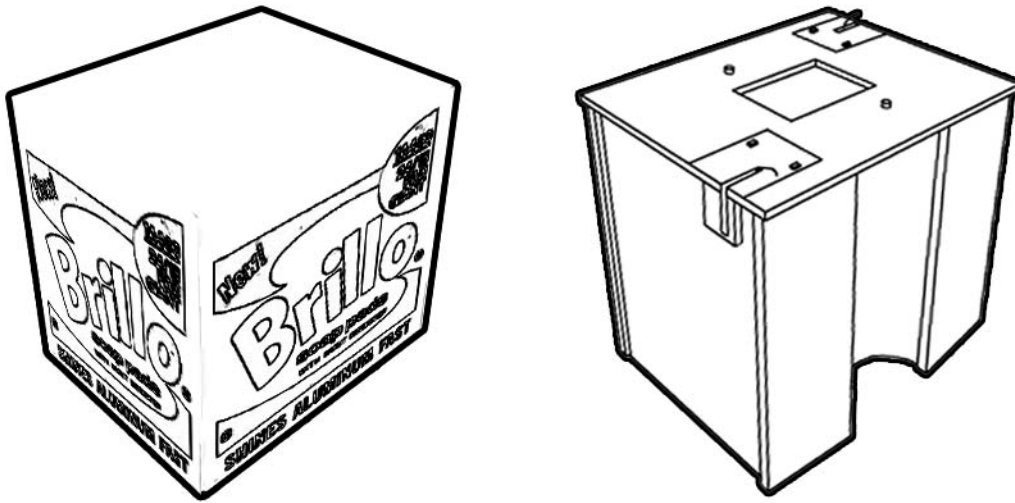


# The electronic *Brillo* Box

An approach to interactive art through the writings of Arthur C. Danto



## Abstract

In the present paper, the theories proposed by Arthur Coleman Danto in his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981) are applied to the interactive artwork *PainStation* (2001), created by Volker Morawe and Tilman Reiff. The purpose of this essay is to show how, by using the theoretical considerations proposed by Prof. Danto, this piece can be seen as a work of art, however presenting many similarities with a video game. A parallelism with Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* (1968), paradigm of the artwork that is indiscernible from the common object is thus established.

## Introduction

The piece considered consists of a two-player game console, the type that can be found in bars or entertainment centers. It looks like a gray table with a monitor on its top, flanked on opposite sides by the players' controls: a cylindrical joystick and a metal panel with two buttons. In order to play, the two players must each place themselves on either side of the table and hold the joystick with the right hand, while placing the left hand on the metal panel (*Pain Execution Unit*, or PEU), so that the two buttons on the panel are pressed. This closes an electrical circuit that starts the game.

The participants compete playing *Pong*, a first-generation video game consisting of a simple tennis game with clearly identifiable rules: each player, represented by a vertical bar, must block and send the ball back to their opponent. The innovation, when compared to the original game, lies in the consequence of failure: each time a player misses the ball, they receive physical punishment in their left hand. This punishment is applied either as heat coming from a lamp located under the metal panel, as low-voltage electric shocks, or as a lash leaving a small wound on the back of the player's hand. The different forms of punishment are represented on screen by a set of icons (*Pain Inflictor Symbols*, or PIS) that appear at random, so

that the player cannot predict them. Both players suffer the same type of punishment, and their actions directly affect each other, so the competition turns into a sort of Russian roulette. The game ends when one of the players, in order to avoid pain, takes their hand off the panel, thus interrupting the electrical circuit, and, consequently, losing. This piece, created by Volker Morawe and Tilman Reiff, is called "PainStation".

I came across the *PainStation* at the *Ars Electronica* electronic art festival that was held in Linz in 2002. This was the first artwork I saw, as it was located in the entrance hall at the O.K. Centrum für Gegenwartskunst, venue of the *Cyberarts* Exhibition, which features the projects which won awards in the interactive art category. Until then I had had little experience with interactive pieces, so all I saw at the beginning was a machine with a screen on top, maybe the customary touch-screen information kiosk where visitors can make inquiries about rooms and works at the exhibit. What caught my attention, however, was the large sign on the sideboard of that gray box that read "PainStation" with the same typography and color of Sony's popular games console "PlayStation". The recognition of the brand name and the pun were immediate. It was about 10 a.m. and the first attendees were arriving at the exhibition hall, and having a look around. Soon some of them gathered around the machine and, once a few explanations were given by one of its creators, Tilman Reiff, they started playing. As the first 'punishment' took place and the shocked player withdrew his hand with a cry, expectations grew among those around: now everybody wanted to take part in this new sort of game in which losing really hurts. Later on I had the chance to play against Reiff, and it proved an enormously addictive experience. The anguish caused by the expectation of a new electric shock and the satisfaction of watching the opponent suffering physical pain when missing the ball were both sensations that had been so far alien to video games. The simple tennis game was no more than an interface for a competition that took place between two people at a physical level. No wonder that the project's original name was 'Enhanced Dueling Artifact'.

Tilman Reiff (Düsseldorf, 1971) and Volker Morawe (Bremen, 1970) met in a postgraduate course at the Kunsthochschule für Medien Köln (Academy for Media Art of Cologne). They both studied interface design and interactive systems, and together with another classmate are the founders of *//////////fur////*, a group investigating 'artistic game interfaces'. The *PainStation* project came up while they were students at the academy, as part of their research on the possibilities of interactivity in computer games:

*In developing the PainStation, the question arose as to how, first, the sensual contact, which is reduced in common computer games and, second, the principle of sociability, which is still only inherent in haptic games, can be integrated (...) not only should man and machine be linked, not only virtual opponents be fought.*  
(Leopoldseder, 2002. p. 102)

In an interview I held with Reiff, he pointed out that the aim of the project is to go beyond the bland interaction that has been achieved so far in computer games, with devices such as vibrating joysticks. By means of pain, the player is physically involved. Since necessarily competing with another person, a different social relation comes forward, at a level superior to that occurring in computer games where the opponent is a virtual being. In this aspect, choosing the game *Pong* as a 'battlefield' is fundamental, since its simplicity prevents the attention deviating

from the true purpose and significance of the game, that is, the competition against another person causing -and suffering- physical pain.

Thus exposed, the PainStation does not seem to be more than an interaction experiment for video game consoles, a controversial step towards a more intense and addictive game experience, but it is the aim of this paper to prove that in fact it is a work of interactive art.

As a work of art, the PainStation poses several questions: How can a video game be an artwork? Where is the difference between this console and any other that can be found in a bar or a gaming center? Is it a sculpture, an installation? Do its authors consider themselves as artists, and their creation as artwork? Can this be a work of art if it is industrially produced? What is it about? What is its message?

Just as Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*, this video game console is too close to the mere object, to the commonplace, to be considered as art. It does not help that the authors do not consider themselves as artists, and are creating more *prototypes* like this one. Nor does the fact that we are dealing with a video game: despite their increasing popularity, they are still considered as mere entertainment, never a cultural product. For all these reasons the PainStation is located at the opposite end of what has traditionally been considered as art. Nevertheless, this very reason paves new paths for contemporary art criticism, which will be explored here using Arthur C. Danto's hypothesis.

### **PainStation and the transfiguration of the commonplace**

In his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Arthur Danto explains how the commonplace object is transfigured into an artwork while offering a series of concepts with which to confront this transformation of meaning. It is by applying these concepts to the PainStation that this paper intends to justify its definition as a work of art.

First of all, there is context. Danto points out, referring to the institutional theory of art, that a material object (or device) is said to be an artwork when it is considered as such within the institutional frame of the artworld (Danto, 1981). Considering that the *Ars Electronica* festival is an event supported by the Austrian cultural and public institutions, and that the exhibition of works selected for this competition takes place in an art center (the *O.K. Centrum für Gegenwartskunst*), it can therefore be asserted that it belongs to the abovementioned institutional framework. The PainStation, by the simple fact of being part of this exhibition, is therefore a work of art. Of course, this sole fact does not explain the difference between the piece and a common video game, but it reveals the importance of context: it establishes to a great extent our perception of the object, and is therefore one of the factors marking the distinction between the work of art and the mere object. The PainStation could not –apparently– be discerned from any other video game if it were placed in a gaming center. It is its situation within the context of an art exhibit that forces our perception towards considering the object under a different light. The reaction of the attendees, described above, is an indicator of this condition: in the context of a gaming center, upon feeling the first electric shock, the astonished player would immediately complain about the 'malfunctioning' of the machine. In

the context of an interactive art exhibition, pain is part of the interaction with the artwork, and it is –to a certain extent– desired.

However, the context does not seem to be satisfactory enough to justify the perception of an object as an artwork, and the theory of the institutional framework can result in misunderstandings and abuses that may distort the value of the artwork. Any object exhibited in an art gallery or a museum could therefore be taken as artwork, and this leads only to greater confusion. It is possible then to assert that an object is a work of art when it is the result of the expression of an artist. As has been explained above, with this piece the artists intend to provoke a question that goes beyond the mere entertainment purposes of video games. This shows that there is content, that there is a *metaphor*. This will be discussed later in this paper.

The idea of art as mirror of nature, as *mimesis*, loses its sense as nature itself is included in the work of art, first by means of *collage*, later by *assemblage* techniques, and finally by means of a recontextualisation of the commonplace object. But this does not prevent the artwork from still being a *representation* of reality. The object, as artwork, is not the object as such anymore, but a representation of itself. What is valid for the 'real object' is not so for the 'representational-object' that is part of the artwork. In 1965, Joseph Kosuth created *One and three chairs*, an artwork composed of three elements: two panels, one with the photo of a chair, another a dictionary definition of the word 'chair' and finally a real chair. With this work, Kosuth shows the triple nature of the concept 'chair', as image, language and physical object. The real chair in this case is no longer the object that is used to sit, but a representation of the 'chair-object'. It is presented not as a piece of furniture, but as a significant object.

The same goes with the PainStation: it is not a video game console, but the *representation* of a video game console, and parallel to Kosuth's chair, it has the purpose of exposing some content, an idea. As representation, the piece needs to establish its own conventions not to be confused with the object it is representing, since, as Danto puts it, the greater the degree of realism intended, the greater the need for external indicators that it is art and not reality (Danto, 1981). Thus, the work displays a series of particularities that differentiate it from the usual object, such as the absence of a coin slot (unthinkable in a recreational machine, since its function is to collect the players' money), the graphical austerity of the game (an aspect which will be further discussed later) and of course the fact that it inflicts pain in the players, something that –at least until now- has not been considered by the gaming industry.

As Walter Benjamin pointed out, the artwork frees itself from the condition of cult object thanks to its mechanical reproductibility (Benjamin, 1981). It therefore loses its 'aura' (the *hic et nunc*), or as Jose Luis Brea puts it, the aura 'cools down', becoming the aura of a new rite, that of systematic multiplication (Brea, 1991, p.14). In an e-mail interview, I asked Tilman Reiff how many copies of the PainStation had been created, and whether any collectors had been interested in the acquisition of the original model. Reiff told me that they had only made one machine, but no collector had been interested in it. They have been contacted by video game enthusiasts and businesspersons who wished to purchase the machine thinking it was an industrial product, not a one-off piece, let alone an artwork. The work, in this case, has lost its aura to the point that it is only conceived as a multiplicity. In connection with this reproductibility, Danto underscores the metaphysical problem posed in relation to the identity of the artwork (Danto,

1981), since this identity is ultimately independent from the copies made. The creators of the PainStation have unintentionally created a space for this metaphysical problem when creating a new version of their project.

PainStation2 is an improved version of the first machine created with commercial purposes in mind. With a new, more streamlined design, it integrates functions and modifications that move it away from the original idea. Due to legal problems with Sony, the artists have been forced to re-baptize their machine as *The Agonizer*, and finally *The Artwork Formerly Known as PainStation* (an ironic reference to the pop star Prince, who had similar trademark conflicts with the firm). New elements have been added to the original game that break away from the idea of simplicity and, in order to satisfy a wider audience that is looking for entertainment, the pain level has been softened and, furthermore, made adjustable. Finally, a coin slot has been fitted. Whether this new version will be successful in gaming centers is still unknown, but in any case what is significant is to question the extent to which this copy continues to be identified with the original artwork. Is this game just a copy of the original artwork, and therefore also an artwork? I feel inclined to say that it is no longer an artwork, since the aspects that made it a representation of a video game (detailed above) have disappeared. In this particular case, the work's reproductibility has led inescapably to the transformation of its content and to the loss of its condition as artwork.

Throughout this text I have described this work of art time and again as a video game or a video game console. Its formal similarity with a recreational machine has made it necessary to show it as an artwork and to differentiate it from the commonplace object. For this reason, this last paragraph is devoted to the key aspect of the work: its signification. As pointed out previously, it is a video game, but *which* video game exactly? It is not, by any means, the ultimate video game, with impressive graphics and sound effects, that we would expect to find in a gaming center. It is simply one of the oldest games in the history of video games, *Pong*, created in 1972 by Nolan Bushnell. The fact that the creators of this artwork chose this game, with a conceptual and graphical asceticism that nowadays would not attract players in any gaming center, brings forth the metaphor distinguishing this object as a work of art. Both *Pong* and the name of the console, *PainStation*, constitute the two references to the history of video games that denote its meaning. By taking one of the first video games in history, with all its simplicity, together with the ironic pun on today's most popular console, the PainStation intends to criticize the whole video game industry. The combination of a primitive game with controlled physical punishment has resulted in a revolutionary recreational machine which invites a reflection on the gaming culture. Then again, the election of *Pong* shows that the gist of the work is not the game in itself but the interaction created between the players and the machine. The authors chose *Pong* because its operating rules are self-explanatory. This was already certain at the moment of its creation, as Bushnell mentions:

*To be successful, I had to come up with a game people already knew how to play; something so simple that any drunk in any bar could play.*  
(quoted in Winter, 2003)

And this is even more certain nowadays, after a whole generation has grown up absorbing video games into their cultural background. Devoid of unessential elements, the meaning of the work clearly focuses on the idea of painful physical interaction with a purely recreational aim. This brings forward a reflection and an experience that a simple video game would not be able to offer. There is thus a

*metaphor* in this work that sets it apart from the commonplace entertainment object: the idea of a more real, a more physical interaction with a machine, superseding simple auditory and visual stimuli, while at the same time offering the possibility of recovering the social element of the game, with the opponent necessarily being another person and not a virtual being. This electronic *Brillo Box* serves as paradigm for most interactive artworks, in which pieces are confused with commonplace objects, only becoming understandable through the interaction that the viewer (turned into user) creates with them.

**Pau Waelder Laso**

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pau@sicplacitum.com

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