

Dual Review

David Davies, *Art as Performance*

REVIEWS BY
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DAVIES, DAVID. *Art as Performance*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, xii+278 pp., \$64.95 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Art as Performance is an important new work focusing primarily on the ontology and appreciation of artworks. Especially important is the way it combines these topics by arguing that a correct account of what artworks are requires a sensitive understanding of the ways we appreciate them, and that fully appreciating works of art requires understanding what they are.

The central thesis of the book is the ontological one that artworks are not physical objects on walls and filling spaces in museums, not sound structures indicated by composers and performed in concert halls, not linguistic structures “uttered” by writers, but the actual “performances” of artists that create such objects. The correlative thesis concerning appreciation is that it requires that we relate the objects just mentioned (which are called the “work-focus”) with the performances that specify them. (Given the ontological thesis, this could be restated as saying that appreciation requires that we relate the “work-focus” to the actual work.) Both theses need much clarification, and the first especially needs much defense. Before turning to these matters, here is an overview of the book as a whole.

Art as Performance begins with a critique of “aesthetic empiricism,” the view that artworks are the kind of entity that are to be appreciated in a direct experiential encounter in which their aesthetic properties are revealed with little or no knowledge of context of origin or artist’s intention. Davies is perfectly aware that he is not the

first to offer such a critique, but his point is to set up a debate with the real critical target of the book: the contextualist views that have largely superseded aesthetic empiricism. According to these views, works of art are context-dependent physical objects or abstract structures, the appreciation of which require knowledge of context of origin. Throughout this book, running parallel to the defense of the performance view is a critique of contextualism both as an ontology and as an account of artwork appreciation. This is essential to Davies’s project since contextualism appears to capture our commonsense intuitions about artworks far better than his own view. Having set up this debate (Chapters 1–3), Davies begins his “cumulative argument” for the performance view and against contextualism and other alternatives (Chapters 4–6). Chapter 7 is devoted to setting out the performance view in some detail, Chapter 8 to answering a central objection to it (and attempting to turn it against the contextualist), and Chapter 9 to displaying the virtues of the performance theory by showing how it illuminates hard-to-appreciate conceptual and performance works. The final chapter provides a brief sketch of the way art might be defined and its value specified in light of the performance model.

What is the cumulative case for the performance view and against the contextualist? It is primarily a sequence of three arguments, which I will call the arguments from intentions (Chapter 4), from modality (Chapter 5), and from the disappearing contextualist object (Chapter 8). I will consider each in turn and argue that none succeeds in establishing the superiority of the performance theory over contextualism.

It is not easy to state the argument from intentions because, on Davies's formulation, it is tied to a controversial theory of artwork meaning. Fortunately, the crucial idea can be stated independently of that theory. The premise Davies wants to establish is that there can be intentions (or, for that matter, other aspects of the context of creation) that fail to play a role in determining meaning properties of a work but are still relevant to the appreciation of the work. (This premise can be granted even by moderate actual intentions about work meaning.) Something like this would happen if an artist intends to create a work that means *m* (or achieves *a*), but actually creates one that means *n* (or fails to achieve *a*). In assessing the artist's achievement, these intentions are obviously relevant, even though they are not meaning determining. Further, they are not merely assessments of the artist, but of the work. Davies thinks that the most plausible way to account for this fact is to give up the idea that artworks are the *products* of the artist's creative activity and accept that they are instead the activity that brings about the product. There is, however, no entailment from Davies's premises to this conclusion (as he realizes), and in fact those premises hardly warrant such a radical revision in our conception of artworks. There is a straightforward explanation of the relevance of such intentions, viz. that in assessing the product, and the achievement it embodies, we need to understand the project of which it is the end result. There is no such thing as the assessment of achievement in the abstract. This fact applies to all sorts of artifacts. One would not assess a sports car and a family car in the same way because they are made with two different bundles of aims. (They are the result of different projects.) But we are assessing the cars and not just the making of them for their success relative to those aims. Similarly, one cannot assess the *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* without an understanding of Picasso's aims or project, but we are still assessing the product of his artistic activity, the object that is universally recognized as the painting.

The argument from modality is concerned with those properties of an artwork that constitute it as the artwork it is and, in virtue of this constitutive role, are essential properties of the work—one it has in all possible worlds. The

first premise of the argument is that whether a property is constitutive of work is work relative. That is, properties like being made at time *t*, or in context *c*, or by artist *a* may be constitutive for some works but not others. For example, Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is plausibly essentially tied to the artworld context in which it was created, but a "naïve" painting made for a local tourist art market may be far less specifically tied to its context of creation. The second premise is that whether a property is constitutive of a work depends on what is to be appreciated in a work. The final premise is that we have to reconstruct the "performance" that created the work to understand what is to be appreciated in it. The conclusion is that only an ontology that identifies works with said performance will capture these constitutive properties correctly. Broadly speaking, there are two problems with this argument. First, it is invalid because, as Davies recognizes, the fact that an originating performance is relevant to individuating works does not show to what ontological category works belong. To fill the gap, Davies has to show that no other ontology could do justice to the fact and, in particular, a contextualist ontology cannot. Davies attempts this but, as with the argument from intentions, he fails to convince. Let us assume with Davies that in order to identify the contextual properties that are constitutive, we should apply something like the following principle: identify the properties of the artist's "performance" in bringing the "work-focus" into existence that are essential to appreciating the work. Even if this principle were correct, there is no reason why the contextualist cannot acknowledge that. For example, if what is to be appreciated is that the work brilliantly solves a problem provided by the artworld concerns at the time of creation, a contextualist can acknowledge that only a physical object/structure made or indicated in such a context would be that work. The second problem with the argument from modality is that it is not clear that its premises are true. I believe none of them are obvious, but the third is particularly controversial. Whatever Davies means by reconstructing the artist's performance, something that is plausibly less than this would do as well or better for grasping what is to be appreciated in a work. This is grasping what I called above the artist's project. Given

an understanding of this project, along with the work (object), we should be able to figure out the achievement, and hence what is to be appreciated. The artist's project is certainly a feature the contextualist can appeal to for individuating works.

The disappearing contextualist object argument claims that such objects collapse into pure (decontextualized) abstract structures/physical objects when their ontology is properly understood. Hence, either we must give up the idea that context plays a role in the ontology of art or we must accept the performance model. How do we get this conclusion? Consider a hand-made one-of-a-kind sculpture. Suppose it is a physical object. We individuate it as a sculpture by its shape and by various features concerning its origin. But if it is a physical object, it is claimed, these features are not relevant to its ontological category. The claim begs an important question. If we inquire about the identity of the physical object that is the sculpture, some would say that there is just one physical object where the sculpture is, and it is such that it would still exist if it lost its shape. But others would say there is not just one physical object where the sculpture is, and the very *identity* of the one that is the sculpture is fixed by shape and context. As with physical objects, so with abstract structures. "Where we have two indications of the same musical structure-type, there is a single ... type that is correctly describable as a work by Brahms and a work by Beethoven" (p. 185). That is perhaps a possibility, but by no means the only one. If we take seriously the idea that there are two works, it is not even a possibility. Suppose work A = type T. If work B = type T, then A = B. But that is impossible if there are *two* works. In coming to his conclusion, Davies just ignores the controversy or takes a side without argument. That leaves the conclusion unproved.

Davies's arguments fail to raise serious problems for the contextualist or convince us to accept the performance view. Nevertheless, this is a work that everyone interested in these issues should read and grapple with. Everyone can learn from Davies's discussions of the bearing of the artist's performance on the appreciation of artworks. The book will require contextualists to revise standing proposals on the ontology of art and to rethink the nature of

art appreciation. On each issue it raises, it will make every reader think through it afresh.

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In his absorbing book *Art as Performance*, David Davies argues that artworks should be identified, not with artistic *products* such as paintings or novels, but instead with the artistic actions or *processes* that produced such items. Such a view had an earlier incarnation in Currie's widely criticized "action type hypothesis" (Currie, *An Ontology of Art*, 1989), but Davies argues that it is instead action *tokens* rather than types with which artworks should be identified. This rich and complex work repays the closest study in spite of some basic objections to be raised concerning Davies's central concept of an action token.

First, a serious problem for Davies will be discussed, one that arises during his often insightful discussion of what he calls "the work-relativity of modality" (pp. 105–113), according to which view the counterfactual possibilities of artwork identity depend on factors specific to the work in question. Davies needs to explain how a given artistic action or performance could itself be evaluated modally. He does so by postulating modally flexible actions or "*doings*"—which he claims to be action tokens—as part of the ontological furniture of the universe.

Let me explain. Davies wishes to hold that artistic actions or performances, such as an artist executing a certain brushstroke at time *t*, "might have transpired otherwise" (p. 116), in that his modal intuition is, for example, that the very same painting might have been painted at a somewhat different time from its actual time of execution. The only way to accommodate such a view in an action ontology is to hold that certain painting-related actions *themselves* could have occurred at a different time, or in a different place, and so on. However, though we may readily admit that Picasso might have painted the very same painting *Guernica* a week later than he actually did, so that in that sense his painting actions might have occurred later, it is quite another thing to claim that the concrete

action *tokens* making up Picasso's actual painting activities could have occurred later. For on standard analyses of actions or events, the time at which they occur is one of their essential characteristics.

Thus the normal sense in which it is true that Picasso could have painted a certain brushstroke later is the sense in which the relevant brushstroke action A, occurring at time t_1 , might not have existed or occurred at all, but instead *some other* brushstroke action B, of the same type as A, occurring at a later time t_2 and having the same effect, might have existed. But in this account there is no single action token such that *it* might have happened either at time t_1 or at time t_2 and hence no room for modally rich actions as such.

Clearly, such normal action rigidity cases are a serious threat to Davies's view, so he is driven to postulate special actions, which he calls "doings" or "happenings" (pp. 116, 167–178), whose time of occurrence is contingent and that are also intensional or description relative, in that, for instance, even if Picasso made a certain brush movement both to paint a brushstroke and to relieve a cramp in his hand, it is only *qua* intentional brushstroke action, rather than *qua* cramp-relieving action, that the relevant doing counts as part of the identity of the artwork *Guernica*.

However, Davies's problem is now that, to the extent that this modal flexibility-introducing and description-relativizing strategy is successful, he has also, at least as judged by conventional standards and assumptions, succeeded in undercutting his own claim that it is action *tokens*, rather than action *types*, with which works of art should be identified. For the only fully clear and noncontroversial sense in which the same brushstroke action could occur at different times, or be description relative, is the sense in which the same action *type* could be instantiated or tokened at different times, and instantiated by tokens whose instantiation of other types, such as that of hand-cramp-relieving actions, is irrelevant to their tokening of the brushstroking-action type.

Nevertheless, Davies goes on to argue in Chapter 6 that action-*type* theories of art, such as that of Currie, are themselves fatally flawed. But then as a result, Davies is left, by conventional standards at least, with no adequate

account of modal or counterfactual properties of artworks at all—an unfortunate result, because some of his most effective criticisms of alternate views, such as of Levinson's contextualist view of artwork modality, are precisely to the effect that they fail because of a similar modal inflexibility.

To be sure, Davies does offer a clear possible-worlds model of his postulated "doings," which would make them analogous to ordinary objects in having a contingent spatiotemporal location. If such "doings" were metaphysically viable, the problems discussed above might be resolvable along the lines he suggests. However, I would argue that it is no accident that standard analyses of actions and events deny them a contingent spatiotemporal location.

To explain very briefly, arguably the reason ordinary objects, unlike events, are able to persist through change and be modally flexible in their spatiotemporal positions is because they are capable of being contingently changed by, and reidentified relative to, those very same *events* themselves, which in general provide the basis for the most basic scientific descriptions of the universe. Thus the concept of empirical contingency for objects presupposes a two-tier structure, in which object contingency or modal flexibility is explained in terms of their reidentifiability relative to distinct clusters of modally inflexible events. But clearly a similar framework cannot be applied to events themselves, without embarking on an unacceptable explanatory regress that would have to postulate proto-events to explain the contingency of ordinary events, and so on. So, to say the least, Davies's invocation of modally flexible events such as "doings" or "happenings" seems metaphysically unpromising as an empirical hypothesis.

A related but more general ontological concern about Davies's theory is as follows. As approached via Danto's theory of art. Danto realized that "mere real things," as he describes them, such as painted canvases, could not themselves be artworks because as physical objects their relational properties are all contingent, whereas artworks, as such, have their artistically relevant relational properties essentially. As a result, Danto argues for an "object plus" ontology, namely, that an artwork is an object plus an interpretation, or an object as

essentially described in appropriate contextual terms.

But to all appearances, Davies's own underlying ontology is structurally exactly like that of Danto. His artworks are not simply performances considered as concrete action tokens, that is, as "mere real events," in Danto's terms, but instead they are those tokens *plus* whatever essential relational properties are needed to link them to a proper grasp of their "focuses of appreciation," and so on. For example, as before, it is Picasso's physical action as essentially described as a brushstroke, rather than as essentially described as a cramp-relieving action, that partly constitutes the artwork on Davies's view.

Hence Davies's pursuit of the true ontological nature of his "doings," as somehow being both concrete event tokens and yet also modally flexible in work-specific ways, is arguably confused, just as Danto would regard a pursuit of special concrete art objects as being confused. In both cases, we must distinguish the purely physical event or object from the essential descriptions or interpretations that enable the resultant complex entity to be an artwork, on a Dantoesque approach.

This point is also important for Davies's concept of a "focus of appreciation," which he defines as "the product of the generative act in so far as that product enters into the proper appreciation of the work," adding that it "as the *outcome* or *product* of a generative performance ... is relevant to the appreciation of the artwork brought into existence through that performance" (p. 26). However, note that strictly speaking, no purely physical object as such—whether a painting, physical inscriptions on a manuscript page, and so on—could count as a "focus of appreciation" under these characterizations, since both of them require the relevant "focus" to have certain *essential* relational properties, namely, those of "enter[ing] into the proper appreciation of the work" and being "the *outcome* or *product* of a generative performance," along with being "relevant to the appreciation of the artwork brought into existence through that performance." Of course, physical objects can have nonessential relational properties, but their empirically contingent status with respect to their causes means that they cannot *necessarily* or *essentially* be "the *outcome* or *product* of

a generative performance," and so forth. Thus Davies has already stacked the deck against a purely physicalistic kind of aesthetic empiricism that admits only configurational rather than recognitional properties, to use Wollheim's useful distinction.

Nevertheless, Davies's own prime example of an empiricist view is one that views a painting as merely a *pattern of colors* (pp. 28–29), which presumably is itself a purely configurational or physicalistic view that does *not* require the object to be "the *outcome* or *product* of a generative performance," hence revealing an unclarity in his concept of a focus of appreciation. But at the same time, his concept of a "focus of appreciation" is also inclusive or vague enough so as to leave it unclear whether or not some relevant physical artifact *must* play a role in appreciation of an artwork. For example, the specific configurational structure of the physical manuscript for a poem, as a series of shaped mounds of ink on a page, is arguably irrelevant to any proper appreciation of the relevant artwork, and so it would not count as part of the relevant focus of appreciation for the poem.

Now Davies defines aesthetic empiricism as "the thesis that the artistic properties of an artwork are given to a receiver in an immediate perceptual encounter with the work" (p. 28). But a problem for Davies in the poem case is that it is the *propositional contents*, rather than their physical vehicle, that are immediately "given to a receiver" when she perceives the poem. For after all, readers of poems rarely, if ever, perceptually attend to the physical configuration of the typeface, or to the texture of the paper on which the poem is printed, when they read a poem. Hence, given his current definitions of "focus of appreciation" and "aesthetic empiricism," even a purely proposition-based view of literary artworks would turn out to be an aesthetic empiricist view.

To be sure, it is clear that Davies would not want this implication, since he claims that an extension of aesthetic empiricism to literature is implausible just because its appreciation involves understanding of words, or direct perceiving of their meanings (p. 29 and n. 3). But again, my point is that his definitions are unclear enough, or at least commodious enough, to allow this unwanted possibility, and

that the root cause is an underlying ontological unclarity concerning the relations of physical events or objects to the essential descriptions that artistically characterize them.

One other potential line of criticism should be mentioned. An artist might consider several distinct ways of constructing a given artwork, only one of which she actualizes. Intuitively speaking, the resultant artwork would be the same whichever distinct action plan she chooses, but since Davies identifies an artwork with the concrete action tokens that produce it—which would be both token and type distinct from the instantiation of any alternative action plan for the work—it seems he would be unable to explain the sense in which the same underly-

ing artwork is embodied in the execution of those distinct action plans.

To sum up, there are many valuable aspects of Davies's book, consideration of which could not be attempted in this brief review. In spite of the basic concerns raised above about his underlying ontology, the book can be strongly recommended for its many stimulating and thought-provoking discussions of a wide range of topics in the philosophy of art.

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