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CONTEMPORARY ART: ONTOLOGY

The ontology of visual artworks might be thought comparable to the ontology of other sorts of artifacts: a work of painting seems to be materially constituted by a particular canvas with paint on it, just as a spoon is constituted by a particular piece of metal (Baker, 2000; Thomson, 1998). But recent developments have complicated the situation, requiring a new account of the ontology of contemporary art. These developments also shed light on the ontology of works from earlier historical eras.

New Developments

On a common-sense conception of the nature of visual artworks such as paintings, the following are true:

1. The artwork is a particular material object.
2. The appearance of the painted surface is central to the work's identity.
3. Extensive, irreversible change to the painted surface is sufficient for destruction of the work.

Can analogous claims be made of modern and contemporary artworks? Consider some examples.

Saburo Murakami stipulated that flaking paint is integral to his *Peeling Off Paintings* (1957), not damage to be avoided or repaired.

Gerald Ferguson's *Maintenance Paintings* (c. 1979-1982) were accompanied by instructions permitting owners to repaint them at will.

Liz Magor's *Production* (1980) involves thousands of bricks made from newspaper that can be configured in various ways for display.

From 1986 to 1990, Adrian Piper distributed cards with a text announcing her black racial identity in everyday performances when people made racist statements in her presence.

Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987) involves the display of a dress sewn from flank steak. The dress desiccates over time and is discarded. A new dress of different design is constructed for each exhibition.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "*Untitled*": (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) (1991) involves a pile of wrapped hard candies that viewers are permitted to eat. The pile is periodically replenished.

Each of these examples involves a shift away from one or more elements of the common-sense conception. Specifically,

1. The works by Sterbak and Gonzalez-Torres do not involve an essential physical object. Piper's performance work is not plausibly identified with an object.
2. All of the works tolerate significant variability in appearance.
3. The works by Ferguson, Sterbak and Murakami can survive vast changes in appearance. The identity and persistence of Piper's performance work do not seem tied to appearance.

Such works do not seem amenable to the common-sense ontological analysis of visual artworks as physical objects: this is one way of capturing the observation that a significant strand of contemporary art is dematerialized (Buskirk, 2005; Lippard, 1973). They seem, intuitively, to be ontologically diverse (Irvin, 2008): Piper's work consists of actions or events; Murakami's and Ferguson's works are particular objects susceptible to change over time; Magor's is a collection of objects subject to reconfiguration; and Gonzalez-Torres's and Sterbak's works seem to be types or universals that can be tokened or instantiated by different objects on different occasions. Is there a way to bring these works together under a common ontological analysis?

Artworks as Events

Currie (1989) and Davies (2004) have proposed that artworks, including works of painting, are not objects at all, but actions taken by the artist. Davies suggests that an artwork is an artist's extended action of producing a "focus of appreciation" such as a painted canvas. This view provides a uniform ontology for all artworks, including the contemporary works listed above as well as works outside the visual arts. It also incorporates into the work the aspects of the artist's process that seem relevant to understanding it. It secures these advantages by reallocating the term 'artwork' from the focus of appreciation to the artist's process of making, a move some may find counterintuitive. It also leaves unexamined the ontology of the focus of appreciation itself, which will be our concern here.

One might, nonetheless, propose that the focus of appreciation itself is an extended event (though typically not an action by the artist, except in works of performance like Piper's). Each of the examples above involves change over time. Perhaps the work is a long event that begins at the moment of creation, ends at the moment of destruction, and includes all the occasions of display (as well as periods of storage or dormancy). This maneuver offers prospects for a unified account of the ontology of all artworks: one might say that even a work of painting is, in fact, an extended event involving displays of a painted canvas. One reservation we might have about this account is a semantic one: if the work is an event, we would need to adjust our standard ways of speaking, since it isn't technically *the work* that is on display in the gallery, or that is created, destroyed or stored. In addition, this account minimizes the difference between paintings that happen to flake and Murakami's: it treats the flaking of paint as an aspect of the work (because it belongs to the extended event that constitutes the work) regardless of whether the artist has endorsed the flaking or not. Similarly, if a museum patron damages the painted canvas with a wayward elbow, this becomes part of the work. One might wish to suggest that such incidental occurrences don't belong to the work in the same way that the flaking of paint belongs to the *Peeling Off Paintings*, but the view of artworks as extended events gives us no obvious basis for making this distinction.

Artworks as Abstract Entities

Several of the examples above are susceptible of having multiple occurrences. Sterbak's work must be reconstituted for each exhibition, Gonzalez-Torres's work may be constituted of a different pile of candy for each exhibition, and Piper's work can be performed on different occasions. One might think, then, that the underlying work in such cases is, like a musical work, an abstract entity. (Dodd, 2007) As a musical work admits of

multiple performances, a contemporary artwork admits of multiple displays whose features may vary. Thus, we have a two-stage ontology, with the artwork as an abstract entity and the displays as its concrete occurrences. (Irvin, 2013)

A problem is that abstract entities are typically conceived as eternal existents, which rules out the possibility that the artist has brought them into existence. Rohrbaugh (2003), however, proposes that works susceptible of multiple occurrences should be assimilated, along with singular material works like paintings, into a category he calls the *historical individual*: works in this category can be created and destroyed, can change over time, and are modally flexible (they could have had different features than they actually have, if the artist had made slightly different decisions). A historical individual can have a variety of embodiments, only some of which are its occurrences: just as a work of photography is embodied in its negatives and its prints, a contemporary artwork like Sterbak's might be embodied in the documents that record how the dress is to be constructed, as well as in the particular dresses that are displayed.

The category of the historical individual seems to be an umbrella category: singular works of painting do not seem to be the same sort of thing, ontologically, as works of photography susceptible of multiple prints or contemporary artworks susceptible of variable displays. The latter seem to fit into Smith's (2008) category of *quasi-abstract entities*, which can have occurrences but are created at particular moments and shaped by historical forces. Smith argues that the category of quasi-abstract entity is necessary to account for a wide variety of socially constructed phenomena, including debts, laws and games; if this is correct, it makes sense to use the same category to accommodate contemporary artworks that are susceptible of multiple occurrences.

On Smith's model, musical works are quasi-abstract entities: they are created by composers, may be changed over time by the composer under some circumstances, and are susceptible of performances that differ in a variety of ways. But contemporary artworks nonetheless seem ontologically distinct from musical works, since most contemporary artworks have material components that are essential to them. In addition, several of the works described above are not obviously abstract: Ferguson's and Murakami's works change over time, but they seem nonetheless to be linked to particular material entities, not susceptible of multiple instantiations.

Artworks and Norms

What is it, then, that links the examples described above? In every instance, there are *normative* elements that govern how the works are to be displayed and treated. (Irvin, 2013; Thomasson, 2010) Ferguson makes repainting normative for his works, while Murakami makes flaking paint normative for his: contrary, in both instances, to the norms typical of works of painting. Magor, Sterbak and Gonzalez-Torres express norms for the construction of displays of their works. Piper does not express norms for performances of her work: since she is directly involved in every performance, she does not need to articulate instructions for someone else to follow. But norms can be extracted from the elements her performances have in common: performances satisfying the norms involve Piper herself presenting a card printed with the relevant text to an interlocutor who has made a racist remark.

Wolterstorff (1980) has offered an account of works for performance, such as musical compositions and plays, as norm-kinds that have performances – specifically,

performances satisfying the norms – as their occurrences. Wolterstorff denies that artworks such as paintings are norm-kinds, on the grounds that a work of painting has only one occurrence, and there are no norms such that, by satisfying them, other painted canvases can count as occurrences of the same work.

Even if we agree with Wolterstorff that conventional paintings cannot have multiple occurrences, we can acknowledge that they, too, are governed by norms, including these:

1. The painted surface should be protected from physical changes.
2. The work has a single appropriate configuration for display (right-side-up).
3. Standard experiences of the work involve vision rather than touch or physical interaction.

What is distinctive about much contemporary art is that it gives up these conventional norms in favor of idiosyncratic norms that are directly shaped by the artist. In Walton's (1970) terms, norms that were once standard for object-based visual art have become optional, or variable. As a result, idiosyncratic norms join physical form as expressive resources that the artist can draw upon in shaping the work, and that viewers can respond to in appreciating and interpreting the work.

At the same time, reducing the works to their normative elements seems inappropriate in many instances: the works of Ferguson, Murakami and Magor all have essential material elements, and the works of Sterbak and Gonzalez-Torres are essentially embodied in material displays, though the particular material objects are variable. Even Piper's performances have a concrete material component, namely the card she hands out. For this reason, we might regard contemporary artworks as entities with a hybrid normative/material nature: the norms determine the nature of acceptable displays, but in contrast to musical works, contemporary artworks require particular forms of material realization and, in many instances, the central involvement of particular material elements.

The examples introduced above belong to the category of conceptual art, broadly construed. However, this ontological picture is also relevant for the many contemporary artworks that take more conventional forms. First, norms of correct configuration are partly constitutive of most visual artworks: there is typically a "right-side-up" which is essential to seeing the work correctly, and a work with a different correct configuration would be a distinct work (as we learn from the painter Georg Baselitz). Second, when modern and contemporary artists began asserting idiosyncratic norms for their works, they transformed norms from standard (and largely invisible) conventions to expressive resources. These resources are now available to all works, and contemporary artworks that adhere to conventional norms can be seen as employing a restricted range of expressive resources. This does not imply that such works are less valuable: such restriction may be employed to good effect. But artists' choices to use or eschew available expressive resources naturally affect our understanding and appreciation of all contemporary artworks.

[See also Conceptual Art; Installation Art; Interpretation; Modernism, *overview essay*; Ontology of Art; Performance Art; Sculpture; *and* Walton.]

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