

5. I owe this example to Richard Keshen. I would also like to thank the anonymous referees of the *JAAC* for useful comments.

Surface Interpretation: Reply to Leddy

In our paper “Surface and Deep Interpretation,” we sought to provide detail and texture to Arthur Danto’s views on interpretation, thereby explicating and defending them.¹ In his response to our paper, Tom Leddy criticizes several key aspects of this approach to interpretation, as well as offering a (negative) thesis about the relationship between interpretation and the artist’s intentions. Leddy’s observations about our views can be summarized in three main points, all of which critique our views and ultimately Danto’s: (1) Leddy rejects the notion of a *correct* artist’s (surface) interpretation for any work of art; (2) he rejects any distinction between surface and deep interpretations; and (3) he rejects the view that artists’ intentions, although necessary, can be sufficient for constituting a work of art. However, Leddy’s response contains both mistakes and misunderstandings. While we will not try to unravel all that he says, a few points are worthy of mention. In the end, Danto’s view, given our explanation of it, remains tenable.

Danto distinguishes between a surface interpretation of a work of art, which is the artist’s intended interpretation, and a deep interpretation, which is an interpretation other than the artist’s intended interpretation, that is grounded in some theoretical or conceptual framework. The surface interpretation captures the artist’s intention in creating the work and is *constitutive* of a work of art in that an object or an event *is* a work of art in virtue of the existence of a surface interpretation: “My theory of interpretation is ... constitutive, for an object is an artwork *at all* only in relation to a [surface] interpretation.”² Using Danto’s mode of expression, interpretations are *transfigurative*, in that they are “functions which transform material objects into works of art.”³ In a later essay, written in response to our comments and other critiques, he adds:

Constitutive interpretations just are what I had in mind by surface interpretations: it is what the audience grasps when it understands the work, and, so far as this interpretation answers to the artist’s intention, to understand the work is to know what the intention was.⁴

Deep interpretations, by contrast, “generally relate works to ulterior causes rather than physical objects to works” and are the more common, ordinary interpretations made by critics and others in which the work of art—previously considered a mere physical

object or event—is understood in terms of some background theory or conceptual framework, for instance, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, or even textbook art history. Also, as distinguished from surface interpretations, deep interpretations are “*not* in any way constitutive of the work.”⁵

In our paper, we specifically discuss Danto’s claims about the relationship between surface and deep interpretations. One relationship, noted above, we called the “Constitutive Dependency Thesis.” The second, which we called the “Content Dependency Thesis,” captured Danto’s argument that a deep interpretation must be *consistent with* the surface interpretation; that is, for instance, a critic’s interpretation must respect the artist’s intention. We pointed out that in his art criticism, Danto does not follow this stricture and offers convincing critical (deep) interpretations that are inconsistent with the artist’s intention. Our perspective is that Danto’s practice as an art critic is fundamentally correct, and he should give up the thesis that a deep interpretation must be consistent with a surface interpretation. In his reply to our criticisms, he absorbed the apparent inconsistencies into a broader notion of “surface interpretation,” claiming that what we perceived as deep interpretations were really part of surface interpretations, and thereby retained his content dependency thesis. This broader notion of surface interpretation seems to permit inclusion of background and commonsense beliefs held in common between the artist and the critic (or viewer). If so, then Danto’s broader notion—though not the one articulated in his earlier book, which was the target of our critique—is consistent with Leddy’s claim (3) that the artist’s intentions are not sufficient for constituting a work of art. Nonetheless, as the above quotation makes clear, Danto continues to maintain that the artist’s intentions are necessary for something being a work of art, in that they are constitutive of artworks.

Let us proceed now to consider Leddy’s criticisms. Note the intimate connections between them. Leddy’s claim that there can be no correct surface interpretation (1) is tied to (2): his claim that there is no such thing as a surface interpretation. Also, since (1) no such (correct) surface interpretation exists, then (3) it cannot be sufficient for turning a physical object or event into a work of art.

Leddy rejects the notion of a *correct* artist’s (surface) interpretation for any work of art based on a rejection of *any* distinction between surface and deep interpretations. In citing a litany of problems in knowing an artist’s intention, he claims that in our essay we are less than helpful by providing “a bewildering variety of subtly conflicting descriptions of surface interpretation.” He expands our characterizations of surface interpretations—taken directly from Danto’s writing—into unrecognizable assertions we never proposed. For instance, we did not suggest that a sur-

face interpretation consists of “a complete set of statements describing the author’s intentions ... ordered in some sequence, for example in a narrative,” nor that the surface interpretation consists in the artist’s intentions at some specific point in the creative process, at the beginning of the project, during the creative process, at its conclusion, or later during reflection. We understand that someone may not be consciously aware of the precise nature of her intentions when creating a work; indeed, the artist herself may only come to articulate them when prompted by someone else long after the work is completed. Also, she might give different descriptions of her intentions over time. Further, sometimes intentions persist over time and guide an action to completion. For example, if Jake intends to thread a needle, his intention to do so initiates his activity and persists over the entire time he adjusts the needle and thread. Similarly, artists can have guiding intentions that initiate their creative work and change their physical activity as the work progresses.

We did, however, state that “a description of an art object is like an observer’s—a spectator’s—understanding of the mere behavior associated with an action” and that “the surface interpretation of a work of art is like an agent’s understanding of his own action.”⁶ This was based on our elaboration of Danto’s analogy between understanding human actions and interpreting works of art to explain his views on constitutive dependency. According to the most plausible version of the causal theory of action, bodily behavior, such as Stravinsky’s arm moving, *is* an action—Stravinsky’s moving his arm—in virtue of its having the right causal antecedent, namely, Stravinsky’s intention to move his arm.⁷ In moving his arm, suppose that Stravinsky signals to others in the orchestra. His action is social, in that others are affected. But Stravinsky’s intentions are personal, in that they occur in his head, as it were. (Indeed, it is difficult to attribute any nonreductive sense to social intentions, for intentions, like beliefs and desires, are mental occurrences of an individual.) By analogy, then, a physical object is a work of art in virtue of its causal etiology, namely its being brought into existence or altered by the artist’s intentional actions. A person’s action can have intended or unintended and unknown consequences; for example, Stravinsky’s moving his arm could cause the cellos to be signaled or it could cause someone else to do something, say, start a revolution, even though Stravinsky himself has no knowledge of this person and no intention whatsoever to start the revolution. By analogy, the work can be interpreted in accordance with the artist’s intention (surface interpretation) or it can be interpreted by a critic in a way wholly unknown and unintended by the artist (deep interpretation).

Thus Leddy misunderstands Danto’s constitutive dependency thesis here. The point is not whether, and

to what degree of accuracy, someone other than the artist can *know* the artist’s intention. Rather, the point is that in creating the work, the artist *has* intentions. The constitutive dependency thesis is an ontological claim, *not* an epistemological one. It does not matter whether anyone other than the artist has any knowledge whatsoever about his intentions. Indeed, it does not even matter whether the artist can articulate these intentions to others, either during or after the creative process. All that matters for an object *to be* a work of art is that the artist have such intentions.

Leddy’s epistemological worries are, in short, otiose. How one comes to know someone else’s intentions, whether or not that person is an artist, is an interesting issue in its own right, but it has nothing to do with Danto’s claim that something *is* a work of art in virtue of the intentions with which it was created. Although a cognitive scientist can tell this story about intention in much greater detail, that detail is not needed to make Danto’s point that something is a work of art only if it is brought about through the intentions of the artist. Leddy’s questions are misplaced, if they are a criticism of Danto’s constitutive dependency thesis. All that thesis requires is that there is *some* intention of the artist relevant to her creating the artwork.

Again, Leddy argues that a surface interpretation, now understood in Danto’s terms, may not be exhaustive of all aspects of the artist’s activity. For example, in some creations, much is left to chance, and the artist’s intention is not complete. In fact, we recognized this fact and even pointed out that an artist’s intention can be irreducibly ambiguous. But once again, this leaves Danto’s thesis intact. A surface interpretation can be partial and ambiguous (though not self-contradictory). That there exists a surface interpretation—not that it is complete or elaborate—is necessary for an object or event to be a work of art.

Observe, too, that creating a work of art is an action. It is something that is done, not something that happens to a person. In acting, the agent always has intentions. Indeed, the defining characteristic of an action is that it is behavior caused by intentions. Thus, all artistic action necessarily involves intention; and thus, in all cases, there are artistic intentions in creating works of art. There is, then, a surface interpretation of every work of art.

Leddy’s claim that actions cannot arise without an historical context to explain them places surface interpretations—those without contextual explanations—on a slippery slope toward deep interpretations. As Danto makes clear in his response (which goes unnoticed by Leddy),

deep interpretations refer us to causes of a kind one would not know about save by virtue of a theory, and in general this can have nothing to do with intentions, since we don’t require theories to know what our intentions are.⁸

Leddy rejects the distinction between surface interpretations and deep interpretations. In choosing between two senses of the constitutive dependency thesis, we accepted the one closer to Danto's explication of it and rejected the sense in which the surface interpretation is a minimal disambiguation of the work. We argued that the latter version "leads down a slippery slope toward collapsing surface interpretation into deep interpretation."⁹ This worry is important to Danto as well. In analyzing our examples of his art criticism of Anselm Kiefer and Julian Schnabel—in which we claim his deep interpretations are *inconsistent* with the artists' surface interpretations—he writes in response:

The Brands sense a danger that one may—that I on occasion have—slipped from surface to deep interpretation unawares, and I suppose there may be a sense in which this is true, namely that in which the theories of a given deep interpretation get taken up into folk psychology as the common-sense explanation of why people do things.¹⁰

An example is Freudian analysis, which can often inform interpretations without our acknowledging it as theoretical. But, according to Danto, the distinction remains:

But just because deep interpretations may seep into folk psychology does not mean that deep interpretations seep into surface interpretations. That distinction remains as before.¹¹

Conjoining (1) and (2), Leddy argues that there is no one unique surface interpretation of a work of art, since "there are no surface interpretations at all, unless by that is simply meant the artist's stated interpretation." Here Leddy begs the question against Danto, since, for Danto, a surface interpretation *is* the artist's intended interpretation. That is what Danto means by "surface interpretation"; there is no independently correct concept of surface interpretation at issue. Leddy sometimes gives his own reading (which he calls "the more traditional distinction") of "surface interpretation" that appears to equate it with "superficial interpretation." But this criticism leaves Danto's view untouched, since he means to identify a surface interpretation with the artist's intended interpretation.

Lastly, Leddy has glossed over the crucial difference between what interpretations stand in relation to and how they are hierarchically, although not temporally, organized. As Danto reminds us,

What I call "surface" interpretation must be in place before deep interpretation can execute its deep readings. For it is

deep interpretation of *that* work—and *that* work is constituted by the interpretation I call "surface." Something has to be a picture of *x* before one can go on to say, being a picture of *x* it is subversive.¹²

Recall that surface interpretations stand in a relationship between physical objects and intentions about those objects, whereas deep interpretations stand between works of art and theoretical explanations. To collapse one into another is to ignore the crucial distinction between the differing objects of interpretation: mere physical object versus work of art.

Involving artists' intentions almost always brings out a cadre of objections. So we are not surprised that Leddy raised these standard objections to us and Danto. However, it is essential that we understand the context and theses in question before jumping hastily to conclusions. Danto's important constitutive dependency thesis does not depend on having solved the traditional epistemological problems about others' intentions. His are theses about the nature of artworks and their conceptual connections to artists' intended interpretations.

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1. Peg Brand and Myles Brand, "Surface and Deep Interpretation," in *Danto and His Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 55–69.

2. Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 44.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

4. Arthur C. Danto, "Responses and Replies," in *Danto and His Critics*, p. 201.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Brand and Brand, pp. 56–57.

7. Cf. Myles Brand, *Intending and Acting* (MIT Press, 1984).

8. Danto, "Responses and Replies," p. 202.

9. Brand and Brand, p. 61.

10. Danto, "Responses and Replies," p. 202.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 202–203.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 202.