Photography and Danto's Craft of the Mind

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It is remarkable that *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), which marks the midpoint of Arthur Danto's career, does not include 'photography' in its index, and yet *What Art Is* (2013), whose copyright page bears the year of his passing, is imbued with consideration of the medium. What caused Danto's late-career interest in photography?

Certainly his quarter century as art critic for *The Nation* was crucial in this regard, as photography had, by the 1980s and '90s, become very much in vogue in the New York artworld that was his beat. A watershed year appears to have been 1987. Within the space of a few weeks Danto saw an exhibition of photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson at the Museum of Modern Art and an exhibition of Cindy Sherman's 1977-1980 *Untitled Film Stills* at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The review occasioned by the former is characteristically edifying but somewhat dutiful. His response to the latter, contrarily, is an exclamation by someone emotionally ambushed by what they had expected to be just another photography exhibition. Exiting the Whitney, Danto found himself "seeing Sherman, like a figural aftereffect, absolutely everywhere—in the jeans ads on the back of buses, on the television screens in the video shops, on the front pages of tabloids" (Danto 1986, p. 126). He warned his readers to "decompress before hitting the street" (Danto 1986, p. 126).

Early the following year Danto visited the career retrospective of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, again at the Whitney. His review conveyed not so much awe as disquiet, concluding that visiting the exhibition was "not an easy experience, but a crucial one" (Danto 1996, p.138). Seeds had been sown, seeds that germinated seven years later in the form of an entire monograph devoted to Mapplethorpe's oeuvre.

In 1993, the Guggenheim Museum SoHo mounted a group exhibition entitled *Photography in Contemporary German Art*. Danto's review indicates neither awe nor disquiet, but something more important. In his concluding description of "a demanding and...rewarding show" (Danto 1993, p. 427), one in which

the reward is nothing short of "coming to know, philosophically, what art is" (Danto 1993, p. 427), we find a settled acceptance of photography as a medium holding a central place in his thinking about the ontology of art.

The next year found Danto back at the Whitney, viewing a career retrospective of Richard Avedon's photographs. Face-to-face with two portraits, one of his friend Isaiah Berlin and the other of Andy Warhol and his entourage, Danto's response was outrage. The portrait of Berlin "in no sense captured how Isaiah looked to anyone who knew him, but instead shows an unrecognizable and invisible sourpuss" (Danto 2013, p.106). The large polyptych of the Warhol entourage included the transgender Candy Darling, who, in wig and makeup, had evidently been required to remove her dress so that her penis was revealed rendering "an exceedingly cruel image" (Danto 2008, p. 296). This exhibition seemed to cement in Danto's psyche an intense ambivalence towards photography, fueling much of his later philosophical writing on the medium.

Danto never produced a monograph on photography, only a somewhat messy record, creative and dynamic, full of stops and starts, gaps and irrelevancies. While delightful, the record would have benefitted from some tidying up, as I offer in this essay.

Part One: Photography and Ethics

(i) Stills Versus Natural Drawings

Eadweard Muybridge famously sought to discover the actual configurations of a horse's legs during a gallop, something that had been a matter of dispute for centuries, as the appearance yielded by unaided human vision is of but a blur. Using the finest photographic technology of the 1870s, Muybridge produced a dozen instantaneous images depicting a single cycle of a horse's gait, images that were quickly accepted as authoritative by painters such as Edgar Degas and Thomas Eakins, who henceforth rendered their depictions to correspond to the reality revealed by the camera (see Szarkowski 1989, pp. 131-2).

But not all artists so conformed. Muybridge's revelations arrived against the backdrop of a lively debate about the function of art, with figures such as Charles Baudelaire having argued that, whereas science is in the business of describing reality, art is instead in the business of conveying how that reality appears to us in perceptual experience, and that if photography, with its mechanistic essence, is wedded to depictions of reality, then photographic depictions are foreign to art. (see Baudelaire 1990). Upping the

ante on Baudelaire, Auguste Rodin declared that "[i]t is the artist who is truthful and it is photography which lies" (Gsell 1983, p. 34), adopting as his metric for truth fidelity to experience rather than reality. Danto called the fidelity yielded by Muybridge's images "optical truth" and the kind yielded by a Rodin sculpture "visual truth" (Danto 2013, p.105). One might expect that Danto would have sided with Muybridge, but he does not and rather sides with Rodin. Everyone who has seen themselves in photographs is familiar with the camera's capacity to reveal the otherwise invisible transient facial configurations that take place during the course of expression. An ill-timed press of the shutter release leads to a depiction with eyes half-closed and lips and cheeks contorted in ways that are wholly alien to our ordinary perceptions of one another. Pictures conveying such optical truths are quickly deleted, leaving behind only visual truths, depictions that conform to how we appear to one another given the character of our perceptual capacities. Such tendency to assign greater value to visual truths than to optical truths furnishes an entrée to understanding Danto's ambivalence towards photography.

Danto invites us to compare two portraits of the Andy Warhol film star Candy Darling, one by Richard Avedon and the other by the photographic chronicler of the New York "downtown," Peter Hujar (Danto 2008, pp. 296-298). As already noted, in Avedon's 1969 *Andy Warhol and Members of The Factory*, Candy Darling appears in her wig and makeup but is otherwise disrobed so that her penis is revealed. In Hujar's 1973 *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed*, she is contrarily shown in wig, makeup and dress, presenting herself as a Hollywood actress. The sexual reality is that Candy Darling is male, while the gender reality is that she is female. Whereas Avedon uses his camera to reveal something akin to an optical truth, Hujar uses his camera to yield something akin to a visual truth.

I say 'akin', as the notions are not exactly coincident. In the case of optical versus visual truths, the character of our *perceptual capacities* constitutes the essence of the distinction, a distinction that assumes a reality apart from the limited capacities of our human visual system, and that furthermore assumes that the photographic process, with its high shutter speeds and other mechanism-based qualities, affords epistemic advantages which can bypass such limited capacities. In the case of the Avedon and Hujar portraits, contrarily, the distinction lies instead in the character of *human interaction* and in desires constituting a substantial portion of this interaction. Persons have desires about how they present themselves to one another, as Candy Darling desired to present herself, photographically, in a manner congruent with her female gender. Avedon ignored her desires and used his camera to reveal a reality hidden behind what he took to be a mere appearance, an instance of what the critic Andy Grundberg calls "inverted fashion" (see Grundberg 1999). Hujar used his camera differently to respect Darling's desires.

Danto marks this difference terminologically. The Avedon portrait is a *still*, a photograph that depicts in a way that is foreign to the realm of human perception and interaction, a realm that I will in what follows refer to simply as the "human realm." The Hujar portrait is a *natural drawing*, natural in Henry Fox Talbot's sense that photography is the "pencil of nature" (Talbot 1844-1846), but a drawing in the sense that Hujar chose how to use that pencil to depict in a respectful way a fellow participant in the human realm.[i] An optical truth is thus a type of still in that it depicts something that is foreign to our ordinary understanding of one another, and a visual truth is a type of natural drawing in that it depicts how we experience one another in the course of ordinary human interaction. For Danto, Rodin was right on track in accusing photographers who use their cameras to create stills of lying, but wrong to assume that cameras can be used to produce stills only. As the Hujar portrait shows, properly handled, the camera can be used to create a natural drawing. Danto regarded that portrait as a "masterpiece, and one of the truly great photographs of the century" (Danto 2008, p.297).

(ii) Kantian Ethics

In her introduction to *The Democratic Forest*, Eudora Welty hones in on a feature that renders William Eggleston's photographs so compelling:

> The extraordinary thing is that...you will look in vain for the presence of a human being. This isn't to say that the photographs deny man's existence. That is exactly what they don't do. Everywhere you find the vividness of his presence. (Welty1989, p. 10)

There is a similar irony in Danto's discussions of stills and natural drawings insofar as the reader will search in vain for an occurrence of Immanuel Kant's name, even though the influence of his ethical philosophy is vividly present. It is a cornerstone of Kantian ethics that interacting persons permit one another to exercise their respective capacities for autonomous action. For the Kantian, it is ethical to pursue one's goals, expressive or otherwise, with the aid of another person, provided that that aid is furnished autonomously. To do so is to treat others as ends, and to fail to do so is to treat them as means.

For Danto, this categorical imperative is woven into the fabric of the human realm in which the photographers he considers and their subjects participate, and it is a violation of this command that underlies much of his condemnation of the Avedon portrait. Avedon had as his artistic goal the practice of inverted fashion. The Kantian would have no objection to the pursuit of this goal in portraiture, provided that the subjects of his photographs autonomously chose to participate in the project. But, in the case of

Candy Darling, at least, it is far from clear that she understood the difference between Avedon's artistic practice and his fashion-photography practice, and that she autonomously agreed to participate in an instance of the former. Instead, Candy Darling had autonomously decided to present herself as a Hollywood actress, and Avedon's coopting her do otherwise thus constituted a violation of that autonomy. Hujar, on the other hand, had as his artistic goal the creation of photographic portraits that depict his subjects consonantly with the presentations they had autonomously chosen, and his general success in doing so can be regarded as the key to understanding his oeuvre's "power and truth" (Danto 2008, p. 301).

If the capacity for autonomous action generates the right to exercise that capacity, Danto sees "an evenly matched contest between the right of an artist over his images and the right of the subject over his appearances" (Danto 2008, p. 295). But perhaps Danto is overly pessimistic in construing such rights as being in a contest, where that notion comes burdened connotations of a zero-sum game. The Hujar portrait, after all, shows that the goals of the artist and of the subject can be in harmony. And even if Candy Darling had little interest in Avedon's practice of inverted fashion, one wonders whether, had he explained to her the nature of his artistic practice and her potential role in its realization, she might have autonomously agreed to participate in the project, perhaps in exchange for later receiving the fashion-photography treatment she so much desired. If so, there would have been no violation of Kantian scruples.

Still, problems remain. Participation is autonomous only if participants have adequate *understanding* of the project in which they are engaged. Othello declares Desdemona unfaithful, but does so non-autonomously because his understanding has been corroded by Iago's lies. Likewise, subjects of portraits participate autonomously only if they understand the goals of the artist, goals which can be complex and, especially in the early stages of an undertaking, not clear even to the artist him- or herself. The worry arises that the complexity of artistic practice renders it necessarily suspect from the Kantian ethical perspective.

(iii) Trust and Autonomy

Like Hujar, Robert Mapplethorpe made portraits of '70s-New York downtown denizens. Unlike Hujar, Mapplethorpe frequently took as his subject matter the practice of gay S&M sex that was so prevalent in that celebrated demimonde. Exercising his love of beauty as manifested in classical sculpture, Mapplethorpe used sophisticated cameras and lighting equipment to create portraits which, in formal terms,

exhibit astounding composition and tonality but which, in terms of content, frequently depict participants engaging in sexual practices that can leave taken aback even those who suppose themselves to be sexually adventuresome.

For Danto, the central ethical question is not that which came to transfix politicians and the press when Mapplethorpe's portraits were scheduled to be exhibited at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, that of the morality of the sexual practices and the depictions of them. The question rather, was with Mapplethorpe's relationship to his subjects. Did they autonomously agree to participate in the practice of revealing, in Danto's terms, Dionysiac sexual truth through the filter of Apollonian classical composition, with its resultant "dissonance between content and form"? (Danto 1996, p.24)

All of Mapplethorpe's portraits are staged, a fact indicated by the frequent direct eye contact between his subjects and the camera or, if eye contact is absent, by the obvious preparation necessary to manifest the compositional perfection. Such staging establishes that, unlike in works such as Garry Winogrand's candid street photography (see especially Winogrand 1975), all parties were willing participants. But, as noted above, mere willing participation is not sufficient to guarantee autonomous participation. The worry remains that Mapplethorpe's subjects did not adequately understand the character of the project in which they were engaged.

It is clear from interviews that Mapplethorpe himself had a robust understanding of his project, or at least that he did so in his later years (see Dunne 1989). The subjects who knew him and his work well, likely also had an adequate understanding of the project. Nevertheless, there were some subjects who would have been unfamiliar with Mapplethorpe's developing oeuvre, subjects he met at clubs in the Meatpacking District and invited back to his nearby studio for sex and photography. Perhaps such subjects were coopted in the way that Avedon apparently coopted Candy Darling.

But Danto thinks not, and his reason for this is that he finds Mapplethorpe's interactions with his subjects to be imbued with *trust* (Danto 1996, pp. 33-74). Sexual practices in general require a substantial degree of trust, and this fact applies especially to the S&M variety, with its paraphernalia frequently designed to render one party helpless. According to Danto, Mapplethorpe, a "participant observer" (Danto 1996, p.43), extended this sexual trust to portraiture, so that his subjects, even if they did not always fully understand his artistic practice, nonetheless understood him to be a trustworthy portraitist and, on the basis of this understanding, autonomously participated in his project. They knew that Mapplethorpe

would take into consideration how they wished to be presented, and that he would build an acknowledgment of those desires into the project, whatever the exact character of that project might be. Candy Darling likewise placed her trust in Avedon, but in that case her belief that he was trustworthy was false, as evidenced by his betrayal of her trust at the crucial moment of exposure. This false belief was sufficient to undermine her understanding and, therefore, her autonomy.

Whether Danto is right about Mapplethorpe's personal character, one can extract from this case a potential solution to the ethical problem of artistic portraiture of autonomous subjects. While it may be that frequently subjects fail adequately to understand the details of a project in which they are engaged, nonetheless it might be sufficient that they have true beliefs about the *character* of the artist, beliefs to the effect that, however the project might develop, that artist will weave their interests into its fabric. Autonomy is then exercised in the act of selecting a trustworthy artist, as when, in a medical context, a patient's autonomy is exercised in the selection of a physician on the basis records of past performance, while remaining ignorant of the exact nature of the illness and best course of treatment.

This general solution would, of course, apply to all artistic media, but for Danto it is especially important that it be recognized in the context of photography, as viewers of photographs tend ascribe a "natural authority" (Danto 2008, p. 302) to them and are thus likely to form beliefs about a subject's character on the basis of stills, even if those stills evoke a character that is radically at odds with their actual character.

Part Two: Photography and the Ontology of Art

Readers familiar with the corpus of Danto's writing might infer from the preceding discussion that his interest in photography is peripheral to his larger investigation into the ontology of artworks. Consideration of the distinction between stills and natural drawings, or of Kantian ethical concerns, appear foreign to his well-known consideration of Warhol's 1964 *Brillo Box (Soap Pads)* (see Danto 1981). But in fact Danto's investigations into photography are central to his larger project, or at least they came to be central in the later years, once that larger project had matured. Two points of intersection are crucial in this regard.

(i) Craft, Aesthetics and Embodied Meanings

Historically, art has been intertwined with craft. In ancient Greece art was understood as skilled manipulation of materials akin to that required for making shoes or building houses. In the medieval, renaissance and classical eras becoming an artist required years of training, often within the context of the kinds of guilds that were otherwise devoted to training to become a blacksmith or a leatherworker. By the 19th century European art was dominated by the art academies, schools that required students to undergo years of rigorous training in the use of perspective, line and color before they were declared artists. The historical connection between art and craft is indeed so tight that it is tempting to declare skilled manipulation of materials to be a necessary condition for art.

If art is a craft it has to be one with an aim that differs from those of the artisan, and it is natural to assume that its aim is instead creations that exemplify beauty. Whereas artisans learn to skillfully manipulate materials in ways that yield good horseshoes or saddles, artists learn to skillfully manipulate materials in ways that yield objects that engender aesthetic experiences. In this way, the historical connection between art and craft is paralleled by one between art and the aesthetic.

The history of photography, in contrast, is one of ambivalence towards both craft and aesthetic considerations. On the one hand, the technology involved lends itself to those who have an interest in lighting, exposure, image processing and printing and in the ways these can be used to create pictures with beautiful contrasts and tonalities. Figures such as Edward Weston and Ansel Adams were renowned for their knowledge of equipment and materials and celebrated for the beautiful prints they produced by the exercise of their craft. These days there are entire websites devoted to the discussion of the technical minutiae of digital photography and how these can be pressed into the service of making eye-catching prints.

At the same time, however, there has been steady movement in the direction of de-skilling photography. Beginning with George Eastman's promise that "you press the button; we do the rest" (Szarkowski 1989, p.144), continuing through the development of the Land camera, and now arriving at the cell-phone camera, the aesthetically impoverished and easily produced snapshot has come to dominate most of our encounters with photographs. Taking ordinary pictures requires no technical skills beyond pointing the camera and pressing the shutter release. And even the camera itself has become inessential. By the early decades of the 20th century, offset printing allowed for the mass reproduction of photographic images in inexpensive newspapers or magazines, images whose purpose was remote from

aesthetics, and which could be harvested and rearranged by anyone with scissors and glue. Today a Google-image search yields an essentially unlimited selection of prosaic photographs ready to be collected with a click of the mouse.

Bringing these historical observations together, one would expect to find that it is photography in its craft form that historically has yielded images that are artworks. And, indeed, we find that photographic movements with artistic ambitions as divergent in character as Pictorialism and Modernism had in common an emphasis on the need for photographers to be highly skilled at using their materials in ways that yielded aesthetically pleasing prints. Given that skill and effort were required to produce such prints, they were rare, and such scarcity led to value, especially monetary value.

But, beginning in the early decades of 20th century, a wholly different current emerged. Danto draws our attention especially to the 1920 *First International Dada Fair*, an art exhibition replete with photographs, but in the form of collages of photographic images cut from magazines and newspapers, rather than in the form of unique fine-art prints (Danto 1993, p. 424). The Dadaists saw themselves as creating a new kind of art, one in opposition to the art woven into the fabric of cultures that had brought on the horrors of the First World War. By creating artworks using inexpensive, mass-produced photographic images, in a single stroke they rendered inessential to the definition of art the qualities of craft and aesthetics that had been part of that definition for centuries. Later in the 20th century, when the center of Western art moved from a war-exhausted Europe to New York, a new generation of artists picked up where the Dadaists had left off, incorporating inexpensive snapshots in their artworks in ways that set up a dramatic contrast with the practices of photographers who continued working in the craft tradition. To take an example noted at the outset, in the late 1970s Cindy Sherman placed her 35mm camera on a tripod and used a lengthy shutter-release cable to create a series of autoportraits each depicting her in the guise of female characters of the sort to which she had been exposed in B movies and magazines during her formative years. Sherman had no interest in using expensive cameras or in fussing over film, exposure, development or printing. Nor does the value of these *Untitled Film Stills* lie in any of the approximately 70 photographs taken individually; rather, it is “the total project...that is the least artistic unit of her work” (Danto 1986, pp.121-22).The craft dimension of photography is attenuated, aesthetics is hardly the point, and there is no unique, precious object in which the art is concentrated.

Danto introduces terminology to distinguish these two currents in photography that came to dominate the 20th century, and that are still very much with us today. Those working in the craft tradition hold onto the title of *photographers*, but those who use photographs *in* art, rather than *as* art, are labeled

photographists (Danto 1993, p. 424). Weston and Adams are photographers; the Dadaists and Sherman are photographists.

While this distinction is handy for art-historical purposes, Danto finds an even deeper importance lurking within it. The use of the human foot has always been irrelevant to the definition of art, but the hand, by virtue of its role in craft, and the eye, by virtue of its role in aesthetics, have both been central. However, the widespread acceptance as art of photography in its de-skilled and de-aestheticized form establishes that neither the hand nor the eye are essential either (Danto 2013, p.113). Danto concludes that we must look to something in addition to the material realm for characteristics essential to art, and *mind* is the only alternative. Art is a blending with materials of the meanings generated by the agency of the mind. Those materials *may* be manipulated with skill in ways that lead to aesthetic experiences when viewed, but the creations of photographists establish that such skills and experiences are optional. The essence of art lies in matter informed by thought, or, as Danto prefers, in "embodied meanings" (Danto 2013, p. 128).

(ii) Embodied Meanings and the Realm of Human Interaction

The idea that art is embodied meaning is both vague and, to the extent to which it is meaningful, too broad. Donald Trump's building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border would be both materially substantial and replete with meaning but it would not be a work of art. How does consideration of photography help Danto both to clarify his mature statement on the ontology of art and to differentiate embodied meanings that are not artworks from those that are?

For it to do so is a tall order. Clarification of the idea requires teasing out some necessary conditions that an embodied meaning must satisfy in order to constitute a work of art but, at the same time, that clarification would have to place no a priori constraints on which meanings future artists might embody, and no constraints on the ways in which they might embody them. I conclude by considering ways in which Danto's reflections on the oeuvres of the photographers discussed above furnish guidance toward resolution of this delicate task.

During the mid-century "street photography" as practiced by figures such as Winogrand and Cartier-Bresson and was socially acceptable, encouraged even. But by the 1970s attitudes toward the practice had begun to change. One basis for such change was that the Kantian ethical considerations discussed above came to occupy a more central place in American life. Hujar's oeuvre, in contrast with Avedon's, embodies this shift in our realm of human interaction insofar as he depicts his subjects in the ways they

autonomously chose to be depicted. Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* likewise embody this change. Whereas Winogrand gave no consideration to whether or not his subjects, who were almost always women, agreed to have themselves presented in the manner he wished, Sherman used the practice of autoportraiture to place full control of her presentation in her own hands.

Yet Sherman's work has an even more important function than that of deciding who has control over how women are presented. On Danto's interpretation, Sherman's project is an instance of performance art, an artform that functions to erode the barrier between artist and audience in ways that will bring about something "transfigurative and even sublime...raising her and her audience to a higher plane" (Danto 1986, p.123). By presenting herself in the guises of female roles that all of us within our realm of human interaction have been exposed to, we are made conscious of those presentations and roles and the ways they have shaped our expectations about what women are and may be. In viewing the series of photographs, all of us together—artist and audience, men and women—find hiding in plain sight within our consciousness these roles, thus triggering our awareness of their arbitrariness and malleability. Together we are changed in positive ways, ways that bring us collectively to the higher plane to which Danto refers.

The 1970s were also a time in which sex generally, and the sexual practices of persecuted groups in particular, were becoming more openly acknowledged. Danto's interpretation of Mapplethorpe's erotic photographs in terms of the trust and autonomy discussed above situate him "not as voyeur, but rather as the agent through which the ordinarily hidden is revealed" (Danto 1996, p.35). The subjects of those photographs are "demonstrating something they have allowed [Mapplethorpe] to witness" (Danto 1996, p.35). Mapplethorpe's erotic photographs in this way embody, not only changing views about the importance of autonomy, but changing views regarding what may be presented openly, and what must remain hidden.

Abstracting from these examples, the sought-after necessary conditions appear to be that the successful artist is one who is, consciously or unconsciously, attuned to the earliest signs of fluctuations in the realm of human interaction in which they and their audience are embedded, and who can then inform their chosen materials with those fluctuations, and do so in ways that introduce further fluctuations, ones that constitute positive change. Trump's wall would embody a meaning, but it would be one that takes us back to a stale aspect of a bygone way of life, and would thus be the antithesis of the sort of function so well exemplified by the work of Sherman.

But the most important lesson Danto extracts from the contrasting examples of Hujar, Mapplethorpe and Sherman, on the one hand, and Avedon and Winogrand, on the other, arises from the ways they establish photography's unique capacity to breach the confines of our realm of human interaction and to depict that which is foreign to it. This capacity, which is the source of Danto's ambivalence toward the medium, both highlights the sense in which that realm is real and important and reinforces the Baudelaireian idea that it, and it only, is the proper subject of art.[ii] Danto's consideration of photography thus reveals that art does essentially involve craft, but it is a craft involving sensitivity to, and dexterity in relation to, aspects of a realm of human interaction, rather than necessarily to materials. Further research may be directed toward refining this new craft and, especially, toward the development of pedagogical techniques suitable to it. If art colleges of the past were substantially devoted to teaching material craft, art colleges of the future may be substantially devoted to teaching this new craft of the mind.

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[i] The distinction between stills and natural drawings is first made in Danto 2008, p. 300 and then elaborated on in Danto 2013, pp. 105 - 106.

[ii] Very late in his career Danto finds in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* a conception of art not dissimilar to Danto's own conception as embodied meaning. In Kantian terms, an embodied meaning becomes an "aesthetic idea," and the kind of sensitivity to the human realm and fluctuations within it discussed here becomes "spirit." If this is correct, then we have a second irony in relation to Kant, not one of presence through absence, as in the ethical considerations discussed above, but one arising from the contrast between the formalism generally associated with Kantian thought on art, on the one hand, and the strikingly anti-formalist understanding of art reflected in embodied meanings or aesthetic ideas on the other. See Danto 2013, pp. 128-133.

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