Art and Meaning

Throughout the history of philosophical speculation on art, it was tacitly assumed that works of art have a strong antecedent identity, and that one could tell them apart from ordinary things as easily as one could tell one ordinary thing from another—a hawk from a handsaw, say. So obvious was the distinction between art and everything else that the Greeks evidently did not require a special word for designating artworks, which they nevertheless undertook to account for in the grandest metaphysical terms. There have, especially in Modernist times, been efforts to transform the term “art” into a normative concept, according to which “good art” is tautologous since nothing can be both art and bad. New York critics were known to say of something they disapproved of that it was not really art, when there was very little else but art that it could be. Any term can be rendered normative in this way, as when, pointing to a certain handsaw, we say “That’s what I call a handsaw,” meaning that the tool ranks high under the relevant norms. But it would seem queer for objects which rank low under those norms to be exiled from the domain of handsaws, and in general normativization must drop out of the concept, leaving a descriptive residue. It is with reference to this residue that works of art were tacitly held to be recognizable among and distinguishable from other things.

At the beginning of the Modernist movement, say in the mid-nineteenth century, certain problems arose at the boundaries of the concept, initially, perhaps, with photographs which were unmistakably pictures, though produced by, as the coinventor of the process, Fox Talbot, phrased it, The Pen-
cil of Nature. There was a double history until very recent times as photographers attempted to emulate paintings, and painters began to distance their work from photography by one or another of the stylistic matrices of Modernism—Cubist, Futurist, Dadaist, Constructivist, etc. Photography was still an outcast in the era of Stieglitz's journal, Camera Work, and perhaps its claim to art was vindicated only when the Museum of Modern Art opened the first photography gallery under Edward Steichen. When that happened, the distinction between pictures drawn by Nature's Pencil and by the hand-held pencils of painters dropped out of the concept of art. And articulating the logical structures of that concept proved to be more exacting than anyone might have believed, when it had been taken for granted that artworks constituted a relatively homogeneous class of things, the members of which could be picked out easily and immediately. It was consistent with this assumption that the borderlines expanded and dilated under pressures of various sorts: articles of furniture, for example, would have been considered works of art in the eighteenth century, when made with precious veneers and elegantly designed by master-ébénistes. But when Jacques-Louis David, associating these luxurious objects with the aristocracy, drew a sharp line between high art and practical art, objects of vertu had to emigrate, like their noble patrons, and became craft instead of art. The distinction remains in effect today, so that one dismisses as craft anything that carries an aura of utility, leaving behind the uncomfortable idea that works of art can have no function, which is a desperate way of keeping borders closed. This leaves intact the assumption that artworks are a special class of things, and that one could walk through any space whatever and pick the artworks out with a high probability of attaining a perfect score. In this respect the distinction between art and anything else was understood as in no way different from the distinction between any pair of classes—hawks and handsaws, once again. From that perspective, the question "What is art?" was never understood as "Which are the artworks?"—to which it could be assumed that we knew the answer—but rather "What are art's essential features?"

What set my book, The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, apart from that philosophical tradition was its recognition that the distinction between works of art and ordinary things could no longer be taken for granted. The question with which the book wrestled was, "Given two things that resemble
one another to any chosen degree, but one of them a work of art and the other an ordinary object, what accounts for this difference in status?” This would not have been a question philosophers could have asked when the difference between artworks and ordinary objects seemed for the most part obvious and uncontroversial. They would not have asked it, I think, because the issue had never arisen, except in the somewhat limited contexts of fakes and forgeries, where one depended on connoisseurship to draw distinctions. In the twentieth century, however, through certain internal transformations in the history of art, works of art began to appear that either were, or appeared to be, objects of daily life and use. Duchamp’s readymades (1915–1917) were ordinary snowshovels, bottle racks, grooming combs, and, in one famous case, a urinal, and these, before Duchamp, would certainly have been considered as entirely outside the scope of art. My favorite example, of course, was Andy Warhol’s Brillo Box, a photograph of which would be indiscernible from one taken of the commonplace containers in which the scouring pads were shipped to supermarkets. So why was one art and the other not, since they looked as much alike as anyone cared to make them? So much alike that the assumption that we could pick the artworks out was put ineradicably in doubt.

Transfiguration sought to answer this question, and it arrived at a provisional formulation of part of the definition of art. I argued, first, that works of art are always about something, and hence have a content or meaning; and secondly that to be a work of art something had to embody its meaning. This cannot be the entire story, but if I could not get these conditions to hold, I am unclear what a definition of art without them would look like. In this essay, I want to respond to certain philosophical objections meant to put my meager set of conditions in doubt.

George Dickie, founder of the Institutional Theory of Art, insists that there are counterinstances to my first claim, offering non-objective paintings as his example. It would be extremely interesting to consider which non-objective paintings Dickie could have had in mind. The Guggenheim Museum in New York was originally called The Museum of Non-Objective Painting, and it displayed work by Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, and Rudolph Bauer. The term “non-objective,” if not first used by Rodchenko, was certainly used by Kandinsky to designate a pure art that seeks to express
only “inner and essential feelings”—and the phrase “non-objective” is closely synonymous with the word “subjective.” The paintings present a reality—albeit an inner reality, or, if an outer reality, then one which has the same spiritual identity as inner reality. And this, to take the other seemingly difficult case, was Schopenhauer’s view of music: it is the language of our noumenal being. Similar stories could be told about Suprematism and what Mondrian termed Neo-Plasticism. Malevich perhaps invented monochrome painting as something other than a joke, but would have been astonished to be told that his Black Square was not about anything. Robert Rauschenberg’s all-white painting was about the shadows and the changes of light which transiently registered on its surface, and in that sense is about the real world. To be sure, I cannot account for every historical example, but I am fairly convinced that I could if presented with any historical case. So we are in the realm of the philosophical counterexample, leached of any content, viz., “What about a painting about nothing?” I would want to know if it had geometrical forms, nongeometrical forms, whether it was monochromatic or striped or whatever—and from this information it is a simple matter to imagine what the appropriate art criticism would be, and to elicit the kind of meaning the work could have. Sean Scully’s paintings are composed chiefly of stripes, but they are meant to assert propositions about human life, about love, even about death. We can of course imagine someone in the spirit of philosophical counterinstantiation painting a work about nothing. But there is a problem of distinguishing between not being about anything and being about nothing, and I incline to the view that nothing is what the painting is about, as in an essay by Heidegger. So my challenge to Dickie would be: give me an example, and I will deal with it. Without some specificity, the game of counterinstances gets pretty tiresome.

The second condition was that a meaning is materially embodied in artworks, which show what they are about. This, if true, must put me in conflict with Hegel’s formulation of what he terms “symbolic art,” the meaning of which, as with a name, is external to rather than embodied in the object, though he and I would be in harmony in respect to the other two forms he distinguishes, classical and romantic art. Since his example of symbolic art is the (Egyptian) pyramid, it can certainly be questioned whether the shape, dimensions, and vectors do not embody the meaning appropriate to its
mummified tenant. But there is a more immediate objection to my second condition, namely that something can at once possess aboutness, and embody its meaning, and yet not be a work of art. It has, for instance, been pointed out that the ordinary boxes of Brillo in the stockrooms of supermarkets are about something—Brillo—and that they embody their meanings through the designs on their surfaces. Since I wanted a definition that would distinguish artworks from real things, however something looked, I cannot have succeeded, since the definition, while it fits Warhol’s box, fits equally well the ordinary boxes from which I was anxious to distinguish it. This was raised as a friendly criticism by Noel Carroll, and it requires a somewhat intricate answer.

There are two senses of “content,” that in which Brillo cartons physically contain scouring pads, and that in which we may speak of the content of a work of art, which may in no physical sense whatever be “in” the work. What the content of Brillo Box as a work of art might be, was a matter of interpretation, having nothing to do with opening the box to see what was there. The “Combines” of Robert Rauschenberg possess content in both senses: they physically incorporate ordinary objects—cans, funnels, brooms, Coke bottles—which then contribute to whatever larger meaning the works may convey. The way in which these ordinary objects get taken up and transfigured is, in Rauschenberg’s case, partly achieved by heeding what one might call the poetry of the commonplace. The objects of the household, for example, are dense with meanings we begin to grasp when they are lost or broken or worn out. They define the structures of life as it is lived, and, if we know how to read the objects of vanished forms of life, we have access to what it meant to live those forms, and hence to the minds of those who lived them. Indeed, we can learn a great deal more about those forms of life from what Rauschenberg’s pieces appropriate, than from those pieces themselves, which were exceedingly strange when they first appeared in galleries in the 1950s, for example a stuffed goat ringed with an automobile tire, which calls upon interpretative responses only tangentially connected with our antecedent ability to recognize automobile tires and stuffed goats.

It follows from these considerations that it becomes quite out of the question that one identify the content of works of art on the basis of their visual qualities, and this does not apply merely to contemporary or near con-
temporary art, but to art of the distant past, inasmuch as it is always possible to imagine objects indiscernible from given works of art but caused by factors in terms of which they cannot mean what the works which resemble them mean. Though this did not occur to writers in the period in which the definition of art seemed a less vexed question than it had become in our own century—whole books today are published on the question of art’s definition!—there are aspects of the concept of art which have made it clear from the beginning that people were worried about fakes and copies, and these preoccupations can always be phrased in terms of indiscernibles, even if it is thought, as with Nelson Goodman, that differences will sooner or later emerge, and we will wonder, as we now do with the paintings of van Meegeren, how anyone could have supposed them original. It was important, for complex motives, that van Meegeren not be told apart from Vermeer since he was anxious to be regarded as as good a painter as Vermeer himself was. Perhaps the discernibility would have been obvious, were it not for the experts, such as the unfortunate specialist, Professor Bredius of the Netherlands, who knew more about Vermeer than anyone then living. He surmised that there had to have been an unrecorded Italian journey—how little after all is recorded about Vermeer’s life!—and a direct encounter with Caravaggism, to which van Meegeren’s first painting appeared perfectly to point. So Bredius was more capable of being fooled through his specialized knowledge than others who knew far less—but who accepted Bredius as the great expert. Of course it is a crazy painting, but what van Meegeren meant in painting it was profoundly different from what Vermeer could have meant, had he produced one indiscernible from it. In fact van Meegeren’s *Christ at Emmaus* is a vaudeville of Vermeer-like mannerisms: one of the heads is exactly like an authentic head by Vermeer, and those little dots of fused light which we see in *View of Delft* are used in ways having nothing to do with the dots in the great landscape, where, for some, they imply the use of a camera obscura. Another dimension of concern arose in connection with restoration, as with the Sistine Ceiling. Is it the same work Michelangelo painted, or has it been changed by the removal of something essential to its meaning? When the painter Morris Louis died, he left upward of six hundred paintings, with no indication of how they were to be stretched. He stained his canvas by pouring, and when the paint was dry, he rolled it up.
and stored it. It was decided that Clement Greenberg, who knew the work well, should be the authority as to where the stretcher-marks should be drawn, and this unsettled the art world, in which some held that these were not Louis's but Greenberg's works. No need to settle the matter now, but it is clear that some decision had to be made, even if we have no incontestably clear idea what Louis would have done had he lived.

In any case it may be assumed that there were enough actual differences between Brillo Box and Brillo boxes that we can even now tell them apart, however visually alike they are. But those differences will not tell us which of them is an artwork, and in implying that they both are, the force of Carroll's objection is to explain how we are to account for their difference. This I will now seek to do.

In my original discussion, I used the two boxes to raise the question of why one was art and the other not, and hence to ask how to draw a philosophical line between art and reality. But it has since become clear to me that the "real" Brillo boxes might themselves indeed be considered art, and that what set them apart from what Warhol fabricated was the difference between fine and commercial art, comical as it might have sounded to anyone but myself to think of Warhol's boxes as fine art in 1964 when they were first made and shown. (Eleanor Ward, the owner of the gallery, felt that Warhol was pulling something over her eyes, and the Director of the National Gallery in Ontario swore that the boxes were not sculpture—a question on which he was taken to be authoritative.) I was obliged to make this concession when it became undeniable that the cartons satisfied my two conditions, which would require me to find a third condition to get rid of the problem, or just accept that the distinction between fine and commercial art was no more and no less pressing than the parallel distinction between fine art and craft. The cartons were certainly about something; and since I was using aboutness to distinguish art from reality, the cartons would make the first cut. And it seemed to me no less clear that they would make the second cut as well, that of embodiment. The upshot was that the cartons made an unsatisfactory paradigm for a real object, since they were after all embedded in a system of meanings, as I shall argue in a moment. So the problem arose of what paradigm to use for a real object, and that turns out not to be so easy. It would require finding something which did not derive some part of its iden-
tity from a network of meanings, and it is not clear that any could be found—it would be like seeking for something that was not in the mind in an effort to rebut the claims of Bishop Berkeley. To the contrary, the moment you find it, it is no longer outside the mind. It was not important for me to step off the edge into metaphysics, since the philosophical tradition used as its generating paradigm beds painted by artists and beds built by carpenters—and no one can deny the aura of meanings surrounding the bed as a site of suffering and joy. So the line between commercial art and fine art became a problem.

In my early essay “The Art World” I invoked a knowledge of the theory and the history of art to achieve this end, and while this remains true, I now think we might talk as well about different structures of art criticism connected with the two objects. Or three objects, if we expand our group to include the Brillo Boxes by the appropriationist artist Mike Bidlo, who, in an exhibition at the Bruno Bishopburger Gallery in Zurich, installed, in the same configuration in which they were shown at the Pasadena Museum of Art in 1968, eighty-five Brillo boxes, which Bidlo had had fabricated. The show was called Not Andy Warhol. (The show in Pasadena could not have been titled that way!) So let us mount the exhibition I usually try to imagine when I discuss these matters—the Warhol box, the Not Warhol box, and the “real” Brillo box made famous by Warhol but also not Warhol, though not Not Warhol either. I ask you to grant me their relative indiscernibility, in that the differences between the objects do not penetrate the differences between the works, since they could as readily be imagined as belonging to the others instead of the one they belong to in fact. If you look at Warhol’s box, there is a kind of dripping where the paint is stenciled on, showing a certain indifference to clean edges. But the Warhol could be clean and the Bidlo dripping. Or they could both be clean and the real Brillo box be dripping—or at least some of them, say a bad batch. There is no reason to protract this reasoning. So let us apply the structures of art criticism to the three, and imagine that they look entirely alike, and that no visual basis is to be invoked for discriminating the two examples of fine art from the one example of commercial art, or, for that matter, discriminating between the appropriation and the appropriated.

It is now well-known that one of the reasons the design of the Brillo box
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Is so good is that it was done by a fine artist who was obliged to practice commercial art when Abstract Expressionism faded in the early 1960s. This was Steve Harvey, about whom I would like to know a great deal more than I do. In any case, his Brillo carton is not simply a container for Brillo pads: it is a visual celebration of Brillo. (You can verify this by looking at the way Brillo is shipped today, in plain brown wrappings like pornographic literature: the difference between the container of 1964 and the container of today expresses as eloquently as anything could the difference between 1964 and today!) The box is decorated with two wavy zones of red separated by one of white, with blue and red letters. Red, white, and blue are the colors of patriotism, as the wave is a property of water and of flags. This connects cleanliness and duty, and transforms the side of the box into a flag of patriotic sanitation. It gives two connected reasons for using Brillo, which is printed in proclamatory letters B-R-I-L-O, the consonants in blue, the vowels—JO—in red. The word itself is dog-Latin, viz. “I shine!”—which has a double meaning, one of which is consistent with the condition of embodied meaning. The word conveys an excitement which is carried out in the various other words in which the idioms of advertising are distributed upon the surfaces of the box, the way the idioms of revolution or protest are boldly blazoned on banners and placards carried by strikers. The pads are GIANT. The product is NEW. It SHINES ALUMINUM FAST. The carton conveys excitement, even ecstasy, and is in its own way a masterpiece of visual rhetoric, intended to move minds to the act of purchase and then of application. And that wonderful band of white, like a river of purity, has an art historical origin in the Hard-Edge Abstraction of Ellsworth Kelly and Leon Polk Smith. It could not have been done before that movement, the clean edges of which give a certain palpable contemporaneity to Brillo. Harvey deserved a prize, and Warhol, who had won prize after prize as one of New York's leading commercial artists, would have been the first to appreciate its value.

That, in general, is a sketch of the art criticism for Steve Harvey's carton, and you can see how meaning and embodiment are connected. What Harvey would never have thought was that the Brillo box might be fine rather than commercial art; fine art by his criteria would have been the paintings he admired by Pollock and de Kooning and Rothko and maybe

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Kline. So what Warhol did was to make something visually of a piece with his, but which was a work of fine art. And one will have to note that none of the art criticism appropriate to Harvey’s box is at all appropriate to Warhol’s. Warhol was not influenced by Hard-Edge Abstraction: he reproduced the forms of an artist who was, only because they were there, the way the logo of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis was there, certifying that that Brillo was kosher (as it was in 1964). It was essential that he reproduce the effects of whatever caused Harvey to do what he had done, without the same causes explaining why they are there, in his Brillo Box of 1964. So where does art criticism come in? It comes in because commercial art was in some way what Warhol’s art was about. He had a view of the ordinary world as aesthetically beautiful, and admired greatly the things Harvey and his heroes would have ignored or condemned. He loved the surfaces of daily life, the nutritiousness and predictability of canned goods, the “poetics of the commonplace.” After all, the Brillo box was but one of the cartons he appropriated for that first show at the Stable Gallery, all of which had their rhetoric but none of which were as successful as Steve Harvey’s. By 1964 real objects had penetrated art as subjects for realistic depiction: a case in point is the sign for Mobil gasoline, the Flying Red Horse, in a characteristically haunting painting by Edward Hopper. Crossing that line shows a philosophical shift from rejection of industrial society—which would have been the attitude of William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites—to endorsement, which was what one might expect from someone born into poverty and in love with the warmth of a kitchen in which all the new products were used. So Warhol’s cartons are as philosophical as the wallpaper of William Morris, meant of course to transform rather than celebrate daily life, and, in Morris’s case, to redeem its ugliness into a kind of medievalized beauty. Warhol’s boxes were a reaction to Abstract Expressionism, but mainly with respect to honoring what Abstract Expressionism despised. That is part of the art criticism of Brillo Box, and there is a great deal more. But the two pieces of art criticism are disjoint: there is no overlap between the explanation of Harvey and the explanation of Warhol. Warhol’s rhetoric has no immediate relationship to that of the Brillo boxes at all.

And this is true of Bidlo’s work as well. If Warhol’s Brillo Box can be considered the emblematic work of the 1960s, Bidlo’s Not Warhol can be the
emblematic work of the 1980s. It was done in 1991, when Bidlo had a residency fellowship at Fullerton, where he made, as if reenacting the “Factory,” over eighty of the boxes, among other appropriations from Warhol. Indiscernible as Bidlo’s is from Warhol’s, his box could not have been made in 1964. It could as an object, of course, but not as a work of art. For it presupposes Appropriationism, which arose in the 1980s as a way of dealing with a perceived end of art. Warhol’s peers were Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, and Rosenquist. Bidlo’s peers were Sherrie Levine, Elaine Sturtevant, and Richard Pettibone, all of whom, not incidentally, appropriated works by Marcel Duchamp. Bidlo, the art historian Robert Rosenblum has written, “has much to reveal about the rampant historicism of the twentieth century, when suddenly the wildest rebels of early- and mid-twentieth-century art have been transformed into ancestral figures of remote nostalgia from a lost age, textbook classics no longer capable of disturbing the status quo or the future, but saints of another, now distant era whom we can resurrect with every possible homage.”

So Bidlo has appropriated Picasso and Léger in addition to Warhol, and is currently making urinals, since the entire generation of urinals from which Marcel Duchamp’s notorious Fountain (1917) was drawn has disappeared from the face of the earth. He is making, so to speak, handmade readymades. It happens that his boxes look as much like Harvey’s as like Warhol’s, but they are about Warhol’s and not about Harvey’s, and they are about what Warhol made with no special further interest in why he made it. The art criticism appropriate to Bidlo—but not to Warhol—is the art criticism generated by Appropriationism: which works are appropriately appropriated and why. It raises, certainly, acute questions of quality. Are Bidlo’s Not Warhols better than his Not Picassos? Are his Not Duchamps better than Levine’s After Walker Evans, where she photographed a reproduction of Evans’s sharecropper woman? We would be hard-pressed to use the art criticism appropriate to photography with Levine’s achievement!

I do not want to prolong my discussion past this point. The claim is that all of these differences are invisible, that the actual box before you underdetermines which work it is—Warhol, Harvey, or Bidlo. It is important to the problem that in all relevant visual respects, the three are entirely alike. That is what I have meant in saying so often that what makes something art is not
something that meets the eye. And that makes clear as well why so much rests on meaning, which it is the task of art criticism to make explicit. The works are not, as it were, synonymous. This is not to say there are not visible marks by which to tell Warhol from Bidlo and Bidlo from Harvey. There are, and these would be enlisted in the connoisseurships so important to collecting and selling art. And are, after all, important to how we look at these things and think about them. We don’t want to discover that we were thinking about the Bidlo when we thought we were thinking about the Warhol. Still, telling a Harvey from a Warhol from a Bidlo, while it is telling a work of fine art from a work of commercial art, and an original from an appropriation, is not in any further sense telling the difference between fine art and commercial art, which rests instead upon philosophy. And this is true even if you are telling the difference between a work of fine art and one not a work of fine art. The criteria may depend upon measurements, paint samples, mode of imprinting, and the like, none of which pertains to the conceptual division between these various objects. The definition of art remains a philosophical problem.

We can confirm this if we think for a moment on how the flagged properties of the connoisseur are precisely those on the basis of which fakes are constructed. The forger is in constant symbiosis with the connoisseur, attempting to outflank him by incorporating as many of the relevant properties into his fabrications as can be found. The great Morelli based connoisseurship on properties no one had paid attention to, which opened possibilities up for forging Fra Lippo Lippi in such a way that Morelli could mistake it for Filippino Lippi. Bidlo, doubtless in order to demonstrate the irrelevance of connoisseurship to distinguish his work from Warhol’s, made no effort to duplicate the latter millimeter for millimeter, or by employing just the same plywood Warhol used—which by now would probably be as difficult to find as a token of the same Mott Works urinal–type to which Fountain belonged. But the point is that telling art from nonart, if we can identify the latter at all, is not like distinguishing two works from one another when their status as art is not in question—as with Lippo and Filippino. But this returns me to the distinction between art and reality, from which the recognition of commercial art diverted me.

I have argued that with the emergence of indiscernibles, the true philo-
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Theoretical question was recognized this way: Given two indiscernible objects, one art and the other not, what accounts for the difference? The insufficiently considered case of commercial art did not belong to this question, though an analogous problem arose in case someone thought that commercial art must in every instance look different from fine art. My view, in any case, was that once the question arose, anything could be an artwork, and that, in consequence, the history of art, construed as the quest for self-consciousness, had reached its end. But I would like to make an observation concerning aesthetic responses to objects in the Post-Historical Period, as I have come to call the history of art since it achieved what I think of as philosophical self-awareness. What does it mean to live in a world in which anything could be a work of art? A family snapshot, a most-wanted poster, an aluminum kettle, a hawk, a handsaw? For me, it is to invent a suitable art criticism for an object, whether or not it is a work of art, though if it is not one—if, for instance, it is not about something—the criticism is void. It is to imagine what could be meant by the object if it were the vehicle of an artistic statement.

I recently visited the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco, and went the next afternoon to lunch with the graduate students in art history at Berkeley. As I headed for the elevator, I passed a large room on the first floor that was clearly being remodeled. There were planks and saw-horses and tipped steel shelves and sheetrock, as well as some power tools here and there, and I thought: I could have seen something exactly like this in the museum! Had I done so, I might in truth have been thrilled, and would have thought of the meaning of such an installation. Not long ago I saw an installation by Haim Steinbach at the Sonnabend Gallery in SoHo in which a room was lined with mostly empty steel shelves of the kind we might see in a storeroom. On one there was a pair of running shoes. On another a television set with a grainy screen. In one corner there was a random stack of drab office chairs, beneath which there was a pile of sand. There was something melancholy about it, and my companion observed that it looked just like some political headquarters in the Negev. With this the possibility of a meaning concerning the state of Israeli culture came into view. To be sure, the headquarters themselves are eloquent on that matter, all the more so if they resemble Steinbach's work. Its disarray and barrenness express the atti-
tudes that the latter represents through exemplification. It is clear that a distinction between two modes of aboutness is what we now require, but drawing it can safely be left to the profession as a way of bringing the definition of art into line with actual practice.

Even more recently, I found myself in the ground floor gallery of the Museum of the American Indian, on Bowling Green in lower Manhattan. It was a vast high room, with columns along its side, and the scuff and scruff one associates with downtown art spaces today. On the floor were a number of wooden pallets, on which stones were neatly piled. I said to my guide that these days such spaces almost always look as if they house installations. I thought a work consisting of stones piled on flats would be pretty impressive if it were art. She said, Well, it really had been an installation, but had since been taken down. The stones were still there because no one knew what to do with them. The work had been blessed by some medicine man, so does that mean that the stones themselves were blessed? Can we discard blessed stones if we cannot afford to return them to the river from which they came?

One final example. A memorial meeting for Richard Bellamy, an adventurous dealer from the 1960s, was held at PS1, in Long Island City. The art world turned up as a clan, since Bellamy was a beloved and admired person. It was uncommonly warm for May, and chairs had been set up in the courtyard of the building. I had the foresight to find a shady place, and sat next to Karen Wilkinson, a critic. We listened to the speeches, but began to notice how people were moving their chairs this way and that—carrying them from one part of the court to another. It was almost as though these movements were choreographed, and Karen said to me that it had begun to look like a performance. She was right. It looked that way. And how appropriate to transform the memorial into a work of art! It would have been an appropriate tribute from that community to that man. Too bad it hadn’t been thought of.

These cannot have been thoughts for anyone in the era before the one that made urgent The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. It is the mark of our period that everything can be regarded as a work of art and seen in textual terms. I count this, to vary a title I envy Suzi Gablik for inventing, the re-enchantment of the world. Contemporary art replaces beauty, everywhere threatened, with meaning.