

Mad Men and Pop Art

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1 Pop Art's Puzzle

This essay explores Pop Art's significance for Arthur Danto's philosophy of art. I work backward from what he wrote by way of commentary on essays published in *The Philosophy of Arthur C. Danto* (Library of Living Philosophers) to his "The Artworld" essay, written some fifty years earlier, to map the influence of Pop Art's puzzle (its resemblance to mere things) onto his ontology of art, intentionalism, and representationalism. I refer also to his theories of action and knowledge (Danto 1997). Pop Art propelled him to articulate art's distinct place in society, which raised issues that could be treated as vehicles for general philosophizing. To set the stage, I look at the views of British curator Lawrence Alloway, Danto's immediate predecessor at the *Nation* (1968–1981). Alloway famously identified "mass popular art" in 1958 and may have furnished Danto, two years his senior, material support. *Nation* readers were well-primed for Danto's first-ever review of "Blam! New York Art 1957-1964" (1984), given that pop-art pundit Alloway had curated most of Pop Art's earliest museum exhibitions.

In 1957, Alloway wrote, "All kinds of messages are transmitted to every kind of audience along a multitude of channels. Art is one part of the field; another is advertising," thereby demarcating the field for Danto's philosophical foray (Alloway 2006, 52–53). And in 1961, Alloway noted, "The urban environment is present, then, as the source of objects, whether *transfigured* [emphasis mine] or left alone." This, too, provided Danto another clue. A bona fide maverick, Alloway wrested art away from the purview of erudite esthetes, elite tastemakers, and arch formalists, such as Britain's Roger Fry and Herbert Read and America's Clement Greenberg; critics who deemed it their supreme duty to discern and safeguard modernist masterpieces. In 1974, Alloway defined the core of Pop Art as "essentially, an art *about* [emphasis mine] signs and

sign-systems" (Alloway 1974, 7). Richard Kalina credits Alloway with being first to appreciate "the implicit malleability of media images" and "reproducibility [as] an inherent property of all works of art" (Alloway 2006, 13).

2 Spurred to Interpret

In Season 2, Episode 7 of AMC's "Mad Men" (2008), which is set in 1962, the same year Danto was first exposed to Pop Art, a new secretary secretly invites several "Mad" men to witness her boss's recently hung painting by Mark Rothko. Sal Romano claims, "I'm an artist, ok? It must mean something." Ken Cosgrove corrects, "Maybe it doesn't. Maybe you're just supposed to experience it. 'Cuz when you look at it, you feel something, right? It's like looking into something very deep. You could fall in." Romano responds, "That's true. Did someone tell you that?" Cosgrove replies, "How could someone tell you that?" A third says, "This is pointless, let's go."

This "Mad Men" script sets the stage for George Dickie's contribution to a 2013 collection of essays on Danto. Echoing Ken Cosgrove from "Mad Men," Dickie accused Danto, our "meaning-oriented artist," of repeatedly ignoring his (and Noël Carroll's) many refutations of the universality of aboutness in light of obvious counterexamples such as nonobjective painting and Danto's own hypothetical *Untitled* (1981), which "happens only not to be about anything." In Dickie's words, "There is no argument here, but Danto seems to be suggesting that paintings with *any* form or uniform coloring will be about something. It is not evident to me that this suggestion is true, and I think Danto needs to show how a painting, say, Malevich's *White on White*, is about something" (Danto 2013, 316). Dickie erroneously attributes Danto's aboutness thesis ("art is necessarily/essentially about something") to "Artworks and Real Things" (1973), even though it was already in full swing in Danto's "The Artworld" (1964), just two years after Danto was first stunned by a reproduction of a pop painting.

Dickie claims that Danto's professed intentionalism, which requires paintings to mean whatever their painters intend them to mean, "destroys the aboutness thesis," since a painting that is "not about anything" is not/cannot be "about nothing" (Danto 2013, 317). Given the context of Dickie's protest, in a book celebrating Danto's life and work, I was surprised by his tone and apparent intent either to publicly scold Danto or to coax him to cough up the goods. Fortunately, Danto addressed Dickie's misgivings. Before earnestly explaining the meanings of various counterexamples (thanks to his great talent for "postgame analysis"), Danto connects his distinguishing artworks from mere things to his theory of action: "I proposed that the difference was in one being about something and the other not – the one possessing meaning and the other lacking it. This was in fact a systematic solution urged on me by the work I had done in the theory of knowledge and the theory of action" (Danto 2013, 325). He further clarified: "[I]n action, certain representations cause changes in the world through our *mediation* [emphasis mine]. It is knowledge when the representation is true; it is action when the representation is *made* true through our effort" (325). In short, we representational beings connect to the world through various systems of meaning.

It thus appears that Pop Art's puzzling resemblance to mere things stimulated not only Danto's brand of representationalism, but also his theories of knowledge and

action. Conscious of the roles played by “our mediation” and “our efforts” as “beings who represent,” he felt motivated to expand the classic billiard-ball model of cause and effect to accommodate intentional actions, namely those underlying both art and design. In *Transfiguration*, Danto characterizes artworks as belonging to a rather large class of “representationally characterizable events,” which includes non-art examples such as words, advertisements, billboards, posters, signs, packaging, maps, charts, graphs, logos, illustrations, facial expressions, gestures, and other non-art actions (Danto 1981, 83). Artworks, however, prompt additional “representationally characterizable events,” such as interpretations, discussions, and conversations, while designed objects (or *real* things in 1973 parlance) do not. Why aren’t we “beings who represent” moved to “representationally characterize” non-art, like cars beautifully aligned on lots, gorgeous arrays of multicolored cheese wheels, sublime billboards, or exotic print ads with dazzling models? Danto’s answer is somewhat unclear, but he sees such non-art as not requiring interpretation in order to be recognized or understood (Spaid 2013).

Danto’s 80s-era “representation-talk” simply reworks earlier material. In 1973, he noted that “the moment something is considered an artwork, it becomes subject to an *interpretation*,” what G. E. M. Anscombe called an action “under a description” in *Intention* (1957). When in 2013 he related *his* “theory” to *her* “description” he suggested that their ideas first converged when he derived “having a theory [is] part of what it mean[s] to see something as art” (1964) (Danto 2013, 29).

Like Ken Cosgrove, Danto realized along the way that feelings are not only meaningful, but the urge to interpret artworks feels uncontrollable. Artworks like Gabriel Orozco’s 1993 spliced Citroën and Jonathan Horowitz’s 2002 real block of tofu floating in water, accompanied by its long list of collectors tapped to purchase it, inspire discussion and debate over their meanings. That powerfully salient elicitation to interpret points to the presence of art.

Keen to explain spectators’ apparently spontaneous responses, Danto reasoned that artistic *mediation* (however unwittingly) triggers such reactions, which are part and parcel of an artwork’s ontology, grounding both his intentionalism and representationism. Implicit in this view is the idea that spectator reactions hinge on whatever theories ground the work. Absent an awareness of such theories, spectators don’t feel interpretative urges, and may not even register that they are in the presence of art.

3 Philosophizing Art

Danto characterized artworks as the kinds of things that prompt philosophizing, a point that proves especially helpful when attempting to discern art-cars, art-cheese, art-billboards, and art-photographs from mere things. Under Danto’s model, artworks intended as art that fail to prompt interpretations are no different than car lots full of snazzy sports cars. In the third episode of the first season of “Mad Men,” Sterling Cooper’s team debates their competitor’s (actually DDB’s) 1960 “Lemon” campaign for the VW Beetle. After scrutinizing its merits, Don Draper blurts out, “Love it or hate it, we’ve been talking about it for the last 15 minutes.” Sterling Cooper’s team claims to hate “it,” but this interlude illustrates what Danto called a “fluke.” Although never

intended as art, DBB's ad inspired the Creative Director to value it as art, just as "popular art" prompted Alloway's appraisal in "The Arts and the Mass Media" (1958).

One might say that this was the true "atmosphere of art theory" to which Danto appealed, the atmosphere in which Pop Art, Anscombe's descriptions, and Danto's interpretations came to fruition. The dawning of film and print media in the late 19th century, coupled with the eventual preponderance of art movements focused on abstract painting and the post-war arrival of television, left the visual field susceptible to the dissemination of commercial artists' arresting pictures. Mad Men's compelling campaigns happily manipulated consumer preferences. It doesn't take much to paint a picture of artists taking tips from that era's Mad Men, just as earlier artists found inspiration in Biblical tales or historic events. Artists slightly younger than Danto's age were suddenly "media" obsessed, quoting what the uber-pluralist Alloway called mass popular art, by which he meant that everyday material like comics, billboards, and print ads (not just their later appropriation and reproduction in art) deserved the same status as fine art.

That pop artists drew inspiration from Mad Men's herculean efforts to mediate human behaviors initially caught Danto off guard. This movement failed to strike the trained printer, as "artistically substantial," let alone "possible" sans some theory. But, as Don Draper discovered, a little indignation helps to get the theories flowing. Recall Danto's description of his first romp with pop:

I remember driving up to Paris in early 1962 to go to the American Library, to check out what was happening in New York by looking at recent issues of *Art News*. I was stunned to see a painting by Roy Lichtenstein, called *The Kiss*, which looked like it came straight out of a comic book. Stunned! It was like seeing a picture of a horse in the newspaper, and read[ing] that it had been elected as the new Bishop of St. John the Divine. It just seemed impossible. How could a picture like that be shown in a New York gallery, and reproduced in what was at the time the defining art publication in America? But I thought of *The Kiss* the rest of my time in France. I thought that if it was possible as art anything was possible in art (Danto 2010).

All of this may be familiar to Danto's readers. What may be less appreciated is the role played by Alloway and artists other than "Mr. Andy Warhol, Pop artist" in prompting Danto to discover the philosophical significance of Pop.

Danto regularly acknowledged the importance of Jasper Johns' *Flag* (1954–1955) and *Gray Alphabets* (1956), as well as Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* (1955–1958) and *Bed* (1955) for Warhol's development. Just as Cézanne had broken the world down into simple geometric parts, which Picasso used to reassemble it, Rauschenberg proposed the real as art, thus inspiring Warhol's indiscernible *Brillo Box* (1964), which further blurred the distinction between art and the real. According to Danto, Rauschenberg "appropriated and transfigured ready-made textures that no one before him could have regarded as fit for art" (Danto 2001, 276). He admired how Rauschenberg and Johns could "Take an object. Do something to it, Do something else to it," fully transforming it; something he felt few artists capably achieved (Danto 2001, 273).

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total vapidness (being "empty" like artworks seemingly lacking in content) inspired this insight. Its very viability as a movement necessitated interpretations. It would, however, take Danto another two decades before he would characterize artworks as symbolic expressions held in an internal relation with their embodied meanings. No doubt, pop protagonists in the US and abroad inspired this ontological distinction, even as its putative superficiality hid artistic thought of great depth.

By 1973, Danto was already grappling with issues inspired by Pop Art's many conundrums. He recalls artists' low status since Plato for being imitators. He notes that art fails if it is indiscernible from reality, yet it also fails if it is not. He points out the irony that the purer art becomes, the greater its chances of "collapsing onto reality," which no doubt reflected art's plight at the height of dematerialization in artworks of the late 1960s and early 1970s that seemed closer to ordinary objects and actions than anything resembling high art. He finds it perplexing that the prices of forgeries and fakes fall once the painter's true identity is revealed. How could Rubens' 32 "Titian paintings" or the three *Deaths of Marat* (not by David, yet exhibited in museums all the same) prove invaluable as quotations, yet worthless as copies? Pop Art's resemblance to real things, its dependence on media (non-art), and its precarious status as art; straddling as it does the border between sophisticated representation (quotation) and pathetic imitation (copies), induced philosophizing.

The more artists adopted imagery and formats familiar to commercial art, the more philosophers needed models to discern, for example, James Rosenquist's billboard size-paintings publicizing pasta, lipstick, cars, and the like, from his actual roadside billboards, hand-painted between 1957 and 1960. There are at least two well-known solutions to this puzzle, and Dickie famously offered one of them. He suggested that some artworld representative baptizes some as art, while the rest remain ordinary billboards, a view Danto repeatedly rejected in his various replies to Dickie over the years. As already noted, Danto sought an ontological justification/argument to differentiate artworks from mere things. As some critics such as Dickie remain unconvinced of Danto's account of the ontological difference, let's take a closer look at Rosenquist's Stuckey billboards and his subsequent large-scale paintings.

Would Rosenquist be justified in asking us to retroactively interpret his fifties-era billboard advertisements – seen then merely as advertisements – as *public art*? Dickie's solution seems to green light such a move, while Danto's insistence on the need for a contemporaneous theory prompting such a reaction would block this possibility. Artists weren't presenting billboards as artworks in the 1950s and no predominant theory at the time sanctioned seeing those billboards as art. Could some artistic activity's inherent value, such as a billboard originally painted by Rosenquist, overwhelm its extrinsic value, as does Rauschenberg's stuffed goat sporting a tire or Robert Smithson's *Earthworks*? Danto's theory of action resolves these issues if one considers artworks to be symbolic expressions that generate symbolic expressions (Case 1 "causal episodes"), while designed things like billboards are symbolic expressions that don't prompt interpretations (Case 2 "causal episodes"). Stuckey's roadside billboards advertising pecan log rolls have no doubt veered millions of cars toward highway exits, but such billboards' symbolic capacities stop at each store. I doubt anyone thinks about, much less discusses, Stuckey's billboards except for when they're hunting one down on the road (or reminiscing about childhood road trips).

Rosenquist's charming billboards for movies and for Coca Cola billboards likely elicited sales, but they didn't stimulate symbolic expressions because, as Danto would argue, Rosenquist painted them to be billboards, not art. But Danto would anticipate someone else, say Lane Posenquist one day laying claim to Rosenquist's historic billboards as art, just as fictional artist J. "declared that contested red expanse a work of art" (Danto 1981, 3) and Don Draper identified DDB's ad worthy as art. Once Posenquist admits Rosenquist's billboard as art, people will spontaneously discuss the significance of her bold and original move, both for Rosenquist's oeuvre (non-art or not) and that of others.

Finally, it's difficult not to discuss, let alone ignore artworks that disgust, disappoint, or astonish (Danto's first reaction to Pop Art). As Don Draper discovered, artworks that hold some inexplicable popularity, interest, or fascination for others tend to arouse indignation, inspiring conversations qua talk-therapy. Non-art rarely triggers such attachments. Sometimes, artworks stump us so much that we exhibit them alongside known examples, ideally helping us to grasp the unfamiliar but sometimes belittling all. Whether or not one accepts Danto's intentionalism, his insight that artworks prompt reflection, thoughts, and reactions, indeed "philosophizing," is an accurate bellwether of art's presence. Alternatively, mere things such as buildings, commercial art, or designed objects serve as invaluable models, objects of study, or collectables. That Danto considered artworks *intended as art* though not recognized as art "failures," and things *not intended as art* though recognized as art "flukes," indicates that his intentionalism accommodates asymmetries (Spaid 2016). I now turn to Alloway's influence on Pop Art, and Danto.

4 All the Way with Alloway

By the time Danto happened upon "The Personality of the Artist" (1964), Warhol's second solo exhibition at New York's Stable Gallery, artists had been referencing the popular arts for nearly a decade. As early as 1956, Alloway decried graphic art, commercial art, and applied art on par with "fine art" (Alloway 2006, 39). Admittedly, it was a "heretical idea that the ads communicate as wide a range of visual experience as any imaginary museum. Here is a wide-open arc of degrees of abstraction with intricate relations of word and picture, emblems, diagrams, motion-studies, and what have you" (Alloway 2006, 39).

Foreshadowing Danto's *Connections to the World*, Alloway noted that "popular art furnishes the symbols that organize our environment" (Alloway 2006, 49). In 1954, members of the Independent Group, who regularly met between 1952 and 1955 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, where Alloway was Assistant Director, studied American mass culture (Western movies, cars, billboards, science fiction, and popular music) with him. In 1956, most IG members joined one of twelve teams that were presenting collaborative installations during "This is Tomorrow" at London's Whitechapel Gallery. This is the first exhibition focused on popular art, the topic occupying Alloway's groundbreaking essay "The Arts and Mass Media" (1958). By 1961, Alloway was installed as Senior Curator for the brand new Guggenheim. Bearing witness to the arrival of Lichtenstein and Warhol's comic-book paintings, Rosenquist's necktie paintings, and Alex Katz's "cut-outs," Alloway declared 1961 Pop Art's first year, though AbEx's last.

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Breaking with AbEx, pop artists increasingly disallowed drips, replicated manufactured looks, and switched to silk-screening, so as to downplay the hand's presence, which was initially Pop Art's hallmark.

In 1962, Warhol presented his 32 *Campbell's Soup Can* paintings at Ferus in Los Angeles. That fall, Sidney Janis Gallery presented the "International Exhibition of the New Realists," an exhibition that counted Warhol's painting *200 Soup Cans* among scores of items by 54 American, British, French, Italian, and Swiss artists. On December 13, MoMA, which supposedly already owned six artworks associated with this burgeoning movement, organized an unexpected Pop Art symposium, which primarily drew skeptics who voiced their concerns regarding Pop Art's legitimacy. No longer in France, Danto nowhere mentions this event, yet Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, and Marcel Duchamp were reportedly in the audience.

One of Alloway's first Guggenheim exhibitions was "Six Painters and the Object" (1963), which featured artworks by Jim Dine, Johns, Lichtenstein, Rauschenberg, Rosenquist, and Warhol. He considered this coterie linked by their use of "objects drawn from the communications network and physical environments of the city" (mass-produced objects such as "flags, magazines and newspaper photographs, mass-produced objects, comic strips, advertisements") (Alloway 2006, 90).

Alloway's 1963 essay praises pop artists for selecting subject matter that is known to all and expanding upon the Dadaists, who first "released the potential of use and meaning for art in common objects and signs, but the assimilation of objects to a rigorous and delicate painting standard was a new development" (Alloway 2006, 90). His focus on worldly content must have seemed at odds with that era's prevailing perceptual ploys, such as Group Zero exhibitions (1957–1967), Roger Sterling's trippy 1964 office in "Mad Men" (Season 4), or MoMA's "Responsive Eye" (1965). "Six Painters and the Object" traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where it was accompanied by "Six More," a show of related west coast artists. In this exhibition's catalog essay, Alloway credits Pop artists' interest in "paradoxes of representation [and] the play of levels of signification," anticipating Roland Barthes' semiotics and Jacques Derrida's slew of 1967 texts. That same year, Warhol exhibited one *Heinz Tomato Ketchup* and three yellow *Brillo 3¢ Off* boxes in "Boxes" (1964) at Los Angeles' Virginia Dwan Gallery.

If Alloway had one lingering influence on those, who like Clement Greenberg, Peter Selz, and Alfred Barr aimed to keep tight tabs on admission, it was his inveterate pluralism. In his March 27, 1965 "Art: View from the Guggenheim" column in *Cue*, the museum's newsletter, he remarked, "Now Pop Art, Op Art, and Abstract Expressionism (still) are all available to an artist," an observation one imagines Danto also proposing, since he often expressed the view that art isn't progressive like science.

By highlighting Pop Art's focus on the process of communication itself, Alloway expected scores of artists across the globe to produce artworks that critics, curators, and dealers could read through the art historical lens of Pop Art, one of the rare art movements to evolve into an actual genre. Leery of the "intentional fallacy," Alloway championed spectator-participation and affective theories ("audience-reception theories") over genetic ones, which credit artists' artworks as the source of meaning. He considered any notion of "mass audience" false, since audiences are highly diversified (Alloway 2006, 63). Regarding intentionalism, he quotes Johns, who sounds

downright Wittgensteinian: "Publicly a work becomes not just intention; but the way it is used. ... Meaning is determined by the use of the thing, the way an audience uses a painting once it is put in public" (Alloway 1974, 66).

In Alloway's 1966 catalogue essay "Systemic Painting," he chastises art writers who describe abstract artworks as either "expressive" or "powerful emotional statements," since "neither writer indicate[s] what was expressed nor what emotions might be stated" (Alloway 1975, 84). The latter attitude strikes him as especially retrograde. A few pages later, he remarks:

When we view art as an object we view it in opposition to the process of signification. Meaning follows from the presence of the work of art, not from its capacity to signify absent events or values (a landscape, the Passion, or whatever). This does not mean we are faced with an art of nothingness or boredom as has been said with boring frequency. On the contrary, it suggests that the experience of meaning has to be sought in other ways (Alloway 1975, 87).

After further explaining how he believes abstract artworks gain their meaning, he concludes, "Possibly, therefore, the evasiveness about meaning in [the Kenneth] Noland already mentioned, may have to do with the expectation that a meaning is complete in each single painting rather than located over a run or a set" (Alloway 1975, 89). So far as I know, Danto didn't broach this approach, but he would concur that "[t]he presence of covert or spontaneous iconographic images is basic to abstract art, rather than the purity and pictorial autonomy so often ascribed to it" (Alloway 1975, 91).

Alloway was among the first to recognize that "[t]he spread of Pop Art in the 1960s coincide[d] with the development of systemic abstract painting and there are parallels," for which he offers several surprising examples (Alloway 1975, 89–90). In 1968, MoMA presented "The Art of the Real," the first museum exhibition to connect Pop art to Minimalism. Curated by E.C. Goossen, it featured 57 artworks, including Johns' flag by 33 artists who were exploring the possibility of exhibiting real things like weather structures, brick lines, or metal boxes that refer only to themselves.

Indicative of Alloway's commitment to representationalism, he treated all manner of things, whether signs or nonobjective painting, as meaningful, thus confirming Danto's twin suspicions that Brillo cartons signify "Brillo pads, inside" and "not about anything," must mean "feeling something." As if to jumpstart the "Postmodern Condition," Alloway pushed representationalism to its logical conclusion, imagining it running amok, such that: "The deceptive order is the analogue of malicious knowledge, which is used to refer to knowledge about knowledge, signs used to discuss signs, and so on extension, art about art" (Alloway 1974, 70). Yet another nightmare has come true.

5 The Perfect Moment

Danto often remarked on his good fortune in being present in the artworld just when conditions were ripe for philosophical theorizing: "It would not have been possible to explore the ontology of the artwork anywhere else or at any earlier time in art history." In the early sixties, New Yorkers witnessed the unpredictable collision of "factuality"

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