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What are Works of Art?

Elizabeth Spier

Introduction

While aesthetics emerged as a formal branch of philosophy only during the 18th century, thinkers and artists alike have examined art from a philosophical perspective for much longer. The nature of beauty in particular captured the attention of ancient Greek and medieval scholars, while relatively contemporary philosophers have abandoned this problem for one which they deem best approached from an analytic perspective—“What is a work of art?” Though there are a number of ways in which one may interpret the question, a conceptual interpretation examines the identification of an artwork: literally what an artwork is according to definitions of the concept “art”. This inquiry avoids the lofty realm of metaphysics insofar as no “inner reality” of art is being sought; rather, it investigates the conceptual requirements and boundaries demarcated by the term. Our inquiry is restricted to the viewer’s perception of art and how such perception squares with our conceptual understanding of the term. As such, asking how one identifies art remains a legitimate question and, moreover, one which seems understandable.

The more specific question, Is an artwork a physical object?, requires dual analysis of the physicality (or non-physicality) of the artwork and its status (or non-status) as an object, and therefore provides a good starting point for this investigation due to its specificity. Richard Wollheim makes this point clear in distinguishing the ways in which the question can be asked: Is an artwork a physical *object*? versus, Is an artwork a *physical* object? (Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 34). Hence, formulating a theory of the status of a work of art will address issues of physicality and categorization.

As will be shown, traditional views which classify artworks as either mental events or strictly physical objects do not account for a broad range of art and both appear too extreme. Understanding the reasons why these theses fail, however, demonstrates what a better description of artworks must consider. A mediating position based on structures *instantiated in* physical objects offers a better alternative for the identification of art, and also encompasses the constructive qualities of the two traditional theses. Moreover, I will show that a trace of the creative act must mark the object in question, constituted by the recognizable art historical context within which an artist must necessarily be working.

Against Purely Mental or Purely Physical Classifications of Artworks

Some philosophers of art such as R.G. Collingwood have proposed that art exists in the minds of artists, suggesting that artworks possess no concrete reality outside the creator's imagination. Collingwood's argument rests not upon logical justification but upon what he calls empirical facts about art (Collingwood, 105). He asserts that artists create art so as to express, and therefore understand, their emotions which, prior to the expression, are un-analyzable. As such, art's existence is rooted solely in the mind of the artist and, as he makes explicit, "The work of art proper is something not seen or heard, but something imagined" (Collingwood, 142). That is, his conception of artworks centers solely on the artist and does not take into account art's existence as an experiential venue for others, its viewers. As art is created *by* an artist, Collingwood argues that art is also created solely *for* the artist.

However, such a claim is untenable for without existence independent of the artist's imagination, the notion of an artwork loses all objectivity. If only an idea, or of the artist's imagination, art loses its status as a possible object of experience for anyone other than the artist. The public accessibility of art vanishes for, if art is as personal to the artist as Collingwood claims, then viewers are unable to access it. That is, the essential subjective and phenomenological aspects he advocates render art "untouchable." Admittedly, these objections rest upon a metaphysical presupposition about the art object, specifically that it must somehow allow for interaction with the viewer. This assumption, however, is generally accepted¹⁴⁶ for art *does* seem essentially experiential—people speak intelligently about experiences of objects they call art everyday. Thus if Collingwood's thesis is to provide descriptive value, it must explain how statements about such aesthetic experience are possible. Since it restricts all consideration to the artist's experience only, this thesis fails to answer adequately our question. Yet Collingwood's proposal illustrates the necessary connection between the artist and his/her work. This, therefore, suggests that our alternative thesis should maintain some version of this close link.

In contrast, if works of art are not purely mental, should we understand them as physical objects? When considering Picasso's *Desmoiselles d'Avignon*, it seems quite obvious that one can identify it as a painting, that is, an object characterized as specific marks of paint in specific color combinations on a canvas of a certain size. This, in fact, is a traditionally held view which posits a one-to-one relation between art and object. However, the physical-object hypothesis cannot account for the identification of works such as Joyce's *Ulysses* or Dylan's song "Love Sick" which, though certainly works of art, are not identical with a particular physical object or instantiation.

If asked to point to Picasso's painting, one can do so easily since there exists only one object constituting that painting. Yet if also asked to point to "Love Sick", to what should we refer? The musical score? A recording of the piece? Which score? Which recording? While all are physical, no particular score or recording can be definitively labeled *the* song "Love Sick". In contrast, it seems practically impossible to point to *all* the objects which might count as "Love Sick". Hence, at first glance it appears that the physical object hypothesis cannot account for the status of all types of artworks.

Objections break down into two sorts which focus upon a very informative distinction found within the arts themselves, that between painting/sculpture and

¹⁴⁶ As discussed with Katerina Reed-Tsocha. See her comments in, for example, *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, ed. D. Costello & J. Vickery. Oxford: Berg Publishers 2007.

literature/music. One might argue that artworks cannot be purely physical objects because artworks possess properties which are not held by physical objects. This objection thus relies on the assumption that only physical objects can possess physical properties (Currie, 481). For example, in claiming that *Desmoiselles D'Avignon* is an intense image, one attributes an emotional characteristic to a physical thing. This first objection asserts that such a claim is unfounded for physical objects cannot (in themselves) possess such emotional content; rather, some other feature of the object (which is non-physical) must be present to accommodate this quality. Additionally, the theory also fails to account for the physical changes a work of art may undergo over time. That is, one might identify statue A with a certain block of marble B at time T1. Yet at T2, after for example, the block of marble has crumbled, the identity relation between A and B would disintegrate. B's existence persists past T2 while A's does not. This objection emphasizes two specific issues—the variable roles of time and of form—and in doing so suggests that an alternative solution must take into account these two features of art. They highlight the problem of identifying an artwork with a specific object even though, as in the case of painting or sculpture, such an association may initially seem intuitive. This situation suggests that physicality, while not a sufficient condition for art, may be a necessary one. In other words, though it seems that the cases which we have examined thus far suggest the required presence of some physical object, this physical object alone cannot accommodate all of the conceptual features of art. Thus, the physical object hypothesis may provide one necessary condition for our theory though this condition alone is not sufficient for a solution to the question. Our investigation should keep in sight the media comprising artworks under consideration however, if physicality is a requirement of the theory.

Categorical Distinctions—Singular/Multiple

More serious objections arise when one attempts to apply the physical-object theory to literature and music. As noted above, one can correctly claim *Ulysses* to be a work of art, yet if one burns his/her copy of the novel, *Ulysses* itself is not destroyed, its existence persists. That is, an individual copy of the book may be lost but the work is not. However, to return to the example of painting and sculpture, if one burns *Desmoiselles d'Avignon* it is irretrievable. This discrepancy in outcomes is explained by the distinction between singular and multiple arts. Painting and sculpture belong to the former category, and literature and music to the latter. Singular arts comprise works which are identified by a single object and whose perfect reproducibility is impossible. In contrast, multiple arts cannot be identified with such a single object but instead, at least in a physical sense, are identified by their copies. Take again the example of *Ulysses*: the work seems to exist apart from its physical instantiations, (copies of the novel) but when identifying the work in terms of physicality, these copies are our only points of reference. Hence, the possibility of reproducibility lies at the heart of the distinction. Also necessarily connected to this distinction is the medium of the artwork in question. *All* painting and sculpture¹⁴⁷ is singular due to the nature of the media. Similarly, *all* literature and music

¹⁴⁷ This point refers to sculpture created through subtractive methods only, and excludes cast works, those done through the lost-wax method, etc. These latter types of sculpture fall in between the categories of singular and multiple works, though they are more closely aligned with the singular category, despite being capable of reproduction. This feature, however, does not contribute to our overall analysis because the

is multiple. This distinction, moreover, accounts for the discrepancy in application of the physical-object theory: though it fails for both sorts of arts, its reasons for failure vary according to the type of art. Consider, for instance, the situation in which all copies of *Ulysses* were burned and destroyed. Only then could one assert that *Ulysses* was lost. Hence like singular art forms, multiple arts connect *in some way* to physical objects. The connection, however, varies along the line of the distinction.

Attention to the media of an art object also brings to the forefront of discussion the role of the history of production. Specifically, arts which employ standard notation (such as letters for novels or notes for music) do not require that a certain context of production mark their creation; arts which lack standard notation, however, treat such specific situational requirements as not only relevant, but necessary (Goodman, 121). Thus, the requirement for a particular context of production aligns with the medium in question. Goodman's distinctions show why the strict physical-object theory fails to account for an ontological understanding of art, and they also act constructively in drawing attention to a number of significant features of artworks which should be considered by alternative theses.

The Type-Token Relationship

We have discounted artworks as either purely physical or mental, and thus must postulate some mediating position. Moreover, we must address what *sort* of object constitutes an artwork if they are at all traceable to physical things. That is, how are we to categorize works of art especially considering the relationship between works like *Ulysses* and instantiations of that work (copies of the novel)? It appears that there exist three possibilities: first, one may classify a literary text or musical composition as a universal and, thus, various copies of the work are instances of it; second, such a work could be a class and its copies are members; or third, works could be thought of as types while the individual copies are tokens. Richard Wollheim treats this question as a logical one and concludes that multiple arts consist of a type-token relationship (Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, 74-9). His aim is to posit what a type is, if not a physical thing. He explains that types are the most intimately connected to tokens, in comparison with a universal to its instances and a class to its members, because types are thought to be present *in* tokens and, indeed, types can also be thought of as preeminent tokens. Moreover, necessary properties of tokens are always transmittable to types, a feature which does not apply to either of the other alternatives. These qualities determine that a type-token relationship best applies to multiple arts for their close connection aligns well with the fact that, for example, various instances of the same novel are thought of as *copies*. In other words, Wollheim's work is useful for our own insofar as his categorical analysis proves that a type-token relationship models the strongest sort of identity relation.¹⁴⁸ Given that the physical-object hypothesis, while insufficient itself, demonstrates the *necessity* of a connection to a physical object, this close identity relation

singular/multiple distinction is made merely to explain for what reasons the physical object hypothesis fails. This we can demonstrate this point without taking into account sculpture produced through casts, lost-wax method, etc.

¹⁴⁸ Implicitly then, the other two possible explanations for this relationship (universal/instances and class/members) do not connect so strongly the two elements of the relation. Art requires this close connection as explained above, thus ruling out any alternatives. For further explication of this point, see Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*.

best models the situation within multiple arts. Wollheim does not commit himself to a very direct answer as to the nature of types, yet he explains how types are postulated. He writes, "A very important set of circumstances in which we postulate types... is where we can correlate a class of particulars with a piece of human invention: these particulars may then be regarded as tokens of a certain type" (Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, 78). Now, then, we can offer a positive thesis to help explain the categorization of artworks by combining aspects of our findings thus far: artworks are distinguished as either singular or multiple and, where multiple, these works are characterized by a type-token relationship in which the structure of the art (the type) must be represented in some token which is physical: thus creating a datable connection between art and object.

Art Historical Considerations

Wollheim's classification of tokens as "pieces of human invention" alludes to another of his claims that the production of art necessarily involves human intention (Wollheim, "The Work of Art as an Object", 112-29). That is, he argues that artworks are made under a certain description, or intention, which the artist formulates by working from specific concepts. These concepts, taken as a whole, constitute a conceptual hierarchy or, alternatively, a theory. Hence, Wollheim argues that artists always work from a theoretical background. I see his assertion as quite significant for it rests on the idea that there is a *deliberate quality* to works of art, best identified by the specific theory from which one produces art. The claim preserves a notion of creativity (it maintains a close connection between the artist and artwork) and keeps in tact the structural requirements of the type-token relationship. Jerrold Levinson more explicitly connects Wollheim's idea to that of the type-token relationship, explaining that, "The crucial point is that such works, [that is, works of the multiple arts] though not themselves physical objects, are ontologically rooted in datable physical objects resulting from concrete acts of human invention or design" (Levinson, "The Work of Visual Art", 133). Hence, musical or literary works are not themselves physical, but they may be *traced to* physical objects through the type-token relationship. These works might be books or scores, as mentioned previously, or even recordings of performances of a symphony, for example. In such a case, the symphony itself would act as the type, and the recording of a performance of that symphony, the token. Generally then, the connection between types and tokens corresponds to the non-physical artwork (some structure) and some other physical object in which the structure is instantiated. Additionally, these works are not traceable to just any object, but an *art* object, determined as such by Wollheim's creative requirement.

This necessary conceptual framework which informs the creation of the piece must be art historical in nature. Art is identified as such only if some viewer/listener/reader understands it *as art*. This understanding comes about through the recognition that the artist produced the piece in question within the greater art context at large. That is, when some object is experienced by a viewer, say, (the possibility of which we have already established) that object is experienced as art and not some other sort of thing due to the viewer's recognition that it was produced with reference to the rest of art history. A certain conceptual understanding of art history thus informs the creative process and reception, and this aspect of the artist's creation *must* be identified by at least one viewer if an object is to be called art.

That said, knowledge of art history is not required for the artist; it must only be recognized by some viewer as the context of an artwork. In other words, an artist *must* intend that his/her piece is art (and not craft, for example) but this intention does not require an art historical background. Intent as art is required for the artist while an art historical framework or context is necessary for the viewer. This distinction is significant for the strength of requirements varies according to person—much more is required of the viewer than the artist by way of conceptual understanding.¹⁴⁹ However, much of what we call art today is produced by people such as children, the mentally ill, ancient “tribal” civilizations, etc. who do not have such a conceptual background. For example, ritual objects found in museums and called art were not produced with such an intent. While these pieces may have been made with aesthetic considerations in mind, no art historical concerns marked their creation and hence they were not viewed as art at the time of their creation. Yet today, they are placed within an art historical context and called art by the museums which house these objects. The distinction, then, accounts for this feature of art, and avoids excluding art of children and others which would otherwise fail to meet the requirements for artworks.

The implications of this claim are not tangential—it requires that both the artist and viewer possess some knowledge of art history. Consequently, it may appear similar to the Institutional theory which posits the existence of an Art World, members of which define and identify what is included as art.¹⁵⁰ I do not suggest, however, such a rigid thesis as this one.¹⁵¹ Rather than speculate on the possibility and constitution of such a seemingly exclusive and esoteric group as the Art World, I wish only to claim that *some* art historical background is required for the identification of art. The level of this knowledge will surely vary according to the situation under consideration. Such flexibility is not a problem, moreover, but a necessary result of this investigation—art itself is a constantly evolving, mutating field and therefore it should not be surprising that a theory of art reflects this malleability. Art is a human construct, both physically and theoretically, and thus its meaning is not fixed or rigid; it evolves and shifts as our own conceptual considerations do. However, the structural requirements for artworks, the framework of a definition, are possible to pin down. Within this structure flexibility is allowed so as to capture the malleability of our conceptual understanding of the term.

This formulation addresses two of the three concerns raised by the main objections noted previously. However a third worry, that of historicity or context, has yet to be met. If we apply Wollheim’s requirement that a specific theoretical framework inform artistic production, we can solve the issue of identifying artworks from other non-art objects. Yet it seems that ontological considerations of artworks must also take into account the process of production so as to avoid including forged pieces under one’s theory. That is, while an art historical conceptual framework provides for one sort of distinction, the history, or context of production, of an artwork is needed to discern between “legitimate” artworks and problematic pieces such as forgeries. Levinson

¹⁴⁹ This distinction was brought to my attention by Janet Folina and the members of the Philosophy Senior Seminar at Macalester College (2006).

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, Danto, Arthur. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Cambridge University Press, 1981.

¹⁵¹ For a more appropriate comparison, see Noël Carroll. *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

attempts to accommodate this requirement by stipulating that works must be “individuated by context of composition, [or, more generally, production]” (Levinson, “What a Musical Work Is”, 19). By this he means that the historical context in which an artwork is produced marks the identification of a piece as such. Now the distinction of media proves itself especially relevant for it specifically treats the circumstances of an object’s production. This assertion follows from that of Wollheim’s theoretical point in that the concepts one employs when creating art are necessarily informed by the situation in which one is working. The implications of this claim are profound, for Wollheim’s conceptual concerns point towards the larger issue of historicity and the history of production of a specific object one has identified as art. That is, his emphasis on conceptual frameworks suggests their importance and, indeed, ultimately their necessity as an ontological understanding of art is produced.

In order to distinguish between, say, an ordinary urinal and Duchamp’s *Fountain* one cannot point to only physical attributes or that which is immediately perceived. Instead, something must be known of the production of each object, a process which includes the artistic intentions of the creator. In the case of the ordinary urinal, functionality motivates the design of the object whereas art historical concerns certainly do not. However, Duchamp’s piece specifically negates function, and, indeed, goes so far as to attack institutional opinions towards and attitudes of artworks. That is, Duchamp was working from a very specific art historical understanding and reacting accordingly. Such a theoretical background (or conceptual hierarchy, as Wollheim would call it) rooted in a knowledge of art history did not influence the creation of the ordinary urinal, and this lack of historical consideration ultimately marks the ontological distinction between the objects. Thus a certain conceptual background *must* inform the creation of an object if it is to be called an artwork, and this background is necessarily art historical in nature as perceived by others.

While this qualification appears necessary for an ontological theory, a significant objection threatens to undermine it, for it remains unclear how one is to define this notion of an art historical conceptual framework. That is, suppose a work of art is created at time T. Could one still claim that that work is the same as another, identical in all respects except that the second piece was created at T+5 minutes? How is one to meaningfully discriminate between the circumstances surrounding the production of each object if even a difference of five minutes technically distinguishes the two objects ontologically? This question seeks to point out the absurd implications which can follow from Levinson’s contextual claim. Though his point is entirely plausible when one considers creating a work in the 20th century versus attempting to create the same piece in the 18th century, (such a discrepancy in context *would* seem to affect production) the argument can be easily rendered absurd as well. Thus, one must consider not only the basic circumstances of production (where and when a piece is created) but under what theoretical framework the artist was operating. Such consideration, moreover, excludes forgeries from our definition of artworks since a forger has no creative concerns in mind, only an aim to copy. Specific intentions of the artist, then, inform this context of production so as to distinguish it from other motivations which produce objects worryingly similar to art. Our problem becomes, then, understanding the mutually dependent relationship between this conceptual framework and the context of production of an artwork.

Conclusion

In examining the ontological status of artworks it is obvious that they are not simply physical objects, nor purely mental entities. Clearly some link to physical artifacts must exist, however, to preserve their status as possible objects of experience. Multiple arts point out an important connection between the work of art and its instantiation, classified by a type-token relationship. Specifically, a work of art is a structure which is somehow instantiated in a physical body, though the level of connection to that body varies. Singular arts such as painting and sculpture maintain a direct connection to one specific object while multiple arts can find their instantiation in a number of objects. Regardless, this bond to physicality must hold. Moreover, these token examples posit a type when they demonstrate some specific evidence of human intention. This requirement maintains the creative aspect of art and also the bond between artist and artwork, the mark of the artist. Generally, one can succinctly classify the ontological status of artworks as structures instantiated in physical objects which bear a mark of human intention and which are created in a specific historical and cultural context identified as such by some person other than the artist—either a viewer, listener, or reader.

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