Transfiguring Triviality

In his response to Jean Clair's article, Arthur Danto makes a reference to Hegel by way of introduction; "It is true that in Hegel's view, art is a superceded moment of Absolute Spirit, and it is in this sense that Hegel famously pronounces the end of art. Its mission, in Hegel's system, is to be taken over by metaphysics." It is not entirely obvious how this fits into the context of twentieth century art after Duchamp.

In another paragraph (which I have mercilessly truncated) Danto says: "Closing the gap between art and life .. Pop refused to countenance a distinction between fine and commercial, or between high and low art. …nothing an artist made could carry meanings more profound than those evoked by everyday garments, fast food, car parts, street signs. Each of these efforts aimed at bringing art down to earth, and transfiguring, through artistic consciousness, what everyone already knows."

click to enlarge



Figure 1
Andy Warhol,
Marylin Monroe, 1967

Warhol's approach was to appropriate something (a graphic design) that was already art (though categorized as "commercial art") and offer it as high, avant-garde, fine, or

“business” art (take your pick of terms). Thus the only thing the context changed was the price…and the “autograph.” Instead of appreciating the value of the label as art (sending us out to grocery store shelves to “collect” it for a few dollars) the result only reaffirmed the power of the art-world to assign arbitrary value and make it believable.

If “nothing an artist made could carry meanings more profound ‘than events or objects from everyday life'” (a suggestion Duchamp once made on viewing a propeller) and if these are things “everyone already knows” what is this “artistic consciousness” that we seem to need to “transfigure” …. why does it need transfiguring anyway? Do we need artists to tell us what we already know?

Is it possible that by closing the gap between art and life it is art that becomes irrelevant? If art cannot provide an insight into life, a fresh view of the quotidian or a clarification of its value and meaning….if it just shows it to us and asks us to celebrate its dull uniformity, glossy chic or garish banality as it is -and as the best life can offer- why would we need art at all? Danto says; “I saw it as the task of aesthetics to show how to distinguish art works from real things when there was no visible or palpable difference between them.” But haven’t we already arrived at the position that now there is no difference? “Art” is indistinguishable from any other commercial product or media sensation except as a speculative or investment vehicle for the very rich.

There have been many moments in the art of both East and West when artists called attention to everyday life and common objects. In every case either our attention was directed to something important about them, something uncommonly noticed, or their use as material transformed by the artist into a newly insightful event. In no case was the value seen to inhere in their triviality. It is a bit ironic that the distinctly non-trivial work of Duchamp has been used as pretext by generations of artists intent on making triviality

a career path. The trivial has not been transfigured but everything else, even rage and disgust, has been trivialized. But then, as Danto has pointed out before, art has ended. It has not, however, become metaphysics.

Kirk Hughey
kirkparis1@aol.com