

The Readymade and the Act

In the preface to his book *Unnatural Wonders*, philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto describes how art changed in the 1960s when the barrier between art and ordinary objects began to fade away: "What was the difference between walking and performing a dance movement that consisted of walking?" (xi-xii). Danto explains that for each case, the particular context must be closely examined to determine the meaning of the two identical objects or actions, one of which is art and the other not. Danto's comment on dance reminded me of Jacques Lacan's remark in this 15<sup>th</sup> Seminar on the *Psychoanalytic Act (1967-8)*: "If I walk up and down here while speaking to you, that does not constitute an act, but if one day it is to cross a certain threshold by which I put myself outside the law, that day my motor activity will have the value of an act" (11/15/67). Here Lacan starts us on the journey of determining how two identical actions can signify differently. When is walking just walking? And when is walking an act? Lacan tells us that the act is outside the law, but we know that not everything that is outside the law is necessarily an act, which is why this passage functions only as a gesture towards an understanding of the act. But I propose in this paper to use the similarity in these two statements in order to clarify both what counts as a work of art in the late-modern era and what counts as an act within Lacanian psychoanalysis. Danto is fascinated by the readymades of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, because they exemplify the way in which meaning is detached from the particular physical qualities or actions. Similarly, we know from Freud and Lacan that the conversation that makes psychoanalysis work is not just any conversation. Like the work of art, an analysis creates something extra, something enigmatic and undefinable, that challenges and transforms the participant's understanding of the world.

To begin with the walking that Lacan describes: the statement implies that an action done in its ordinary way does not qualify as an act. However, if the walking crosses a threshold that puts the subject outside the law, the meaning of "walking" then changes and is indeed subordinated to the meaning of the particular transgression. This addition is what Danto calls *aboutness*. The particular action's obvious denotative meaning is minimized when the action or object becomes *about* something else, usually something metaphysical or even ontological. For

example, when the urinal is used in its ordinary way its significance is limited, but once it is turned upside down and displayed in a gallery it becomes about something much larger, for example questioning the nature of what we call art, our appreciation and awareness of the objects we interact with, the confinement of traditional understandings of beauty (i.e. fountains), our assumptions about the body and the abject qualities of urine—this list could go on and on. By playing with the meaning of a urinal Duchamp was able to force viewers to reflect on what they do and think, thus making the urinal about much more than relieving oneself.

In addition to transgression, other aspects of the psychoanalytic act are that (1) it signifies: “There is nothing introduced in these chapters about the act except the fact that it is posited as signifying” (SXV 22/11/67). This means that an act cannot be accomplished by thinking alone; it must be performed in some way. In addition it must be new (2): “What is the status of the act? It must be said to be new, and even unheard of if one gives its full sense, the one we started from, the one which from all time has been valid about the status of the act” (SXV 11/22/67). This implies that the act cannot be ritualized or codified. However, I believe we have to consider the newness of the act in the context of another criterion, which is the transformation of the subject (3). As Lacan writes in Seminar XIV, “the subject is, as a subject, entirely transformed by the act” (2/15/67). At issue here is whether the act that transforms the subject can utilize established cultural frameworks, or whether the frameworks negate the new, rejuvenating power of the act. To follow my example of readymades as cultural acts similar to the psychoanalytic act, Duchamp’s *Fountain* could not exist without the ritual of the gallery show. Its *aboutness* comes from its unusual placement in this familiar context. Similarly, Warhol’s presentation of *Brillo Box* participates in a particular ritual but forces us to view that ritual in a new way. We know that for Duchamp’s *Fountain* to succeed as an act it had to be initially refused as art by the established authorities of the artworld. It had to be placed in a discourse—that is, it had to signify—but it could not signify in a traditional way, and its definition as art had to be founded on a new assumption about what art is.

Now I would like to present two more concepts from Danto that may help us to conceptualize the act and to understand the significance of the act in late-modern culture. First, central to Danto’s understanding of modern art is the transfiguration of the commonplace, which is the title of his magnum opus. Danto argues that modern art’s ability to transform an ordinary object into something moving and thought-provoking proves that art is no longer dependent on

foundational definitions about what art must be. His controversial claim that the “the end of art” has arrived simply means that art can no longer be viewed teleologically as a series of movements moving closer to one true “reality.” Art is now free to be what ever it wants to be, as long as it embodies something. But what it embodies is no longer confined to traditional frameworks and, indeed, is preferably something new. Thus *transfiguration* and *embodiment* are two ideas that also appear to be central to the act in that the subject must be transformed through an alteration of the fundamental fantasy and, through the transference, the act embodies much more than an ordinary conversation between two people. We see that the concept “fountain” really is present when we look at Duchamp’s urinal. Just as past experiences are physically present, indeed *embodied*, in analysis.

I’ll finish with some conclusions that should clarify the broader implications of to comparison of the psychoanalytic act to the readymade of conceptual art. I believe that both the act and conceptual art help to explain the temporality of postmodern life and some of the shifts in pleasure that have puzzled traditional cultural commentators. Ed Pluth’s book *Signifiers and Acts* is useful here in that he discusses at length how the achievement of the act differs from the effect of fantasy. He writes that “In an act, a subject does not constitute itself as a satisfying object of the Other’s desire, and in it a subject is not demanding recognition of its own desire by the Other either. Rather, a subject is simply using signifiers autonomously, as it were, in a signifying repetition of a libidinal event” (104). The key phrase here is “libidinal event,” in that the ideal pleasure is no longer a fantasy of perfect wholeness, but instead a perplexing, uncanny libidinal moment that provokes a new desire. Pluth builds on Lacan’s discussion of puns in Seminar V to argue that puns parallel the act in that by garbling signifiers they evacuate meaning, thus creating a sense of freedom and increased desire. In *Unpacking Duchamp*, Dalia Judovitz makes the same argument about puns and readymades, arguing that “As linguistic ready-mades, puns act like switches between common sense and nonsense, thereby technically reactivating and enriching their common usage” (96). Thus the security of the fantasy is undermined by the libidinal event that challenges knowledge in order to gain greater proximity to the real and jouissance. And the emphasis on freedom that comes from abandoning origins and foundations is reflected in the thought of “post-metaphysical” thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger who are important to both Lacan and Danto. In aphorism 44 of *Daybreak* Nietzsche writes: “the reality of what is most near; what is around us and within us begins, little

by little, to show colors, beauties, enigmas and richness of significance—things of which ancient humanity had not the least suspicion.” I would argue that analysis and art serve to reveal a richness and significance that the ancient and enduring world of utility conceals.

#### Works Cited

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