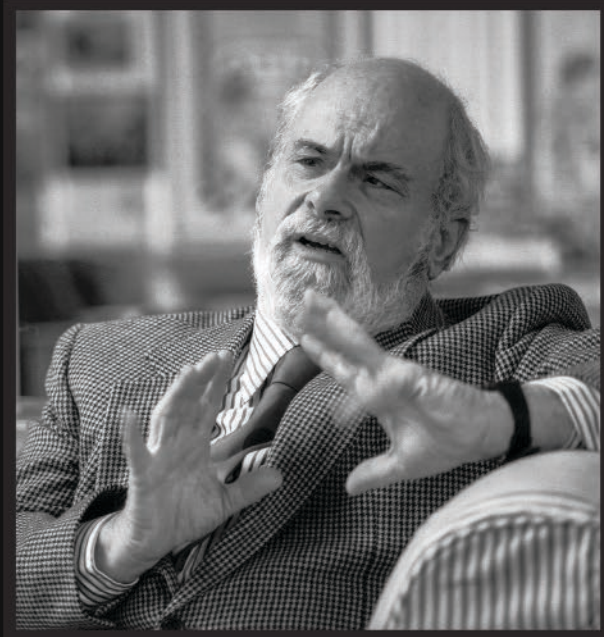


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# A COMPANION TO ARTHUR C. DANTO



*Edited by*  
JONATHAN GILMORE AND  
LYDIA GOEHR

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# A Companion to Arthur C. Danto

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# A Companion to Arthur C. Danto

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Jonathan Gilmore and Lydia Goehr

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# Preface

JONATHAN GILMORE AND LYDIA GOEHR

This Companion was conceived following the death of Arthur Coleman Danto in 2013. Its long-standing gestation owes something to the process of commissioning articles, but more deeply reflects our desire, as its editors, to wait a while, to let his death be mourned and his influence be reflected upon. The volume stands apart from the already impressive collections of essays on Danto's life and work, edited by Randall Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn (in 2013), by Mark Rollins (in 2012), and by Daniel Herwitz and Michael Kelly (in 2007). (The many contributions outside America to Danto scholarship should also be noted.) The contributors to the present volume, renowned scholars and emerging new voices, were tasked to offer short, essayistic interventions, suggestive of the style in which Danto himself excelled. As Danto borrowed the long-standing idea for his own philosophical outlook: style makes the person just as it renders unique an art work and a thought. The contributions to this volume have not been written therefore as parts of a systematic or unified whole, nor to cover every aspect of Danto's extensive oeuvre. Instead, with an often-revisionary aim, they capture what the writers—with their unique perspectives—found most compelling. This collection thus truly serves as a companion to a thinker who much enjoyed the wit, eclecticism, variety, and tensions between alternate philosophical methods and traditions. It takes paths that Danto sometimes more tiptoed than trod with well-made steps: into, for example, architecture, dance, and film. Constructed and composed with the marvelous assistance and the refined critical perspectives of Jonathan Fine and Elizabeth Benn, the companion offers a contrapuntal accompaniment to reading Danto, but not, we insist, a substitute.

In his astonishingly capacious intellectual life, Danto wrote on violence in the works of George Sorel, Nietzsche, Sartre, Buddhism, action theory, the history of analytical philosophy, and the philosophies of language, perception, and mind. It was, however, his philosophies of history and art that, in his lifetime, were taken up the most vigorously. If one hears the name Danto, one responds: ah yes—his analytical theory of narrative/historical sentences and his Hegelian thesis for the end of art! And then—how possibly could one make the two stand together? His lifelong attempt to weave Anglo-American, analytical and so-described continental approaches to philosophical thinking, produced fascinating antagonisms, perfectly reflective of the post-War, Cold War, and East-West struggles of the early decades of his long career in the academy. Likewise, his voracious reading in social and cultural history allowed him to assume an overall humanistic perspective and range of views often at odds with the quarrels of self-proclaimed modernists and postmodernists.

Danto liked to recall his accidental introduction to questions in the philosophy of art, when, at the last minute, he was invited to speak at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association. The result was what was to become his enormously influential essay of 1964, "The Artworld." The accidental character of his address regarded his engagement only with the philosophy of art, not with the arts themselves. Early on, he was a highly-accomplished and ambitious lithographer and printmaker, a period from which many works remain and have recently been exhibited (as readers will learn from his daughter Ginger Danto's essay in this volume). After his death, an extraordinary number of those prints, plus paintings and drawings, were found covered in dust on the top of a cupboard in his apartment on Riverside Drive.

Why he turned from art-making to reflecting on art is of course a question that demands a more complex answer than his favored quip, that he did it "for the money." To be sure, he found stability in his tenure as a professor of Philosophy at Columbia University. But it was as a theorist, critic, and commentator on the arts, writing for *The Nation* magazine, in which he discovered his *métier* and passion. Writing everyday with unwavering joy, he held to the belief that he had never had the same thought twice. A voracious reader of fiction, he showed how even a rigorous and perspicuous philosophical exposition can possess the style of a literary art. His most influential writings bear the impress of profound changes between the 1960s and the 1990s in art practice, the market, museums, audiences of art, and the role of critics and connoisseurs as guides and gatekeepers. But this body of work also responded to tumultuous changes in society at large in those decades, as we see in his reflections on human and civil rights, public values, dreams of democracy, racism, feminism, and censorship. Many of the essays here offer thoughtful commentaries on these more political and social issues. Danto's engagement with living artists of his own day allowed him to breathe in the atmosphere to which he appealed as defining what art essentially is. He belonged very much to his century, in ways—following his philosophy of history—that time continues to tell.

## Notes on Contributors

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# Introduction: Five Pieces for Arthur Danto (1924–2013) *In memoriam*

LYDIA GOEHR, DANIEL HERWITZ, FRED RUSH, MICHAEL  
KELLY, AND JONATHAN GILMORE

## Life with Art

*Lydia Goehr*

Arthur Danto once told me that having been born on the first day of the year (the year was 1924) he felt obliged to do something important. When I asked him what I should then do having been born on January 10th, he replied, “obviously not as much as me.” He did do something important. He stands as one of the four giants of the Anglo-American tradition, with Stanley Cavell, Nelson Goodman, and Richard Wollheim, who together rearticulated the terms for how philosophers should think about the arts as part of a broad philosophical vision each had of the world. Danto held his so-described “analytical philosophy of art” as “of a piece” with his analytical philosophies of history, action, and knowledge. Before achieving world renown for his philosophy of art, he was much admired as a philosopher in these other domains. At first, when writing on art, he intended to write a work titled *The Analytical Philosophy of Art* to match several of his previous books. But very quickly he found himself turning away from this bland title to one indicative of the transfiguration in his thought that would allow him to escape some of the restrictions of a philosophy to which, however, he remained lifelong devoted. He found a way to enhance analytical philosophy, to bring it to life by engaging in a mode of description, in perfectly crafted and entirely illuminating detours, that would result in his being recognized as the leading philosophical critic of the art, most especially of his own times. With similar conviction, he imported themes he variously drew from Hegel, Nietzsche, and Sartre – he wrote monographs devoted to the latter two – and from a Zen Buddhism whose teachings he experienced at Columbia University. Of his more than thirty books and hundreds of articles and art-critical pieces, his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* marked a turning point in the philosophy of art



and in the life of a man whose nickname happened also to be Art. Although he never wanted philosophically to overcome the gap between art and life – everything about his thought was aimed at preserving the difference – he lived his life in the pathways of art with a transformative joy and optimism. He turned what others experienced as nightmares – and there were plenty in the twentieth century to choose from – into dreams for a better human condition liberated from the political and speculative tyrannies of a world that, in different ways, he regarded over, ended, and out of date.

When I first met Arthur, it was on a bus in Sweden, over thirty years ago. The bus was transporting a whole host of eminent philosophers to a conference on the theme of intentionality. Why I was on the bus is irrelevant to the story. But pertinent was the fact that I had just begun my studies in the philosophy of music and finding myself sitting “next to Arthur Danto” gave me the chance to describe the paper I was writing on the relevance of Kripke’s thought to music. Arthur listened with the utmost charity, although little, he later told me, inspired him. But he also told me that he never forgot this encounter. Getting to know him later, I realized that he forgot few persons, that nearly every meeting was special to him in some way. He found something to admire whatever the age or status of his interlocutors.

My next encounter afforded me an opportunity to describe Arthur Danto in public. It was the year, if my memory serves me right, that I offered the history I had written of the American Society for Aesthetics to the Society at their annual meeting. Coming from England, I was naïve about many things to do with America. So when I read in preparation for my speech that Danto was “the art-critic for the Nation,” I assumed that meant that he was akin to “the Poet-Laureate of the United States” (for I did not know then of the magazine to which he would contribute for many years.) So this is how I described him. The audience laughed, but when I learned of my mistake, I was pleased that I had imported a suitably honorific content into what otherwise would have been a true but bland description. My descriptive leap perfectly fitted Danto’s theory of narrative sentences as developed in his philosophy of history, and it equally well suited a person who really did become in America the poet laureate of the philosophy of art.

When twenty years ago I came to teach at Columbia, I became very close to Arthur, although this doesn’t mean that he was always content with my approach to aesthetics. On one occasion, he remarked that my gaze was far too focused on Europe and that I should open my eyes to the world around me – by which he really meant New York. And so, reading between the lines, I began to write about his work, American to the core, although still in deliberate juxtaposition with the work of a German aesthetic theorist, Adorno, in whom I retained a devoted interest. For a decade, I worked tirelessly on Danto and Adorno, even to the point of naming these two figures as one: AdorDanto (and by then I really did adore Danto). My intellectual project was difficult for many reasons, but for this reason in particular: that whereas Adorno felt like a figure of the past, having died in 1969, Danto was very much alive and living next door. Because I wanted to get his views right, it became all too easy for me to call him or pop over to his apartment and ask him what he had had in mind when writing this or that. One morning, he called me on the telephone to tell me that although he was willing to talk to me about everything else in the world, I should, in writing my book, treat him as I was

treating Adorno, as unavailable as far as his intentions were concerned. Since I knew Danto was an intentionalist, my first response was to laugh and my second to wonder whether he was offering me a telephone version of the intentionalist fallacy – that all the intentions I needed to know were there to be read from his work, so no telephone call was needed in addition. Finally, however, I came to understand something else: that though Arthur was an intentionalist, intentions had been the last thing he had ever really appealed to in interpreting the art of his contemporaries. Much more, he had drawn on facts of friendship and, more importantly, on “being there” in the right place and time – as he was there to see those Brillo boxes, which, stacked up on the gallery floor, allowed him to take a final stock in his philosophy of art. More even than becoming an eminent critic of contemporary art, he became a storyteller of his life with artists whose company he so much enjoyed. To be an intentionalist might be the stance of the philosopher, but how this translated into an art criticism was never as obvious as Danto sometimes claimed it was. When I finished my book, Danto said almost immediately that he did not recognize his views. I told him that it served him right, that he should have been more forthcoming on the telephone. He laughed and reminded me of how intentionality had been the way our long friendship had begun.

At Columbia, each year and for many years, I offered a year-long, graduate aesthetics course, a survey that was nicknamed “From Plato to Nato.” Nato was, of course, Danto, who generously agreed to come to the last class to present his work. The students sizzled with excitement when he appeared, even to the point where one very sweetly came up to me after class and said, “Oh Professor Goehr, it was so nice to meet a real philosopher face to face.” That Danto was the real thing was true; that he was the culmination of a long road that had begun with Plato was also true; he even, in his early life as a woodcut artist, produced an image that uncannily depicts Socrates as Arthur himself would later look. Artistic depiction always, he argued, transfigures. Even if I was a little miffed by not even being a candidate, in this student’s view, for entry into the philosophical-world, I blamed myself for offering a syllabus that rendered all the philosophers I taught almost indiscernible in appearance. So, as years passed by, I increasingly stressed the teaching to which Danto was most committed, that in the face of indiscernibility, don’t be taken in merely by what you see: work out wherein the differences between things lie. For then, things that look the same will no longer stubbornly be assumed to be the same sort of thing. And when we come to understand that, so many more ways of appearing will be granted entry into the hallowed halls, be they the halls of philosophy or of art.

In the last months, weeks, and days before Arthur’s death, I spent many hours in his company. Often we turned to opera as a medium for communication. I would take my iPad over to his apartment and play him arias from operas. He recalled having heard many of the great singers, but above all, he told me, he loved Amelita Galli Curci. On one of these occasions, Arthur began to sing, in perfect Italian, the opening love duet from *La Bohème*. The last piece he had read by me was an essay on this opera set into comparison with the red squares with which he had begun his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Not able to hear very well anymore, he watched me listening to the aria and began to describe what he was seeing. He saw me not as listening but as singing to him. I did not know that this would be the last image he would ever have of me and

me of him. Two days later, he received the first copies of a book for which he had been waiting a long time: the book that was his life and work, produced by the *Library of Living Philosophers*. A few hours later, he lost consciousness with the joy of knowing that he had left his world in good order and that he would meet again the friend with whom he had spoken every day for sixty years, Richard Kuhns. Not the belief but the image I have of Art and Dick now again taking a walk somewhere each morning in deep conversation is a comforting one in this time of mourning the loss of two friends who meant so much to me and so very much to each other.

Danto was born the year Puccini died. I had always wanted to write about them both together, which is what I have recently been doing and will continue to do. My book is not about endings and new beginnings, but about beginnings, first lines, which is where Arthur always was, given the excitement with which he woke each day to write. A year or so ago, he called me one morning when writing his last book, *What Art Is*, to tell me that he had suddenly understood something that he had never understood before: why Warhol with his *Brillo Box* was so central to him in allowing him as a philosopher to know what art essentially is. I did not dismiss his thought as repetitive; on the contrary, I thought back to how he had begun his *Transfiguration* with a red square that had been described by the philosopher who had so famously reversed the terms of repetition. Danto's last thought about art had all the freshness of spring. He named the thought a wakeful dream. He had the ability to look at something so profoundly familiar – almost commonplace – as though he were looking at it for the very first time. His work now stands before us, asking always to be read anew, filled to the philosophical brim with the spirit of Art.



**Figure 1** Danto, “Socrates in a Trance” 1962 detail. Reproduced with permission of Lydia Goehr.

## In Memoriam, Arthur Danto

*Daniel Herwitz*

Arthur Danto was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1924 and grew up in Detroit. He served in the military during the Second World War, driving trucks in North Africa and Italy. "I had a really great time," he told me, making me wonder if anything at all could not, given his fascination with life, turn into an adventure. After the war, he studied Art History and Art at Wayne State then in Paris, becoming a printmaker of significance, a maker of images in the manner of German Expressionism, woodblocks with figures articulated in a chaotic swirl of lines, barely discernible in the intensity. At a certain moment in the 1960s, he took the decision to give up art, believing his work out of step with the *Zeitgeist*. This decision was made on philosophical grounds and without regret, for Arthur was already a philosopher dedicated to thinking through the conditions through which object, performance, and gesture may become art, spinning a theory as intricately inventive as any work of avant-garde art. He had taken the decision to continue at university and gotten a PhD at Columbia, and after a brief stint working in the philosophy of science turned to aesthetics. He was to spend most of the rest of his working life in the classrooms, galleries, and museums of New York, ending up Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy at Columbia while also serving as art critic for the *Nation* magazine.

It is well known that Arthur's eureka moment on the road to Damascus took place at a West 58th Street gallery, the Stable Gallery, where he witnessed an exhibition of oversized Brillo boxes by Andy Warhol. Offered in play as a way of blurring the distinction between industrial and fine art, Arthur transformed Warhol into a philosopher in gel (one who wore his gel lightly). In Arthur's view, Warhol's boxes became revelations of the conditions that turn ordinary, real things into works of art. These conditions could not be anything visual since the box in the supermarket was (more or less) visually identical to the one in the gallery, but only the one was fine art. The man in dark glasses and a wig had hit on, with Arthur's prompting, Leibniz's problem of indiscernibility: that what makes two virtually identical things different in kind has to be something hidden and abstract. That something, Arthur argued in the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1964, could only be a background of shared theory: a set of concepts constructing terms for the box in the gallery to "make a statement" to the art world. Warhol could press the limits of the art world (with a supermarket box) and get away with it only because these concepts, at a moment of performance art, abstraction, and pop, were in place. Not that Warhol's gesture was without controversy. Many took Warhol's antics to be the attention-grabbing of a drugged-out denizen of the Velvet Underground whose pasty skin bespoke the need for a sunlamp if not a two-week vacation in Miami Beach. But the very fact of controversy proved (to Arthur) that the concepts were in place to allow for the argument.

It only remained for Arthur to articulate all the philosophy he believed implicit in Warhol's gesture, and thus to complete a long history of avant-garde experimentation. On his reading of the avant-gardes they had always been in the project of self-discovery, which Warhol then brought to completion. Who needed to make expressionist woodcuts when the true thrust of art history had ended up in his lap?

Great aestheticians often stake new philosophy on the art of their time: Roger Fry on Cézanne, Richard Wollheim on British figurative art, Friedrich Nietzsche on Wagner (till he got burned). Arthur's double was Warhol. When he published his theory of art in the *Journal of Philosophy*, no one knew what to do with it, exactly in the way no one knew how to take *Brillo Box*. Arthur's thinking was ahead of the game. Utterly dedicated to making a contribution to philosophy, he did so in the manner of an avant-garde artist, riding the curl of history and finding it on the streets of New York. It is not fortuitous that the book he would publish after his work on the art world in 1964 would be *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, which similarly befuddled the New York philosophical world, a world, which at that time believed Nietzsche a freak if not a Nazi. What followed was an endless litany of works in philosophy and art criticism, each filled with dazzling insight and unforgettable philosophical twists.

When he became a critic for the *Nation* magazine in 1984 (a post he held until 2009), postmodernism was in high swing; he became its most imaginative theorist. Having completed the project of self-discovery, Arthur believed (in a Hegelian manner) that art history was completed, freeing art to pursue a prism of new possibilities in the manner of a thousand flowers blooming. This was, in fact, what was happening in the New York art world, where the intense anxieties of the art historical movement (whose military quarters were the Cedar Bar) were giving way to a kind of populist individualism with each artist free to experiment with any style for any reason, composing paintings in which German expressionism meets Italian Mannerism, Abstraction reacquaints itself with the human figure and Duchamp turns into a TV serial. This efflorescence was tailor-made for Arthur's abundant generosity; he could be free to like *everything* or at least find everything fascinating. Not that he was without complaint. In an essay in *The Nation* called "The Painting of Importance," Arthur bemoaned the new high seriousness whose point seemed to be to make a work of art seem important rather than be it by carrying the aura of deep meaning and struggle with form while in fact bespeaking no message at all other than size and a lot of scratching on the surface and a deep title taken from the Second World War. Certain bad boy artists of the 1980s he chided as adolescents, the kind who come out of their bedrooms in the American suburbs only to tell their parents to stuff it and return to their television sets (now they would be insulting each other on Facebook). He had the pulse of America just as he had the pulse of art. But he never ceased to be cheerful, for he found each twist in the inscrutable pattern of life a new surprise, giving him something new to think about. The worst thing in life, to twist the words of Warhol, is not having anything to think about.

Arthur's big mind was a generous one. He welcomed serious thought from all quarters, whether it criticized him or not. I had in 1992 submitted a book for publication that criticized parts of his work, and when he read the manuscript, he wrote to me: "Rather than duking it out, what can I do to help you get this book published." Two years later, I was coming out of a shop somewhere on the Eastside when I ran into him hurrying to a lecture. His warmth was unmistakable. Not ten seconds after he greeted me, an artist who had been living in Italy sauntered by and was bear-hugged. Arthur immediately introduced this man to me, at which point a third stopped to pay respects, and Arthur said, "Three wonderful people on one day." When we were seated at the same table with a famous Indian artist after an exhibition at New York University in 1985, the artist went on about painting a canvas ninety-six yards long. "Couldn't you make it a hundred?" Arthur asked, with dry cheerfulness.

It is not often that a philosopher can achieve a central role in the precipitation of culture and in the most cosmopolitan way. It is not often that a philosopher can move effortlessly through various genres of writing, and with such suave, effervescent prose, prose that inevitably finds a philosophical twist to art, and an art to the way philosophy can be imagined. It is less often still that such a person can be loved, really loved by so many. Arthur was what the Greeks call “great-hearted.” He filled the room while leaving ample space for others. The room is bare without him.



**Figure 2** Reproduced with permission of Lydia Goehr.

## Remembering Arthur Danto

*Fred Rush*

I came to Columbia for graduate work in philosophy in 1989. My plan – if one could call it that – was to concentrate on the areas of ancient philosophy, German philosophy, and the philosophy of art. The last bit, the philosophy of art, was something I was unsure about. I had pursued a musical career with some seriousness after college, and my undergraduate course in philosophy had concentrated on what was at the time the central concern in analytic philosophy, the philosophy of language. It would not have occurred to me to connect contemporary philosophy with art. Philosophy and art were utterly distinct for me; I would not have wanted to sully one with the other.

The degree to which I was open to the philosophy of art was due to having picked up, pretty much at random, a copy of Arthur Danto’s *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* from a bookstore in Atlanta. What commenced as a cautious, half-hearted read developed into an avid one, and I saw for the first time how one might do something exciting and innovative in aesthetics. Still, I did not arrive in New York entirely convinced. I did not meet Arthur until my second year in graduate school. He taught a seminar called, I believe, simply Topics in Aesthetics, which I discovered, in practice, meant “read a book with Professor Danto.” The course consisted entirely of discussing the philosophical issues

raised by a book (of Arthur's choosing) and writing up a paper on some topic covered. I do not remember what book we read that term. I have retained an impression that it was not very good, but that didn't matter because what I found out was that the book was just a prop for Arthur to discuss his own views. That was much more exciting, of course! Arthur was what Harold Bloom calls a "strong reader," and his somewhat impetuous and even impertinent style was a chance, in essence, to talk with Arthur about Arthur – about his work. He held forth, seamlessly integrating great chunks of his own aesthetics with both historical views and real-world examples from the visual arts against which one might test the theory. I remember writing a too-long paper on the connection of semantics and ontology in Arthur's view as I understood it. I hesitated to turn it in. It contained a number of objections, which I thought he might take to be snotty and superficial. The paper, in fact, was the model of politeness, but I thought that he might not like being objected to (as some philosophers do not) and especially not if the source of the objection was a puny graduate student. So, I showed the paper to Sidney Morgenbesser, with whom I had worked a fair amount, and he thought it was OK. So I turned it in and held my breath. As it turned out, Arthur thought they were pretty good objections to some theory, just not to *his* theory. This was a jovial result for him; he thought it a good effort on my part but that I had misunderstood his views at what he took to be a crucial turn in the argument.

Some things never change. In our last philosophical exchange, this time in print, he still thought I misunderstood what he was driving at. In the intervening years, Arthur had been a co-supervisor of my dissertation, supported me vigorously in getting my career off the ground, gave visiting lectures at the places I taught, and we met many, many times at conferences, at bars, over meals, and at his apartment on Riverside Drive. With my good friend Lydia Goehr, whom Arthur deeply admired and loved, I visited him two days before he died. But the misunderstanding abided.

Arthur resisted my characterization of his view that artworks embody their meaning as a form of social expressivism. I considered this not a criticism at all. The expressivism I had in mind was bound up with what I took to be a Hegel-inspired social externalism about the meanings of artworks, to which I took Arthur to be fully committed. I thought and still think that Arthur's aesthetic theory both conceptually and historically combines the two major trains of thought that preceded his own account, representationism and expressivism about content, but in a way that transforms both strands. This faintly Kantian taxonomy appealed to him as a matter of philosophical historiography, but I believe he thought that bringing his views too close to expressivism implied that his account was psychologistic. He preferred a formal way of putting his point that he loosely modeled on Frege's account of concepts as functions, a formulation that he made in his blockbuster essay "The Artworld" and in altered form in *Transfiguration*. But *Transfiguration* had the power it did because it substantially fleshed out the internal structure of his views, and I was concerned that the structure did not cohere quite the way he thought, especially if one took as canon law his rather minimal formal definition of a work. Arthur's formal side liked to express his view that "interpretations constitute artworks," by construing interpretation as a "function" that "mapped" art-content onto physical objects. But to my mind this did not rule out an important sense in which a work might be said to express interpretation through content. His

connection of content to concepts such as “point of view” and “metaphor” in the later chapters of *Transfiguration* seemed to me to offer an account of expression, not of artists’ intents through works perhaps, but certainly of the art itself. He came to call this embodiment, but I could not see the difference between that and, coupled with the idea of an artworld and its “atmosphere of theory,” the sense of expression I took to be part of his debt to Hegel. In the end, I guess I thought that the formula Arthur used to represent the relation of interpretation to work was more gesture than substance, a nod to the way analytic philosophy was done in the day but not really much more.

Was Arthur right that I misunderstood his views? Perhaps. Was I right that social externalism was a part of the view? Perhaps. Arthur’s own character was not to belabor disagreement. There was his definitive shoulder shrug, not dismissive but reconciliatory: if we disagreed, so what? The reason I detail the disagreement and its unsettled nature is that it tokens something deeper, I have come to think. In his letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Freud asserted that projection is a process in which one takes negative traits of oneself that are difficult to accept and recognize as such and ascribes them to another in order to both make criticism of the trait possible and reduce anxiety. Subsequent psychoanalytic theory has refined this Freudian understanding somewhat but retains the emphasis on the negative character of what’s projected. This seems too restrictive, for there are plenty of cases where projection operates in tandem with positive self-assessment. Projection of positive qualities can be a function of wanting others to be like oneself or oneself to be like others. Where the other person is someone one finds deeply admirable, even lovable, that seems especially plausible. What my and Arthur’s disagreement about the internal structure of his aesthetic views meant, why I kept coming back to those views and wanting to make sense of them in what I took to be their own terms, was about more than simply settling something philosophically. After all, was I *really* saying to Arthur: look, I understand your views better than you do?



**Figure 3** Reproduced with permission of Lydia Goehr.



Perhaps part of what Arthur taught me was the importance of letting go. Philosophical disagreement is not so important finally; it is subservient to imagination and intellectual depth. Sometimes disagreements are productive, sometimes not. And sometimes they are productive for a while and then peter out. The value in letting go is to be able to start over again someplace else, someplace where the philosophical imagination operates with more impetus and range. That Arthur could treat his own work that way, as something he was willing to let go of, expressed a deep trait in him. I know that I must, in time, let go of Arthur, but that has always been a difficult thing to do.

## Working with Arthur C. Danto

*Michael Kelly*

I first met Arthur in person when I was being interviewed in 1986 for the Managing Editor position at the *Journal of Philosophy* at Columbia University (he was President of the *Journal*). The second, informal interview took place at the December annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association, held that year in Boston. Arthur suggested that we meet at the Institute of Contemporary Art, located at the time next to a fire station on Boylston Street. When I arrived, Arthur was talking to a few friends, so I waited, thinking we would be meeting alone. But he called me over and introduced me to Nelson Goodman and Richard Wollheim, who were standing in front of a contemporary work on paper by David Salle. If Goodman was wondering when the work was art, if it were, and if Wollheim was closely seeing in the work hoping to discern it as whatever the artist intended it to be, Arthur was mischievously disinterested in making any aesthetic judgment of it, though he was already an art critic for *The Nation*. He was instead trying to understand what could account for the work's ontological status as art. It embodied meaning, he divined, even if the meaning it embodied were largely to provoke vexing questions about art among some of the world's leading experts at the time. Whether good or bad, Salle's work corroborated Arthur's definition of art as embodied meaning, to which he added "wakeful dreams" as a third criterion in his last, recently published book, *What Art Is*.

I worked closely and fortunately with Arthur for sixteen years. In the long run, however, he ruined my life as an employee, and I told him this because he was so generous, judicious, and respectful that I came to expect similar treatment everywhere else I have worked since leaving Columbia. If I have not found it in other employment situations, and if I have not developed the same leadership qualities on my own, both are less a criticism of others, myself included, than confirmation of how special Arthur was in this regard. Should there be an afterlife, Arthur should be president, even if work is not required.

At the same time, Arthur had an uncanny, enviable ability to deflect any criticism of his philosophy, and perhaps of his person too. While he could seem aloof in doing so, he was really returning the criticisms to the senders, cleverly inviting them to think instead about their own ideas. Any such exchange with Arthur was an opportunity,

hopefully characterized by wit and erudition on the interlocutor's side, too, for each person to become clearer about her ideas, not simply as one's own but as ideas. This is perhaps why Arthur did not have many, if any, students in the typical academic way that a prominent philosopher might foster students to develop and sustain his theories. Rather, he encouraged independent thinking, which was his gift as a teacher and friend.

Turning back to art, it is still hard to forget the image of Arthur, forty years old, standing amidst the stacks of Brillo pad, Delmonte peach, Heinz ketchup, and other cartons in the Stable Gallery in April 1964, where he famously had his epiphany about art. None of it made any sense to him as art, though he was a relatively successful practicing artist, making wood-block prints in an expressionist or mannerist style while also teaching philosophy at Columbia. He stopped making art roughly around the time of the Stable show, I believe, for he decided he could no longer continue doing both art and philosophy. Why did he choose philosophy? Because more than art alone, philosophy enabled him to make sense of the art that did not make any sense. But first, since he determined that no existing definition or philosophy of art could explain why Warhol's Brillo boxes were art when their supermarket equivalents were not, Arthur had to discover a new definition, which he somehow found in those boxes and which anchored his essentialist philosophy of art for forty-nine years, and beyond.

Arthur is and will remain exemplary, as a philosopher and critic, because of the way he understood the intimate relationship between philosophy and art, and especially because of his insistence that the philosophy of art be calibrated to contemporary practice, and not just to Warhol's or Salle's work. Whether or not people agree with Arthur's philosophy of art, they should appreciate that he worked harder than anybody, perhaps ever, to correct philosophy's tendency to disenfranchise art because it allegedly steals our attention and diverts us from truth. He always believed, despite the postmodern turn in culture contemporaneous with his Stable epiphany, that philosophy's ultimate goal was still truth. But he also thought that at times it could not achieve that goal without art. After all, knowing the essence of art is a way of knowing truth, and, he argued, this truth is revealed only by art, though it then had to be articulated by philosophy. It turns out that art discloses something about the nature of truth, and not just in relation to art, for truth is truth.

Like Baudelaire and Hegel, a fusion of writer and thinker Arthur embodied in many ways, he believed you could find the universal truth about art only in its contemporary embodiments, for that is where such truth lives. That is also where Arthur lived, and where we will always find him, playfully and generously philosophical as ever.



**Figure 4** Reproduced with permission of Lydia Goehr.

## ***ACD, In Memoriam***

*Jonathan Gilmore*

There are many current accounts of Arthur Danto's intellectual itinerary and his celebrated place within the worlds of art criticism and philosophy. I wish to offer a sense, partial of course, of what he was like to those who knew him closely. When his friend and former colleague Richard Wollheim died, Danto told me of his vexation that, in his substantial autobiography *Germes*, Wollheim described only his personal development, largely within psychoanalytical parameters. But Danto wanted to know how Wollheim the philosopher, not Wollheim the man, came into being. Danto might have taken comfort in knowing that to distinguish these two dimensions in himself might not have been possible. Who he was as a philosopher was hardly distinguishable from who he was as a person.

His philosophical fame came from analyzing the transformation instantiated in works of art – those of Pop and Fluxus, the music of Cage, and the dance of Cunningham – that took as its substance everyday objects, sounds, actions, and the like. That began as early as 1964 in his essay “The Artworld,” in which he quaintly referred to a certain “Mr. Andy Warhol,” a figure whom few among his philosophical audience would have heard of or, had they heard of, would have taken seriously. With that essay, and the philosophical and critical writing that followed, Danto initiated a revolution in the theoretical reflection on the arts, a revolution in which philosophers once again began to ask the truly grand questions about art – about its essence and its history – themes that were foresworn by an earlier generation of philosophers allergic to metaphysical speculation and wary of attributing any great cognitive significance to “mere” aesthetic forms. His range and concreteness of examples gave vividness to his discussions – a kind of flesh to spirit – not often found in the anemic Anglo-American tradition in aesthetics. But, more significantly, in grounding his thought in the history of art and its contemporary manifestations, he gave aesthetics a demonstration of the philosophical payoff that the philosophy of science came to enjoy after it recognized that expert knowledge of the sciences and their histories serves not just as coloration in developing idealized models, but in analyzing the very concepts – say, that of *species* – that are central to philosophical theories.

Danto's major systematic work of aesthetics was the *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, a title he borrowed from one appended to a non-existent book mentioned in a real book by Muriel Spark. But it might as well have been the name of a commonplace book in which he inscribed his principles for how to respond to others. For anyone who had Arthur as a teacher learned that his default approach was to excavate what might be even a minor part of one's work if it had some value or depth, and show how that was what the work as a whole was really about – transforming lead into gold, or at least a richer metal than what one started with. Responding to a paper I once wrote for him, he said that the first twenty-four pages amounted to no more than superficial philosophy of science, but after that, it was the best philosophy of art he had read in a long time. The paper was only twenty-nine pages! And anyone who went from being his student or admirer to his friend, as I did, learned that this is how he treated people as well

– finding whatever was good in them, however implicit or accidental, and deciding that it was that which defined who they really were. This would remain a purely external redefinition if it weren't that one wanted, when in Danto's company, to be one's best self, and sometimes found that one could.

But the ordinary things, of which he described the transfiguration into indiscernible artistic counterparts, were meaningful to Danto in their own right, and not, as to ironists, only as a form of slumming. In responding to my primitive Italian with his "soldier's Italian" and an account of the trouble it caused him in polite society, he described with real passion how, when serving in Italy in the Second World War, he would avidly await each installment of a British comic strip about a young intelligence officer named Jane whose misadventures inexplicably but reliably left her partially disrobed (this was the 1940s). After I sent him a book with reproductions from the series, he described the reverie he was sent into while reading it, now more than a half a century later. But that sort of thing was never just one thing for Danto, the way it might be for someone who thought cultural ephemera couldn't sustain any substantial reflection. We once shared a long train ride and discussed watching the nightly reruns of *Seinfeld*. I thought, at least in this art form, I'm as much of an expert as him – until, after a long pause in which he adopted a characteristic inward focus, he turned to me and said, "You know, it really is the closest thing our age has to the *commedia dell'arte* tradition."

It was sometimes said of Danto, with admiration or consternation, that he saw the world as it should and could be, not as it was. It would imply too volunteerist a perspective to say that he chose to adopt this perspective, but he certainly recognized having it, blaming it on being born on January 1st, in which, he said, "Each year opens on a new page, for me as well as for the world." In truth, Danto's way of seeing the world was as essential a feature of his identity as any other might be. He suffered, and he suffered with you, and his optimism was not held blithely. Instead, it represented in some ways a moral stand, one no doubt a source of frustration to those who wanted him to share in their cynicism, however, warranted that might be in academic locales. For me, and I'm sure for many others around him, his attitude, his exemplary being, was a source of strength: a goad to think, when possible, beyond what was currently a source of pain; and not to curse the world even if one was right to curse one small part of it. And his cosmopolitanism and earthiness, and his profundity as a philosopher, made that stance credible, when it might have seemed an artificial conceit in others. Although he engaged in the ruthless disputation required of professional philosophers, where expressing too much agreement with another's argument is a form of discourtesy, Danto was contemptuous of the academic *déformation professionnelle* of taking pleasure in snide and cavalier criticism. False sophistications and too-clever-by-half arguments made him impatient. Yet he delighted in wit, even at his expense, as when he was told by a graduate student of a somewhat deconstructive bent that the indefinite article in the subtitle of his book – "a philosophy of art" – appeared to betray a false modesty.

Danto didn't believe in an afterlife and took some comfort in knowing, he said, that the end really was the end. But, of course, one keeps in one's mind an image of those we lose. When turning older, he embraced the observation that he and Socrates shared a



**Figure 5** Reproduced with permission of Lydia Goehr.

physiognomy, and he showed me from time to time pictures that friends sent him of busts of the ancient philosopher that made the comparison highly credible. But I continue to think of him through another set of images, those painted several years ago by his wife, the artist Barbara Westman. In these, she has represented the two of them as Adam and Eve in the Garden. And there he is, with grey beard and bald pate, dancing, kissing, and otherwise cavorting with his partner, while beasts of the kingdom somewhat quizzically look on. Danto beamed with pleasure when showing these images to visitors, a pleasure that declared the great happiness he found in his life with Barbara, and the happiness, I think, of the figure by which he is represented in that Eden.

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# 1

## Roquebrune, 1962

GINGER DANTO

My sister and I were little. We rode in the scratchy backseat of a mustard-colored Citroën sedan. No seatbelts. It was 1962, the south of France. The countryside was raw, the villages small and closed, the only sign of life smoke coming from the chimneys. Grandmothers were home cooking. Men were in the fields.

For my father's first sabbatical year from Columbia University, my parents settled in the tiny, sloping village of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, probably because of the house, that had not just a kitchen with a terrace and a view of the sea, but a spare upper room where my father could write. It was the Côte d'Azur before it was the Côte d'Azur. Life was slow, simple. Celebrities were still only interested in the yachting playgrounds of Monaco and Monte Carlo.

My father was by then keen on philosophy: it was his subject as an academic, the analytical his trade as a professor. But art and art making still held sway from his formative career as an artist of moderate success in our hometown of New York City. That was where he made woodcuts, in the apartment where we grew up, with the dusty perfume of woodchips everywhere littering the floor, splashes of ink on the wood panels and sheets of luminous rice paper for printing, rolled and ready for use.

He didn't have any of this when we traveled, however, much less a studio. Just a blue black Olivetti and a battered briefcase, the same one he carried around on campus. But among the books and manuscripts was invariably a sketchbook, or a portfolio of Sennelier paper, with somewhere a bottle of ink, a pen, and a set of watercolors.

Reading my father describe his early life as an artist, particularly his famous discussion of giving it up, I was surprised to see him say categorically that he never used color. Or that color didn't interest him. That his medium was all prints, all black and white.

Certainly, the woodcuts were his signature and what afforded a certain income, beyond his professor's salary, that he admitted "meant a lot." But when we traveled as a