Sculpture

Sherri Irvin

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Sculpture has received comparatively little attention from philosophers of art. However, sculpture, in its classical and contemporary forms, raises distinctive questions about the ontology, representational character and appreciation of art, and is thus well worth attending to.

DEFINING SCULPTURE

Before the turn of the twentieth century, nearly all sculptures in the Western fine art tradition were three-dimensional representations of recognizable objects, most often human figures. Most sculptures were freestanding objects, though bas-relief sculpture on buildings and altarpieces also constituted a notable form. Sculptures were typically static objects made of durable materials such as stone, bronze, clay and wood.

But over the past century, the range of sculptural materials, subject matters and practices has exploded. Many sculptures, such as the abstract works of Barbara Hepworth or Louise Nevelson, are not obviously representations of objects, even imaginary ones. Kinetic sculptures, unlike their static predecessors, involve movement and, sometimes, sound elements. Installation artworks frequently involve an immersive environment that we explore by moving through it, rather than an object that we view by circling it; and they may incorporate multimedia elements such as film and video. Earthworks involve interventions, sometimes on a very large scale, in exterior landscapes. Sculpture includes all of these developments, since they are outgrowths of earlier sculptural traditions and practices. At the same time, we should maintain the traditional divisions separating sculpture from painting and architecture, and to distinguish sculpture from performance art, which raises interesting but distinct issues. Sculptures must also be distinguished from three-dimensional non-art objects, no small feat now that artists have begun to incorporate a wide array of artifacts into their work. Sometimes a snow shovel is just a snow shovel; other times it is Marcel Duchamp's (1915) In Advance of the Broken Arm.

A simple, neat definition of sculpture is thus precluded by the great diversity of sculptural works and by the complex contours of the boundaries that distinguish sculpture from other domains, which are the product more of historical traditions and practices than of rational calculation. Moreover, there is no defining sculpture without having already made some decisions about what to include, as indicated above. And once those decisions have been made, much inquiry about sculpture could proceed—and has proceeded—by looking at a variety of cases without trying to unify them under a definition.

An attempt at definition might, nonetheless, be helpful in allowing us to see where philosophical inquiry is most needed. So let's begin here: sculpture is the art form consisting of the articulation or presentation of objects geared centrally toward

appreciation in three spatial dimensions (and possibly the temporal dimension), excluding substantially constructed buildings and works involving the living human body.

In claiming that sculptures are "geared toward" rather than "intended for" appreciation, the definition remains neutral about whether the artist's intentions or other factors, such as audience reception or artistic convention, determine the aims or functions of an artwork. An account of what determines the artwork's aims would be needed to flesh out the definition.

The definition expressly includes sculptural works with a temporal component, such as those with kinetic or time-based media elements. It also nods to the fact that our appreciation even of static sculpture is typically temporal in a special way, involving our movement around or through the sculpture as we gain access to features that are not available, even in principle, to a momentary glance. (See Martin 1981: chapter 2.) It distinguishes sculpture from painting by invoking appreciation in three spatial dimensions; while paintings are three-dimensional objects, in standard cases appreciation focuses on their (approximately) two-dimensional surfaces. The definition roughly separates sculpture from three-dimensional arts such as furniture and pottery by stipulating that sculpture is geared centrally toward appreciation, as opposed to functions such as supporting the human body or containing other materials. This division is somewhat porous, as it must be. It allows that pottery and furniture geared centrally toward appreciation, rather than or in addition to use, will count as sculpture. The definition roughly distinguishes sculpture from architecture by ruling out substantially constructed buildings, leaving open the possibility that some works of architecture that are not substantially constructed buildings may occupy the boundary between the two categories.

The distinctions between sculpture and other sorts of three-dimensional artifact might be firmed up by offering an account of the specific sort of appreciation that is appropriate to sculpture. As discussed below, such accounts, which are often especially concerned with the distinction between painting and sculpture, tend to appeal to the role of touch and bodily or spatial awareness in the appreciation of sculpture. In order to distinguish sculpture in the appropriate ways from furniture, jewelry, couture and pottery, these accounts would need to be supplemented with an understanding of the role of critical engagement in the appreciation of sculpture as art: we appreciate sculptures not just by considering their effects on our physical or spatial awareness, but also by considering them in light of specific artistic, art theoretic and art historical traditions. To appreciate a sculpture as art, then, is to engage with it critically in light of these traditions even while experiencing its bodily or spatial effects.

A final note is that our definition leaves open the possibility that Duchamp's In Advance of the Broken Arm is not, in fact, a sculpture. If the work does not have appreciation in three dimensions among its central aims—if, instead, its central aim is to prompt reflection on the boundaries of art, or to emphasize the artist's audacious gesture in presenting a purchase from the hardware store as an artwork—then it may not be a sculpture despite involving a three-dimensional object.

SCULPTURAL CONTENT

Much of the recent philosophical literature about sculpture concerns the nature of sculptural representation. Intuitively, representation in the visual arts has something to do with resemblance: a painting or sculpture looks like the object that it represents. Clearly, though, this notion must be qualified, for the differences between an artwork and the object it represents may be, from some perspectives, far more salient than the similarities. A sculpture may be cold, hard, monochrome and static, while the person it portrays is warm, soft, multicolored and mobile. Richard Wollheim (1968; 1987), speaking chiefly of painting, refers to this phenomenon as twofoldness: we see both the artwork with its particular material features, and the object represented by way of those features, which we understand as having a distinct set of characteristics. In Wollheim's terms, appreciation of an artwork involves seeing-in: we see the person in the painting, while recognizing that many features of the painting are not to be attributed to the person.

Robert Hopkins (2003) suggests that Wollheim's view, in its broad outlines, is as plausible for sculpture as for painting. But seeing-in must function differently for sculpture than for painting: in standard sculptural cases, it will not involve ascertaining a three-dimensional object based on marks on a two-dimensional surface. However, we should not conclude that the sculpture simply represents an object that shares its three-dimensional form (perhaps adjusted for scale). As Hopkins (1994) notes, particular objects can be misrepresented in sculpture: a sculpture may present a caricature of a person, or may present some of her features erroneously, while still representing her. The sculptural form may be abstract enough that its material features don't resemble those of its subject to the exclusion of every other person. Moreover, it may possess stylistic elements (such as a rough surface) that we clearly are not meant to attribute to the person. There may, then, be significant discrepancies between the form of the sculpture and the form of the subject it represents. Hopkins (1994) argues that the sculpture ultimately represents the subject that it is taken to represent within an appropriate appreciative experience, where this will be determined not just by isomorphism of shape, but also by other factors such as the manner of presentation of the sculpture (including the work's title), and the viewer's knowledge of conventions of representing the subject (e.g., the knowledge that George W. Bush is frequently caricatured as having very large ears). Our perceptual and cognitive processes in responding to the sculpture, then, lead to the sculpture's being phenomenally experienced as resembling a particular subject. This phenomenal experience of resemblance determines what the sculpture represents.

Some writers have made claims about the content of sculpture more generally. Several (e.g., Herder 2002/1778; Martin 1981; Read 1956; Rogers 1984) have remarked on the special suitability of sculpture to depict human bodies. Martin (1981: 123) claims, moreover, that whatever particular sculptures may represent, "sculpture has a distinctive underlying, all-pervasive subject matter—the importance of being aware of our unity with things…." As these claims are related to matters of sculptural aesthetics and appreciation, they will be taken up in the following section.

An aspect of sculptural content that has been neglected, but is central to the appreciation of much modern and contemporary sculpture, pertains to the generation of meaning not just

through resemblance-based representation but through incorporation or inclusion. Marcel Duchamp's (1913) Bicycle Wheel is a sculptural assemblage involving a bicycle wheel and fork mounted upside down on a wooden stool. Appreciation of the resulting object depends in part on the recognition of what may be called its inclusion-content: the fact that it incorporates a bicycle wheel and a stool, and that it positions them so as to render both of the incorporated objects inert relative to their usual functions. The fact that the objects are actually a bicycle wheel and a stool, not merely objects constructed to resemble them, contributes to the impact of the work. Representation may be one aspect of inclusion-content: perhaps the bicycle wheel contributes content to the work partly by representing (or, in Nelson Goodman's [1976] terms, exemplifying) certain properties of bicycle wheels more generally. But this does not seem to exhaust the inclusion-content that a ready-made object can bring to a sculptural work. Tracey Emin's (1998) My Bed is a presentation of Emin's bed and associated objects, including soiled sheets, rumpled pantyhose, used condoms and cigarette butts. While the meaning of the work may depend in part on these objects' representing or symbolizing other things, it also seems to depend on very particular aspects of how these objects are arranged and how they are proposed as relating to each other in the context of Emin's life. There is thus no reason to assume that inclusion-content can be reduced to representational content more generally.

Some works have both standard representational content and inclusion-content. In Zhan Wang's Urban Landscapes of the 2000s, stainless steel kitchen implements are assembled so as to represent cityscapes. These works have both representational content (the cityscape) and inclusion-content (pots, pans, spoons, etc.). Appreciating the work involves recognizing both forms of content and grasping their interplay: for instance, the cleverness of representing traffic by using forks and spoons whose handles suggest a trail of motion in the vehicles' wake.

An artwork may also have inclusion-content by nature of the substances it includes, even when these are not ready-made objects. Janine Antoni's (1992) Gnaw consists in part of a 600-pound cube of chocolate and a 600-pound cube of lard that the artist shaped by carving them with her mouth. These materials seem to signify in a way that, say, the stone of a traditional sculpture does not. Though it certainly matters aesthetically that Michelangelo's Pietà is made of marble, this choice of material does not seem to feed into our understanding of the subject matter: Mary and Jesus are not presented as hard or stony, as the magnificent drapery clearly attests. But with Antoni's work, the very nature of the materials contributes to our grasp of the work's themes of desire, excess and female body image. A work with a similar appearance but made of different materials would not express the same meanings in the same way.

Because modern and contemporary sculptures often have inclusion-content that significantly affects their meanings, a philosophical account of inclusion-content is needed to bring the literature on sculptural content up to date.

APPRECIATION OF SCULPTURE

A number of writers have attempted to characterize a distinct sculptural aesthetics, in contrast with the aesthetics of painting. While Adolf von Hildebrand (1907/1893) suggests

that sculpture is distinctive in providing a series of two-dimensional visible silhouettes that are apprehended from various locations around the sculpture, most have thought that touch or bodily awareness plays a special role in the appreciation of sculpture. Herbert Read, offering an extreme version of such a view, claims that "[s]culpture is an art of palpation—an art that gives satisfaction in the touching and handling of objects" (1956: 49) and suggests that when we are unable to touch a sculpture our appreciation is impeded. Other writers, while acknowledging a special role for touch and related forms of bodily awareness in the appreciation of sculpture, allow that the activation of this awareness may occur by way of vision. Johann Gottfried Herder (2002/1778) suggests that we use vision as a substitute for touch in our apprehension of sculpture: the eye is guided to seek out the information that the hand desires. We are then able to reconstitute an understanding of the form as a whole by imaginatively synthesizing the data we have taken in through vision. (See Zuckert 2009 for detailed discussion.) Herder suggests that the beauty of three-dimensional forms, and the pleasure they occasion, belong to touch: the form is felt (perhaps imaginatively), not seen, as beautiful.

Some writers have objected to the suggestion that sculpture, in contrast to painting, is a distinctively tactile art. Rhys Carpenter (1960) rejects outright the claim that sculpture appeals to touch rather than to vision, regarding the matter as settled by the fact that sculptures are made chiefly to be looked at and not felt. Hopkins (2005: 576) notes that paintings, like sculptures, can stimulate tactile imaginings in their vivid presentation of textures. And Dominic McIver Lopes (1997; 2002) argues that in principle, there could be tactile pictorial arts; it is merely a contingent fact that our painting tradition is directed toward vision rather than touch.

Several writers, though, have argued that sculpture has a distinctive effect on the perceiver's bodily awareness. Herder (2002/1778) claimed that we experience imaginative bodily identification with sculptures that depict human bodies, and that this allows us to grasp the sculpture's expressive content. Robert D. Vance (1995: 225) suggests that such identification occurs even when the subject of the sculpture is non-human or abstract: "I identify with … the sculpture by imagining its apparent features as being experienced by myself," and then "imagining it as an extension of [my] own body."

Vance's claim that we identify bodily with sculpture seems more plausible for some works than for others. While Meret Oppenheim's (1936) Object, a fur-covered cup, saucer and spoon, surely affects our bodily self-awareness, it seems to do so by provoking us to imagine what it would feel like to use the objects (and tempting us to touch them), rather than by causing us to experience them as parts or extensions of our bodies. Other accounts of sculpture's effect on bodily self-awareness have attempted to do without Vance's strong claim about identification with sculptures. F. David Martin (1981), offering a detailed account of the phenomenology of sculpture appreciation, argues that sculpture enlivens space, sending out forces that create urges in the viewer to respond with bodily movement. Though we perceive sculptures visually, he suggests, "[W]e invariably perceive the forces of a sculpture as if they were pressing on our bodies" (1981: 62). For this reason, "Our body sensations are part of the unity of the aesthetic experience" of a sculpture (1981: 74). Because sculpture affects our bodies in this way, Martin suggests, it is unique among the

arts in emphasizing our "physical or spatial withness" with things (1981: 134): whereas painting creates a pictorial space from which we are physically excluded, sculpture heightens our sense of sharing space with and being impinged on by other things. Martin claims that this is a therapeutic effect in the context of modern life, which often causes us to feel alienated and distanced from our actual physical environment.

Martin's view, like Vance's, seems better suited to some sculptures than to others. Not all sculpture obviously "'bangs' into our bodies with convergent forces" (Martin 1981: 169), even when we do feel inclined to move around it. Viewers move around Anish Kapoor's (2004-2006) Cloud Gate, a large public sculpture in Chicago, to explore the varying ways its surface reflects their own bodies, rather than being moved around by forces the object projects into the surrounding space. It is also unclear that Martin can make good on his claim that sculpture invariably promotes our "withness with things." In his remarks about the representation of women in sculpture, he says, "Even the most perfect real woman—at least from a male chauvinist standpoint—is always moving away, or talking too much, or covering up, or in bad light, or sick, or getting old. The sculptor can make her stand still, shut her up, strip her, give her good light, and keep her young and healthy" (1981: 167). If a central function of some sculpture is to realize the sexist project of shutting women up, stripping them, and forcing their bodies into ageless immobility, it is hard to see how this helps to secure the audience member's "withness" with real women or their bodies. More generally, the idealization of objects or the creation of immersive spaces through sculpture may, in some instances, distance us from the physical particularity of the world we live in rather than reconcile us to it.

Martin's remark calls to our attention the fact that sculpture, especially when it depicts the human figure, may appeal to us as specifically embodied and gendered beings: and part of its appeal to our bodily senses may be sexual. While most commentators have shied away from discussing the role of sexuality in aesthetic responses to art, and some have claimed that sexual and aesthetic responses are incompatible, Herder (2002/1778) acknowledges that sexual attraction can provide the impetus for careful aesthetic exploration of a sculpturally depicted human form, and holds that bodily responses are integral to rather than in tension with aesthetic ones. As Herder notes, and as remains true today, philosophers have tended to privilege vision as the "highest" of the senses and to downplay the importance of embodied experience, including sexuality. Rachel Zuckert (2009: 294) suggests that the intimate connection of sculpture to our embodied condition may explain the striking philosophical neglect of sculpture among the arts.

As we have seen, several theorists have proposed that sculpture has specific effects on the bodily awareness of the spectator, but each account has its limitations. A more promising contender is Susanne Langer's (1953) proposal that sculpture affects us by altering our experience of space. In general, Langer claims, we experience space as organized by our kinetic possibilities: the way in which we might choose to move through it. In the presence of a sculpture, we experience space as organized by the kinetic possibilities we imagine for the sculpture—which, when the sculpture represents an identifiable object, are determined in part by the kinetic possibilities we understand that object to have.

As Hopkins (2003) notes, Langer's view may have its limits: it is hard to account for the impact of a portrait bust by appealing to its kinetic possibilities, which seem to be severely circumscribed. Nonetheless, Langer's view may be able to absorb many of the phenomena discussed by Herder, Vance and Martin by suggesting that we identify bodily with sculpture, or experience its forces as physically impacting us, because it alters our felt relationship with the space that it and we jointly occupy.

Langer's account provides useful resources for seeing Duchamp's In Advance of the Broken Arm as operating sculpturally, not just conceptually. Our awareness of the snow shovel's kinetic possibilities, already activated by our knowledge of its ordinary use, is heightened by the title (which is also inscribed on the object). In addition, the shovel was originally hung from the ceiling by a wire, which introduces the possibility of a swinging motion, perhaps even caused the viewer's body. It thus makes sense to think that our appreciation of the work involves a response to the shovel's kinetic possibilities as they interact with our own.

SCULPTURE AND THE ONTOLOGY OF ART

While sculpture has been little discussed by philosophers of art, it has been a popular topic for philosophical metaphysicians. The traditional puzzle of the statue and the clay is the puzzle of how an artifact relates to the material out of which it is made. While we might intuitively think that a statue is identical to a particular hunk of clay, a problem arises because they have different persistence conditions: the hunk of clay may have existed before the statue was made and may persist after the statue is destroyed. Judith Jarvis Thomson (1998) and Lynne Rudder Baker (2000) argue, for related reasons, that the clay constitutes the statue rather than being identical with it. The statue inherits many of its aesthetic features from the way that clay is arranged, but the statue and the clay are nonetheless distinct entities.

The problem of the statue and the clay as it is typically understood is not specific to sculpture, but instead pertains to all artifacts (Thomson 1998: 157). A less frequently remarked puzzle, which arises specifically in artistic contexts, pertains to the normative aspects of the relationship between the sculpture and the material that constitutes it. Sculptures have correct configurations; typically a sculpture has a top and a bottom, and for sculptures that involve multiple objects there are typically norms for positioning those objects in relation to each other. For some works of sculpture, it is essential that a particular object be displayed. But for works such as the candy spills of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, which involve piles of wrapped candies that the audience is permitted to eat, all the objects on display are subject to removal and replacement. Between exhibitions, a museum may continue to own Gonzalez-Torres's work, but without maintaining any material component in storage (Irvin 2008). Other works seem to occupy an intermediate place on this spectrum: one cannot present just any snow shovel as Duchamp's In Advance of the Broken Arm, but Duchamp authorized reconstructions of the work after the original was lost.

These examples suggest that the view that the sculpture is constituted by one or more hunks of material is false in some instances (for Gonzalez-Torres's sculpture exists even at

times when there is no material that could be thought to constitute it). And even where it is or may be true, it fails to explain crucial matters such as what the correct configuration of the constituting matter is and which material elements (if any) are replaceable. Because these matters are essential to a correct account of the nature of the work, the view of sculptures as constituted by physical material is ontologically inadequate (Irvin 2012).

Irvin (2005; 2008) argues that a crucial aspect of what the artist does in creating the artwork, over and above selecting or fabricating an object, is to express a set of norms governing how that object is to be displayed and treated. These norms, far from being trivial background matters, are essential to the nature of the work and to how viewers are to understand it. In particular, they determine how the material stuff is implicated in the work: is a particular component essential, or are all the work's components in principle replaceable? Can the work persist without any constituting physical material at all? Can the objects be displayed in different ways on different occasions? The norms expressed by the artist determine the answers to these questions.

For this reason, many sculptural works, like most musical works, are best understood as having a two-level ontology (Irvin, forthcoming). The composer creates a musical work, which is a set of norms that musicians (perhaps including the composer) interpret to create particular performances. Similarly, the sculptural artist expresses a set of norms which must be satisfied to create the display object viewers see on a particular occasion.

Questions about correct configuration and about the essential material features of the artwork can arise in relation to painting as well; norms play a crucial role in the ontology of all artworks (Irvin 2005). However, sculpture raises these matters with special acuteness, and new thinking about the ontology of visual artworks is likely to be driven in large part by sculptural examples.

CONCLUSION

I have confined my attention to matters relevant to all sculpture: the question of how sculpture may be defined, the nature of sculptural content, and the appreciation and ontology of sculpture. These do not exhaust sculptural trends and topics that merit philosophical attention. Much public art, especially in outdoor settings, is sculptural; sculpture thus supplies fertile ground for considering how art does and should (or should not) serve political ideologies and public needs. The way sculpture occupies space seems to give it special potential to shape the experience of those who interact with it; there may, then, be an ethics of sculpture that is distinct from the ethics of other art forms. Finally, much sculpture throughout history has been designed for specific environments, and relocation of the work may have more significant effects on the appreciation of sculpture than of painting. It is sometimes claimed of contemporary sculptural works that they are site specific, and thus cannot be relocated without undermining their aesthetic effect or even destroying them. The special relationship sculptures seem to have to their display environments, and the possibility that the site is sometimes integral to the ontology of a sculpture, warrant philosophical inquiry to match the extensive attention they have received from art critics and historians.

Philosophy often takes a while to catch up with its subject matter, and this is certainly true when it comes to art. As philosophy comes increasingly to accept and celebrate the relevance of embodied experience, and as aesthetics inches toward the twenty-first century, we can expect sculpture to occupy an increasingly central rather than marginal place in philosophical theorizing about art.

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RELATED TOPICS

See also Pictorial representation, Music, Ontology of art, Architecture, Painting, Goodman