginable on some other planet, and many philosophers have gone so far as to find a superficially identical twin earth a philosophically significant possibility.) But the relation can also hold for other sorts of items, even those which are not easily associated with particular physical objects, for example, dance, music, and literature—what Nelson Goodman⁷ termed the allographic arts. The problem of such an extension is manageable. Just as identical bodily movements can instantiate different actions, so identical patterns of bodily movements might instantiate different dances, perhaps created worlds and centuries apart. Consider the very important example of texts. Danto gives credit to Jorge Luis Borges in his story "Pierre Menard" for being the first to recognize the possibility that "there should exist indiscernible artworks—indiscernible at least with respect to anything the eye or ear can determine...[Borges] describes two fragments of works, one of which is part of *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, and the other, like it in every graphic respect—like it indeed, as much as two copies of the fragment by Cervantes could be—which happens to be by Pierre Menard and not by Cervantes" (TOC 33). Danto goes on to support Borges's claim that these two fragments are instances of two different works with different stylistic and interpretive properties.

⁷ *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1968).

Although not uncontroversial, this is perfectly plausible.⁸ If we define a text by word order and syntax solely, then both authors would have produced the same text. But Danto wants to claim that the (art)work cannot be completely identified with the text (nor a musical work with a sound sequence, and so on). For a nonart instance, it is easy to see how two people could write two different letters—each referring to different people and events, each containing different implications, each performing differing speech acts—although each letter is embodied by the same text (as defined above) and thus are indiscernible counterparts of each other.

In defining the relation of being an indiscernible counterpart we have so far said nothing distinctive about the arts, although they have presented a particularly challenging range of objects over which to generalize the possibility of such a relation. Given that we have succeeded in defining the relation, it appears to be uncontroversial to claim that all objects of any sort can have indiscernible counterparts. We move to a substantive claim about art (the arts), and potential controversy, only when we consider cross-categorical arrays of ICs only some of which are artworks—for example, when we return to the seven red rectangles and their ilk. For the seven red rectangles are ICs of each other. Moreover, actual urinals are or were ICs of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. Sherrie Levine's photos of Ansel Adams's and Walker Evans's photographs are ICs of those photographs.⁹ And so forth. These examples imply something general that we might call the *indiscernibility of artworks and mere (or ordinary) things*.

Such a formulation remains vague. I propose to make it more precise. The argument so far makes a case for the following trio of claims, which together I shall call the *broad thesis of indiscernibility*:

- (A) Every ordinary thing has or can have an indiscernible counterpart that is an artwork.
- (B) Every artwork has or can have an indiscernible counterpart that is a different artwork.
- (C) Every artwork has or can have an indiscernible counterpart that is an ordinary thing.

⁸ For a denial that Pierre Menard's text is a different work from Cervantes's text, see Michael Wreen, "Once Is Not Enough?" *British Journal of Aesthetics*, xxx (1990): 149–58. For music, the parallel to Danto's idea is that an event type consisting of a particular series of tones could be a performance of more than one piece of music. Peter Kivy denies this possibility in "Platonism in Music: Another Kind of Defense," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, xxiv (1983): 245–52.

⁹ See Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Art Forum* (September 1982): 43–56.

Of course, no amount of examples of indiscernibles, such as the seven red rectangles or Duchamp's urinal, deductively imply these universal generalizations. Thus, later I shall consider a more modest view I shall call *narrow indiscernibility*. The broad thesis yields what I shall call the *general problem of indiscernible counterparts*:

(PIC-G) What theory of art accounts for the truth of (A)–(C)?

II. THE GENERAL PROBLEM OF INDISCERNIBLE COUNTERPARTS

(A)–(C) provide a formidable obstacle to what are perhaps the two most common theories of art. First, they appear to count decisively against the view that Crispin Sartwell calls "critical formalism" and Gregory Currie calls "aesthetic empiricism," the view that artworks are properly appreciated and defined solely by their perceptual properties, independent of contextual relations that they might have.¹⁰ (This is because either both ICs would be artworks or neither would be.) As Danto puts it: "The purpose of such examples...is to put pressure on theories of art which endeavor to base themselves on manifest properties of art."¹¹ The broad thesis also appears to undermine a second theory, the institutional theory of art. Indeed, one of the main burdens of *Transfiguration* is to differentiate Danto's own account from the institutional theory, which Danto regards as deeply flawed.¹² (That the institutional theory cannot account for (A)–(C) is not initially obvious but will emerge throughout the rest of this paper.)

Against these competitors Danto proposes a contextual theory of art: "What makes the difference between indiscernibles is going to be a matter of how the one is and other is not embedded in a certain structure and that structure is the 'context'."¹³ In *Transfiguration*, and Danto's other aesthetic and critical works, he attempts to spell out those features of the context of creation of the artwork which are relevant to generating an artwork. For my purposes, it will suffice to summarize these as the item's embeddedness in a meaning confer-

¹⁰ Sartwell, "Aesthetic Dualism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XLVI (Summer 1988): 461–68; Currie, *An Ontology of Art* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), pp. 17–18.

¹¹ "Responses and Replies," DAC, p. 197.

¹² Danto insists: "I don't believe any institutional theory gives us a definition of art, simply an account of how something gets to be received as art"—*ibid.*, p. 204.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 208. Noel Carroll, "Essence, Expression, and History," in DAC, pp. 79–106, attributes to Danto a much more specific theory, which Carroll labels transcendental essentialism. This theory comprises five propositions characterizing what a work of art is, one of which states that works and interpretations thereof require an art-historical context.

ring historical situation. Usually this means that the item was created within some sort of artworld.

But are (A)–(C) plausible? Surely no one before the twentieth century, and hardly anyone before the 1950s, would have entertained the thoughts expressed by (A), (B), and (C), let alone, having had such thoughts, counted them as believable. But after conceptual art and the retrospective notoriety it brought to Duchamp's readymades, and the subsequent attempts to cope with such examples in philosophical art theory, (A)–(C) look more plausible.

The main source for thinking something like (A) is true is simply the realization that almost anything can be made into a work of art under the right circumstances. Here the fascination of Duchamp's readymades: a comb, a urinal, Paris air, or a bank draft seems to support a sense of the limitlessness of what can possibly be elevated to the status of art object. This seems to be the central lesson of the readymades (and subsequent work inspired by Duchamp). Although this "lesson" is not logically equivalent to (A), it does imply it. If it is possible to do something to any ordinary thing or (mere) artifact to make it into an artwork, then it follows that any ordinary thing or artifact could have an IC that is an artwork. (Because it can have an IC which is not an artwork which is converted into an artwork.¹⁴)

It is important to differentiate (A) from similar but nonequivalent claims. First, neither (A) nor the lesson of the avant garde from which (A) may be derived says the same thing as the obviously false claim that every ordinary thing is (literally) an artwork. There is, however, an aesthetic version of a similar idea that is not absurd: anything can become an object of aesthetic experience. Although this may be true, it has little bearing on (A). As Danto puts it:

In some sense Warhol's *Brillo Box* was 'inspired' by the ordinary Brillo boxes it so precisely resembled. But that did not turn the ordinary packing cartons into works of art, even if a case can be made that Warhol elevated them as objects of aesthetic consciousness. *Anything* can become an object of detached aesthetic scrutiny—the teeth of a dead dog, to cite an example of St. Augustine's, the purpled eyelids of his dead wife, as in the case of Claude Monet. These of course were real things, in contrast with works of

¹⁴ Admittedly, such possibilities have been most fully exploited in the visual arts. But examples can be found in other art media. For example, twentieth-century art music provides numerous examples of composers—most notably John Cage—using all manner of sounds from nature and culture as musical material and even as whole musical works—for example, Charles Dodge's *The Earth's Magnetic Field*, Alvin Lucier's music *For Enormously Amplified Brain Waves*.

art or artifacts, but whatever the appearances, the distinction between art and reality, like the distinction between artwork and artifact, is absolute.¹⁵

But perhaps there is another way to put the idea: anything is such that we can regard it *as if* it were an artwork. Unfortunately, this has no clear sense if we mean it to go beyond the bare claim that we can apply aesthetic scrutiny to any object. More importantly, (A) does not merely say that there is an IC that may be regarded *as if* it were an artwork. (A) says that there is or can be an IC that is (really) an artwork. And this claim involves no slight of hand involving changing the concept of art; (A)–(C) are generalizations alleged to be supported by our current concept of art.

The most important thesis to distinguish from (A) is the claim that anything may *become correctly regarded as* literally (rather than ‘as if’) an artwork *if* it is labeled as such by the artworld—in short, the claim usually attributed to the early institutional theory.¹⁶ Consider one of George Dickie’s examples: paintings by chimpanzees. Dickie tells us that those which were displayed in the Field Natural History Museum of Chicago were not works of art. But “if they had been exhibited a few miles away at the Chicago Art Institute they would have been works of art” (*ibid.*, p. 256). He does not mean that antecedently to their display there are two types of paintings, those which are and those which are not art. Rather, he means that the art world’s labeling an object “art” is sufficient to make it correct to regard it as (literally) an artwork.

This is a claim with which Danto thoroughly disagrees. Danto’s notion that the distinction between art and mere things and artifacts is *absolute* means that an object that is not an artwork cannot be correctly regarded as an artwork just by artworld labeling.¹⁷ It either is or is not an artwork independently of whether the artworld displays it. From this perspective the institutional theory results from a misunderstanding of the “lesson” of the avant garde. That lesson was that anything could be *made into* an artwork. That is different from the claim that we may correctly regard anything as a work of art if certain conditions are met, such as artworld display or attracting the interest of members of the artworld. The Dantoesque view of readymades is that they are nonartworks that are transformed into artworks by artists (*not by curators*). At a minimum, artists make a place for the artifact within the body of their own work—establish relations with their own works and the artworks of others—as Duchamp did for his readymades. *In Advance of a Broken Arm* is, therefore, not just like the other snow shov-

¹⁵ “Art and Artifact in Africa,” *Beyond the Brillo Box*, p. 94.

¹⁶ This is the way that George Dickie’s early versions were interpreted, for example, in “Defining Art,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vi (1969): 253–56.

¹⁷ The idea that we could make rational sense of such labeling is criticized by Richard Wollheim in *Art and Its Objects* (New York: Cambridge, 1980, 2nd ed.).

els from which it is indiscernible. (As if, were we to find some of the identical shovels and display them with *In Advance* in the Museum of Modern Art, they would then also be correctly regarded as artworks.) As Danto points out, *In Advance* has properties they do not have.

Danto accepts (A) in its full generality; broad indiscernibility applies to *all* art forms: “Although it may appear that the methods so far used in this book have a special and perhaps unique application to what was once called the ‘visual arts’, it is not difficult to show that all the same problems may be forced to arise throughout the domain of art” (TOC 180). The example he goes on to suggest has clear application to (A). He imagines “an entity that, without benefit of interpretation or artistic identification, one would suppose to be a simple exemplar of the Manhattan Telephone Directory for 1980” (TOC 180). As Danto points out, this item, “could be a piece of paper sculpture, a folio of prints, a novel, a poem, or perhaps in the spirit of novel notation, the score for a musical composition...in which the names are to be chanted.” He goes on, in particular, to imagine it as the experimental novel *Metropolis Eighty*, a book that, its author concedes, “lacks romantic interest and eschews description—but these are bourgeois excrescences he is anyway delighted to sacrifice in the interests of producing a piece of pure art: an Absolute Novel of Abstract Narrativity” (TOC 181).

That for Danto nothing can be ruled out as a possible candidate to have an IC that is an artwork comes out clearly in his disagreement with Ted Cohen, who argued against the institutional theory that some objects, for instance, plastic forks, are such that they cannot become artworks because they cannot be appreciated. Danto suggests, on the contrary (and correctly), that a work with “abysses of meaning” might be made out of three thumbtacks (TOC 105). Thus, Danto clearly embraces the “lesson” of the *avant garde*, and so (A).

(B), the claim that every artwork can have indiscernible counterparts that are different artworks, is an equally startling claim. Here again the argument is partly carried by examples from twentieth-century art. There are many examples in recent art of appropriation, that is, the more or less exact copying of past artworks to produce new artworks by the appropriating artists, as well as of stylistic imitations of past work, as in George Rochberg’s astonishing imitations of the styles of Bartok, Berg, Schubert, and Beethoven in various movements of his string quartets. Such imitations produce works that have (possible) ICs in the past that are very different artworks.

Part of the argument for (B) is also carried by Danto’s virtuostic ability to make up and convincingly interpret examples such as his initial five red rectangles. Danto, of course, credits the discovery of

indiscernible artworks to Borges in his “Pierre Menard”; but Danto has gone beyond Borges. It is one thing to note that there could be (at least one) such pair of indiscernibles, and quite another to generalize to all artworks. Based on both actual and imaginary examples, then, I take it as plausible that any artwork can be copied to produce a different artwork, rather than a mere fake or mere copy.¹⁸ Further, it is plausible, that any artwork has a possible IC that is produced in a different context (say, a few years before or after and by a different artist in a different situation) with a different resulting meaning.¹⁹

One of the virtues of analyzing indiscernibility into its subpropositions (A), (B), and (C) is that the argument against the institutional theory then becomes much clearer. Intuitively, what Danto asks of a theory of art is that it explain the origin of content in artworks—the status “artwork” being derivative from that content. And his complaint against the institutional theory is that it has nothing to say about this issue; it merely attempts to account for how an object gains the status. But to explain (B), as the problem requires, is necessarily to address the basis for content in artworks, because it requires an explanation of the difference in the qualities and interpretation of two indiscernible artworks. Hence, (B) provides a direct challenge to the adequacy of the institutional theory.

(C), the thesis that every artwork can have indiscernible counterparts that are nonartworks, is perhaps the most surprising of the three.²⁰ Of the three propositions, it is least clear that Danto is aware of (C) and its difference from (A). Nonetheless, his crediting

¹⁸ What is missed by Wreen (*op. cit.*), who claims that Menard’s *Quixote* is the very same work as Cervantes, is that the text is produced not by copying but by a causal process similar in some respects but also different from that of the original author (Cervantes). This possibility generates an additional range of possible ICs.

¹⁹ Such examples have been exploited by Jerrold Levinson in “What a Musical Work Is” and “What a Musical Work Is, Again,” both in his *Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1990), where he produces parallel arguments for music; that is, he argues for the truth of (B) for musical works.

²⁰ Wollheim, “Danto’s Gallery of Indiscernibles,” in DAC, pp. 28–38, alleges to find an ambiguity in the notion of indiscernibility that threatens the significance of (C): “Has [Danto] in mind objects that we initially, or after no more than a cursory examination, find ourselves unable to tell apart, or does he have in mind objects that we cannot tell apart, no matter how much we learn about, and look, at them?” (p. 34). If we take the former horn of this dilemma, (A)–(C) are in danger of being trivialized. But the latter horn seems just false, and Wollheim rejects it in general. His proffered options, however, leave out many intermediary levels of indiscernibility. For the indiscernibilist, there is a profound difference between the artwork and its IC, and this difference would presumably be reflected in our experience of them once we have learned more facts about each object. All that is required for (C) to be both plausible and interesting is that the objects be indiscernible, after careful examination, with respect to those manifest properties which provide the observational basis of any adequate interpretation.

Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* of 1964 for essential stimulation to his theorizing seems to imply (C): "Since any definition of art must encompass the Brillo Boxes, it is plain that no such definition can be based upon an examination of the artworks. It was this insight that equipped me with the method I use in my book..." (TOC vii). Moreover, his example of the paint centrifuge-created pseudo-*Polish Rider* is clearly generalizable to all visual artworks, any one of which could possibly have an IC produced by some accidental process. Similarly, we can see how it is causally possible that, through an accidental process, any sequence of sounds, a "sound structure" in Jerrold Levinson's²¹ terminology, can be produced which is acoustically similar to a performance of any piece of music, hence an IC of such a performance.

Literary works are tougher to accommodate to (C). But the contemporary version of typing monkeys—namely, text, produced by computers—can do the job. This does not even require random processes. For example, in a possible world there might be programs—say, programs in linguistics, computing, or printing attempting to search for something very different from what we think of as an artwork—that along the way could produce any given text.

III. THE PROBLEM OF THE MATERIAL COUNTERPART

To appreciate the nature and force of the problem of indiscernible counterparts, it is critical to distinguish it from what I shall call the *problem of the material counterpart* (PMC). Both Danto and his critics confuse these two problems. The problem of the material counterpart is the problem of accounting for the relation between an artwork and its "material counterpart,"²² whatever that may be. This is a troubled, but important aspect of Danto's theory. Briefly, we can understand the issue on the model, repeatedly mentioned by Danto, of Ludwig Wittgenstein's question, *what* is left over when, from the fact that you raise your arm, you subtract the fact that your arm goes up. Danto illustrates this question with six tableaux by Giotto in the Arena Chapel in each of which Christ is similarly portrayed with a raised arm. Although in each episode Christ has the same bodily pose, he is in each performing a different action. This illustrates the familiar distinction between bodily movement and action, which

²¹ See Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is."

²² Alone among commentators, Wollheim clearly differentiates PMC from PIC. In his discussion of indiscernibility, he sets aside the thesis, which he attributes to Danto, that "the work of art is not identical with, and so is to be distinguished from, the supporting physical object, whether this be canvas, piece of metal, lump of stone, which is then said to be its vehicle"—"Danto's Gallery of Indiscernibles," p. 29.

Danto suggests carries over to art theory: “The difference between a basic action and a mere bodily movement is paralleled in many ways by the differences between an artwork and a mere thing, and the subtractionist query may be matched with another one here, which asks what is left over when we subtract the red square of canvas from [the artwork] ‘Red Square?’” (TOC 5). This question, ‘What is the relation of the physical object that constitutes the artwork, *Red Square*, to the artwork?’ expresses what I am calling the problem of the material counterpart.

Danto strongly endorses an antireductionistic answer to this question: “My claim throughout is that an artwork cannot be flattened onto its base and identified just with it, for then it would be what the mere thing itself is—a square of red canvas, a dirty set of rice paper sheets or whatever” (TOC 101). This is one of the most important, intuitively plausible, and potentially useful themes in Danto’s theory of art. It may even be imperative in determining what counts as proper appreciation of artworks, especially controversial ones or potentially “obscene” works. Nevertheless, it is also one of the murkiest. Danto is taken to task by both Sartwell (*op. cit.*) and Joseph Margolis (*op. cit.*) for his position on this issue. Margolis dislikes the picture of a neutral something-or-other (mere thing) that constitutes the artwork. He accuses Danto, wrongly in my opinion, of being inconsistent about the relation of the artwork to its substrate, and of insinuating that the artwork is the mere thing—thus, of being tempted by naive reductionism. Sartwell, proposing an opposite interpretation, accuses Danto of holding a sort of dualism, according to which the artwork is like the soul of the painted canvas, and he claims that Danto’s arguments do not validly support this sort of nonreductionist position as against the hypothesis that (visual) artworks are physical objects. Fortunately, I shall not need to sort out this dispute or answer these critics if we can disengage PIC from PMC.

Clearly, there is a difference between the physical object, the urinal, which Duchamp purchased and which then went on to comprise, or to be the basis of, or to be the material ground of, *Fountain* and an identical urinal that Duchamp did not purchase. The first is the material counterpart of *Fountain*, the second is an indiscernible counterpart to *Fountain*. Similarly, in Danto’s original thought experiment, there is a clear distinction between the red canvas that underlies *Red Square* and the indiscernible counterpart that is “merely” a red-painted canvas (canvas #7). Although there is a clear distinction between these two objects in both examples, relative to a given

artwork, they are easy to confuse with each other because what we say about one may be what we say about the other. Certainly, Danto often wants to claim that the material counterpart has the same characteristics as an indiscernible counterpart that is a “mere thing.” That Danto conflates talk of indiscernibles with talk of material counterparts is easily shown. Consider:

Even granting that a thumbtack itself was beneath appreciation, it would not follow that an artwork materially like a mere thumbtack could not be appreciated; and that to which we might respond appreciatively would be the properties of the artwork without necessarily being the properties of the thumbtack. To be sure, the connection between the two may be very intricate to work out—as intricate perhaps as the connection between a person and his body (TOC 93).

Here, the first thumbtack artwork is contrasted with a mere thumbtack; hence it is contrasted with an indiscernible counterpart. By the second sentence, however, Danto conflates that contrast with the different one of the artwork with its material counterpart (= the thumbtack of which it is made). He opts for the latter reading of the thumbtack example when he later says that “a work whose material counterpart consists of three thumbtacks may have abysses of meaning...” (TOC 105).²³

Why then is it so hard to maintain the distinction? I think it is because (C), with additional assumptions, implies the existence of a material counterpart for each artwork. An indiscernible counterpart is a mere ordinary thing. This I-counterpart presents a perfect model of what the work’s material or M-counterpart is. For example, the seventh red-painted canvas presents a perfect model of the M-counterparts of *Kierkegaard’s Mood*, *Red Square*, and the rest. Thus, we observe the work, think of a “mere thing,” that is, an indiscernible counterpart, and posit the work’s material counterpart (MC) on the model of the IC. Hence, if every artwork has an IC that is a mere thing, then every artwork has an MC that is a mere thing.

This way of looking at artworks immediately raises the difficult question of the relation of the artwork to its material counterpart. This troubled water, however, can be bypassed simply by dropping

²³ Kathleen Higgins and Robert Solomon, too, seem to conflate material and indiscernible counterparts: “The artwork [*Brillo Boxes*] and the ordinary Brillo boxes are thus *perceptual indiscernibles*...Not only the *Brillo Boxes*, but every other artwork can be distinguished from its *material counterpart*, i.e., a perceptually indiscernible object that consists of identical materials, and yet fails to be an artwork. The material aspect of an artwork is not itself the artwork”—“Danto’s Hegelian Turn,” DAC, p. 115.

talk of the material counterpart. Much that Danto wants to say in *Transfiguration* about the “barbarian” misapprehension of artworks (TOC 105-07) could be rephrased in the language of indiscernibility. Danto is concerned to argue that those who approach an artwork as if it had the “aesthetic” properties of its material counterpart, for example, gleaming surfaces and graceful curves in the case of *Fountain*, are missing the true artwork, with its very different properties, “daring,” “impudence,” and so on. (He suggests that the institutional theory is committed to this mistake.) This point could be rephrased simply by saying that the barbarian approach confuses the artwork with *an* indiscernible counterpart. This blocks the temptation Danto succumbs to of musing that “the connection between the two may be very intricate to work out—as intricate as the connection between a person and his body.”

But are we free to deny a commitment to material counterparts while accepting the thesis of broad indiscernibility? We can certainly bypass a commitment to a metaphysically thick conception of the material counterpart. If we look back at the derivation of material counterparts given above, we see several places to enter caveats. For starters, it does not follow that because every artwork has a material counterpart that there is one type of entity that is the material counterpart of every artwork. So, in particular it would be an additional assumption to think that “physical object” in some pure sense is the type of the material counterpart of every artwork. Part of the tendency to think that some form of physicalism is involved in Danto’s treatment of indiscernibility comes from his original example of seven red rectangles. But as we have seen, indiscernibility will be defined in different ways depending on the type of artwork involved. Consider ICs of literary works. These will not be usefully definable as physical objects, nor do they necessarily even form one class of writing—instead they will be, for example, items of reportage, linguistic exercises, and so on.

If we reconsider the original seven red rectangles, we see that even the case of visual art is overly simplified by Danto. His seventh canvas is described only schematically as “a surface painted, not *grounded*, in red lead: a mere artifact” (TOC 1, italics in original). This hints that there truly might be a mere thing definable by a simple catalogue of its physical attributes and lacking any other properties. But this is an unnecessarily reductionistic way to look at these examples. First, there are many nonart ICs of any of the red paintings which are more than mere physical objects: color samples, items of evidence in a murder trial, pieces of apparatus in a physics experiment, and so

on. And like the artifact that is the canvas grounded by Giorgione for his unrealized masterwork *Conversazione Sacra*, these other possible ICs will have further interesting properties. So, unless we have an independent reason to insist on the metaphysical priority of the purer examples, the existence of indiscernible counterparts does not lead us to conclude that what underlies any given artwork is exactly like any particular indiscernible counterpart of that artwork. Indeed, someone may deny that there are any merely mere things or merely mere artifacts; after all, the seventh red rectangle will itself have a history and context and properties over and above its apparent physical attributes. I conclude that broad indiscernibility does not entail, without additional assumptions, debatable claims about the underlying materiality of art.

Perhaps the most important reason to differentiate indiscernible from material counterparts is to avoid a potential misunderstanding that is encouraged by the very title, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. This is the idea that every artwork is usefully regarded as a transfigured “mere” thing. Consider Sartwell’s formulation:

Danto’s view is aptly described by the title of his book. On it, the commonplace things in this world are “*transfigured*” into art, by which Danto means to indicate a change so dramatic that even “metamorphosis” does not do it justice. When a transfiguration takes place commonplace things become so radically other than they were that there is no identity through the change (*op. cit.*, p. 461).

This unduly mystifies the arts. It implies that every artwork is to be regarded as if it were a readymade, and that is surely an error in a theory of interpretation. What makes readymades and conceptually related artworks in other media interesting and important is just the way they play at the boundaries of broad indiscernibility. Other artworks, however, do not gain their meaning (content) by arcane transfiguration of an otherwise and obvious mere thing or artifact. It is factually mistaken, for instance, to regard the *Brillo Boxes* as transfigured ordinary Brillo boxes; but nor is it particularly useful to regard them as transfigured plywood and paint. Neither regard grasps their point. As Danto clearly notes: “Not every artwork, it perhaps goes without saying, is a transformation through interpretation of an *objet trouve*...”²⁴

The difference between a readymade and (say) *La Grande Jatte* or *War and Peace* lies in the ease with which viewers may successfully

²⁴ “The Appreciation and Interpretation of Works of Art,” in his *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia, 1986), p. 39.

posit the latter two items' context and thereby hypothesize their interpretations. To describe all art as if to appreciate it we had to discern content that would not ordinarily be there (in the untransfigured material counterpart) is seriously to misdescribe normal cases of both appreciation and interpretation of art.

There is yet another type of case in which Danto speaks of transfiguration:

My theory of interpretation is instead constitutive, for an object is an artwork *at all* only in relation to an interpretation... Interpretation in my sense is transfigurative. It transforms objects into works of art... (*ibid.*, p. 44).

Thus, it seems there are *three* candidate types of transfiguration into art: (a) an artist transfiguring an object; (b) the artworld transfiguring an object (as in the institutional theory); and (c) interpretation transfiguring an object. We have seen that (a) is inapplicable in most cases and that (b) is positively wrong; so it is perhaps (c) that is the essence of the matter, and the sense of the title of Danto's book. Trouble remains, nevertheless, if we insist on viewing the "object" that is transformed by interpretation as the material counterpart. Such a view ought to be avoided because, as I have urged, most interpretation is not usefully viewed as applied to a material counterpart, nor for that matter have we been able to identify any unitary notion of the material counterpart that could play this central role in a theory of interpretation.

IV. THE ATTENUATED PROBLEM OF INDISCERNIBLE COUNTERPARTS AND THE ARGUMENT FOR BROAD INDISCERNIBILITY

Would the problem survive a weakening of claims (A)–(C)? (A)–(C) have a fallible status because they are universal generalizations. So consider the more modest thesis of *narrow indiscernibility*:

- (A') Some ordinary things have or can have an indiscernible counterpart that is an artwork.
- (B') Some artworks have or can have an indiscernible counterpart that is a different artwork.
- (C') Some artworks have or can have an indiscernible counterpart that is an ordinary thing.

Narrow indiscernibility is unproblematic. (A')–(C') are easy to demonstrate. There are familiar examples of actual artworks that instantiate (A')–(C'). For (A') and (C'), now logically equivalent to each other, consider Duchamp's readymades or, for variation, consider performance-art pieces, such as artist Mierle Ukeles's *Touch Sanitation Performance—Handshake Ritual* in which she shook hands

with New York City sanitation workers²⁵ or the cosmetic surgeries Orlan has had done on her face.²⁶ For (B'), consider again Levine's copies of famous art photographs. Let us then define the *attenuated problem of indiscernible counterparts*:

(PIC-A): What theory of art can account for (A')-(C')?

Clearly, the attenuated problem is a real problem since indiscernibility applies to some art. Whether it is a significant problem is another matter.

(PIC-A) still provides a puzzle which many theories, for example, aesthetic empiricism, seem unable to resolve. What of the institutional theory? Insofar as the institutional theory cannot explain the difference in content between indiscernible artworks, (B') still shows up this weakness.

The more pressing question is whether only narrow indiscernibility is true. For if only narrow and not broad indiscernibility is warranted, then contextualism is also undermined. The denial of (B) and (C) would be troubling; for it would mean that there are some artworks that could not have ICs that are different artworks, and some that could not have ICs that are nonartworks. These facts would be embarrassing for Danto's theory as well as for the institutional theory.

If broad indiscernibility is false, some artworks are puzzlingly unique. Such uniqueness would suggest that there is some noncontextual factor that has not been taken into account. This prospect comes to the fore in the denial of (C), for that suggests that there are some artworks so unique that they have no possible mirror image in the world of ordinary things. This would seem to be a fatal admission for a contextualist theory (as well as for the institutional theory). It would suggest that some artworks are intrinsically, or at least nonrelationally, artworks.

Richard Wollheim opposes Danto's theory with something like such a claim. Wollheim denies the generality of indiscernibility; in my terminology he denies broad indiscernibility. He grants that in general there could be pairs of indiscernibles involving artworks, but only if we understand their indiscernibility as cursory:

What seems to me impossible, except in a one-off way, is that there should be pairs of this sort that, ultimately, or when all information is

²⁵ See Suzi Gablik, "Deconstructive Aesthetics: Toward a Responsible Art," *New Art Examiner* (January 1989): 32-35.

²⁶ See Barbara Rose, "Is It Art? Orlan and the Transgressive Act," *Art in America* (February 1993): 76-81.

in, cannot be told apart. That, I claim, would transgress the assumptions of art: in particular it would transgress the assumption that an object made by an artist out of some set of appropriate materials will bear the imprint of his intention.²⁷

As we saw earlier (footnote 20), there is ambiguity in this claim. If Wollheim means to insist that there must be some difference between the two objects—and hence in principle some way to know that difference—then he should get no disagreement from the indiscernibilist. But if he is claiming that although some works can have doubles others cannot, then he embraces an implausible doctrine. The idea that one can determine the causal history of an object—indeed the intentions with which it is made—solely on the basis of observation with no knowledge of its context is fairly incredible; it seems clear that every artwork can be copied or parodied or accidentally produced with, in principle, whatever degree of precision you like. What would there be about those artworks that could not be appropriated or accidentally produced? Short of an answer to that question—size or complexity clearly will not do—I think this oddity must be construed as a further argument for broad indiscernibility.

The attenuated problem has the strange property of undercutting itself by generating through suggestion a mirror-image problem of why there are some things *without* indiscernible counterparts. Danto has argued that the problem of indiscernible counterparts proves that *art* is not a natural kind; this is important because “since before [our century] it had seemed as if artworks did constitute a natural kind, even one identifiable on perceptual grounds.”²⁸ But the attenuated PIC tends to suggest the odd possibility that a subclass of artworks *do* form a unique natural kind. This is not a possibility that we have any reason to take seriously, however.

V. CONCLUSION

Broad indiscernibility is supported in two ways. First and most centrally, it is supported by inductive reasoning based on the ingenious examples twentieth-century artists have produced. Second, as I have argued, its denial entails queer claims about the nature of at least some artworks. Moreover, we have discovered no general principles incompatible with it. I conclude that broad indiscerni-

²⁷ “Danto’s Gallery of Indiscernibles,” p. 35.

²⁸ “Philosophizing Literature,” in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, p. 171.

bility is in fact a warranted thesis and that, therefore, the general problem of indiscernible counterparts is a genuine problem for aesthetic theory. If the main argument of this paper is compelling, we may also draw a more speculative moral: some version of a contextualist theory of art must be true since we need it to explain broad indiscernibility.

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