

Alterpieces: Artworks as Shifting Speech Acts

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Abstract

Art viewers and critics talk as if visual artworks say things, express messages, or have meanings. For instance, Picasso's *Guernica* has been described as a "generic plea against the barbarity and terror of war", forming a "powerful anti-war statement".

One way of understanding meaning in art is to draw analogies with language. My thesis explores how the notion of a speech act – an utterance with a performative aspect – can illuminate art's power to 'speak'. In recent years, philosophers of art have explored speech act theory in relation to literary art, though barely at all in relation to visual art. Given the way we talk about painting, sculpture, installation, film, and photography, and given that artists have investigated performativity through their art, this neglect is surprising.

My thesis develops two main arguments. First, artwork meaning is *active*. I argue that visual artworks, under certain conditions, are speech acts. They have propositional content, and they have a certain force: they can *do things* such as assert, protest, and criticise – things we would normally do with words. I defend these contested claims against several dissenters, and explore some consequences: in particular, I explore how art can lie, a hitherto neglected question.

Second, artwork meaning is *flexible*. I argue that what an artwork says and does is affected by the context in which it's displayed, and in particular, by its curation. As a result, an artwork's content and force can vary from context to context. This goes against a dominant view in the philosophy of art – what I call 'Originalism' – that the meaning of an artwork is fixed by factors which held at the time of the work's creation, and so cannot change across time. I argue that this is mistaken: artworks can change in meaning. Curatorial factors can affect an artwork's content and force, and consequently its social effects.

It is known that our verbal speech has the power to oppress and liberate people in a society. My thesis aims to show that art also has this power to shape society; through what it says, and through what it does.

Declaration

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Faculty of Philosophy's Degree Committee.

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Introduction

1. Art as speech

A tapestry reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) was covered up by United Nations officials during the US Secretary of State's presentation of the American case for war against Iraq, in 2003. *Guernica* is a large, looming painting, with shades of black and grey exploding into chaotic shapes and distorted, contorted, screaming figures. The painting depicts the German Luftwaffe air raid that destroyed the ancient town of Guernica in the tenth month of the Spanish Civil war, which killed or wounded a third of the village of 5,000. The desolate mural has been described by art historians as a "protest-painting" (Foster et al, 2004: 285), and more generally by viewers as a "generic plea against the barbarity and terror of war",¹ and "a bold visual protest" which challenges our notions of warfare, thus forming a "powerful anti-war statement".² The literal cover-up at the UN headquarters in New York demonstrated the acute power of the mural as speech: the artwork's vehement anti-war message, "threatened to speak to historical parallels that the Bush administration and UN officials were clearly determined that the media or the public should not make" (David Walsh, 2003).

Visual art has the power to speak to us in this way, without using words. For centuries, we have ascribed 'meaning' to artworks, understanding art to communicate ideas, emotions, and other kinds of content. For instance, a dictum coined by Pope Gregory the Great in 600AD held that religious paintings were "books" for the illiterate (Duggan, 2005: 66). According to Pope Gregory,

Pictures are used in churches so that those who are ignorant of letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they cannot read in books (*codicibus*)...What writing (*scriptura*) does for the literate, a picture does for the illiterate looking at it.³

¹ Leal, P. E., (1992)

² PBS: *Treasures of the World* (n.d.)

³ Quote from Duggan (2005: 63).

Paintings depicting stories from the Old Testament and New Testament evoked not only religious emotion, but also expressed “the important messages of the scriptures to those who could not read them” (Williamson, 2004: 66).

Many have said that visual art has ‘meaning’, and many have acted as if this was the case. The cover-up of the *Guernica* reproduction at the UN is an instance of censoring a work because of its potent meaning, as speech. Throughout history, artists have been commissioned to make art that communicates ideals and principles to particular audiences. Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1516) – a startling depiction of the Crucifixion which originally stood in the Monastery of St Anthony – was commissioned to convey a particular message which would aid the healing program for diseased patients at the monastery. An art historian writes:

That Grünewald chose to transcribe a presumably predetermined program into visual language that touches the experiences of these patients only brings out more dramatically...his extraordinary capacity to be affected by this context and his evident need to communicate with this special group of viewers (Hayum, 1977: 516).

And because art is so readily regarded as speech, it is often protected by principles of free speech, alongside some visual pornography and political cartoons. Censorship of artworks causes uproar, for it is seen as an infringement of the right to free speech.⁴

2. The Puzzle

This communicative function of art has been understood through two main areas within the philosophy of art. On the one hand is the idea that art’s meaning is to be identified with just the emotion it expresses (Langer 1953; 1957, Ducasse 1944). For example, the meaning of *Guernica* is identified with an expression of negative emotion towards war. The problem with this approach though is that art does so much more than express emotion.⁵ It also expresses ideas and concepts. It *says things*.

⁴ For instance, consider the Charlie Hebdo satirical magazine attacks in 2015, the destruction of Banksy’s anti-immigration pigeon mural in 2014, and the philosophical debate about pornography being protected as free speech (see MacKinnon 1987; 1993, and Langton 1993).

⁵ For consideration of various theories of how art expresses emotion, see Matravers (2009), and for a defence of ‘the arousal theory’ in particular see Matravers (1991; 1998).

On the other hand is the idea that art just is a kind of language. Under this idea, *Guernica* communicates as a language, with its own kind of syntax and semantics.⁶ The problem with this approach though is that while art and language share some features, it is very dubious that art is strictly a language. There are important disanalogies between visual art and sentential language: visual art doesn't possess its own grammar and syntax for one thing. Language is conventional; its marks have meaning due to the rule-governed conventions, and it contains a fixed vocabulary and rule-governed grammar, resulting in compositionality (the ability to generate infinite sentences) (Margolis, 1974: 176-177). While artworks often use conventional symbols (such as using a dove to represent peace), this doesn't go far enough to show that all artworks can be construed in terms of a vocabulary and grammar. Nothing like the finite grammar that helps generate well-formed sentences can be formulated for the arts (Margolis, 179); in fact, this would probably hinder artistic creation. So the claim that art possesses a fixed vocabulary and syntax is far-fetched: "pictures cannot be 'read' in the same way as, or as fully as, a book" (Duggan, 2005: 95).

So while people speak and act as if art communicates messages, there is a puzzle to be solved. The puzzle is: how can visual art have 'meaning', and 'speak' in this way, without containing words, or without being a language in the ordinary sense?

While art shouldn't be regarded strictly as a language, it is illuminating to treat art as *sharing* some important features with language. Under this picture, the notion that art can 'speak' isn't interpreted literally in the sense that art uses a strict vocabulary and grammar, but rather, as indicating a close and important link between art and sentential language.⁷

A recent dominant avenue to solve the puzzle this way is to primarily look to the role of the artist's intentions about their artwork, and the relationship between these intentions and the work itself. The Intentionalist Debate in the philosophy of art does this, and explores the nature of artwork meaning by drawing analogies between art and language. The idea is that artworks are *like* utterances, in that they have a 'speaker' (artist), and a meaning, which is communicated to the viewer.⁸ The competing positions in the debate consider whether and how the artist's intentions partly determine the meaning of their art, and how facts about a work's original context partly determine the work's meaning.

⁶ Carter (1974; 1976) and Goodman (1976) can be said to hold something like this view, or at least variations of it.

⁷ See Hagberg (1995) for a Wittgensteinian treatment of this link between art and language.

⁸ For example, see Carroll (1992; 2001), Levinson (1992; 1996), and Stecker (2003; 2006).

I wish to explore a new avenue to solve the puzzle. Like the Intentionalist Debate does, I want to use philosophy of language to shed light on meaning in art, but my interest is in three features of language which have hitherto been somewhat neglected in the philosophy of visual art: illocutionary force, propositional content, and norms of communication. When we consider how these might apply to artworks, we will be in a position to make two novel contributions. First, we can make visible the power of artworks as speech acts: the meaning of artworks is to be understood in terms of their force, as speech acts. Second, we will see the role of curation in determining an artwork's meaning: a factor neglected by all parties, but crucial to an understanding of 'how to do things with artworks'. Both contributions have implications for the Intentionalist Debate which I outline later on.

2.1. *Active meaning*

Let us explore how the notion of a speech act – an utterance with a performative aspect – can illuminate art's power to 'speak'. To do so, we need not treat art literally *as* a form of language. J. L. Austin (1962) noted that philosophers had hitherto overlooked the capacity of speakers to *do* things with words. Philosophers were too focused on sense and reference, and he wished to bring out the performative aspect of language use. When we speak, we're not merely uttering sentences with propositional contents, but we're also doing something with those words. The utterance, in that context, has a particular force. Suppose I say "You'll close that door". I say something that has a certain propositional content, what Austin called a 'locutionary act'. But I am also doing something: perhaps issuing a command, making threat, or making a prediction, what Austin calls an 'illocutionary act'. The force of my uttered sentence affects what kind of message I communicate, or the meaning I express.

I shall be arguing that the 'meaning' of artworks likewise has these two components: *illocutionary force* and *propositional content*. While Austin was able to take for granted that sentences have propositional content, that *artworks* have propositional content cannot be taken for granted: it has been highly contested that artworks express propositions. So, my argument that artworks have an 'active meaning' is two-fold: artworks can have illocutionary force and propositional content. When an artwork's content is put forth with a certain force, such as assertion, this comprises a message. It is these messages that comprise an artwork's overall meaning.

This adaption of speech act theory to art, or at least the sentiment, is not new. Indeed, Jerrold Levinson claims that "art-making...is closely analogous to a speech act: an act of

attempted communication...” (1996: 180). However, this investigation has hitherto almost exclusively been concerned with *literary* art such as poems⁹, and barely at all in relation to visual art, which most of the time has merely been gestured to.¹⁰ A few philosophers have more systematically adapted speech act theory to visual works, most notably Novitz (1977) and Kjørup (1974; 1977). But these have tended to limit their arguments to more simple pictures, such as visual signs used in ordinary conversation. My thesis ventures into relatively uncharted territory: I focus on *visual art*, and adapt aspects of speech act theory to what I call the ‘artworld’, doing justice to the artworld’s complexities, such as exhibition-making and the role of the curator.

2.2. *Flexible meaning and the overlooked curator*

Meaning, which includes both content and force, is normally informed by the context of utterance, in linguistic situations. For example, we need to consult the context of utterance in which a speaker says, “I’ll take that one”, to fully parse the sentence’s content and force: what does the demonstrative ‘that’ refer to, who is the speaker, and is this an order or request?

Similarly for artwork meaning, a work’s content and its force are informed by context. Grounding an artwork’s meaning in its perceptual properties alone, or the artist’s intentions alone, is too limited to make sense of how we engage with art. Indeed, it’s been argued that the formal qualities of a work are connected to historical facts (Walton, 1970; Davies, 2006b: 60), and concentrating on artist intentions alone has absurd consequences for meaning more generally. So, when determining artwork meaning, the context needs to be consulted in some way.

The aesthetics literature acknowledges the importance of context to a work’s meaning, in particular, the context in which the artwork was created.¹¹ But it is yet to give sufficient attention to the question of whether the context of a curated exhibition in the artworld, and the role of the curator in a certain socio-political context, bear on artwork meaning.¹²

⁹ For example, see Eaton (1983), de Gaynesford (2009; 2011), Mikkonen (2010), and Mole (2013).

¹⁰ For example, see Levinson (1996: 180) and Stecker (2003: 20).

¹¹ See for example Davies (1996; 2006b), Levinson (1990), and Stecker (2003).

¹² A notable exception is Ventzislavov (2014). However, Ventzislavov doesn’t explore in detail as to how exactly the curator can contribute to artwork meaning, and moreover, he focuses more on the relation between the curator and artistic value.

Originating from the word *cura* (care) from the Medieval period, a curator is someone who cares for, develops, and organises collections of objects, in this case, artworks (Balzer, 2014: 24-27). Broadly speaking, curators are exhibition-makers, ranging from museum employees who research and care for delicate, historical objects such as Chinese fans or European Renaissance illuminated manuscripts, to autonomous freelancers who work in the contemporary artworld, exercising authority and power over large art displays, such as Hans Ulrich Obrist, Beatrix Ruf, and Harald Szeemann.

In recent years, the curator appears to have gathered more power over the generation of meaning in the artworks curated. With Europe's "institutional acceptance" of conceptual art in 1972, and with this the concepts of the exhibition and of curation becoming self-critical (Foster et al, 2004: 554), curators were required to digest and communicate these growing complexities of the artworld in the 1960s and 1970s:

In this crucial moment, the curator's custodial or caretaking position becomes supplanted by that of the connoisseur; or rather, custodianship *becomes* connoisseurship. Curators no longer tended ground, but secured, organised and landscaped it (Balzer, 2014: 40).

When developing a show, curators implement an exhibition concept, and liaise with publishers, artists, the media, and galleries, "in effect, shaping creatively in their own right" (Wells, 2007: 29). Hans Ulrich Obrist writes:

[The curator] is no longer understood as simply the person who fills a space with objects, but as the person who brings different cultural spheres into contact, invents new display features, and makes junctions that allow unexpected encounters and results (2014: 24).

Curators are thus beginning to take on more creative and artistic roles, constructing and shaping dialogues between works – works that are not always intended by their artists to be exhibited together. Consequently, the curator and the artist "now closely imitate each other's position" (O'Neill, 2010: 252)¹³, but where the artwork and artist are often "subsumed by the identity of the whole curatorial endeavour" (O'Neill, 255). Indeed, the curator Liz Wells (2007: 31-32) talks of "curatorial strategy" and "curatorial voice" forming "critical

¹³ Ventsislavov even argues that "curating should be understood as a fine art" (2014: 83).

interventions” in the exhibition space, where artists’ works are used to fit into a broader project defined by the curator.

The curator, their place in the artworld, and the wider socio-political contexts in which they operate, have been overlooked in the literature on artwork meaning. My thesis gives them some much-needed attention. In particular, I focus on the effects of curation in exhibitions. I consider how curation creates norms of communication within the artworld, how it helps generate metaphorical content in artworks, and how it can help create new situations in which artworks are interpreted, resulting, I argue, in their meaning accumulating. Broadly, I argue that curatorial decisions can affect the meaning of artworks by influencing what is done and said by the work as a speech act. In other words, curation and context are the mechanisms by which artworks can *shift* in their content and force.¹⁴

2.3. *Shallow and deep meaning*

When we inspect what *Guernica* means or says, we notice that it depicts what happened during a specific war – the Spanish Civil War – but it also expresses deeper messages about the nature of war itself. The reason its reproduction was covered up at the UN wasn’t because *Guernica* depicts a specific air raid, but because of what it says *about* that air raid and its more general deeper anti-war message. To make sense of this feature exhibited by most artworks, we need to distinguish between different levels of content in an artwork. Throughout the thesis I make use of this independently motivated distinction; what I call *shallow* content and *deep* content. When shallow or deep content is expressed with a certain illocutionary force, such as assertion, it generates shallow and deep messages. Such messages can be broadly understood as the “the product[s] of coming to understand the work”, by grasping a work’s representational and expressive properties (Nathan, 2006: 282).

A shallow message is generated by what might be called the work’s ‘depictive content’: whatever the work immediately depicts, or what it says at a descriptive level. For example, *Guernica* depicts a light bulb in the sky above the unfolding attack. The painting therefore shallowly says, roughly, *there was a light bulb in the sky when Guernica was bombed*. A deep message of a work can be construed as that content which goes beyond this descriptive content, and forms the ‘point’ of the piece. Deep messages can be expressed

¹⁴ This thought is gestured at by Ivan Gaskell’s suggestion that “meaning might be generated by the juxtaposition of works of art” (2000: 86).

through shallow content, perhaps via the use of metaphor or presupposition. For example, the way that the attack is depicted in *Guernica*, and the painting's use of certain symbols, serve to express the deep message that *war is barbaric*.

Exactly how a work depicts objects at the shallow level has prompted several answers which can be classed into three diverging approaches to depiction: resemblance-based, convention-based, and psychology-based.

The resemblance-based approach to depiction has it that for something to depict an object, it must somehow resemble that object. This resemblance has been understood in a variety of ways. First, in terms of sense as opposed to reference, whereby the mode of presentation (sense) of a picture is "an aspect or view of an object or arrangement of objects, relative to an implicit point (or a variety of points) of view" (Hyman & Bantinaki, 2017). According to Hyman, the sense of a picture is determined by the surface marks constituting colours and shapes, which are governed by optical principles (Hyman, 2006). A picture's sense is considered independent from any artistic style or tradition in which the picture belongs, and independent from any artist intention or experience in the viewer.

Second, resemblance has been understood "in respect of perceptible features that jointly capture the object's overall appearance" (Abell & Bantinaki, 2010: 6). The main proponent of this view, Abell (2009), has it that "different respects of resemblance govern different instances of depiction" (2009: 196), such as optical or response-dependent properties, and these should at least be visible (199). In contrast to Hyman, Abell argues that the various respects of resemblance in a picture do depend on the artist's intentions and offers a Gricean treatment of this artist communication (2009).

Shallow content under a broadly resemblance-based approach would therefore be generated by the picture's surface marks and the colours and shapes they form, or by various aspects of resemblance to the object represented in the artwork, capturing the object's overall appearance as a result of the intention of the artist or picture-maker.

The convention-based approach holds that depiction constitutes the necessary and sufficient structural features of a picture, which are possessed "in virtue of their relationship to other members of the system of representation to which they belong" (Abell & Bantinaki, 2010: 3). Rejecting the idea that there is simple imitation or resemblance to the world, conventionalists hold that depiction is governed instead by sets of conventions and symbols which are part of a representational system, and crucially, which *denote* their objects in the same way that referential terms in language denote objects (Goodman, 1968 and Kulvicki, 2006):

A picture that represents—like a passage that describes—an object refers to and, more particularly, denotes it. Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance (Goodman, 1968: 5).

While depictions and linguistic descriptions are equally “arbitrary” and “conventional”, according to Goodman, they differ in that depiction belongs to a broad symbol system which is analog (syntactically and semantically dense) and replete, meaning that any slight change in the picture’s shapes, lines, composition, size, or colour will be relevant to what the picture represents (Goodman 1968: 229-231). Shallow content under this approach would therefore be generated by the artwork’s denotative symbols which will belong to certain depictive systems. For example, *Guernica* depicts an injured horse because a part of the painting constitutes a symbol which somehow denotes that object, rather than the depiction being governed by a resemblance relation, for instance.¹⁵

Lastly, the psychological approach to depiction can be divided into experiential theories and recognitional theories (Hyman & Bantinaki, 2017). Roughly, an experiential theory holds that for something to depict an object it is necessary that it elicits “a perceptual experience with a certain phenomenology” (Abell & Bantinaki, 2010: 5). This ‘certain phenomenology’ might involve: an illusion that one is seeing the actual thing that is depicted (Gombrich 1977); a ‘two-folded’ experience of both the object depicted and the picture’s surface medium (Wollheim, 1987); an “experienced resemblance” (Hyman & Bantinaki, 2017), whereby our experience of the depiction must resemble in some respect the experience we’d have if we saw the object in the flesh (Budd, 1993; Hopkins, 1995; Peacocke, 1987); or it must cause a game of visual make-believe with the depicted object (Walton, 1990).

In contrast, a recognitional theory holds that for an object to depict something it is necessary that it “engage those mechanisms that are responsible for our ability to recognise that object in the flesh” (Abell & Bantinaki, 2010: 6). This needn’t involve a *felt* experience as per the experiential approaches, but involves ‘sub-personal processes’ of the spectator. According to this theory of depiction, pictures activate recognitional skills in the viewer which are normally used in ordinary visual perception: “a picture of *O* is precisely something

¹⁵ Denotation here is understood as a relation between a symbol and an object, such as between a name and its bearer. For a critical review of Goodman’s notion of denotation in depiction see Hyman & Bantinaki (2017).

which can trigger the interpreter's *O*-recognising abilities" (Schier 1986: 195); "The ability to work out what pictures depict covaries with the ability to recognize their depicta in the flesh" (Lopes, 2005: 170).¹⁶ The competence with which a viewer engages their recognitional abilities will be relativised to certain pictorial systems or styles:

A suitable perceiver for Picasso's *Vollard* must be able to recognize cubist design-content correlations. Somebody who can recognize *Vollard* but cannot interpret cubist pictures is not a suitable perceiver of such a picture. We must say that a suitable perceiver of a picture must have a competence in its system (Lopes, 1996: 153).

Shallow content under a broadly psychological approach would therefore be generated by the artwork eliciting felt or 'sub-personal' experiences similar to those that are caused by seeing objects in ordinary visual perception. For instance, *Guernica* depicts a screaming horse because it invokes in the spectator an experience somehow similar to the one we'd have if we saw such a horse outside of the picture.

All these theories of depiction invoke a particular "standard of correctness" (Abell & Bantinaki, 2010), which will also be relevant to our notion of shallow content. This standard constitutes a necessary condition for depiction: it is needed in order to explain how something forms a depiction of something else, rather than something accidentally resembling an object, or something accidentally eliciting a particular phenomenology in the spectator. For instance, stains on a wall might form the appearance of a face via resemblance relations or by eliciting an experience with the same phenomenology as an experience evoked by a picture of a face (2010: 6). But the stains on the wall do not *depict* a face. So, depiction theorists stipulate a condition or relation that something must bear to an object if it is to depict it.

There are two schools of thought about this standard. The first relates to intention: "something must have been intended by its maker to bear the relevant phenomenological, recognitional, or resemblance relation to an object if it is to depict it" (2010: 7). The second relates to causality, where the content of the depiction must have been caused by the object in some way. While photographs are directly causally related to their objects, some theorists

¹⁶ According to Lopes, denotation plays a role in depiction, but not in Goodman's sense of the relation being arbitrary. Rather, "What pictures symbolise may depend in crucial respects on the perceptual skills of their interpreters" (Lopes, 1996: 93, 111).

hold that non-photographic pictures are indirectly causally related to their objects “via a series of preceding information states that have those objects as their sources” (2010: 7, Lopes 1996). So, an artwork’s shallow content will either be partially generated by the intentions of the artist, or by causal relations between the object depicted and the depiction itself.

I do not intend, in this thesis, to place shallow content in a particular depiction theory; I believe that shallow content in general can be understood rather well under any of the three approaches to depiction. However, as I will explain in Chapter 3, my proposition theory of art potentially invokes a broadly *psychological* theory of depiction, with an intentional standard of correctness. Despite this, I don’t set out to argue for such an approach. Rather, I merely note that given that my proposition theory of art makes use of agents performing cognitive actions, this suggests that it enjoys some obvious links with a broadly psychological and intentional theory of how exactly a picture depicts an object.

Given that my arguments in this thesis are designed to incorporate both picture-based artworks, and artworks which are not strictly speaking pictures such as sculpture and installation, I intend ‘depiction’ to be taken rather broadly, to encompass pictures as well as other art-forms. Unfortunately, not a huge amount has been done to fully extend the notion of depiction to non-pictorial art-forms. But what can be said is that, depending on which depiction theory is adhered to, it will need to be tweaked to allow for certain resemblance, conventional, or psychological ‘respects’ of depiction, which are unique to the art-form at hand (for instance, sculptures but not pictures have a distinctive relation with 3D space). The extended analysis would presumably be done whilst holding on to core features of that depiction theory, such as resemblance relations, syntax and symbol systems, or psychological qualities (Hopkins, 2003). It is not my goal in this thesis to fully establish such an extension of the concept of depiction, but it’s important to bear in mind that I’m not using the term ‘depiction’ to refer purely to picture-based artworks.¹⁷

The shallow/deep distinction has similar counterparts in the aesthetics literature. For instance, DeWitt Parker anticipated the distinction, labelling it ‘surface meaning’ and ‘depth meaning’ respectively:

¹⁷ See Hopkins (2003) for a more comprehensive application of depiction to sculpture.

Many poems and some works of plastic art possess what I like to call “depth meanings” – meanings of universal scope underneath relatively concrete meanings or ideas. Thus in the following line of one of Frost's little poems

Nothing gold can stay

the word “gold” has its usual *surface meaning*, but underneath that is its *depth meaning*, precious; so in addition to saying that nothing golden can endure, the poet is saying that nothing valuable can abide — a more universal statement (Parker, 1920: 32).

More recent theorists allude to this distinction as well. A shallow message can be unpacked as being generated by what a work represents or depicts at its “subject level” (Lamarque, 2009: 150) or “descriptive level” (Korsmeyer, 1985: 203). For example, the subject level of *Guernica* consists of an airstrike destroying a town; the painting represents, at a shallow level, the bombing of Guernica. This will in turn express a shallow message related to this content, such as *Guernica was destroyed in the Spanish Civil War*. Deep messages, on the other hand, can be unpacked as belonging to the ‘theme’ of the work, which form “a perspective or...general reflection that informs the subject matter and moves beyond the immediate events portrayed” (Lamarque, 150). Or, deep messages can be considered comprising the ‘thesis’ or ‘point’ of a work (Carroll, 2001: 166), the work’s ‘moral messages’ (Korsmeyer, 203), or they might comprise what Gabriel Greenberg calls “artistic representation” as opposed to pictorial representation: “...artworks are characteristically tuned to expressive and metaphorical significance beyond literal content...” (2013: 220). For example, a thesis of *Guernica* might be that *war is barbaric*. Moreover, shallow messages are commonly considered to be often expressed explicitly, and deep messages often expressed implicitly (Carroll, *ibid* & Weitz, 1950: 142).

I don’t intend these other conceptions to entirely capture the shallow/deep distinction in artworks. For instance, shallow/deep content will not always correspond with being explicit/implicit, for deep messages could be expressed explicitly and shallow messages expressed implicitly. Moreover, shallow/deep content will not always correspond with being non-moral/moral, for shallow messages can be moral messages, and deep messages needn’t be morally loaded. But I hope that these other conceptions help further clarify the distinction.

It’s important to note that the above is not meant to suffice as a definition of these meaning levels in art. And this thesis is not an attempt to argue for their existence. Rather,

I make use of this distinction which is frequently used in the aesthetics literature, and which is hopefully familiar and intuitive to art-viewers.

3. Thesis plan

While each chapter in this thesis is designed to be self-contained, each one complements and provides further support for the other, either by one chapter defending assumptions made in another, or by one chapter filling in explanatory gaps and consequences left open by another. The dialectic is as follows.

Chapter 1 – *The Illocutionary Force of Artworks* – argues that artworks can perform illocutionary acts. We talk about art ‘challenging’, ‘protesting’, and ‘questioning’ certain states of affairs. Within natural language, these are familiar speech acts: things we normally do with words. But can art – and, more pressingly, non-verbal art – perform such actions? How artworks do things without words is far from obvious. Chapter 1 defends the claim that art can perform such actions, and identifies these with J.L Austin’s ‘illocutionary acts’. By drawing on Austin’s speech act theory (1962), I argue that art has the capacity to perform acts like criticism, protest, assertion, etc., enabling it to contribute to our understanding of reality.

Chapter 2 – *Can Art Lie?* – explores in detail an offshoot from Chapter 1: the act of lying. We learn from art and we believe that it can reveal truths about reality. But can artworks lie? If they can, this may explain what we find objectionable in certain artworks, affect how we interpret them, and have consequences for the culpability of the artist. The aim of Chapter 2 is to establish whether representational visual art can lie, where lying is treated as an insincere assertion. I argue that art *can lie*, but only in contexts where communication should be truthful: contexts in which H. P. Grice’s first Maxim of Quality, “Do not say what you believe to be false”, is in effect. I argue that this is a genre/curation sensitive issue, and so whether art can lie is a context-sensitive matter.

Chapter 2 assumes that art can express propositions, and a lot rests on this assumption. Propositions are the bearers of truth-value. And if art cannot express propositions, then it’s unclear how art can lie, given that lying involves expressing or saying something believed to be false. Chapter 3 – *Artworks Express Propositions: a Soamesian Picture* – argues that artworks do have propositional content, thereby providing support to the assumption made in Chapter 2: artworks can say true and false things. Call this ‘the proposition theory of art’.

I deal with three main difficulties for this view, and I show how Scott Soames' (2014b, 2014d) recent theory of propositions might help us understand how artworks have propositional content.

Visual artworks tend to say a lot more than what they merely depict. For instance, van Gogh's oil painting *A Pair of Shoes* (1886) has been taken to say things about the nature of labour and the life of the peasant. But a problem arises: how are such messages expressed, when all is depicted is a pair of boots? It might be argued that it's unclear how artworks can express such deep meanings without words, and how familiar pragmatic mechanisms used to express deep meanings in verbal conversation might translate to the artworld. Chapter 4 – *Metaphor in Art* – argues that metaphor can help explain how an artwork expresses these deeper messages. I first explore how we should understand metaphor in art more generally. I consider a seemingly obvious contender, that of *visual metaphor* (Carroll 1994), but I argue that this should be rejected. I then develop an alternative proposal, which aims to do justice to a neglected phenomenon in the generation of metaphors in art: an artwork's historical context and its curation can help generate metaphors in the artwork. This power to draw on metaphor is one way that artworks can convey their deeper meanings.

Chapters 1-4 make use of the mechanism of *curation*. For instance, I argue that the way a work is curated can affect whether or not the work lies, and what metaphors it might express. In other words, I claim that curation can affect the meaning of an artwork. If true, then artwork meaning can shift over time: for different curators will have different beliefs and different agendas about the curated works, thereby affecting what the work expresses (for instance, what metaphors are expressed). However, this flies in the face of a dominant view in the philosophy of art: what I call Originalism. Originalism in art is the view that the meaning of an artwork is fixed by factors that held at the time of the work's creation. This means that artworks cannot change in meaning: as time goes by, and throughout their different curation, their meaning remains fixed. If Originalism is true, and artwork meaning cannot change, then curation cannot affect artwork meaning.

The final chapter, 5 – *Alterpieces: Against Originalism in Art* – argues against Originalism, and shows that artworks *can* change in meaning, given certain conditions. I call this view 'Constructivism'. The role of the curator is therefore not ruled out as playing an important role in determining artwork meaning.

A typical motivation behind Originalism is the plausible ontological claim that an artwork is a historically indexed object; its meaning is informed by its original context, and typically, Constructivist views don't do justice to this. Using the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1516)

as a case study, I argue for a Constructivist position that does do justice to this nature of artworks: an artwork receives its meaning in its original context, but the work can accumulate (alter) in meaning in subsequent contexts: artwork content and force can shift across time and place.

Chapters 1-5 together develop the two main arguments of the thesis. First, artwork meaning is *active*. I argue that visual artworks, under certain conditions, are speech acts, and so possess active meanings: they have illocutionary force, and have propositional content. I defend these contested claims against several dissenters, and explore some consequences: in particular, I explore how art can lie, a hitherto neglected question.

Second, artwork meaning is *flexible*. I argue that what an artwork says and does is affected by the context in which it's displayed, and in particular, by its curation. This goes against the dominant Originalist approach in the philosophy of art; that the meaning of an artwork is fixed by factors which held at the time of the work's creation, and so cannot change across time. I argue that this is mistaken: artworks can change in meaning. Curatorial factors can affect an artwork's content and force, and consequently its social effects.¹⁸

These two arguments thus comprise the title of the thesis: *Alterpieces: artworks as shifting speech acts*.

Some notes about methodology and technical terms. Where I talk about the 'artworld' I mean to refer broadly to the social institution composed of people involved in the creation, criticism, preservation, production, and sale of fine art (Becker, 1982: x). This broad institution can be more accurately seen as consisting of multiple and interacting institutions and networks including galleries, museums, professions in the arts, art education, and the art market. The origin of the term 'artworld' can be traced back to Arthur Danto, who understands the artworld to be "an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art" (1964: 580): it is the existence of artistic theories that makes the artworld and works of art possible (581). While Danto uses this more theory-laden conception of an artworld, my thesis will invoke a more general concept, pertaining to the various institutions and networks involved in the making and presenting of art to a public, as well as to the general art theory and art history which binds these domains.

Moreover, the works of art I attend to in the thesis and which I include in this 'artworld' cover a wide spectrum, ranging from works that were originally created for churches and serving a religious function – and which today sit in our galleries and museums – to works

¹⁸ For the artistic *value* of works that primarily socially engage with society, see Simoniti (2018).

that were created intentionally for the more familiar artworld we know today.¹⁹ More specifically, the kind of art-forms that fall within the scope of the thesis are exclusively visual representational art. ‘Visual art’ is here understood as including painting, sculpture, installation, photography, and performance, spanning across art history. For ease of investigation, I focus on a select few paintings, but my arguments are intended to generalise to other plastic mediums in the artworld that are representational in some way, but which do not contain linguistic symbols (such as words) in their composition. ‘Representational art’ is here understood rather loosely, where the artwork depicts, represents, or stands for, an aspect of reality in some way. This will include works that depict or represent via more traditional methods such as imitation, but also via less straightforward and more abstract methods.

My arguments do not generalise, though, to *purely* abstract artworks: works which do not clearly represent anything at all, whether an object or concept. However, I don’t see this limit to my arguments as a problem, but rather a merit. For it’s unclear how purely abstract art has any meaning at all, and we wouldn’t want a theory of artwork meaning to overgenerate to such specimens. Such art forms, if they are even ‘art’, will require separate investigation.

Lastly, it should be noted that sometimes artworks are discussed in the thesis by reference to magazines and gallery websites rather than academic sources. The reason for this is to capture examples of how a layperson and average viewer actually understands the artwork in question, rather than only drawing on academic writers. Where appropriate, I refer to academic writings when outlining a work’s particular history, but I sometimes use more informal sources when discussing examples of interpretations given for a work of art by a range of people.

4. Implications for the Intentionalist Debate

The Intentionalist Debate today can be divided into two main camps: what I call Originalist and Anti-Originalist. According to the Originalist camp, the facts that determine the meaning of an artwork are exhausted by the (relevant) facts about the work’s original context, i.e. the

¹⁹ For more definitions of ‘artworld’ see Danto (1981), Dickie (1984), and Davies (2015).

context in which it was created. Consequently, artwork meaning cannot change over time in new contexts: it is fixed to its original setting.

Traditionally, three broad positions fall under the Originalist banner. First, *Actual Intentionalist* views hold that an artwork's meaning is determined somehow by the actual artist's intentions. Historically, this type of view is divided into either extreme or more moderate versions. According to extreme actual intentionalism, the meaning of an artwork is simply what the artist intended, even when that intention is not supported or detected in the work itself. This 'identity thesis' is widely rejected in the philosophy of art, so I won't deal with it further.²⁰ In contrast, moderate actual intentionalism holds that an artwork's meaning is determined by the artist's *successfully* realised intentions, i.e. those intentions that are supported by the work itself.²¹ This emphasises the artist's actual original intention, but it also blocks 'Humpty Dumpy' communication, where the artwork is supposed to mean whatever the artist intends it to mean. On this account, the intention is recognised through conventions and other facts that held in the work's context of creation (Carroll 2000: 79, 82; Davies 1996: 21). So, the meaning of *Guernica* is whatever Picasso successfully intended the painting to mean.

Second, *Hypothetical Intentionalism* holds that an artwork's meaning is determined by a suitable audience's hypotheses about the artist's intentions; hypotheses which are based on the linguistic and artistic conventions that held in the work's context of creation (Levinson 1996; 2010, Davies 1996: 21).²² This emphasises the actual artist's perceived, or imputed, original intention. So, the meaning of *Guernica* is determined by the intentions a suitable audience is best justified in attributing to Picasso, regardless of the intentions Picasso actually had.

And third, *Conventionalism* holds that, regardless of the artist's intention, the conventions of language and art that were in effect when the work was produced are sufficient to secure the meaning of the artwork (Davies, 1996: 21).²³ Conventionalism emphasises the artwork's original context, but not the artist's original intention, actual or

²⁰ Originally held by Hirsch (1967) and Knapp & Michaels (1982), the view is now unpopular in the literature. However, see Stock (2017) for a recent defence of the theory.

²¹ Moderate actual intentionalists include Carroll (1992; 2000; 2001) and Stecker (2006).

²² The main proponent of Hypothetical Intentionalism is Jerrold Levinson (1992; 1995; 2010). There are other versions of Hypothetical Intentionalism which postulate a hypothesised or fictional author (see Nathan 1982; 2006 and Currie 1990: 78), but such views would fall into the Anti-Originalist camp because they detach the work from its artist's context of creation.

²³ David Davies can be said to hold a kind of Conventionalist view about *literary* artwork meaning at least (Davies, 2007: 82).

perceived. It is a form of ‘Anti-intentionalism’, in that it rejects as necessary the artist’s intentions – actual or merely hypothesised – in determining work meaning.²⁴ When deciphering a work’s meaning, artist’s intentions need have no relevance, giving the work autonomy from the beliefs of its creator. Here, the meaning of *Guernica* is determined by facts about the work’s original setting, and what Picasso intended or may have intended for the work, has no role in determining the meaning of the painting. One particular theory of artwork meaning – a version of ‘value-maximising theory’ (Davies, 1996; 2006a) – can be characterised as Conventionalist. According to this specific theory, the meaning of an artwork is determined first by the conventional meanings of the parts of the artwork, whether visual or linguistic, and second, by whatever interpretation of the artwork’s content would maximise the aesthetic value of the work (Davies, 2006a). Crucially, this kind of value-maximising theory emphasises the work’s original context when deciphering the conventional parts of the work (Davies, 1996 fn. 3; 2006a). For the purposes of this thesis, I’ll refer more generally to Conventionalism rather than to specific value-maximising theories.

Anti-Originalists deny the central Originalist claim: it is *not* the case that the facts that determine the meaning of an artwork are exhausted by the (relevant) facts about the work’s original context.

A traditional way to be an Anti-Originalist is to adhere to ‘The New Criticism’: a movement in aesthetic theory which released the artwork from its maker, minimising facts about the work’s origin, and in its extreme, spelled the ‘death of the author’²⁵. The New Critic not only denies the Originalist claim, but much more besides. The New Critic makes the additional move of *entirely* rejecting a work’s original context as informing its meaning. Historic facts about the artwork’s origin, such as facts about the society in which the work was created, are irrelevant to the work’s meaning. A breed of Anti-intentionalism, it holds that artist’s intentions – actual or hypothesised – have no relevance at all to artwork meaning, and interpreters should give the work complete autonomy from the beliefs of its creator. Divorcing an artwork’s meaning from its original context and the intentions of its creator

²⁴ Hypothetical Intentionalism can also be construed as Anti-intentionalist, in that it rejects the artist’s *actual* intentions as determinants of work meaning. However, my thesis remains neutral about this taxonomy; whether Hypothetical Intentionalism is an Intentionalist position, like Actual Intentionalism is, or whether it’s Anti-intentionalist. My arguments don’t hinge on this terminological difference.

²⁵ See for example Beardsley (1970), Nathan (1982; 2006), and Wimsatt & Beardsley (1946). While Roland Barthes was not a member of the New Criticism school, his theory of the ‘death of the author’ (1967) shares similarities with it; specifically, in being against the notion that the author’s intention and their biographical context has any effect or power over the meaning of their work.

has the advantage of explaining how artworks seem to supposedly gain new meanings after their author or artist has died (Beardsley, 1992: 26). For example, *Guernica* could mean something quite new, in the context of a 2003 UN debate about the Iraq war.

Another stripe of value-maximising theory can be characterised as Anti-Originalist in this way, namely, that artwork meaning is determined by the interpretation that maximises the artwork's aesthetic value, but is constrained only by the conventional parts of the work, and not by the work's original context.²⁶ This is in contrast to Stephen Davies's version of the theory, which constrains interpretations to those that are faithful to the work's original context. Again, I won't deal with value-maximising theory in either of its stripes, but more generally with the fundamental commitments they hold: being Originalist or Anti-Originalist.

My argument has implications for this Intentionalist Debate. Where relevant throughout the thesis, I outline the specific ways my arguments enter into the debate, but I'll sum them up here.

My argument that artwork meaning is *active*, resting on a speech act analysis of art, is as it stands neutral on the Intentionalist Debate. But I sketch out how a speech act theory of art might fit within Moderate Actual Intentionalist, Hypothetical Intentionalist, and broadly Anti-intentionalist pictures of artwork meaning (both Originalist and Anti-Originalist), noting some consequences along the way.

However, my related argument that artwork meaning is *flexible* – via the theoretical importance that the thesis as a whole gives to the curator – casts doubt on *all* of the positions in the Intentionalist Debate that I outlined above. This is because I argue for an Anti-Originalist picture of artwork meaning, by assigning the curator in non-original contexts a role in determining artwork meaning. If what I've argued is true, then Moderate Actual Intentionalism, Hypothetical Intentionalism, and Conventionalism, are all ruled out, for these are all Originalist positions. My position also rules out the existing Anti-Originalist Anti-intentionalist approach – that of the New Critic – in that my approach still gives a work's original context theoretic importance in determining artwork meaning. This leaves us with a need to carve out new space in the debate.

The current main players in the Intentionalist Debate are Originalist: Moderate Actual Intentionalism, Hypothetical Intentionalism, and Conventionalism, where each of these assign factors in the original context different importance. They have in common a core

²⁶ Alan Goldman's value-maximising theory (1990) can be said to be along these Anti-Originalist lines.

claim: “the meaning of a work is determined by circumstances obtaining at its creation” (Davies, 1996: 22). But, the underexplored question of the artworld context and the role of the curator in artwork meaning, which my thesis addresses, opens up some other possible positions that have been hitherto unnoticed. Traditionally, it looks like the only way to be Anti-Originalist is by being a New Critic. But this menu as it stands is too restrictive, and my thesis exposes some partitions in the logical space of the debate that haven’t yet been noticed.

A consequence of my thesis is that while intentions might have some kind of role to play in determining artwork meaning, this needn’t just be the artist’s intentions. For instance, works can perform illocutionary acts, or lie, based on the beliefs and intentions of both the artist and the *curator*. This suggests that we should acknowledge an *augmented* or *expanded Intentionalism* that assigns a role to the curator as well as the artist in determining artwork meaning. This could either be an expanded Moderate Actual Intentionalism or an expanded Hypothetical Intentionalism. These Anti-Originalist variants of Moderate Actual Intentionalism and Hypothetical Intentionalism would each capture the importance of the original context to artwork meaning, but also capture the flexibility of artwork meaning in new, non-original contexts.

I should stress that my thesis is by no means an argument for such expanded intentionalist positions, nor does it comprise a solid knockdown objection to the existing positions in the Intentionalist Debate. The central two arguments of the thesis are that artworks are *active* in meaning, and *flexible* in meaning. However, the results from at least the second argument about meaning flexibility cast doubt on the existing positions in the Intentionalist Debate, and they suggest schemas for possible augmented intentionalist positions. In the Conclusion of the thesis I’ll outline in more detail these Anti-Originalist variants of Moderate Actual Intentionalism and Hypothetical Intentionalism.

Chapter One

1. The Illocutionary Force of Artworks

Abstract

This chapter argues that artworks can perform illocutionary acts. We talk about artworks ‘challenging’, ‘protesting’, and ‘questioning’ certain states of affairs. Within natural language, these are familiar ‘speech acts’: things we normally do with words. But can art – and more pressing still, non-verbal art – perform such actions? How artworks do things without words is far from obvious. Chapter 1 defends the claim that artworks can perform such actions, and identifies these with J.L Austin’s illocutionary acts. By drawing on Austin’s speech act theory (1962), I argue that art has the capacity to perform actions like criticism, protest, assertion, etc., enabling it to contribute to our understanding of states of affairs in reality.

1. Introduction

Many visual artworks – such as paintings, sculptures, films, installations, performance, and photographs – represent things, and so have content: that is, there is something they represent. But for centuries, we’ve talked as if, through this representation, visual artworks *do* things. When artists, art critics, and philosophers talk and write about artworks, they frequently make the assumption that such works are capable of performing certain actions such as stating, denouncing, protesting, criticising, etc. For instance, recall Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), which is said to *protest against*, *criticise*, and *denounce* the disastrous effects of war, as well as *asserting* certain anti-war views and *pleading* for peace.

Such actions – protesting, criticising, denouncing, asserting, and pleading – are familiar things that we normally do with words. For instance, when a frantic father shouts ‘Look out, it’s slippery!’ when his daughter walks on a frozen lake, he is *warning* her about the ice. Or, when the officer shouts to her troops ‘Open fire!’ she is *ordering* them to shoot. When we speak, we don’t merely utter sentences with certain contents, but we also do something with those words: the uttered words have a force. When I utter a sentence and express a proposition – what J. L. Austin (1962) calls a ‘*locutionary act*’ – like, “You’ll close that door”, I might be issuing a command, threat, or making a prediction – what Austin calls an ‘*illocutionary act*’ (I call this act an ‘*illocution*’ for short). It is the locution and illocution that comprises what Austin calls the overall ‘speech act’.¹ Likewise, artworks are about things and express certain contents, but also seem to put forth this content with an illocutionary force.² These two components – content and force – combine to create speech acts, which express messages or meanings. It is the supposed *illocutionary force* of art, as opposed to its content, that forms the focus of this chapter.

But can visual art perform illocutions without using words? Or are our beliefs about, and descriptions of, artworks doing such things, actually mistaken? The capacity to perform illocutions through non-verbal means is far from obvious, for in such cases there is no speech

¹ The term ‘speech act’ is frequently used in the literature to refer to the illocution alone, and not to the locutionary act. I however follow Austin’s usage of the term (1962: 146), where ‘speech act’ refers to both the locutionary act and illocutionary act, i.e. an utterance with a performative element.

² See Novitz (1977) and Kjørup (1974; 1978) for support of the idea that *pictures*, at least, can perform illocutions, and Young (2001) and Crane (2009) for resistance of this claim.

ordinarily understood used to perform the act.³ You might think that visual art and other representations cannot perform such acts without at least being accompanied by a verbal language: “It seems to me that someone could assert something by using a picture – but *only* by saying something too” (Crane, 2009: 458). Some have thought it ludicrous to claim that artworks can perform illocutions, for instance the act of arguing: “the suggestion that paintings, sculptures, works of architecture and musical compositions provide arguments is...frankly incredible” (Young, 2001: 70).

This chapter argues for the claim that visual art can perform illocutions by drawing on J.L Austin’s speech act theory (1962), and David Novitz’s (1977) and Søren Kjørup’s (1974; 1978) adaption of Austin’s theory to pictures. I do not comprehensively defend Austin’s theory. Rather, I present a workable explanation of it and I explore how it can be used to argue that artworks can perform illocutions. It’s also important to note that I neither claim that art can perform all illocutions, nor that all artworks can perform illocutions. Art may be unable to promise for example, as Kjørup points out (1974: 219). Equally, it’s unclear what acts might be performed by more abstract works such as Rothko’s colour-field paintings or Mondrian’s geometric paintings. I don’t want to rule out such examples, but I make the weaker claim that some artworks can perform some illocutions.

This adaption of speech act theory to art, or at least the notion, is not new. Jerrold Levinson claimed that “art-making...is closely analogous to a speech act: an act of attempted communication...” (1996: 180). However, this investigation has almost exclusively been concerned with *literary* art such as poems⁴, and barely at all in relation to visual art; which is most of the time merely gestured to.⁵ This chapter makes a start at filling this gap. Moreover, my account both expands on, and diverges from, Novitz’s (1977) and Kjørup’s (1974; 1977) adaption of speech act theory to visual works. I expand on these two theories by dealing with visual *artworks*, as shown in artworld spaces such as galleries, rather than

³ This problem also arises in the debate about whether pornography is harmful speech: there are reservations about whether pornography constitutes any kind of speech act at all, for most pornography consists of images rather than words. See Langton (1993), Jennifer Hornsby (2011), and Louise Antony (2011). What I say in this chapter should apply *mutatis mutandis* to pornography, and so form a response to the objection that pornography cannot perform speech acts, though I do not directly address this issue.

⁴ For example, see Eaton (1983), de Gaynesford (2009; 2011), Mikkonen (2010), and Mole (2013).

⁵ For example, see Levinson (1996: 180) and Stecker (2003: 20). Moreover, the literature on ‘performativity’ in the visual arts focuses on art’s performing of *perlocutionary* acts, for instance by changing artworld conventions (see von Hantelmann, 2010). The focus of this chapter though is on a different kind of act: the act performed “*in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something” (Austin, 1962: 99), i.e. *illocution*.

focusing merely on how simple pictures can be used as visual signs in everyday conversation. And, as will become clear, I diverge from both Novitz and Kjørup in how I treat the relations between artist, artwork, and speech act.

My arguments will show that many artworks are not mere representations or mere vehicles for emotion, contrary to theories that pervade in aesthetics. Such theories overlook art's vital capacity to perform actions; a capacity that has implications for debates on what is communicated by art, and the moral status of art. In particular – and as I'll show later in the chapter – once we analyse more carefully what's involved in performing speech acts, this has implications for the Intentionalist Debate in aesthetics; a debate that considers the role of the artist's intentions about their artwork, and the relationship between these intentions and the work itself. Aesthetic theories about artist meaning, then, ought to take into account the active nature of artistic communication. Section 2 gives some data which suggests that artworks perform illocutions. Section 3 outlines Austin's account of speech acts. Section 4 considers how this account can be extended to visual artworks and considers the implications of this for the Intentionalist Debate. Section 5 concludes.

2. *The force of art*



Figure 1

Picasso's *Guernica* is a large, looming painting, consisting of many different shades of black and grey exploding into chaotic shapes and distorted, screaming figures. The painting depicts the air raid that destroyed the ancient town of Guernica in the tenth month of the Spanish Civil war. Picasso began making sketches five days after the devastating attack by Luftwaffe

and Mussolini planes, and he then took just five weeks to complete the painting (Clark, 2013: 242). The piece was first exhibited to the public in the entrance hall of the Spanish Republic's pavilion at the Paris World's Fair. The show was curated such that *Guernica* sat opposite a large commemorative photograph of Garcia Lorca, the socialist poet who was executed during the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. In-between these two pieces sat Alexander Calder's *Mercury Fountain* with mercury falling into its pool (a main export for Spain). Outside the pavilion was a cinema showing films of the civil war (Clark, 240).

When viewing this piece, the viewer feels that the work not merely depicts the effects of war, but that it is also *doing* something. Armed with the specific context in which *Guernica* was created and displayed, it seems natural to say that *Guernica* is not only depicting or representing the air raid and the violence, or expressing an emotion such as anger towards it, but is also *deploring* and *denouncing* it. The work appears to *protest against*, *criticise*, and *challenge* the disastrous effects of war, as well as *asserting* certain anti-war views. In other words, there is more to the painting than its mere content. An art critic writes:

Guernica...is a picture that makes its giant size...work to confirm a wholly earthbound, and essentially modest, view of life. Life, says the painting, is an ordinary, carnal, entirely unnegotiable value...it finds a way to propose this visually (Clark, 2013: 246-248).

The artworld is abundant with artworks that seem to make statements and perform other actions towards their subject matter or content. This is evident in the broad range of art criticism. I've taken a fraction of such examples (which I've italicised):

[About Brueghel's 'Conversion of Saul' (1567)] It has been suggested that the picture *commemorates* in some fashion the passage of Alba and his troops through the Alps in spring of 1567 (Gibson, 1977: 182).

[About Lubaina Himid's 'Revenge' (1991-92)] 'Revenge' is at once a monument to the victims of the transatlantic slave trade, a *critique* of the patriarchy, and a space for dialogue. This series is a *lamentation*, an *act of mourning* transfigured in to a new phase (*Modern Art Oxford*, 2016).

What makes an artwork powerful and provocative is not just what it depicts or the emotion it supposedly expresses, but *how* it puts forth that content; the illocutions it performs. Indeed, the contemporary artist Lubaina Himid has said “I am a political strategist who uses a visual language to encourage conversation, argument, change”.⁶

The assumption that artworks are capable of performing illocutions also underlies discussions about the ethical evaluation of art. The view that the moral value of an artwork affects its aesthetic value involves analysing the moral stances or “attitudes” possessed by an artwork and how these affect its overall value (Gaut, 1998: 182). Berys Gaut understands this as the work displaying pro or con attitudes towards a state of affairs, and this can be done in many ways. It looks like though for something to take or display a pro or con attitude there involves a doing of something, such as *commending* or *deploring* a state of affairs.

Moreover, philosophers engaged in the debate assessing the relevance of the artist’s intentions to artwork meaning also assume that artworks can perform actions. Robert Stecker writes,

We can talk about *what a painting does and what it is intended to do*: what it represents, expresses, how its formal features interact among themselves and with representational features, and what the painting is intended to do along these lines. Since these are the things we need to identify to understand and appreciate a painting, it is not an unreasonable extension of the word “meaning” to call these things aspects of the meaning of a painting...It is analogous to utterance meaning, *since it identifies things the artist “does” in the work...just as utterance meaning identifies what a speaker does in using certain words* (2003: 20, my emphasis).

And Stephen Davies argues that recognising what an artwork is doing is vital to understanding what it’s about:

Picasso’s impassioned painting *Guernica* is yet more powerful when seen as a *protest* against the bombing of the town by fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War (2006b: 68, my emphasis).

While this chapter focuses on visual art, it’s worth noting that non-art visual representations frequently seem to perform illocutions as well. Pictorial road signs, adverts, and visual

⁶ From *Modern Art Oxford* (2016).

propaganda are paradigmatic examples. Moreover, it's been argued that some visual pornography constitutes harm to women because it performs the illocution of subordination. In particular, because the pornographic material may have a kind of authority over consumers, it's argued that it subordinates women through what it depicts, and through the manner of this depiction.⁷

This is a brief overlook, but it reveals the extent to which artists, philosophers, and art critics take for granted the assumption that artworks and other images can perform illocutions; actions we normally do with words. To better understand this, we need a grasp on what speech acts ordinarily are, within language.

3. *How to do things with words*

Consider a student protest to the government against the rise in tuition fees. The students shout "No ifs, no buts, no education cuts!" and use these words to argue that the increase in fees is wrong. The intended effect of their arguing is to persuade the government to reconsider their decision. According to Austin, three elements are at work in this speech act (1962: 94-101). The uttering of the words "No ifs...!" is what Austin would call the *locutionary act*. In addition to expressing a certain proposition, the utterance of these words (and sentences) in this particular context constitutes the action of arguing, and it is this action that Austin labels the *illocutionary act* (illocution). The protestors' intended effect of convincing the government is the *perlocutionary effect* or *perlocutionary act*, which is separate to the illocution. Note that the protestors can still perform the illocution of arguing without achieving their desired perlocutionary effect of persuading the government.

Illocutions, i.e. the acts performed "*in saying something as opposed to performance of an act of saying something*" (Austin, 1962: 99), require certain conditions to be in place for their smooth performance, i.e. 'felicity' conditions: "some at least of the things which are necessary for the smooth or 'happy' functioning of a performative" (Austin, 14).

First, the correct 'locution' needs to be performed. Most of Austin's examples focus on the illocutions that are performed by a *verbal* locutionary act; by the utterance of a

⁷ For more on this see MacKinnon (1993) and Langton (1993). My account provides some much-needed detail and close analysis of how exactly a visual representation can possess illocutionary force; something which is somewhat overlooked in the pornography literature, largely because there, focus is placed on the *political consequences* of such a view about pornographic content.

sentence expressing a proposition. Indeed, that's why we tend to call actions like questioning or asserting *speech* acts. Austin states:

...to perform an illocutionary act is necessarily to perform a locutionary act: that, for example, to congratulate is necessarily to say certain words (1962: 113).

While Austin allows a locutionary act to take a written form as well as a spoken form (1962: 60), he holds here that to perform an illocution must involve a verbal language. Given this, it looks like claiming that art can perform illocutions without a verbal language is doomed from the start, at least insofar as fitting with an Austinian framework.

However, while it is perhaps characteristic for an illocution to be performed by verbal means, it's not essential. In a contradictory vein towards his above remark, Austin claims that illocutions can sometimes be performed in a non-verbal way:

...we can for example warn or order or appoint or give or protest or apologize by non-verbal means and these are illocutionary acts. Thus we may cock a snook or hurl a tomato by way of protest (1962: 118).

A way out of this seeming inconsistency is offered by Novitz:

Austin realises full well that although illocutionary acts are usually performed by speaking, one does not have to speak in order to perform them. Of course, if one performs an illocutionary act by speaking, it is also necessary to have performed a locutionary act. But this is all that Austin admits (1977: 77).

So while Austin was mainly providing an account of verbal speech acts, this does not mean that illocutions are essentially verbally performed. And this seems right. Consider silent protests, greeting another person by smiling, or a pedestrian who objects to, or condemns, a nearby speeding driver, by flinging their arms up in the air.

While we can perform illocutions by using non-verbal locutions, Austin places a restriction on this: these non-verbal means must still be 'conventional'.

Strictly speaking, there cannot be an illocutionary act unless the means employed are conventional, and so the means for achieving its ends non-verbally must be conventional. *But it is difficult to say where conventions begin and end* (118, my

emphasis).

Such non-verbal gestures or locutions will need to be recognized and established in a certain community of interlocutors in order for the resulting illocution to be successful.⁸

There are two readings of this convention restriction, drawn out by Peter Strawson (1964). I call these the strong reading and the weak reading. Under the strong reading, illocutions must be performed using conventional means that are a result of the relevant institution with its constitutive rules. For example, to christen a ship I must possess a certain type of authority and must perform a certain gesture whilst uttering a particular sentence. Indeed, pictorial objects such as road-signs may fall under this strong reading: they act as signals that contain the information they do *qua* conventional sign and not *qua* picture – a blue square may have served just as well to warn drivers of oncoming pedestrians, and succeeds in performing the illocution of a warning purely because there is a convention stipulating that it does.⁹

This strong reading does capture the more ceremonial types of illocutions, such as marrying, calling out in a tennis game, or christening a ship. However, many (if not most) illocutions are not ceremonial in this way, and are merely communicative such as warning someone, greeting someone, or promising something to someone. Such illocutions employ different kinds of conventions: those that are not part of a historical institution or possess constitutive rules. For example, to warn someone I do not need to possess any authority, nor must I perform every time the same type of physical gesture. As Strawson writes, the utterance of ‘The ice over there is very thin’ can be used to issue a warning “without its being the case that there is any storable convention at all” (1964: 444).

For the performance of most ordinary and communicative illocutions, then, we merely need certain linguistic conventions to fix the meaning of the locution: my hearer needs to understand my uttered sentence in the first place in order to grasp the illocution being performed. There needn’t be a conforming to extra-linguistic conventions over and above this in order for the illocution to be performed successfully. This weak reading of the convention restriction is indicated by Austin's claim that:

⁸ This complaint captures Antony’s (2011) objection within the pornography debate: pornography is mainly visual and does not contain words. As a result, it lacks conventions and so cannot perform illocutions: “it is not connected with or governed by conventions in the way that is essential to the operation of performative speech acts” (2011: 387).

⁹ This example is taken from Young (2001: 43).

[the performance of an illocution] may be said to be conventional *in the sense that at least it could be made explicit by the performative formula* (1962: 103, my emphasis).

This can be understood as the claim that the means employed in the performing of an illocution – the locution – must merely be recognised by my interlocutor(s): there must be “general suitability” as Strawson writes (1964: 449). These recognisable and suitable means, such as frantically pointing to the thin ice and gesturing a slit throat with my finger, will then grant or justify the use of the first person performative formula: ‘I’m warning you!’.

Under this weak reading, convention is understood not as consisting of specific constitutive rules as a result of an institution, like with marriage, but instead as consisting of certain means employed that are somewhat established and accepted in the nearby linguistic community, whether this is the uttering of the appropriate sentence or an already recognisable and appropriate gesture, like sending flowers to apologise. Austin seems, then, to intend a more general or weak idea of ‘convention’ when he says that the means employed when performing an illocution must be conventional; he does not intend the strong reading for all illocutions.

So, the means employed to perform an illocution – the locution – need to be conventional: they must be established and recognised in a language community, otherwise communication will not get off the ground. For instance, saying, ‘the frozen lake is beautiful’ will in most cases fail to warn someone about the thin ice, for this uttered sentence is inappropriate, in that context, to perform the act of warning. In other words, the means employed to perform an illocution must be *internally* conventional, in that the means must be recognisable and conventional in themselves. Call this condition *Internal Convention*.

However, for those ceremonial illocutions such as marriage, further conventions in the context of utterance over and above and external to using the correct locution also need to hold for the illocution to be successful (Strawson’s strong reading of Austin is accurate for some cases). Such conventions might be (i) *authoritative*; I can only get married by an authorised celebrant, (ii) *structural*; certain marriage rituals and orders of service must be followed, and closely related (iii) *institutional*; I can have a Christian wedding only within a Christian institution. Call this further condition that applies to some illocutions, *External Convention*.

As well as uttering the correct locution in the correct circumstances, for the “smooth

or happy functioning” (Austin, 14) of some speech acts, argues Austin, the speaker must have the appropriate feelings, thoughts, and intentions (though these needn’t be necessarily distinguished (1962: 41)):

Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further, must actually so conduct themselves subsequently (15).

For instance, in order to congratulate someone smoothly, I must feel pleased for that person, and not annoyed. To find someone guilty smoothly, I must believe that they are guilty. And to smoothly perform the act of promising, I must intend to do what I promise (40). Call this condition *Intention*; some types of illocution, to be performed smoothly, require the speaker to possess the appropriate intentions or beliefs. For instance, *Intention* might be true of the act of promising, but perhaps not true of the act of an order.¹⁰

And last, even if the correct locution is used, for most illocutions to be successful the hearer must also actually understand the force of the speaker’s locution, that is, there needs to be *uptake* in the audience:

I cannot be said to have warned an audience unless it hears what I say and takes what I say in a certain sense. An effect must be achieved on the audience if the illocutionary act is to be carried out . . . Generally the effect amounts to bringing about the understanding of the meaning and of the force of the locution. So the performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of uptake (Austin, 116-17).

Call this condition *Uptake*.¹¹

So, to successfully and smoothly perform an illocution within an Austinian framework: (i) the speaker must use the appropriate locution (*Internal Convention*); (ii) if needed, the correct conventions must be in place in the context in which the locution is made (*External Convention*); (iii) the speaker must possess, if needed, the requisite intentions and thoughts for the smooth performance of the act (*Intention*); and (iv) there must be uptake in

¹⁰ Someone with perceived authority could unintentionally yet smoothly order someone to do something: “coming from *him*, I took it as an order, not as a request” (Austin, 1962: 76).

¹¹ For critical discussion of this condition see de Gaynesford (2011).

the audience (*Uptake*). More precisely, *Internal Convention* and *Uptake* are necessary, and in some cases sufficient, for something to count as an illocution. *Intention* is only necessary for certain types of act to be ‘smoothly’ performed. And *External Convention* is only necessary for those more ceremonial speech acts, such as marriage, where *Internal Convention*, *Uptake* and *Intention* together are not sufficient for the act to come off.

4. *How to do things with art*

We can begin to see how an artwork might perform illocutions. The artwork’s formal elements might roughly correspond to a kind of locution: its shapes, colours, and general forms which serve to depict a certain subject matter will inform what the work represents or the content it expresses.¹² Moreover, if a viewer can understand what the work is about, this might form a kind of uptake. Furthermore, the practice with which we tend to display art has its own conventions, such as curatorial techniques and the nature of the gallery space. This section argues that artworks in the artworld can meet the *Internal Convention*, *External Convention*, *Intention*, and *Uptake* success conditions.

4.1. *Internal Convention*

We’ve established that for illocutions to be performed successfully via non-verbal means, such means need to be internally conventional: they must be recognised, established, and accepted in a community of people.

The problem is whether artworks meet this condition. If they don’t, then this will either rule out their purported illocutionary force, or we’d need to reject the condition altogether. This latter option should be avoided, for to dispense with *Internal Convention* would mean that someone could apologise or assert something, for instance, completely outside any

¹² Novitz draws an analogy between artworks and sentences when he writes that just as a sentence cannot by itself perform an illocution – it must be uttered in a certain context – so too must a visual work be used in a certain context to do something (1977: 7). Here, the artwork is seen as a vehicle to perform illocutions like an uttered sentence is. But since there can be illocutions performed without verbal locutions – that is, things unlike sentences such as non-verbal gestures – it needn’t be the case that artworks must be conceptually or structurally similar to sentences in order for them to perform illocutions. Since my argument that artworks can perform illocutions doesn’t hinge on the claim that artworks are actually like sentences, I do not uphold this contentious analogy.

conventions, but this wouldn't be possible. I cannot apologise to you by handing you a pen if there is no established convention between us both that such an action would count as an apology; the illocution of apologising would be unsuccessful. I will therefore attempt to show instead that at least most visual art does meet *Internal Convention*.

In verbal performances of illocutions there needs to be an understood language, and in non-verbal cases the gestures need to be understood and recognised within the wider context. Similarly in art, there are conventional 'gestures' within art-making, and in particular within the formal features of a work, which will facilitate illocutions. Here I understand 'conventional art-making' in a rather loose sense, involving a merely recognisable and established means of depicting or representing something.

As John Hyman writes, "Certainly, rules and conventions of various kinds are involved in making and interpreting pictures" (2006: 171).¹³ What a painting or sculpture represents, and the way it represents it, can be recognisable, understood, and interpreted by many viewers. This can be achieved by depiction at the surface level of the work, and through more complex means such as metaphor and symbol; all of which make use of convention in some way.¹⁴

First, there are recognisable 'gestures' within the artworld used to depict reality, which come in several forms such as style and genre. Hyman gives an example of such a 'rule' which is "involved in making and perceiving pictures":

...there are *technical* rules, such as Alberti's rules for drawing a pavement in perspective... or the techniques set out in the classic Chinese manual, *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, [which includes] specific techniques for painting orchids, bamboo, plum trees, and so on... These are techniques for the application of slip or ink, which are designed to control the appearance of a foot, a stem, a branch, or a leaf and which therefore mediate between the marks on the surface of a picture and its content (2006: 171-172).

¹³ I interpret this claim to also be applicable to other visual art forms.

¹⁴ It should be noted that while I make use of the uncontroversial fact that there are conventional means of art-making, this doesn't entail that the relation between a depiction and what is depicted is itself necessarily conventional, as per a conventionalist theory of depiction such as Goodman's. I remain neutral as to the success of such a theory, while making use of systems of representation that are merely recognised, established, and accepted by people.

Other examples include ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics which would depict objects from multiple views at once, and rules for perspective and naturalism which developed throughout Renaissance and Impressionist styles.¹⁵ These techniques enable parts of artworks to ‘naturally’ symbolise or represent things, primarily by imitating something else with some degree of resemblance (Hospers, 1946: 49-50). The average viewer will be able to recognise or understand that these ‘natural symbols’ of a work depict things in reality. Depending on what theory of depiction you adhere to, this understanding might be due to: an intended resemblance between the depiction and the object depicted; the depiction eliciting “a perceptual experience with a certain phenomenology” in the viewer (Abell & Bantinaki, 2010: 5); or the depiction engaging sub-personal perceptual mechanisms in the viewer, such as their recognitional skills normally exercised in ordinary visual perception (Lopes, 1996; 2005). But either way, the phenomenon involves us grasping a depiction via familiar and established means.

For instance, one of the things depicted in *Guernica* is a screaming horse. Its mouth is open and distended, revealing a sharp tongue. Its eyes are bulging and its limbs are in disarray. This manages to convey to the viewer that this horse is injured and in agony: the average viewer familiar with cubist styles and conventions, and a basic ability to detect a resemblance, or experience some kind of recognition between the depiction and what is depicted, will grasp that this is what is being depicted. In general, if the viewer understands the depiction method used, and is familiar with certain artistic styles and conventions of art-making, these will form suitable means to make explicit the work’s purported illocutions. Indeed, according to Novitz (1977), what speech acts a picture can be used to perform will depend in part on what the picture resembles.

Second, a painting’s use of complex symbols and metaphors expresses certain contents beyond what the work immediately depicts. Hyman gives an example of such a convention or rule:

...there are *iconographic* conventions, such as the ones concerning the symbolic attributes of saints: Saint Peter’s keys, Saint Catherine’s wheel, the palm frond held by a martyred saint, and so on...iconographic conventions allow us to make inferences about the subject of a picture. For example, if we know the relevant convention, we can infer that a bearded scholar with a lion at his feet is Saint Jerome, that a pelican fighting

¹⁵ Novitz calls such conventions “umbrella conventions” (1977: 46).

a snake represents the crucifixion vanquishing original sin, or that a winged figure is an angel (Hyman, 2006: 171-172).

For instance, in Christian paintings, the halo is a conventional (as opposed to ‘natural’) symbol for divinity, and the colour white is a semi-conventional symbol for purity (Hospers, 38). ‘Conventional’ here means that the symbol stands for its denotation or referent only because of a common convention; the relation between the symbol and what is symbolised is an arbitrary one (words also fall into this category). ‘Semi-conventional’ here means the fact that one convention was selected rather than another “is not an accident” but the result of some natural relation or resemblance between the symbol and its denotation or referent (such as white and purity) (Hospers, 33). Such symbols require prior understanding of certain conventions, without which the viewer cannot go far in interpreting the work.¹⁶

For example, the horse in *Guernica* is normally interpreted as a complex symbol for the massacred civilian population of the Basque town (Gottlieb, 1965: 111). Moreover, the woman to the right of the painting who stretches out a light above the scene unfolding beneath her has been interpreted as a symbol for ‘Civilisation’ or ‘History’ or ‘Enlightenment’ (ibid). Notice too the elliptical form of the artificial light bulb, and the nearby elliptical bomb-like form inserted into the horse’s screaming mouth. This visual parallel has been interpreted as a “visual metaphor” for power: associations of technological sources of power (the light bulb) are linked with associations of war and weapons. This fusion creates the metaphor that beneficent power can “contain the seeds of violent destruction” (Green, 1985: 67).

Historical facts surrounding an artwork, such as knowledge about the setting in which it was created, are normally required to help us further interpret a work’s formal content. Background knowledge about *Guernica*’s history, such as knowing that the work was created in the immediate aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, and knowledge about the catastrophe Picasso was responding to, help us interpret the work’s depictions, symbols, and metaphors. Moreover, depending on your favourite theory of art interpretation, knowledge about the artist’s intentions might help guide ascertaining the meaning of the piece.

¹⁶ The relation between a symbol and depiction should be noted here. A visual symbol may *denote* an idea, theme, or object because of pre-established conventions: for instance, the halo symbol will denote divinity. But this needn’t entail that the halo symbol *depicts* divinity. Rather, the halo symbol depicts the object of a halo. This means that we needn’t be committed to a conventionalist theory of depiction in order to help ourselves to denotative symbols in works of art; such symbols can indeed denote things while depiction might function in a non-conventionalist way, governed by different principles. I return to this point in Chapter 5.

Alternatively, we might merely hypothesise the artist's intentions to illuminate the meaning of the artwork, much like we do when we communicate with words: we hypothesise what the person intends to say. I return to this issue of artist intention in section 4.3.

The conventions that artworks frequently employ in their formal qualities and methods of depiction, as well as the available background knowledge to help us understand these art-making methods, enables, I think, most art to therefore satisfy *Internal Convention*.

4.2. *External Convention*

Recall that for the successful performance of some illocutions, certain conventions, over and above the locution used, need to be in place in the context of utterance in which the appropriate locution is made. In verbal cases, such conventions tend to be authoritative, structural, or institutional. For example, for 'I do' to count as accepting Christian marriage, this will at least need to be uttered during the appropriate ceremony in a church, and to christen a ship, one must have the correct authority and perform specific physical actions, like smashing a champagne bottle.

Analogously, there are external conventions – over and above the artworks themselves – in place in the artworld, which can accommodate the performance of certain illocutions. First, there are structural and institutional conventions. Galleries generally tend to have consistent layouts and designs: they are frequently white cubes, with familiar restrictions such as ropes or markers to stop viewers getting too close to the artworks. Moreover, artworks are curated in certain ways: their display is chosen carefully to play out the curator's narrative they want to tell. This narrative is normally evident in the statements on the gallery walls, as well as catalogues and reviews of the show.

For instance, *THIS PLACE* (2015) at Prague's DOX gallery, consisted of twelve photographers' works attempting to understand and challenge the complexities of Israel: its history, geography, inhabitants, and its resonance for people around the world. Information on the gallery walls stated that the images combined to create "a heterogeneous narrative of a conflicted, paradoxical and deeply resonant place...".¹⁷ These features of the artworld normally make clear that the gallery is a place of communication: a place for the exchange of ideas whilst also offering aesthetic experiences. With certain curative elements in place, we tend to have certain expectations about what the works might be saying or doing. For instance, if a show is curatorially geared towards political dissent, this will affect how we

¹⁷ Cotton, C., (2015)

engage with the artworks on display, and also help make explicit the illocutions the works might be performing.

For instance, recall that *Guernica* was first displayed in the entrance hall of the Spanish Republic's pavilion at the Paris World's Fair. The painting was curated such that it sat opposite a large commemorative photograph of Garcia Lorca, the socialist poet who was executed during the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Outside the pavilion was a cinema showing films of the civil war's destruction. With this curation, it was clear that the artworks were denouncing and deploring the events they depicted, as well as warfare more generally, rather than celebrating and glorifying war. Just like saying 'I do' to accept marriage requires the presence of certain conventions beyond and external to the locution itself, gallery conventions facilitate the illocutions performed by *Guernica*.

Moreover, such structural and institutional elements of the artworld can exude a certain authority, whether this be from the artists, the curators, or collective bodies like the gallery itself. The authority of the artist for instance may derive from implicit historical treatments of the artist as having "sanction" over their work (Irvin, 2005: 315), and also from the law: "Under most international and national laws, artists have the statutory 'moral right' to object to what UK law calls 'derogatory treatment' of their works" (Lydiate, 2007). Moreover, the authority of the curator may derive from the growing need over the last century for curators to translate and communicate artworks in a modern artworld: the artwork and artist are often "subsumed by the identity of the whole curatorial endeavour" (O'Neill, 2010: 255). Often, autonomous curators exercise authority and power over large art displays, such as Hans Ulrich Obrist and Harald Szeemann (Balzer, 2014). Consequently, artworks, when displayed in artworld exhibitions, are able to perform certain illocutions that may require a background of authority, such as the illocution of ordering, or even of subordination.¹⁸

The conventions that almost always surround artworks, such as the wider art institution, structural elements such as gallery displays and curation, as well the authority we ascribe to the artist and the wider gallery community, enable most art to therefore satisfy *External Convention*.

It might be objected that placing such convention restrictions on artworks in order for them to perform illocutions unreasonably restricts artists who attempt to *break* such conventions: whether they be internal or external. Indeed, Novitz does not consider this and

¹⁸ See MacKinnon (1993) and Langton (2017) for the relation between pornography, authority, and the illocution of subordination.

instead outlines how artworks neatly fit within certain conventions (1977: 28-39). However, many artists do not comfortably sit in established styles or exhibiting conventions.

For example, consider Robert Barry's *Inert Gas Series* (1969). Testing the limits of materiality within the artworld, Barry produced a poster for an exhibition that had neither a location nor a date. The poster contained a telephone number for the gallery, which had an answering service with a recorded message describing the 'work.' The work was the release of five measured volumes of odourless, colourless, noble gasses into the atmosphere in various locations.¹⁹ Barry's work focuses on escaping the previously known and assumed physical limits of the art object, and is one of the many examples of artists who attempt to escape the limits of artworld conventions.

Such works pose a problem for an attempt to contain art within both internal and external conventions because art is constantly breaking conventions and creating new ones. Verbal language is bound by convention, and you might think that art is not bound in the same way, so art cannot and should not satisfy any convention restrictions. And since we need internal conventions (at the very least), for the successful performance of illocutions, art therefore cannot perform such acts.

To respond to this problem we can concede that artists do constantly break conventions and create new ones, but point out that this is always or mostly done against a backdrop of wider, recognised conventions. For the art-object to even be recognised and treated as art, and so be interpreted as performing certain actions in the first place, there needs to be sufficient conventions in place to render the object 'art', whether these be internal in the form of the medium used, or external, in the way that the work is displayed to the public. Once the object is construed as art, it will always or mostly evoke and reference past and current works, artists, and styles, and is thus contained within various artistic conventions, even if this is against the will of the artist.

This might mean that to perform illocutions an artist's work can never truly escape artworld conventions, internal or external, but this bullet isn't too big to bite. If an artist created an artwork that was completely unbound by convention and perhaps, as a result, didn't clearly communicate anything at all, then it wouldn't perform any illocutions. But this is a good result: in such a case we should want to refrain from interpreting such a work as performing any illocutions for it isn't communicating anything recognisable at all.²⁰

¹⁹ 'Robert Barry' *MoMA* (n.d.)

²⁰ This reflects von Hantelmann's (2010) adaption of Judith Butler's ideas about 'performativity' to art, namely, that "the artwork does not *gain* a societal impact by rupturing these conventions; it is via these conventions

4.3. *Intention in art*

Austin claims that some illocutionary acts, to be smoothly performed, require the speaker to possess the appropriate intentions and thoughts. I called this condition *Intention*. If the correct thoughts, ideas, or intentions are not held by the speaker when she performs a particular illocution, then the act is considered non-ideal, or stilted in some way. Here, in what Austin calls an ‘abuse’ of an illocution, the act *is* achieved, but is done so defectively, because the appropriate intentions do not lie behind the act. Where *Intention* isn’t satisfied with an act that requires it, the act is still performed, though not smoothly. For example, when I assert something I believe to be false, I still assert, though insincerely. Austin considers this to be the act of lying: an abuse of the act of assertion, or an insincere assertion. This is because in lying you assert something you believe to be false, where ordinarily you should only assert something you believe to be true (1962: 40).

There is disagreement over whether a condition like *Intention* is true. Some have thought that speaker intention as a whole is irrelevant when determining illocutionary force, and a relic of an outdated conception of speech acts (Butler, 1997: 92-93).

However, for the most part, theorists agree that something like *Intention* is required for the smooth performance of many types of illocution. The disagreement lies more in how this condition should be interpreted: for instance, is it the actual intention of the speaker, or merely an attributed intention to the speaker, that is required?

Peter Strawson holds the former. He argues that most types of illocution such as asserting, warning, promising, and requesting, are communicative, as opposed to those more institutional speech acts such as marriage or check-mating in a game of chess. Consequently, the speaker’s actual intention to perform these communicative speech acts is necessary for the act’s smooth performance. Strawson uses Paul Grice’s notion of non-natural meaning to provide an analysis of the type of intention required behind these illocutions, which amounts to “broadly an audience-directed intention” (Strawson, 1964: 459). For the act to be smoothly performed, the speaker must intend “his audience to recognise his intention to produce a certain response by saying what he does” (de Gaynesford, 2011: 126, explaining Strawson’s position).

that there already *is* a societal impact” (2010: 14) and “...for Butler any form of acting is only thinkable *within* the constitutive and regulative structure of conventions...a radical break with conventions *must* fail...With this notion of performativity we can, for example, concretise how every artwork, not in spite of but by virtue of its integration in certain conventions, ‘acts’: how for example, via the museum it sustains or co-produces a certain notion of history, progress and development” (2010: 19).

On the other hand, others have rejected the claim that certain illocutions, to be performed smoothly, require the speaker's *actual* intention. Rather, merely an *attributed* intention to the speaker is necessary for the smooth performance of certain types of act.²¹

I won't come down on either side of this debate: an investigation into how artworks perform illocutions is hardly the place to argue for a particular view of intention in speech acts more generally. However, what I will do, is explore how the role of intention in performing illocutions can be understood in the artworld. I offer a *derivative* picture of intention in art, and one that uses the notion of a *distant speaker*. In doing this, I draw on an existing debate about determining artwork meaning.

Performing illocutions like asserting, deploring, or protesting, is something we normally take people to do, rather than inanimate objects. This is because performing speech acts normally involves possessing psychological states, and objects, such as artworks, cannot have psychological states. Whether or not we agree with *Intention*, it does seem that many speech acts involve expression of, or at least the appearance of, certain psychological states. For instance, assertion tends to involve at least the appearance of belief, and promising to do something normally involves an intention to do that thing. In ordinary conversation people normally have intentions to perform certain illocutions, which they attempt to make manifest or signal to by using appropriate locutions. Moreover, understanding what illocution is supposedly being performed by someone normally involves the audience at least ascribing an intention to the speaker to perform the act in question. Given that artworks as inanimate objects cannot possess psychological states, they therefore cannot perform speech acts entirely on their own.

But an object can at least perform illocutions in a *derivative* sense, in a way that derives somehow from an agent. Consider verbal objects, like notes or signs, which can be used by an agent to do things. For instance, at a building site Mark puts up a sign saying 'Demolition work in progress'. Mark is asserting that demolition work is in progress. But we also speak of the sign as asserting that demolition work is in progress, because an agent uses it: it forms an utterance. More generally, while we tend to speak about *utterers* saying things, we also speak of *utterances* saying things. Indeed, Austin speaks of both people and utterances performing actions like asserting or lying (1962: pp. 6-8, 57).

This distinction between people performing illocutions and objects performing illocutions is useful because we can begin to see how an artwork might count as performing

²¹ See Sbisà (forthcoming).

illocutions in a derivative sense. In the artworld, we tend to have people who use an artwork to say something: normally artists and curators. The artist creates the work, and a curator can put the work to a use perhaps not always intended by the artist. So we can either speak of the artist or curator asserting, for instance, or of the *artworks* asserting in a derivative sense, perhaps deriving from how the artist or curator uses the artwork. We can ask: what does the artist or curator assert? Or, what does the artwork assert?

This can be divided into two claims: (a) the *artist* (or curator) performs the illocution through the artwork that functions as a vehicle, or (b) the *artwork itself* performs the illocution, but in some derivative sense.

Both (a) and (b) are implied within the aesthetics literature. For instance, both Novitz and Kjørup's extension of speech act theory to pictures consists of the argument that people can use pictures to perform illocutions. They talk of the person behind the picture as performing the act, using the picture as a *vehicle*: "...whereas neither captions and labels nor pictures are statements in themselves, they can all function as vehicles for statements performed by human beings" (Kjørup, 1974: 218). And a person can warn others by using visual signs, for instance, warning others of their vicious dog by placing a picture of the dog on their garden fence (Novitz, 1977: 75). This sides with (a): it's people who perform illocutions using various vehicles, such as pictures.

However, Morris Weitz writes of *Guernica*:

The *painting asserts* [that the victory of Fascism is the brutal destruction of everything] through the bull, who symbolizes Fascism and who is relatively intact, and the other subjects – the soldier, the horse, the women, the children, and the houses – which are torn to pieces (1950: 150, my emphasis),

thus siding with (b), and Stephen Davies writes of *Guernica* being a protest itself (2006b: 68). Furthermore, the art critics whom I mention in section 2 talk of the *artworks* as performing illocutions or saying certain things, also siding with (b).

This divide does not just arise in the case of art; it is first present in Austin's account of ordinary verbal means of performing illocution – is it the person behind the utterance or the utterance itself that performs the illocution? Austin affirms the former when he writes about uptake: "I cannot be said to have warned an audience unless it hears what I say and takes what I say in a certain sense" (1962: 115-16). But he also affirms the latter when he talks of the "issuing of the utterance" and the "utterance of words" as constituting the

performing of an action (6-8).

That we tend to speak of the illocutionary force of art in both ways – either that someone behind the work is saying something and using the work to do so, or that the work manages to speak for itself – raises the question of what is really going on.

In ordinary verbal situations, it depends on the context whether it's the person behind the utterance or the utterance itself performing the illocution. When the speaker is present, either spatially or temporally with the hearer, it makes sense to say that she is performing the act of warning, for instance, by uttering a certain sentence or by making a certain gesture. In verbal situations this is the norm. But when there is no clear speaker – perhaps with a railway sign that reads 'Passengers are warned to cross the track by the bridge only' (Austin, 57) – then the utterance itself seems sufficient for the performance of the illocution.

The performance of illocutions by artworks tends to be more akin to the derivative picture, (b): *artworks* perform illocutions, derivatively on an agent behind the work. The reason artworks are able to speak for themselves in this way is because they tend to have *distant speakers*. Communicative artworks have a 'speaker' or an artist behind the work, but in contrast to many verbal conversational cases, the artist, say, needn't be present for their art to perform illocutions. While it's necessary that artworks have creators, the artist could create the work and then die, and the work still be used in different contexts to perform illocutions for centuries to come.

In this *distant speaker* picture, what a work does and says is derivative on a person in some way, but in a distant way, both spatially and temporally, enabling the works to speak for themselves. This is similar to the case of road signs, where we ascribe (or describe) intentions to a distant speaker, whether this is a collective body such as the government or the council, or a single person. In such cases, even when it's not clear *who* the speaker is, we can still identify clear intentions. David Goldblatt captures this when he draws an analogy between the posting of road signs and the display of artworks:

...the driver has been warned. *But by whom?* What isn't clear is that a single individual has determined the idea for such a sign or for its appropriate posting. There are those who would not be satisfied with saying "the government" or "bureau of traffic control." *But the point is that intention can be clear without the intender being clearly identified* (Goldblatt, 2011, my emphasis).

This distant speaker notion of (b) remains faithful to Austin's speech act theory. When discussing a sign at a station that reads 'Passengers are warned to cross the track by the bridge only', Austin writes: "this serves to indicate that the utterance (in writing) of the sentence is...the instrument effecting the act of warning, authorizing, &c" (1962: 57). This idea that an illocution can be performed without a clear speaker *per se*, as with a railway sign, is plausible, since it allows other objects such as generic answering machines to perform acts such as greetings and assertions, where there is no speaker *per se* but rather a machine that performs illocutions for the speaker precisely because they aren't available.

I've opted for a derivative picture, and one where the artwork manages to speak for itself, on the basis of a 'distant speaker'. Given this, and given that artworks do not have psychological states, from what or whom might the artwork's supposed illocutionary force derive? Who is the 'distant speaker', and how should we analyse this? There is already a debate in aesthetics about the relation between artwork meaning and the artist's intentions that we can draw on to understand a derivative distant speaker picture of artworks performing illocutions. I'll focus on three options.

First, the artwork might perform illocutions derivatively on the artist's actual intentions. Here, the distant speaker is the artist. This position would be held by *Moderate Actual Intentionalists* (henceforth just 'Actual Intentionalist'), who hold that what determines an artwork's meaning is the artist's intentions that are recognised in the work, using evidence drawn from the work's and artist's context of creation (Carroll, 2000: 79, 82).

Second, the artwork might perform illocutions derivatively on an ideal audience's *hypotheses* about the artist's intentions. Here, the distant speaker is again the artist, who we then hypothesise about.²² This position would be held by *Hypothetical Intentionalists*, who believe that an artwork's meaning is determined not by the artist's actual intentions, but by a suitable audience's hypotheses of the artist's intentions, which are based on the linguistic and artistic conventions that held in the work's context of creation (Levinson, 1996; 2000). These hypothesised intentions needn't cohere with the actual psychological states held by the artist in order to determine the artwork's meaning.

On the other side of the spectrum, *Anti-intentionalists* hold that when deciphering a work's meaning, the artist's actual or imputed intentions have no relevance at all, and

²² Under some breeds of Hypothetical Intentionalism, the distant speaker could be a 'hypothesised artist' as opposed to the actual artist being hypothesised about. Levinson holds the latter view, and see Davies (2006a) for the former view.

interpreters should give the work complete autonomy from the beliefs of its creator.²³ They recognise that the work has an agent behind it, but what that agent supposedly believes or intends for the work is beside the point. There might be quasi-intentions the Anti-intentionalist can defer to in their theorising about artwork meaning: an artwork might perform illocutions derivatively on *its own* ‘intentions’. This view would use an “object-orientated use of intention” (Roskill, 1977: 100), where intention is ascribed to the work rather than the artist. As Mark Roskill writes:

Thus one finds T. S. Eliot writing of a ‘harmonics of poetry which would interfere with the poem’s intention’ (rather than the poet’s); the Marxist critic George Lukacs of the ‘intention realized in the work [which] need not coincide with the writer’s conscious intention’ (Roskill, 1977: 99).

Goldblatt’s claim about intention being detected in road signs is particularly relevant here: within an Anti-intentionalist framework, “the intention can be clear without the intender being clearly identified” (Goldblatt, 2011).

This laid-out terrain in theories of artwork meaning might have parallels with how intention is treated in speech act theory more generally. Depending on how you treat the role of intention in ordinary verbal speech acts – for instance, whether or not you think *Intention* is true – might affect what you’ll take to be the case with art. In regards to this, I’ll here outline some suppositional reasoning.

If you think something like *Intention* is true, and the smooth performance of some illocutions requires the speaker’s actual intention to perform the act in question, or at least requires an imputed intention to the speaker, then this might entail the following.

Under an Anti-intentionalist framework of artwork meaning, these types of illocutions that do require actual or imputed intentions could only be performed defectively. This is because Anti-intentionalism dispenses entirely with the artist’s intention – both actual and imputed – so there are no intentions playing a role in determining artwork meaning. So the particular illocution that would require an intention on the part of the speaker could still get performed, but only ever defectively. Under an Actual Intentionalist framework of artwork meaning, the types of illocutions that do require actual or imputed intentions will be defectively or smoothly performed depending on the artist’s *actual* intentions. And under a

²³ See for example Barthes (1967), Nathan (1982; 2006), and Wimsatt & Beardsley (1946).

Hypothetical Intentionalist framework of artwork meaning, the types of illocutions that do require actual or imputed intentions will be defectively or smoothly performed depending on whether the ideal audience hypothesises or attributes an intention to the artist for the act in question.

On the other hand, if you think something like *Intention* is not true, and no illocutions require any intentions of the speaker – actual or imputed – for their smooth performance, then under Anti-intentionalist positions artworks could perform many illocutions smoothly without the artist’s actual or imputed intention having any role to play, which fits well with the Anti-intentionalist broad picture of artwork meaning.

However, if *Intention* were not true, this wouldn’t sit comfortably with either Actual Intentionalism or Hypothetical Intentionalism. For if *Intention* were not true, then artworks could smoothly perform many illocutions not intended by the artist, nor even hypothesised to be intended by the artist. But recall that for Actual Intentionalism and Hypothetical Intentionalism artwork meaning is determined by whatever the artist successfully intends their work to mean, or is determined by an ideal audience’s hypothesis of meaning. If, for both positions, this ‘artwork meaning’ partly comprises the illocutionary force of a work, then the work could smoothly perform illocutions, and so have some meaning-features, not actually intended by the artist nor attributed to the artist. This goes against the central tenets of Actual and Hypothetical Intentionalism, for some meaning-features, such as illocutionary force, would be possessed by the work contrary to what the artist intended, or contrary to what an ideal audience hypothesises. However, given that the majority of theorists think that something like *Intention* is true, I don’t take this to be a worrying problem for Actual or Hypothetical Intentionalism.

4.4. *Uptake in art*

According to Austin, uptake is a matter of the audience understanding the meaning and force of the locution used by a speaker. However, Austin’s notion of uptake is incomplete, for he provides no account of the conditions necessary for securing uptake.

Strawson offers an intention-based view of uptake, arguing that uptake – understanding the force of a locution – must be achieved by the speaker’s knowing and intentional involvement (de Gaynesford, 2011: 125). Specifically, Strawson uses Grice’s notion of non-natural meaning to provide an analysis of audience understanding (i.e. uptake), which amounts to “recognizing what may be called broadly an audience-directed intention

and recognizing it as wholly overt, as intended to be recognized” (Strawson, 1964: 459). In other words, uptake involves a speaker *successfully* intending “his audience to recognise his intention to produce a certain response by saying what he does” (de Gaynesford, 126), and a speaker will not secure uptake “unless his complex intention is grasped” (Strawson, 450). That is, the intentions involved in performing the illocution need to be grasped by the audience.

Whether or not we agree with Strawson’s intention-based picture of uptake, it does seem that what you take the role of intention to be in performing illocutions will be linked to what you think about uptake. If the speaker must possess a particular intention to perform a certain act for the act to be performed smoothly, or at least possess an attributed intention to perform that act, then uptake will likely involve the audience recognising this actual or imputed intention. But if the speaker needn’t possess a particular intention to perform the act for the act to be performed smoothly, then uptake will involve something more minimal; perhaps a recognition of the purported illocutionary force via the speaker’s use of *Internal* and perhaps *External* conventions. Equally in the case of art, what you hold for *Intention* in art will likely be mirrored by what you take *Uptake* to involve in art. As above, I’ll here outline some suppositional reasoning for this.

If something like *Intention* is true, and for the smooth performance of some illocutions in art the artist must possess an actual or imputed intention to perform that act, then uptake could be treated within any of our frameworks.

Under an Actual Intentionalist picture, uptake for those acts that require intention would involve the viewer recognising the artist’s actual intention to perform that illocution. Under a Hypothetical Intentionalist picture, uptake would involve a suitable audience recognising a hypothesised intention of the artist’s, or imputing an intention to the artist, given certain evidence, to perform that illocution. And under an Anti-intentionalist framework, uptake for those acts that require intention would be more minimal, and wouldn’t involve a recognition of any intention behind the purported act. Here, uptake would involve the audience understanding the work itself, comprised of its formal content and historical setting, i.e. recognising the internal conventions and perhaps external conventions employed in and surrounding the work. However, as noted above, if *Intention* were true, then uptake within an Anti-intentionalist framework would only ever secure a defectively performed illocution.

And if something like *Intention* is not true, and no artist intention – actual or imputed – is required for the smooth performance of any illocution in art, then uptake for any

illocution could still be treated within at least an Anti-intentionalist framework, as above. But what uptake in this case would involve within an Actual or Hypothetical Intentionalist framework is less clear. That a speaker's actual or imputed intentions under this particular theory of speech acts isn't required for the smoothness of any illocution, would mean that uptake needn't track the actual or imputed intentions of the speaker, or artist. But this goes against the central tenets of Actual and Hypothetical Intentionalism. Actual and Hypothetical Intentionalists could persevere with their picture of uptake offered above, which would involve the viewer recognising the artist's actual or imputed intention to perform that illocution. Or, they could be pressed to abandon their theories for determining at least the illocutionary forces held by artworks. But again, given that the majority of theorists think that something like *Intention* is true, I don't take this to be a worrying problem for Actual or Hypothetical Intentionalism.

In sum: *Guernica* depicts the utter devastation and sorrow inflicted upon an innocent town. The visceral depictions carry symbolic and metaphorical contents, and when this is coupled with knowledge about the painting's creation, the average well-informed viewer will likely understand the force of this visual locution. More specifically, this uptake might involve (i) the audience grasping the intentions actually held by Picasso about the work, (ii) the audience hypothesising what Picasso might have meant by the work, or (iii) by the audience understanding the work itself, without deferring to any intentions behind the work. I do not adopt any one of these options in particular, but have merely provided their landscape.

5. Conclusion

By utilising Austin's analysis of illocutionary force, I have argued for the assumption commonly made by art critics and philosophers of art that non-verbal visual artworks can perform illocutions. Of course, I haven't defended Austin's theory of speech acts, and more work needs to be done to consider the differences between the illocutionary force of art and the illocutionary force of our words. But I hope to have shown that it's very plausible that visual artworks, without containing words, can perform actions such as asserting, protesting, and denouncing. This is because artworks, without containing words, can meet the *Internal Convention*, *External Convention*, *Intention* (albeit in different ways), and *Uptake* conditions.

To conclude, I want to reflect a little on the implications this has for the Intentionalist Debate. Recall that I opted for a derivative picture of illocutionary force in art, and one where the artwork manages to speak for itself, on the basis of a ‘distant speaker’. I asked who this distant speaker might be in the art case, and explored what Actual Intentionalists, Hypothetical Intentionalists, and Anti-intentionalists would have to say about it. However, this picture as it stands is too restrictive on who the distant speaker could be in the artworld.

For both Actual Intentionalists and Hypothetical Intentionalists at least, the distant speaker is the artist. But it looks like artworks could perform illocutions derivatively on the intentions or beliefs of people other than the artist, such as the *curator*, which could be a single person or a collective entity. Indeed, curators are often indispensable in generating environments facilitating an artwork’s performance of illocutions, such as the way *Guernica* was curated at the Spanish Republic’s pavilion at the Paris World’s Fair.

In the artworld, artists and curators place artworks in exhibition situations to say something. The artist creates the work, and a curator can put the work to a use not always intended by the artist. This would explain how artworks can perform illocutions not envisaged by the artist, as well as works doing things long after the artist has died. So when we speak of artworks performing illocutions in a derivative sense, this could be derivative on how the artist or the curator uses the artwork. Indeed, Roskill considers the possibility of there being more than one creator (1977: 101), or ascribing intentions to collective organisations like workshops or schools (102). It should be noted, though, that this notion looks incompatible with Anti-intentionalist theories of artwork meaning. If Anti-intentionalists reject *any* intention behind the work as determining an artwork’s meaning, this will also exclude the curator’s.

Perhaps we therefore should acknowledge the possibility of an augmented Actual Intentionalism or Hypothetical Intentionalism, that doesn’t concern just the artist. We can bring in the curator too. On this kind of picture, the artwork might perform illocutions derivatively on the artist’s actual intentions or derivatively on the actual intentions of the curator, or derivatively on an ideal audience’s hypotheses about the artist’s intentions, or on an ideal audience’s hypotheses about the curator’s intentions. This curator could be a single person, or a broad collective in some sense.

Accommodating the curator into a broad intentionalist picture of artwork meaning of course requires more developed defence. But for now, I want to merely gesture towards such a move.

Chapter Two

2. Can Art Lie?

Abstract

This chapter explores in detail an offshoot from Chapter 1: the act of lying. We learn from art and we believe that it can reveal truths about reality. But can it lie about things? If it can, this may explain what we find objectionable in certain artworks, affect how we interpret them, and have consequences for the culpability of the artist. The aim of this chapter is to establish whether representational visual art can lie, where lying is treated as an insincere assertion. I argue that art can lie, but only in contexts where communication should be truthful: contexts in which H. P. Grice's first maxim of quality ("Do not say what you believe to be false") is in effect. I argue that this is a genre/curation sensitive issue, and so whether art can lie is a context-sensitive matter.

1. Introduction



Figure. 2

Many visual artworks seem to lie to us. Yves Klein's photograph *Leap into the Void* (1960) (Figure. 2) shows the artist supposedly jumping off a roof into the air, hurtling himself unprotected from the concrete below. This 'artistic action', documented as a photograph, was displayed by the artist on newsstands throughout Paris, bewildering all those who encountered it (Fineman, 2012: 189). In reality, Klein hired photographers to montage two negatives together: one showing Klein leaping into a tarpaulin, and the other showing the surrounding scene without the tarpaulin (Fineman, 181). The result is an illusionary documentary photograph, which seems to lie that the artist leapt to the ground unprotected, refuting the supposed truism 'the camera never lies'.

And consider Liu Chunhua's *Mao Zedong Goes To Anyuan* (c. 1963). This painting, reproduced over 900 million times and one of the most important paintings of the Cultural Revolution in China, has been criticised for telling lies about Mao's leadership. The painting

depicts a young Mao on a mountaintop, en route to the industrial city of Anyuan, supposedly to coordinate a miners' strike which came to be known as The Anyuan Miners' Strike of 1922, which was a defining moment for the Chinese Communist Party. However, the painting has been criticised for being "politically-motivated fiction" further exaggerating Mao's actual role in the strike (Pan, 2009). But the painting's artist has other ideas about his work:

With the arrival of our great leader, blue skies appear over Anyuan. The hills, sky, trees and clouds are the means used artistically to evoke a grand image of the red sun in our hearts. Riotous clouds are drifting swiftly past. They indicate that Chairman Mao is arriving in Anyuan at a critical point of sharp class struggle and show, in contrast how tranquil, confident and firm Chairman Mao is at that moment (Chunhua, 1968: 2-6)

But, according to a *Business Insider* writer:

This is a lie...Mao's rule was anything but tranquil, and China's human-made crisis during the decade of the Cultural Revolution was traumatizing enough to convince all of China's subsequent leaders to eschew collectivization and "Mao Zedong thought."¹

Moreover, lies might be detected in sexist and racist art in general. Titian's *Rape of Europa* (1559-62) (Figure. 3) – which depicts a scene from a myth, where Jupiter, incarnated as a bull, abducts Europa – has been accused of eroticising rape (A.W. Eaton, 2003: 161, 166).

¹ Rosen (2015)



Figure. 3

This eroticising might partly involve the painting telling rape myths, which capture false beliefs that are persistently and widely held about rape. In other words, the painting might tell lies such as *rape satisfies a woman's secret desires* and *women are naturally objects*. And consider the *Great Exhibition of German Art* (1937). It showcased so-called 'Aryan' art, which depicted idealised blonde nudes and landscapes. The curator, Adolf Ziegler (Peters, 2014: 21, 36, 37), displayed these works so that they were taken to express racial purity and represent the Nazi ideal of an Aryan race (Foster et al, 2004: 281), so maybe the works lied that *the Aryan race is naturally superior*. Conversely, it might be thought that the Nazis saw modern art – branded 'degenerate art' – as the lie: "a dangerous lie perpetuated by Jews, communists, and even the insane to contaminate the body of German society," according to a *New York Times* art critic.²

Plato accused artists and their artworks for telling 'wicked lies.'³ as imitations, they

² Farago, J., (2014, my emphasis).

³ According to one translation (2003: Book III, p. 84). All other references are from an online translation. More precisely, Plato talks about *writers* and *tales* telling lies (Book II p. 197, 217; Book III p. 329) but he is clear that this extends to all arts (Book X, p. 401). For more on this see Hursthouse (1992: 244) and Rockmore (2013: 24).

were three stages removed from the truth, i.e. false (Book X, p. 403).⁴ However, there has been little philosophical attention as to whether or not art actually *lies* rather than being merely false, for as I'll show, expressing falsehoods is neither necessary nor sufficient to lie.

Whether or not art lies matters a great deal. Lying is generally considered a morally objectionable thing to do because it normally tries to create in the listener a false belief. The person lied to subsequently possesses misinformation, which may be harmful to her or others. Moreover, the person lied to feels and has been manipulated, and is "unable to make choices for themselves...unable to act as they would have wanted to act" had they had adequate information (Bok, 1978, 20-21). If art can lie, this will partly explain what we find objectionable in certain artworks, affect how we interpret them, and have consequences for the culpability of the artist. For example, if artworks belonging to the western genre of the female nude such as Titian's *Rape of Europa* tell lies such as *women are naturally objects*, then this will play a role in perpetuating gender inequality. As I argue however, whether this particular painting lies or has lied in the past is a complicated matter, concerning doxastic and contextual dimensions.

This chapter is an attempt at some much-needed philosophical enquiry as to whether or not art can lie.⁵ I make a conditional argument: *if* art can express truth-evaluable contents or messages, then it can lie, but *only* in contexts where communication should be truthful: contexts in which H. P. Grice's first maxim of quality ("Do not say what you believe to be false") is in effect. I argue that this is a genre/curation sensitive issue, and so whether art can lie is a context-sensitive matter. Given this, I show that: Klein's *Leap into the Void* did indeed lie on one level; the works in the *Great Exhibition of German Art* and Chunhua's *Mao Zedong Goes To Anyuan* probably did *not* constitute lies; and that it depends on who is displaying Titian's *Rape of Europa* and where it is displayed as to whether or not it lies. Section 2 makes some preliminary assumptions and distinctions. Section 3 offers a definition of lying which is most suitable for the artworld. Section 4 argues that on this proposal (and assuming that art can express truth-evaluable contents or messages in the first place), art can lie but only in certain artworld contexts. Section 5 considers how curation can affect what lies are told by an artwork.

⁴ Moreover, Marcia Eaton writes that once we've shown how artworks can assert, painters can then lie (1980: 22). Furthermore, it's been suggested that other visual representations can lie: Rae Langton and Caroline West (1999) claim that some pornographers lie through pornography about women.

⁵ I limit my scope to the representational arts to ensure a straightforward investigation. Non-representational art may be able to lie, but I leave this for now.

2. Preliminaries

This chapter makes two assumptions about the meaning of artworks, namely, that it has two components: *propositional content* and *illocutionary force*.

First, I assume that artworks possess propositional content. This assumption is made because lying involves expressing certain truth-evaluable contents, i.e. propositions. The next section will consider this in more detail, but in sum, lying involves saying something you believe to be false. In analysing how artworks might lie, I take for granted that they can express propositions in the first place. But, there's good reason to think that artworks can express propositions and so say things with truth values. An artwork might express propositions partly through its symbols and subject within its composition (Weitz, 1950: 149). For example, the mutilated people and intact bull in Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) serve to express the proposition *that the victory of Fascism is the brutal destruction of everything* (Weitz, 150). Moreover, we can apply propositional operators such as negation or modal terms to the depictive contents of pictures, as Alex Grzankowski (2015) has observed, which suggests that at least the shallow content of pictures is propositional.⁶ Chapter 3 offers an argument in defense of this propositional claim.

Second, I assume that artworks can possess illocutionary force. This assumption is made because to lie, you need to assert something; you must perform a certain kind of speech act (the next section deals with this more closely). In analysing how artworks might lie, I take for granted that they can possess illocutionary force in the first place. And we do speak as if artworks have illocutionary force. Part of the power of Picasso's *Guernica* is that it *protests* against war and *pleads* for peace – actions which Austin called illocutionary acts.⁷ The previous chapter, 1, defends this particular claim.

These two assumptions are made in order to provide a smooth investigation into whether artworks, understood as objects that possess propositional content and illocutionary capacities, can lie. Against this assumed background, this chapter analyses how exactly an artwork might perform the specific speech act that is required for lying, noting contextual and doxastic complexities along the way.

⁶ For more proponents of the view that artworks can express propositions, see Greene (1940) and Korsmeyer (1985).

⁷ For support of this claim see Novitz (1977) and Kjørup (1974; 1978). For resistance, see Young (2001) and Crane (2009).

Moreover, to do justice to the complexity of lying in the artworld, we need to draw on our distinction introduced at the beginning of this thesis, between two levels of content in an artwork; what I called *shallow* and *deep*. When shallow or deep content is expressed with a certain force, it generates shallow and deep messages. An artwork's shallow content roughly comprises what a work represents or depicts at its "subject level" (Lamarque, 2009: 150) or "descriptive level" (Korsmeyer, 1985: 203). For instance, *Guernica* represents, at a shallow level, the bombing of Guernica in the Spanish Civil War. However, the way that the attack is depicted serves to express something more; something deeper, such as *war is barbaric*. This deep content in *Guernica* is expressed with various illocutionary forces, such as denouncement. Deep messages go beyond the shallow level, and form the 'point' of the piece (Carroll, 2001: 166), belonging to the 'theme' of the work.

However we unpack this distinction, what is important for our purposes is that shallow and deep messages needn't have the same truth-value. Shallow messages can be false whilst deep messages true, and vice versa. An artwork with a false shallow message can convey a true deep one, as *Guernica* does: there wasn't a light bulb in the sky during the attack on Guernica, but it's true that war is barbaric. Moreover, a true shallow message may be used to convey a deep falsehood. Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 film *Triumph of the Will* does this, using raw documentary footage of the 1934 Nuremburg rally to convey false deep claims about the glamour of war. And indeed, some artworks convey false messages at both levels – consider Gustav Closs's *Nazi St George Slaying a Dragon* (1937), which depicts an event that never happened in order to convey a false deep message idealising war – or true messages at both levels, as does Nick Ut's famous 1972 photograph *The Terror of War* which depicts a real event – a napalm bombing – to convey a true deep message about the horrors of war. Crucially, if an artwork can say false things at a shallow or deep level, then maybe an artwork can tell shallow lies, deep lies, or both.

In sum, this chapter assumes that artworks can have illocutionary force and propositional content (and so are truth-evaluable),⁸ where the latter is divided in to shallow and deep levels. This chapter thus makes the following argument: *if* art can express truth-evaluable contents or messages, then it can lie, but *only* in contexts where communication should be truthful.

⁸ See Chapters 1 and 3 for arguments defending these assumptions respectively.

3. Lying requires 'quality'

Plato hints that the artist lies because her art expresses falsehoods. In this crude sense, art seems to lie all the time: many artworks say false things. However, merely saying a falsehood isn't lying. Telling a story isn't lying, nor stating something you believe to be true which is in fact false.

So what is lying? Lying at least involves saying something with a meaning and truth-value. Whether we lie verbally or non-verbally (for instance, by nodding), what we thereby say will at least have propositional content. This also explains why certain deceptive acts, like pretending to pack your bags to convince your partner that you're leaving, are not *lies*, since in such cases nothing is strictly said.

However, lying is not simply saying something false, for saying something false is neither necessary nor sufficient for lying. I may sincerely believe that Mark is hiding in the church when in fact he is not: I do not lie when I tell this to Sophie. Alternatively, if I tell Sophie that Mark is hiding in the church when in fact I believe he's in Nana's cottage, I am lying to Sophie, even if it turns out what I told her was actually true. These examples show that to lie, what is said needn't be false. A speaker must merely believe that what she says is false.

While believing the content of one's utterance to be false is necessary to lie, it's not sufficient. I can utter something I believe (and know) to be false without lying, as when I act in a play and utter "I am thy father's spirit", or when I wink or smile to signal sarcasm or a joke. These are not lies, and this is because my utterances are not *assertions*: in acting or joking, I am not asserting something I believe to be false. Here, my utterances should not be taken seriously, and in order to lie I need them to be made in a context where they ought to be taken seriously.

Asserting something is saying something in a context where you ought to speak truthfully or sincerely: a context where H.P. Grice's (1989) First Maxim of Quality "Do not say what you believe to be false" is in effect as a norm of conversation.⁹ Call a context in which this maxim is in effect a *quality context*. This is a default feature of everyday conversation, unless there are signals to the contrary. If I wink at you, I temporarily 'turn

⁹ More substantive accounts of assertion have stronger normative components (Williamson, 2000). I follow Fallis (2009: 35) and don't aim to give a complete analysis of assertion but merely to capture the normative component of the speech act necessary for lying, i.e. assertion, which follows the quality maxim.

off' this quality maxim (Fallis, 2009: 35); during a play, the maxim is not in effect at all. Here, in what we can call *non-quality contexts*, the speakers aren't *asserting* something they believe to be false, and so they don't lie. At best, they pseudo-assert things (Fallis, 50).

The audience and certain conventions in the context of utterance determine whether a context is one of quality. For example, the conventions and expectations surrounding a conference presentation explain why that presentation forms a quality context. Contrastingly, the architecture of a theatre with a stage, curtain, dimmed lights, and a hushed audience may create a non-quality context: the actors need not speak truthfully.

To assert, and so to lie, a speaker must believe that they are in a quality context. If I say something I believe false to you in a quality context, but for some reason I don't believe this context holds (perhaps I believe I'm in a play), then I'm not lying. This is because I don't intend you to take me seriously, even if you are doing so. In such a case, I'm not even asserting. So, to lie, you must intend to be taken seriously in the first place.

In addition to a speaker believing she's in a quality context, in order to assert something to someone else, and so to lie, the speaker must also be *in* a quality context. Imagine that I'm performing a play, and I attempt to communicate – through the fourth wall – something to you, the audience, which I believe to be false. Regardless of whether *I* believe I'm in a quality context, *you* won't take me to be telling the truth, for I am actually in a non-quality context, in a play. If you don't take me to be telling the truth in the first place, then it doesn't look like I can successfully assert something to you, and so successfully lie to you. In general, in non-quality contexts, the audience won't recognise the speaker's intended assertion: they take her to be like an actor. Consequently, the speaker doesn't lie successfully because recognition of her supposed intention to assert in the first place isn't secured.¹⁰ To assert something to someone, and so to lie successfully, then, the speaker must speak in a context where they should be taken seriously in the first place.

It might be objected that this isn't necessary to lie: the speaker does not need to be in a quality context, they must merely believe they are in one (David Fallis thinks this, 2009: 48). Intuitions on whether this condition, call it '*Q*', is necessary for lying are divided in the literature. Thomas Carson thinks that a variation of *Q* is necessary, for if a quality context is not in effect, we'd have a puzzling case in which both the speaker and the audience misunderstand what is going on (2010: 38).

¹⁰ For support of this see literature on 'misfires' of speech acts, such as Langton (1993: 316).

I agree with Carson: if it's not the case that interlocutors are in a situation where the truth should be told in the first place, then it doesn't look like a speaker can successfully assert something to you, and so successfully lie to you. This is because of a lack of 'transmission' between the speaker and hearer. Much like I cannot successfully lie to you if I whisper to you too quietly something I believe to be false – and you just don't hear me – if we're in a context where the truth need not be told, my attempt at a lie will wash over my unsuspecting and unaware hearer, who thinks I'm merely pretending, like an actor.

Even if we granted that *Q* is not necessary in ordinary verbal lying cases, it looks like *Q* is necessary for an *artwork* to lie because of the complexities of the artworld, which will become apparent in the following sections. The communication space between a viewer and an artwork is different to that of ordinary conversation between interlocutors. Artworks do not communicate meaning as directly or clearly as ordinary speech does; for one thing, they are visual and not verbal,¹¹ and what an artist believes to be the case – perhaps whether the context in which their work is shown is one of quality – is frequently distorted or ignored in differently curated exhibitions. To drop *Q* in our definition of lying as applied to the artworld would further muddy the communication space between the artwork and viewer, making successful lying very difficult.

For argument's sake, assume that it *isn't* necessary that an artwork be in a quality context to lie. Imagine a viewer, who interprets a painting in a non-quality context as false in some way. Given that the context is not one of quality, the standard viewer would likely believe: 'oh, well, the painting's *meant* to be false in this way to convey truth in that way'. Here, the falsity in the work would be taken to be akin to an actor's false speech, washing over the unaware viewer, and not taken seriously regardless of whether the artist believed the context was one of quality. That is, even if the artist believed their work was saying something false in a quality context, this isn't enough to secure the successful communication of the lie to a viewer in an art gallery.

To therefore ensure that lies can be successfully communicated through art, *Q* should be made a necessary condition: the viewer needs to appropriately expect that the truth should be told in the first place in order for the artwork to communicate the lie. So, lying – as construed for our purposes in its application to the artworld – requires both quality and belief in quality: lying is saying something you believe to be false in a quality context, whilst

¹¹ For support of this see Nelson Goodman (1968: 225-254) on the 'density' of visual, non-linguistic symbol systems.

believing that quality applies. More briefly, lying is *asserting* something you believe to be false: an insincere assertion.¹² This is captured below:

(L) Person *S* lies that *p* to audience *H* iff:

(S) *S* says that *p* to *H* (*saying condition*)

(BF) *S* believes that *p* is false (*belief of falsity condition*)

(BQ) *S* and *H* believe that *S* says that *p* in a quality context (*belief of quality condition*)

(Q) *S* and *H* are in a quality context (*quality condition*).^{13,14}

4. Can art lie?

Lying is something we normally take people to do, rather than objects. This is because lying involves having beliefs about the truth-value of one's statement and about the context of utterance, and objects cannot have beliefs. But an object can lie in a *derivative* sense, in a way that derives from the use an agent puts it to. Consider verbal objects, like notes or signs, which can be used by an agent to lie about something. Bill Clinton can use a note saying 'I did not have sexual relations with that woman' to lie about his infidelity. Here, the agent's use of a note affects what the note does.

More generally, whilst we tend to speak about *utterers* saying things, we also speak of *utterances* saying things. For instance, at a building site Mark puts up a sign saying 'Demolition work in progress'. Mark is saying that demolition work is in progress. But we also speak of the sign as saying that demolition work is in progress, because an agent uses it: it forms an utterance.¹⁵ And so with lying. Suppose there is no demolition work in

¹² Though there's disagreement on the details of this view, for support of the broad view that a lie is an insincere assertion see Siegler (1966), Shibles (1988), Carson (2006), Sorensen (2007), Fallis (2009), and Saul (2012).

¹³ You might think that an intention to deceive is necessary to lie. However, it is widely agreed that such an intention is not necessary: you can lie without intending to deceive, i.e. in 'bald-faced lying'. This is not a controversial claim, and receives a lot of support in the literature: see Siegler (1966: 129), Shibles (1988: 102), Carson (2006: 289), Sorensen (2007), and Fallis (2009). For simplicity, I too omit an *intent to deceive* condition in my definition. However, even if an intention to deceive were necessary, my argument would still go through.

¹⁴ Many others subscribe to this kind of view - Chisholm and Feehan (1977), Williams (2002), Carson (2006; 2010), Sorensen (2007), Fallis (2009; 2012), Saul (2012), and Stokke (2013a; 2013b). (L) is similar to Don Fallis's (2009) definition, but, for reasons I've given above, my definition adds the fourth condition, *Q*.

¹⁵ J. L. Austin speaks of both people and utterances performing actions such as lying (1962: pp. 6-8, 57, 151).

progress at the site, but Mark puts up the sign to lie that there is. Mark is lying that demolition work is in progress, and the sign is lying that demolition work is in progress. So strictly speaking it's people who lie, but objects like signs can lie in this derivative sense.

This distinction between people lying and objects lying is useful because we can begin to see how an artwork might count as lying in this derivative sense. In the artworld, we can have two people who use an artwork to say something: artists and curators. The artist creates the work, and a curator can put the work to a use not always intended by the artist. So we can speak of the artist or curator lying, or of the *artworks* lying in a derivative sense, deriving from how the artist or curator uses the artwork. We can ask: does the artist or curator lie? Or, does the artwork lie?

However, we must distinguish between (i) an artwork lying because a person is using it as an aid to *her* lying, and (ii) the artwork itself lying. Regarding (i), I can lie that my ancestor was 'this person', and hold up my painting of Elizabeth I. The painting might lie because I use it to lie about something. However, the focus here is on what *I've* said and what *I've* lied about, not what the artwork is saying or lying about. On the other hand, (ii) focuses on what the *artwork* says, and so what *the artwork* lies about on the basis of the artist or curator's beliefs. This is different to a person lying and using the work as a mere visual aid.

I'll focus on the question: 'can the *artwork* lie?' A natural way to answer this will be systematically related to our definition of lying (L), but now with a focus on what the *artwork* says and so what *it* lies about. So, (S) in (L) now becomes: an *artwork* says that *p* to *H*. There are four conditions in (L) to meet. Recall that this chapter assumes that artworks possess propositional content and illocutionary force. I therefore take it that artworks can express truth-evaluable messages, and thus they satisfy condition (S). Consequently, I will not deal directly with condition (S).

I'll now show how each remaining condition in (L) is met by considering the following: (i) Whose beliefs are relevant for assessing lying in the artworld, i.e. can art satisfy conditions (BF) and (BQ)? (ii) Does the artworld constitute a quality context, i.e. can art satisfy condition (Q)? Answering these questions will explain how an artwork can lie: how it can make an insincere assertion. If an artwork can say something in a quality context that the artist or curator believes to be false, then it can lie.

4.1. Conditions (BF) and (BQ): Whose beliefs?

It's important to first note whose beliefs are relevant for assessing lying in the artworld. Recall that (L) stipulates two belief-related conditions:

(BF) *S* believes that *p* is false.

(BQ) *S* and *H* believe that *S* says that *p* in a quality context.

For an artwork to lie, someone, most likely the artist or curator, must believe that the artwork says something false in a quality context, where communication should be truthful. We need to rely on a person behind the work in this respect, because artworks cannot believe things. So, applying this to artworks, the belief conditions become:

(BF_A) *S* believes that what the artwork says, *p*, is false.

(BQ_A) *S* and *H* believe that the artwork says *p* in a quality context.

But whose beliefs – the artist's or the curator's – are relevant? Over whom does 'S' range in (BF_A) and (BQ_A)?

'S' must range over the same person on a given occasion, normally the artist *or* the curator. The same artwork can be used to lie by different people, but on any given occasion it will be one and the same person's (or group's) beliefs that are relevant for the lie: in each context 'S' is held fixed.

This is because the person whose beliefs are relevant to an instance of an artwork lying will be the person using or presenting the artwork in that very instance. Suppose that Titian believes that what *Rape of Europa* says is false, but he doesn't intend his work to be taken as serious truth (he intends the work to be interpreted in a non-quality context). His belief that his painting says something false cannot then be hijacked by a curator into a later, quality context. That is, Titian's belief about the truth-value of what *Rape of Europa* says shouldn't be separated from his belief about the current context in which *Rape of Europa* is displayed. Instead, the curator herself must believe that what the painting says is false. So *S* in our belief conditions must range over the same person or group in each situation. In each context of

use, we should either defer to the artist's beliefs *or* the curator's beliefs. Which person (or group) this is depends on the situation.¹⁶

This dependence on the artist or curator's beliefs when determining whether an artwork lies has implications for the Intentionalist Debate in aesthetics, which asks how we should detect and interpret the meaning of a work of art.

Recall that the debate today can be roughly divided into three positions, each one assigning different roles to intention in determining artwork meaning. First, *Actual Intentionalism* holds that what determines an artwork's meaning is the artist's actual intentions that are supported by the work, and which are recognised by the viewer using facts that held in the work's context of creation as evidence (Carroll, 2000: 79, 82). Second, *Hypothetical Intentionalism* holds that an artwork's meaning is determined by a suitable audience's imputing intentions to the artist, drawing on facts from the work's context of creation (Levinson 1996; 2010). And third, *Anti-intentionalism* (including both *Conventionalism* and 'The New Criticism' movement) holds that when deciphering a work's meaning, artist's intentions have no relevance at all.

I won't argue for any of these positions in particular, but whether or how art lies has interesting results for this Intentionalist Debate. If you're an Actual Intentionalist, the artist's actual beliefs partly determine the meaning of the work, and so will have preference or weight over what the curator does with a work. So under this framework, whether an artwork lies depends on what the artist actually believed, not the curator.

And if you're a Hypothetical Intentionalist, hypotheses about the artist's beliefs determine the meaning of the work. So under this framework, whether an artwork lies will depend on our hypotheses about what the artist believed, not the curator. Since the determiners of meaning here are imputed intentions, then they will track only the likelihood that the work is or was lying, so the lies would only ever be 'hypothesised lies'.

However, if you're an Anti-intentionalist such as a Conventionalist or a New Critic – and so exclude any reference to intentions and beliefs behind a work – then artworks, under an Anti-intentionalist framework, consequently *cannot* lie, for lying involves having beliefs,

¹⁶ Of course, Titian and the curator may happen to hold the same beliefs on an occasion, and may even be the same person.

which artworks cannot have in themselves. It should be noted, then, that the claim that artworks can lie is incompatible with such Anti-intentionalist positions.¹⁷

Recall my claim that whether or not an artwork lies partly depends on the artist or *curator's* beliefs about what the artwork in question says. But there is currently no place for the curator in the existing Intentionalist Debate. Allowing the *curator* to affect what a work does and means, and in this case, whether it can lie, is incompatible with Actual and Hypothetical Intentionalism, as well as the Anti-intentionalist positions of Conventionalism and the New Critic.

Perhaps we therefore require an augmented brand of Actual or Hypothetical Intentionalism, that doesn't include just the artist's beliefs and intentions when theorizing about whether a work is lying. We can bring in the curator too. And it's possible that Actual and Hypothetical Intentionalism both have expanded variants which admit reference to the curator. On either type of model, the artwork might lie derivatively on the artist's actual beliefs or derivatively on the actual beliefs of the curator, or derivatively on an ideal audience's hypotheses about the artist's beliefs or on an ideal audience's hypotheses about the curator's beliefs. This curator could be a single person, or a broad collective in some sense. Of course, accommodating the curator and her mental states into a broad intentionalist picture of artwork meaning, and specifically into a theory of how artworks lie, requires more developed defense. But for now, I'll merely gesture towards such a development.

4.2. Condition (Q): *The artworld is not by default a quality context*

To see whether an artwork can assert (and so lie), we need to consider the context in which it's normally displayed to viewers. To assert something, a quality context needs to hold. So for an artwork to assert something to a viewer, both it and its viewer need to be in a quality context. However, as I shall argue in this subsection, the artworld doesn't facilitate a context anywhere near systematically enough to have this norm by default. It cannot ensure that the quality maxim is *automatically* in effect for either the shallow or deep level of a work's meaning. Consequently, artworks can lie only in certain contexts, because they won't always be able to make assertions.

You might think that the quality maxim is often flouted in the artworld; Marcia Eaton

¹⁷ This is unless the Anti-intentionalist admits reference to the *curator's* intentions, if not the artist's, in determining artwork meaning and specifically whether the art lies. But then this kind of position looks to collapse into a type of intentionalist approach.

makes this observation (1980: 25). Perhaps the general goal of artistic discourse is to do with *how* something is expressed, as well as *what's* expressed. Viewers at a Titian exhibition might be just as concerned (or more concerned) with the manner of expression as with the truth of the work's shallow or deep messages. Since beauty is the focus, truth in the ordinary sense is almost irrelevant: the quality maxim is often flouted.

However, for a norm or maxim to be flouted in a certain situation, it needs to hold as a *default* feature of that situation. It only makes sense to disregard a norm of communication if that norm ordinarily holds steadfastly. So, there's a difference between a norm applying and sometimes being flouted, and that norm not ordinarily applying at all. In ordinary conversation, the quality maxim applies by default and can be flouted (such as President Trump's bulshitting) or switched off (for instance by winking). This is not so in the artworld: there's no default quality maxim to be flouted or switched off in the first place there. It's a mistake to assume that a default norm of *verbal* conversation – obeying the quality maxim – also holds in artistic conversations.

The reason for this is that there are many cases where artists don't believe that they should make artistic statements where the maxim "Do not say what you believe to be false" is in effect. And viewers of art frequently don't believe that the quality maxim is automatically in effect either: it's not appropriate to think that artists or their artworks should *always* make true statements in most contexts. Artists and their works are not frequently rebuked for uttering falsehoods, at either the shallow or deep level. There are at least three supporting reasons for this.¹⁸

First, in many artworld contexts it's inappropriate to expect that the truth should be told. Some exhibitions don't deal with shallow or deep truth-value directly, where aesthetic experience or art materials are the focus. If what matters is beauty, then truth is not the point.¹⁹ This is a familiar sentiment in 20th and 21st century artworld exhibitions. For example, many abstract art exhibitions don't have the quality maxim in effect: consider Kazimir Malevich, who developed a series of 'zero point paintings' for the *0.10* exhibition (1915). According to this show, the surface of a painting isn't determined by the artist's life, but instead concerns the pictorial material itself (Foster et al, 2004: 131-132). At this exhibition it was not the case that the truth should be told at either the shallow or deep level of the works. Similarly, exhibitions of non-abstract art with a focus on style will not usually

¹⁸ These claims are empirical, and supporting them exhaustively is more a task for art historians.

¹⁹ Korsmeyer makes a similar point (1985: 260).

have the quality maxim in effect either. For example, *JMW Turner: Adventures in Colour* (2016) focused on the artist's use of colour.²⁰ The paintings may still have said true and false things in this show, but the show's curatorial goal focused on the artist's painting techniques. Here, it was not the case that the truth should be told.

Second, there are many exhibitions of art where it's *unclear* whether the truth should be told. Perhaps the artworks are complex, and play with the nature of truth and falsity. For example, the show *Pictures* (1977) explored a new sense of the image by questioning authenticity and the notion of originality in photography. Referencing images in mass media, the works challenged authorship by stealing other images, concentrating on representation as such without a concern for what was represented (Foster et al, 580). One work at the show, Jack Goldstein's *The Pull*, consists of three chromogenic prints. Each print has its own appropriated image: one of a diver, a falling figure, and a spaceman. The images of the figures have been lifted from unknown sources, isolated from their original contexts, and placed at a small scale against three single-colour backgrounds. This makes it look like the figures are at a great distance, though the 'photographs' are actually fake.²¹ The viewer's expectations about whether the work should tell the truth in this show, either shallowly or deeply, were constantly challenged. So it was unclear whether the works should have been telling the truth.

Contemporary artworks in particular are becoming increasingly complex, especially regarding their truth-value. For instance, artworld contexts from the 1960s onwards which contain critical or 'institutional critique' art present bourgeois and liberal hypotheses which the audience is supposed to take as problematic.²² This deliberate complicating of truth and falsehood critiques conventional political viewpoints and institutions. To demand of such artworks that they should not speak falsely oversimplifies and does a disservice to the complex nature of art. It also doesn't reflect current artistic production and consumption.

Third, in many cases it's appropriate for viewers to expect artworks to be shallowly or deeply *false* in some way, perhaps because they represent fictional situations, or because audiences and artists are more concerned with the technique of representation, rather than fully-accurate representation. Most artworks are at least *shallowly* false. For example, it was appropriate in the 16th century for painters to depict biblical figures in inaccurate clothing

²⁰ 'JMW Turner: Adventures in Colour' *Turner Contemporary* (2016)

²¹ 'The Pull' *Met Museum* (n.d.)

²² See, for instance, Merlin Carpenter's paintings which form a critique of contemporary systems of art reception and consumption (Sonnenborn, 2006).

(Varriano, 2006: 119), and it was usual for portrait artists to ignore their sitter's blemishes (West, 2004: 131), thereby expressing a shallow falsehood about the complexion of the portrayed.

It's also frequently appropriate for viewers to expect *deep* falsehoods in the artworld, even if the works don't actually express such falsehoods. *The Degenerate Art Exhibition* (1937), curated by Adolf Ziegler (Peters, 2014: 21, 36, 37), was designed to promote the rhetoric that modernist art was a conspiracy against German ideals and so "un-German" (Barron, 1991: 10-11). Assuming the curation was successful, and encouraged people to see the works as anti-truth and anti-Nazi (and 'Degenerate art' was indeed seen as "betray[ing] a Nordic ideal of beauty" (Peters, 2014: 26)) the audience will have appropriately thought that these works told deep falsehoods about German ideals.

The artworld's frequent indifference to simple truth-value, the frequent precarious and unclear expectations of truth-value, and the frequent expectation of falsehoods, are features that make it complex and unclear whether the truth *should* be told in the artworld, and frequently make it clear that artworks *need not* tell the truth most of the time. They show that the quality maxim doesn't hold systematically for either level of meaning in art: it doesn't constitute a default feature.^{23,24} Of course, we don't attend galleries expecting that everything we see is false, or that truth in the artworld is irrelevant. Rather, the artworld is a complex space with shifting norms. Each show is different, and so it's difficult to track uniform communicatory norms throughout all spaces and shows. Because of this, the norm that *the truth should be told* is not universally and clearly held as it is in everyday verbal conversation. Indeed, Lamarque and Olsen (1994) reflect this sentiment when they present their 'no truth' theory of literature²⁵, which holds that "the concept of truth has no central or ineliminable role in critical practice"; a theory which receives wider support in the critical community than do 'pro-truth' theories (1994: 1).

Since it's not a default feature that artists or their works should tell the truth at either level of their work's meaning, art in many cases will fail to satisfy the *quality* condition of (L). If an artwork and its viewers are not in a quality context, then the work cannot assert

²³ It might be objected that the artworld's default context *is* a quality one because we frequently learn things from art. However, to learn something you don't have to be in a quality context: I can learn about Greek mythology and renaissance painting from *Rape of Europa* in non-quality contexts.

²⁴ The demands of the art-market might partly explain the preclusion of a default quality maxim in the artworld: "The museum, as well as the art market, treat artworks not as messages but as profane things" (Groys, 2016).

²⁵ This term comes from Elliott (1967).

things to the viewer. If it cannot assert things then it cannot lie, because lying is asserting a believed falsehood. Titian may intend his painting to lie. But if it's not the case that communication should be truthful in the context in which the painting is shown, the messages of the work should not (and likely will not) be taken seriously by its viewers in the first place, and so cannot be lies. In a nutshell, simple truth norms in the artworld are complicated, and this makes it *difficult* to lie there.

4.3. Condition (Q): The artworld can contain local quality contexts

Whilst the artworld doesn't have a quality maxim in effect by default, the quality maxim can be 'switched on' in an exhibition. This switching on will depend on how the art is displayed, and what the art actually is. More precisely, *curation* (i.e. the exhibition or event in which the work is shown) and the *genre* of the artwork (i.e. the style of the artwork in relation to other works in the artist's oeuvre, and to other similar works within art-historical movements) can deem it appropriate to expect that the truth should be told: an art show can form a local quality context. In such cases, an artwork can assert something to a viewer, and so can lie about something.

THIS PLACE (2015) at Prague's DOX gallery, can serve as an example. THIS PLACE consisted of twelve photographers' works attempting to understand and challenge the complexities of Israel: its history, geography, inhabitants, and its resonance for people around the world. Given this show's curation and its works' prevalent genre, it was the case that the truth should be told there. That is, the quality maxim was switched on; a quality context facilitated. Let's take curation and genre in turn.

4.3.1. Quality depends on curation

Curation made it clear that the photographs in THIS PLACE were *documenting* events in Israel. Like newspapers or other media images, the artworks acted as true insights into the reality of a volatile place. Information on the gallery walls stated that the images combined to create "a heterogeneous narrative of a conflicted, paradoxical and deeply resonant place...".²⁶ The show was a documentation of a country in turmoil, and a counter-argument to the media's representations of Israel. This suggests that the show was nearer to the truth about the area than was the news media.

²⁶ Cotton, C., (2015)

The curator thus invited the viewer into an *investigation* about Israel and its politics. The artist statements and curation information placed next to each artwork achieved this narrative.²⁷ With this curation in place, it was clear that the artworks ought to tell the truth.

4.3.2. *Quality depends on genre*

The prevalent genre in THIS PLACE was documentative monochrome photography. This genre partially explains why the show constituted a context where the truth should be told. In many contexts, it's generally appropriate to expect that a monochrome documentative photograph complete with annotations and information should tell the truth about something. Given that the show was composed mainly of these kinds of photographs, an archival or museum aesthetic was created, or curated. And archives and museums are places where communication should generally be sincere.

In contrast, the works in the *Pictures* (1977) show subverted and challenged this documentative photograph genre. This genre-play partially explains why it was unclear what to expect from the works in *Pictures*, and so precluded the quality maxim from taking effect there.

4.3.3. *Established quality*

Local quality contexts in the artworld are not at all unusual. For instance, the norm of quality will likely be present in many exhibitions of church art, political art, and realist 19th century art, for these genres tend to strive for accuracy and simple truth in what they depict and represent, whether the realities of ordinary life or moral truths. However, my point about a lack of *default* quality still stands: whether the norm of quality has been switched on when we enter an art gallery very much depends on the genre and movement of the works in the show, and how they have been curatorially arranged. It is not the case that the norm is automatically in place just because we're dealing with art simpliciter, in contrast to how the norm holds by default in verbal conversation.

If a quality context is established, and the artist or curator believes this, then the artwork can assert that *p* to the viewer in this quality context. If the artist or curator believes that it's false that *p*, then the work can lie that *p* to the viewer. In THIS PLACE, a work's

²⁷ This echoes Ventzislavov's claim that, "we are justified to think that curatorial work retains a strong element of artistic creativity to the extent that it engenders ever new narratives for artworks to dwell in" (2014: 90).

shallow message could be believed false: a photographer could have staged an event but presented it as actually happening. This would therefore be a shallow lie. However, the work's deep message could be true: the staged event could be saying something true about conflict in Israel. So no deep lies there. But if through a shallow falsehood or truth the work reveals a deeper falsehood, then the work would be telling a deep lie.²⁸ This is because in this exhibition, communication ought to be truthful, and so assertion is possible.

So unlike ordinary conversation, the artworld doesn't constitute a quality context by default, unless there are signals to the contrary. I've shown what these signals might be: curation – including exhibition catalogues and reviews – and genre. These signals can switch on the quality maxim, enabling the artworks to assert and therefore lie.

5. Lies and fine-grained quality contexts

Suppose that Titian believes that *Rape of Europa* says shallow falsehoods such as *Europa was carried by a bull across the ocean* in a quality context, and he knows this. However, suppose that he doesn't take these shallow believed falsehoods to be lies; he considers them mere falsehoods. Or, suppose that he doesn't take his work's deep believed falsehoods such as *rape satisfies a woman's secret desires* to be lies; he considers them mere falsehoods. But if what I've said so far is correct, then everything (shallow and deep) a work such as *Rape of Europa* says in a known quality context believed to be false by the artist or curator, will be a lie. Titian will then be accused of creating a shallowly, or deeply, lying painting, even though he doesn't intend this. This seems wrong. For instance, it's far-fetched to say that Titian intended *Rape of Europa* to lie about the behaviour of bulls. Even in a quality context we shouldn't take seriously such content. The problem then is that my account seems to overgenerate and predict lies where intuitively we'd say the artwork has just given us falsehoods.

This problem can be solved by acknowledging that even in a quality context particular things said should not be taken seriously, and so count as neither assertions nor lies. For

²⁸ You might think that a deep lie is not a *lie* because lying is *explicitly* saying (i.e. asserting) something you believe to be false (Stokke, 2013 41-43). Rather, *implying* something you believe to be false is *misleading* (Saul, 2012: 5). I'll set this aside, for I think an artwork's deep messages can be said explicitly, and so can be deep *lies*. Moreover, with art at least, whether it lies or misleads is likely not normatively significant.

example, it's generally inappropriate to provide a list of ailments from which you suffer when asked how you are by an acquaintance. Rather, one typically answers, 'I'm fine thanks'. Such pleasantries should not be taken seriously: it's normally odd to rebuke someone for uttering polite falsehoods, like saying you're fine when really you're not. However, imagine that someone in the same conversation then mentions his recent achievements. This content should, and likely will, be taken seriously. Moreover, if what he says is false, it's appropriate to rebuke him for uttering such falsehoods. So, if the quality maxim is in effect in a context, it might not apply to every sort of content. It'll be appropriate to take seriously some of what's said, but not everything that's said.

A context can similarly affect different levels of an artwork's meaning. In a quality context, some content should be taken seriously, but others shouldn't. Different quality contexts will varyingly affect the levels of a work's meaning: quality might apply to the deep level but not the shallow level, or vice versa, or to both levels. Depending on which meaning-levels of a work should be taken seriously, different lies can be told. Consider four illustrative contexts.

No-narrative context: *Rape of Europa* is displayed amongst other paintings in a museum or other neutral showing without clear curatorial direction or narrative.

Since the artworld doesn't constitute a quality context by default, one needs to be established via curatorial devices and genre. In *No-narrative context* there are no such curatorial signals, so it remains a non-quality context. Here, it's not the case that the artist or their work should tell the truth, because it's unclear if any norm of communication at all is in effect due to the show's lack of direction. Since the work therefore cannot assert anything here, it cannot lie about anything either, though it may still say dangerous falsehoods.

Style context: *Rape of Europa* is shown at an exhibition focusing on painting style, investigating 16th century art-making techniques.

For the same reason, *Style context* isn't a quality context. While there's curation with a clear narrative, it doesn't deal with truth-value in any clear sense. Its focus is the development of art materials. It's therefore not the case that the artists and their artworks should tell the truth at either level. Consequently, *Rape of Europa* cannot lie in this context.

Rape-narrative context: *Rape of Europa* sits amongst other paintings depicting rape in an exhibition with clear narration and curation regarding rape representations. Assume that here it's clear that the curator seeks to show through art how rape *should* be understood.

This is a quality context because it contains certain curatorial devices and genres, which point towards a narrative dealing with how rape should be understood. Consequently, here, deep truths about rape should be told. So while we should take seriously *Rape of Europa*'s false deep message that *rape satisfies a woman's secret desires*, we shouldn't take seriously its false shallow message that *Europa was carried by a bull across the ocean*. Granting that the other conditions of (L) are satisfied here, *Rape of Europa* would be telling a deep lie about rape. The painting would still be saying something false about bulls. But it wouldn't be *lying* about bulls because the quality maxim in force doesn't apply to that shallow content.

It should be noted that a type of exhibition such as *Rape-narrative context* may seem highly hypothetical, which may at first glance threaten the applicability of my account to any extant cultural practices. While I've merely used the, perhaps fanciful, constructed curatorial situation to serve merely as a thought experiment, its plausibility can be strengthened by the following observations.

First, there are many exhibitions of Renaissance art today that curate their works within previously overlooked new themes or narratives, and which place these works in contemporary moral and political environments. For instance, the show *Botticelli Reimagined* (2016) at the V&A was centered around how the Renaissance artist's work has been received and appropriated in subsequent centuries. It explored how cinema, fashion, and contemporary art reconfigured the artist's famous *The Birth of Venus* (1584-86). And, consider *The Other's Gaze. Spaces of Difference* (2017) at the Museo del Prado, which applied themes of homosexuality and sexual identity, "presenting a new focus on its permanent collections" of iconic Renaissance paintings.²⁹ It is therefore not a big leap to imagine an exhibition at some point in time constituting something like *Rape-narrative context*. Indeed, a recent exhibition in Brussels may form a close attempt at this: *What were you wearing?* (2018) displayed replicated clothing worn by victims of sexual assault. The overall aim of this show was to dispel the rape myth that what a victim is wearing somehow justifies rape.

Relatedly, the second observation to be made concerns the use of erotic art in private

²⁹ Museo del Prado (n.d.)

collections in previous centuries. For example, *Rape of Europa* was commissioned by Philip II to form part of his erotic art collection, composed of other ‘poesies’ (poems in paint) by Titian (FitzRoy, 2015: 11). Interestingly, Philip II identified himself as Jupiter, no doubt influencing how Titian chose to execute the myth in paint for his patron (FitzRoy, 44-45). Hidden from public view in the king’s Royal Alcázar palace, these erotic works including *Rape of Europa* caused a stir. Philip IV’s Queen Elizabeth “found the overt sexuality of Titian’s nudes so disturbing when she came to visit her husband that she ordered them to be covered over” (56), and, the highly conservative Catholic society of Spain disapproved of the king’s erotic treasures (57).

It should also be noted that *Rape of Europa* belongs to the genre of “‘heroic’ rape imagery”, which had as one of its primary functions to “elucidate marital doctrine” (Wolfthal, 1999: 10), functioning as “lessons for the bride” and visualising “the ideal traits that were expected of a new wife” (Wolfthal, 12). Moreover, art historians still disagree as to whether *Rape of Europa* expresses a “tragic or lighthearted interpretation of the myth” (FitzRoy, 48), as the painting has been interpreted as showing a combination of both fear and ecstasy surrounding Europa’s abduction.

This supposed ambiguity in the painting, as well as the fact of the work’s genre, could easily be traded upon and exploited by a corrupt curator; one who seeks to perpetuate the myth that rape is erotically charged, where the lines between consent and fear are blurred. So, we need only imagine a corrupt curator who wishes to knowingly sneak such a rape myth expressed in a work of art into a particular quality context. And, even if this scenario turns out to be rather unlikely, what I have at least done is show therefore how difficult it is for art to lie. Indeed, if we want to take seriously what lying strictly involves, then lies told by art are going to be hard to come by.

Bull-narrative context: *Rape of Europa* sits amongst other paintings depicting bulls interacting with humans in an exhibition with clear narration and curation regarding real-world bull behaviour. Here, assume it’s clear that the curator seeks to show through art how bulls actually behave.

This is also a quality context because it contains curatorial devices which point towards a narrative dealing with how bulls behave in the real world. Here, the truth should be told about bulls. Consequently, we should take seriously *Rape of Europa*’s shallow message that *Europa was carried by a bull across the ocean*, but perhaps not take seriously its deep

message that *rape satisfies a woman's secret desires*. Granting that the other conditions of (L) are satisfied here, *Rape of Europa* would be telling a shallow lie about bulls. The painting would still be saying a dangerous falsehood about rape, but it wouldn't be telling a deep *lie* about rape because the quality maxim in force doesn't apply to that content. Again, I admit the highly hypothetical nature of this scenario, but just as above, I intend it to merely act as a thought experiment demonstrating how my account might work.

So, the lies told by an artwork depend on the type of quality context in effect: it depends on how the quality context has been curated. Whilst the artist's work will be saying many falsehoods, many of these shouldn't be taken seriously in the first place, and so won't be lies. It's likely, then, that if *Rape of Europa* is shown in a quality context, it won't be lying about *bulls* because it's unlikely that we should take seriously such content in the first place.

6. Conclusion

If art can tell the truth, then art can lie. However, I've shown that it's difficult for an artwork to lie for at least two reasons. First, a quality context is required, and the artworld is a complicated world which doesn't offer the quality maxim by default. But, quality can be established by curation and genre in individual shows within the artworld, enabling lies to be communicated to the audience. And second, whether or not a work has lied partly depends on the beliefs of the artist or curator. The issue of course is that ascertaining the actual beliefs of the artist or relevant curator about the work in question is no small feat, especially when we can no longer directly ask the artist.

There are several upshots to this. First, there are implications for the Intentionalist Debate more widely. For Actual Intentionalists, the lies told by artworks will be determined by the artist's actual beliefs; for Hypothetical Intentionalists, determined by hypotheses about the artist's beliefs, giving us hypothesised lies; and for Anti-intentionalists, artworks cannot lie. Crucially though, acknowledging the role of the curator and the exhibition narratives that they facilitate in determining how artworks might lie, opens up some other possible intentionalist positions that have been hitherto unnoticed: that Actual and Hypothetical Intentionalism, at least, have expanded variants which admit reference to the

curator. These are unexplored possibilities, and for now I leave them unexplored, and merely note them as interesting results from an investigation into how art might lie to its audience.

Second, I've shown that just because an artwork might be false at either level, and perhaps dangerously false, this doesn't mean that it lies. This has implications for the examples of putative lies in art with which we began this chapter. It's likely that *Rape of Europa* hasn't told a *shallow lie* about what happened to a particular woman and bull, probably because Titian or the curators have not believed that the painting ought to be communicating sincerely about such shallow details, or because the painting hasn't been displayed in a context where the truth should be told at this shallow level. But, put into the wrong hands and context (i.e. a certain exhibition that switches on the quality maxim), then *Rape of Europa* could indeed tell a *deep lie* about rape. Now, whether or not the painting has indeed *lied* about rape depends on the beliefs of the artist or curator. And as I said above, ascertaining the actual beliefs of Titian or subsequent curators would be no small feat. So, discovering whether *Rape of Europa* has indeed told lies over the centuries is a task best suited for the art historians, but, it is a possible situation for which I have at least laid down the philosophical foundations.

And Klein's *Leap into the Void* was indeed a *shallow lie* rather than just a shallow falsehood. This is because it depicted an event that didn't happen, and was knowingly presented in a quality context, established by the fact that the work was displayed outside of the gallery on public newsstands, and by the fact that the photograph appeared to belong to a documentary genre; a genre that we frequently expect to contain truths. Moreover, Klein believed that what the work was saying or representing at a shallow level – that he leapt to the ground unprotected – was false. This artwork was thus a shallow lie.

But, artworks like those in the *Great German Exhibition*, and Chunhua's *Mao Zedong Goes To Anyuan* – contrary to our initial observations – were likely not *deep lies*, for the artists (such as Chunhua) and curators (such as Ziegler) will have likely believed that the works' deep messages were actually true. Such works of art are dangerous falsehoods, and propaganda in general will a lot of the time be dangerously false, though it will not always lie. On the other hand, if Chunhua or Ziegler, for instance, believed that their artworks' deep messages were actually false, then the works in question would be deep lies.

My argument demonstrates that whether an artwork lies is sensitive to contextual conditions, and to the beliefs of its artist or curator. However, artists don't have complete power over this. Titian may have wanted *Rape of Europa* to lie about rape, but whether it does depends on where and how the painting is displayed. On the other hand, an artist may

not intend their artwork to lie at all, but their art may be subsequently used to lie by a curator. Works at the *Degenerate* exhibition were taken to lie about German society, even though the artists themselves likely had no such intentions. If the fascist curators of the show believed that the messages of, for example, Freundlich's sculpture *Large Head* (1912) (Figure. 4), were false, and if they successfully curated a quality context, then *Large Head* would be lying – derivatively on the curator's beliefs – about German ideals. This partly reveals the power that curation can have over what an artwork can mean, and whether it can lie.

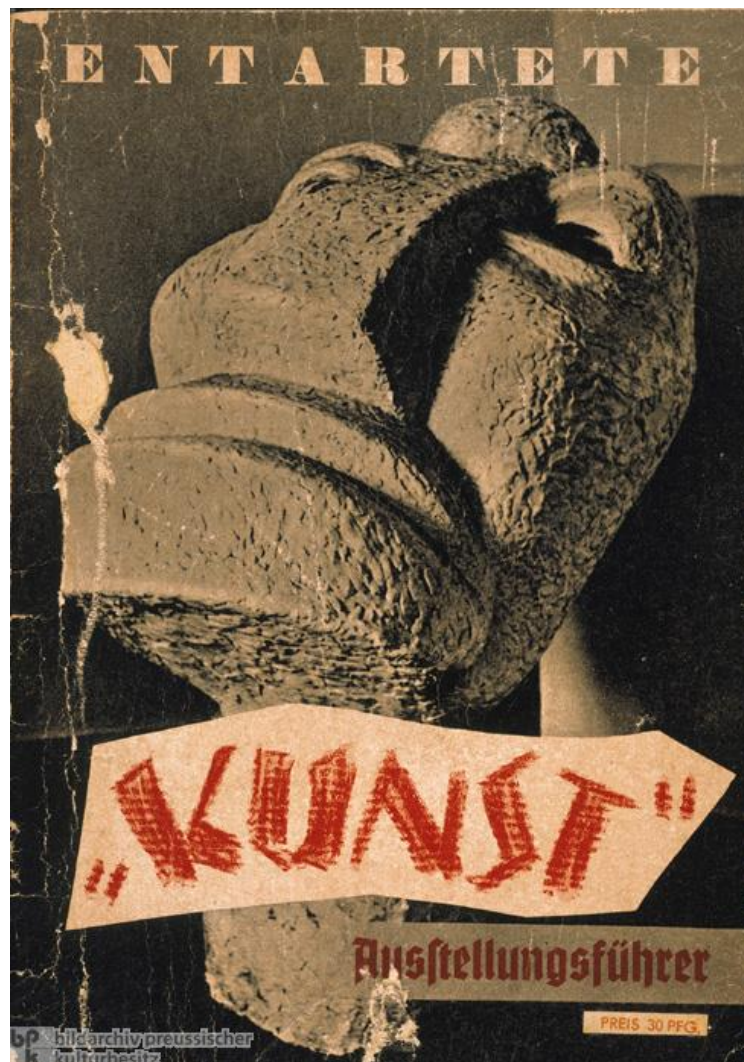


Figure. 4

Chapter Three

3. Artworks Express Propositions: A Soamesian Picture

Abstract

Chapter 2 assumes that art can express propositions, and a lot rests on this assumption. Propositions are the bearers of truth-value. And if art cannot express propositions, then it's unclear how art can lie, given that lying involves expressing or saying something believed to be false. Chapter 3 argues that artworks do have propositional content, thereby providing support to the assumption made in Chapter 2: artworks can say true and false things. Call this 'the proposition theory of art'. In particular, I hold that the shallow and deep messages of artworks are propositional. I deal with three main difficulties for this view, and I show how Scott Soames's (2014b, 2014d) recent theory of propositions can help us understand how artworks have propositional content.

1. Introduction

Many visual (non-linguistic) artworks represent things, and so have content: that is, there is something they represent. But for centuries, art critics and art viewers talk as if, through this representation, visual artworks *say* things, express messages, or have meanings. That is, artworks seem to communicate meaning to us. For instance, recall the large and looming painting, *Guernica*, composed of a myriad of dark angular shapes exploding into distorted, screaming figures: a famous anti-war symbol, partly because of what it communicates. According to one art critic, “Life, says the painting, is an ordinary carnal, entirely unnegotiable value” (Clark, 2013: 246).

But how does an artwork do this? How should we understand artwork meaning? In this chapter, the meaning of artworks will again be understood as having two components: content and force. Just like when we speak we express certain contents with forces such as asserting, commanding, or requesting, an artwork’s content is also put forth with certain forces, such as assertion. These two components of content and force combine to create messages, informing the overall meaning of the work.

Recall that artworks don’t appear to ‘speak’ at just one level: I stipulated that an artwork’s representative content can be divided into two levels; *shallow* and *deep*. Shallow content roughly comprises what a work depicts at a descriptive or literal level, and is normally constituted by the work’s composition, use of pigment, size, shape, and medium. Deep content goes beyond this shallow level, forming the ‘point’ or ‘theme’ of the piece, and is normally generated by the particular handling of the work’s shallow content, and also by its use of symbol and metaphor. For example, *Guernica* depicts the airstrike using chaotic, jagged forms, and on some interpretations, the intact bull to the left of the composition symbolises Fascism. This deep content, when expressed with an illocutionary force such as assertion, comprises a deep message, for instance: *Fascism is barbaric*. In general, when shallow or deep content is expressed with a certain force, it generates shallow and deep messages.

What is the nature of these shallow and deep messages in art? More familiar messages – messages that people express or communicate with words – are considered to be *propositional* in content. But it isn’t obvious that messages expressed by visual, non-

linguistic artworks are propositional. Rather, it is more common to hold that artworks have a distinctive kind of content, such as ‘pictorial content’.¹

This chapter defends the view that visual (non-linguistic) art has propositional content. That is, these works “contain” or “express” propositions: those things also expressed by sentences. Call this ‘the proposition theory of art’.² In particular, I hold that the shallow and deep messages of artworks are propositional. I leave it open whether artworks can express other kinds of content that are non-propositional. For instance, artworks might have ‘emotional content’ (whatever this might be), which may be non-propositional.

I aim to defend the proposition theory of art by drawing on recent philosophical work on the nature of propositions. Section 2 gives a broad overview of the proposition theory of art. Section 3 outlines the supposed main inadequacies of the theory. Section 4 gives a brief survey of how propositions have been understood in the philosophy of language, and offers Scott Soames’s (2014b, 2014d) recent account. Section 5 adapts this account to artworks and tries to solve the problems faced by the proposition theory of art. The burden of proof will be left to my opponent to show that either Soames’s account of propositions is wrong, or that it cannot be applied to art.

2. The proposition theory of art

Propositions are traditionally understood as the pieces of information encoded by sentences and extracted by agents. That is, understanding the meaning of a sentence amounts to grasping the proposition it expresses. Different sentences can express the same proposition, i.e. they can have the same meaning: “snow is white” and “Schnee ist weiß” both have the same meaning; they both express the proposition *that snow is white*. Propositions are the bearers of truth-value: sentences are true or false in virtue of whether the propositions they express are true or false. We also speak of things being necessarily or possibly true: it’s necessary that $2+2=4$, and swans could have been pink. So propositions also seem to have modal attributes: they can bear modal truths about whether something is necessary or possible. Propositions are also identified with those things agents bear attitudes to: we

¹ See Crane (2009), Haugeland (1998), Peacocke (1987, 1992), and Sainsbury (2005).

² Proponents of this view also argue that linguistic art such as novels and poems express propositions. However, this chapter (as well as the whole thesis) will focus only on non-linguistic visual art, as the problems with the propositional theory of art are mostly concerned with the claim that visual art can express propositions.

believe, doubt, and assume *that something is the case*. To believe that grass is green, for example, is to bear a cognitive relation to the proposition *that grass is green*.

The proposition theory of art holds that artworks express propositions: those entities also expressed by natural language, but in art they are expressed in a “distinctive communicatory medium, [and] may be *as* true or false as a scientifically expressed proposition” (Greene, 1940: 425). Moreover, the theory holds that propositions (or ‘truth-claims’ as Weitz sometimes says) in art are expressed at both the shallow and deep level³, where shallow propositions are understood as “descriptive” (Greene, 1940: 444) or sitting at the “surface” of a work (Weitz, 1950: 143-145), and deep propositions as perhaps “evaluative” (Greene, *ibid*), or sitting at a level of “depth” (Weitz, *ibid*):

If a work of art has ‘anything to say’ it must be regarded as the expression, in an artistic medium, via artistic form, of a proposition (simple or complex) which is both factual and normative, that is, which *not only describes an objective situation but formulates an evaluation of it...* artistic expression of one or more *descriptive and evaluative propositions* (Greene, 1940: 443-444, my emphasis).

According to proponents of the proposition theory of art – propositionalists – propositions in art are expressed via illocutionary acts such as assertion, questioning, or criticism. It is then up to the viewer and artist “to supply the language that crystallizes them into definite statements”, as Korsmeyer affirms (1985: 264).

Propositionalists hold that the expression of propositions by art is possible due to the representative features within the artwork (Korsmeyer, 262). This has been likened to expression by the act of kneeling in prayer (Weitz, 1950), which, within a Christian context expresses the proposition *that there is a God who is worthy of human respect* (or something equivalent). Rather than being expressed verbally, the worshiper gestures it as part of her total act: “the action is the medium of conveying the asserted proposition” (Weitz, 1950: 149).

It is proposed that the propositions expressed in art are presented in much the same way, mainly through the artwork’s depiction of its subject matter within its formal elements, and its use of symbol and metaphor (Weitz, 1950: 149). The former method, which relates to the work’s basic plastic elements and what the work simply depicts, will compose shallow

³ Alex Grzankowski’s (2015) argument that pictures have propositional content focuses on what he calls ‘depictive content’ (151), which I take to be shallow content.

propositions. For instance, it is partly because of what *Guernica* depicts that it expresses the propositions *that a woman grieves for her dead child, that a light bulb is in the sky, that a woman holds a light* and so on, or, using Grzankowski's example, when looking at a picture depicting a man jumping over a car, "the proposition that the man is jumping over the car, a proposition encoded in the picture" (2015: 161).

The latter method, which involves symbol and metaphor for instance, will generate deeper propositions. For example, the horse in *Guernica* is normally interpreted as a symbol for the massacred civilian population of Guernica (Gottlieb, 1965: 111). Moreover, the woman to the right of the painting who stretches out a light above the scene unfolding beneath her has been interpreted as a symbol for "Civilisation" or "History" or "Enlightenment" (Gottlieb, *ibid*). The intact bull – which on some interpretations symbolises Fascism – and the screaming people and animals, "serve to express the proposition *that the victory of Fascism is the brutal destruction of everything*" (Weitz, 1950: 150 my emphasis). In this example, the shallow content (comprised of what the painting depicts), combined with symbolic meanings and external knowledge about the work's history, partially explain how the work expresses its deep messages. Indeed, it is *how* the painting's objects have been depicted which explains how these deep messages are expressed in such a visually effective and disturbing way.

These artistically expressed propositions at both the shallow and deep level are construed in a familiar way: they are the bearers of truth-value, the objects of cognitive attitudes, and they represent the world (Greene, 1940: 425, 443).

Alex Grzankowski has recently offered a powerful argument that pictures, at least, have propositional content at the shallow level (he doesn't deal with what pictures "artistically represent", for example: "all manner of things from liberty to discontent to a lost love" (151); using my terms, this seems to refer to deep content). Grzankowski observes that we can apply propositional operators such as negation or modal terms to the depictive contents of pictures, which suggests that, in my terms, the shallow content of pictures is propositional (Grzankowski 2015: 161).⁴ I agree with this, but I go further to try understand *how* visual artworks, including pictures, might express propositions in the first place at both levels.

There is motivation for adhering to the view that visual artworks have propositional content, and in particular identifying shallow and deep messages in art as propositional. First,

⁴ Also, see Novitz (1977: 86-106) for his proposition theory of pictures.

it explains and accommodates the intuitive observation that artworks somehow ‘say’ things, and seem to be true or false. In particular, artworks seem to convey truth-values at their shallow and deep levels. Shallow messages can be false whilst the deep messages are true, and vice versa; both can be true; and both can be false. For example, some of *Guernica*’s shallow messages seem false: there was no light bulb in the sky during the airstrike. However, the painting appears to say true deep messages regarding the nature of war. Moreover, a true shallow message may be used to convey a deep falsehood. Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 film *Triumph of the Will* does this, using raw documentary footage of the 1934 Nuremburg rally to convey false deep claims about the glamour of war. And indeed, some artworks convey false messages at both levels – consider Gustav Closs’s *Nazi St George Slaying a Dragon* (1937), which depicts an event that never happened in order to convey a false deep message idealising war – or true messages at both levels, as does Nick Ut’s famous 1972 photograph *The Terror of War* which depicts a real event – a napalm bombing – to convey a true deep message about the horrors of war.

The messages that artworks express have certain characteristics: we bear cognitive attitudes to them, we ascribe to them a truth-value, and they represent states of affairs. For example, we interpret *Guernica* as saying that *war is barbaric*. I can believe *that war is barbaric*, it seems true, and the message appears to represent a certain state of affairs. Given that propositions are taken to play these roles, and given that meaning is generally identified with propositions, the claim that the meaning of an artwork is to be partly understood as propositional is motivated.⁵

Second, analysing the meaning of an artwork as propositional generates explanatory power in other debates in aesthetics. It opens up the possibility of art offering propositional knowledge, and it helps explain art’s relation to morality: an artwork can be celebrated or accused for what it says or the messages it expresses (this will normally be in reaction to the work’s deep messages). For instance, we generally value works like *Guernica* because of what they say about certain events and concepts, and how they say these things.

⁵ While the propositions expressed by an artwork bear a truth-value, this may not be considered an artistic merit and relevant to artistic value; truth-value might be hard to determine and perhaps less urgent given how we interact with art (Korsmeyer, 1985: 257).

3. *Three problems*

Despite its initial appeal, the proposition theory of art has frequently come under fire. While we can agree that *sentences* express propositions, it's controversial that *artworks* do. Three main difficulties can be extracted.

3.1. *The disanalogy problem*

There are important disanalogies between art and sentential language, and so opponents of the proposition theory of art generally argue that artworks simply aren't the kinds of vehicles that can express propositions like sentences do. This is captured in James Young's (2001) complaint about the proposition theory of art, which he sees as "clearly a non-starter" (46):

...since statements are vehicles of information, and pictures are not, pictures are not statements. Since pictures in general are not statements, works of pictorial art are not statements (Young, 46).

And E. H. Gombrich's claim that:

...the terms 'true' and 'false' can only be applied to statements, propositions. And whatever may be the usage of critical parlance, a picture is never a statement in that sense of the term. It can no more be true or false than a statement can be blue or green (Gombrich, 1960: 59).

A first naïve attempt to articulate the problem can be given. It might be complained that visual art doesn't have the "transparency of the verbal sign" (Rieser, 1950: 700), and that this prevents artworks from being vehicles of both shallow and deep propositions. Indeed, language is conventional; its marks have meaning due to rule-governed conventions, and it contains a relatively fixed vocabulary and rule-governed grammar, resulting in compositionality (the ability to generate infinite sentences) (Margolis, 1974: 176-177). However, art is frequently inventive and progressive in the way it depicts objects at the shallow level. The claim that it possesses anything like a fixed vocabulary and syntax is far-fetched. That art doesn't share these features with language supposedly betrays the hopelessness of the proposition theory of art.

Underlying these objections is the assumption that only linguistic vehicles such as sentences can express propositions. Since the artworks with which we're concerned are not linguistic, they cannot express propositions. Call this the *linguistic constraint*.

The linguistic constraint can easily be rejected however. This is because things other than sentences do have propositions as their content. It's generally accepted amongst philosophers of language that at least maps, visual signs such as road signs, and diagrams, have propositional content (King, Speaks & Soames, 2014). For example, maps appear to have propositional content, whereby the small points representing towns can be treated as the analogues of words in a sentence, and similarly have semantic values: the towns they represent. The spatial relations between these can be treated as sentential relations, which also have semantic significance by representing the relations between the towns. The proposition assigned to the map will be constituted by these spatial relations (King, 2014: 191).⁶ Opponents of the proposition theory of art who wish to hold on to a kind of linguistic constraint, then, will be unreasonably restricting the class of objects that express propositions. Just because sentences are the most familiar things to express propositions, doesn't entail that they are the only things that do.

However, the disanalogy problem can be strengthened. It could be argued that while objects like maps, diagrams, and visual signs are counterexamples to the linguistic constraint – thereby showing that things other than sentences have propositional content – this doesn't entail that artworks can express propositions. This is because the above counterexamples are still each employed within a system of strong, static conventions, and artworks are not.

While artworks often use conventional symbols at their shallow level (like using a dove to represent peace), which thereby contribute to the work's deep messages, this doesn't go far enough to show that all artworks can be construed in terms of a vocabulary and grammar. Nothing like the finite grammar that helps generate well-formed sentences can be formulated for the arts (Margolis, 1979): this would probably hinder creation. Artworks aren't novel expressions within a language; rather, they constantly institute *new* conventions that aren't collected as “admissible expressions formed in a stable vocabulary and finite grammar”, as Margolis writes (1974: 178).⁷ If such a syntax cannot be established at a

⁶ However, King states that it's doubtful that there is a proposition shared between the map and a sentence, and so no sentence will express the same proposition as the map (2014: 193). He finds this result plausible, however.

⁷ This problem has been highlighted elsewhere: Morgan writes: “It's difficult to see any clear sense in which the elements in most pictures might be called ‘linguistic’...Only those that have a combination of elements that obey a conventionally established syntax [might be called linguistic]” (1953: 23).

work's shallow level, it becomes unclear how the work might express shallow *propositions*, as well as deep propositions (which apparently partially rely on this shallow content).

So while maps, diagrams, and signs use strong conventions and systems, artworks do not contain anything this systematic. According to the objection, something like syntax or a systematised convention is required within the object for it to express or contain propositions. As Carolyn Wilde writes, "talk of 'propositions'...is not strictly appropriate when speaking of something which lacks syntactical structure" (2007: 134). Call this the *syntax constraint*.⁸ This constraint seems a genuine problem for art, as opposed to the linguistic constraint, which was earlier dispensed with. The disanalogy problem should therefore be construed as placing this syntax constraint.

3.2. *The (in)determinacy problem*

It might be argued that the fact that propositions are determinate and artwork meaning is indeterminate gives us reason to doubt that artworks have propositional content. Wilde anticipates this objection:

The idea that any work of art 'proposes a thesis' or 'presents a proposition' is problematic. For it seems to imply that we can expect some determinate meaning from a work of art. Yet a common assumption is that although works of art are subject to interpretation, whatever is communicated...is not equivalent to any determinate statement (2007: 119).

The problem is that propositionalists might be misconstruing the nature of artwork meaning. Claiming that artworks have propositional content isn't faithful to the fact that artworks admit of many interpretations.⁹ Rieser (1950) raises a similar worry:

⁸ The syntax constraint rules out a particular theory about artwork meaning, related to the proposition theory of art. Bennett (1974) claims that pictures coupled with a label or title are *sentences*, thus requiring syntax. But many artworks are untitled and without labels, and to construct a syntax like Bennett suggests for all artworks will likely not work. So Bennett's account should be rejected from the outset because a strict syntax cannot be established for all art.

⁹ Of course, utterances of ambiguous sentences might leave it unclear as to what propositions are expressed, but normally the set of possible candidates are reasonably restricted.

It is certainly far-fetched, to say the least, to look at a still life picturing two worn-out shoes [van Gogh] and to say...that this is a statement. What statement? “These are two old shoes” or “You should wear such shoes...” (1950: 696).

Rieser’s point here can be interpreted as perhaps relating to shallow content initially: “these are two old shoes”, and then relating to a somewhat deeper content with the more normative: “you should wear such shoes.”

The problem is that when we analyse the candidates for the meaning of a particular artwork, shallow or deep, we end up with options that are too fine-grained. It is indeterminate which content – p_1 or $p_{1.5}$ or $p_{1.75}$ or p_n – forms part of the expressed set of messages. It then becomes arbitrary or artificial which contents are to be included in the set expressed by the artwork, which constitute the work’s meaning. There can be no fact of the matter which of the many candidates is the relevant one. This problem of indeterminacy seems to arise for both levels of content. It arises at the shallow level: which of the following is *Guernica* expressing?: *that there is a horse to the left*, or, *that there is a horse x inches to the left*, or *that there is a horse y inches to the right*, and so on. The problem also arises, perhaps more pertinently, for deep content. *Guernica*’s deep content also seems to be endless: *that fascism is brutal*, *that fascism is the brutal destruction of freedom*, *that fascism is the brutal destruction of truth*, *that fascism is the brutal destruction of love*, and so on.

In sum: for the sake of argument, assume that the proposition theory of art is correct, and that artworks have propositional content. Since propositions are determinate meanings, then artworks have determinate meanings. Artworks do not have determinate meanings at either level. We should therefore reject our assumption: the proposition theory of art is incorrect; artworks don’t have propositional content.

3.3. The expression problem

Proponents of the proposition theory of art might be running into a red herring. They may be conflating propositions expressed *about* an artwork, with propositions expressed *by* the artwork. While we can refer to the contents of pictures with sentences that express propositions, this is insufficient for showing that the content being described is also propositional: “describing the content and being the content are not the same thing” as Tim Crane argues (2009: 460). In other words, the fact that we can read shallow and deep propositions into an artwork doesn’t mean that the work has propositional content at either

level (Rieser, 1950: 698). Propositionalists still leave it mysterious as to how exactly artworks “express” or “contain” propositions.

4. What are propositions?

The above debate between those who think artworks can express propositions (propositionalists) and those who think they cannot (anti-propositionalists) arises from a dispute over the appropriate vehicles of propositions. As such, the nature of propositions is our pivot point, for what we allow as a vehicle for propositions depends on how we understand propositions in the first place.

Propositionalists claim that artworks can express propositions partly because propositions are independent from language, and can be expressed by things other than sentences. Anti-propositionalists argue that artworks cannot express propositions because propositions are dependent on language, and artworks lack the fundamental features of language. This disagreement is due in part to different understandings of what propositions actually are. If we consider propositions in a *narrow sense*, i.e. that they are dependent on language, then artworks do not have propositional content:

If a proposition is defined as a *verbal* expression of which truth and falsity is predicable, then pictures are surely not propositions, for they are not verbal...It is, I think, only in this very narrow sense of ‘proposition’ that we can exclude the notion of ‘pictorial truth’... (Morgan, 1953, 23).¹⁰

However, if we consider propositions in a *broad sense*, i.e. that they are not dependent on language, then this leaves open the possibility that artworks have propositional content:

Like with propositions, [pictures] can serve as evidence for states of affairs, arouse similar responses in the audience’s mind, be ambiguous, require interpretations, and they are subject to verification and disverification...(ibid).

¹⁰ I take ‘pictures’ here in the loose sense including visual artworks like paintings and sculptures.

In this section I outline the traditional conception of propositions. After outlining its inadequacies, and showing that the opponents of the proposition theory of art partly rely on it, I outline an existing new theory which offers a refreshing way of conceiving propositions. I argue that propositions should be construed not in the narrow sense, but in the broader sense.

4.1. Traditional approach

Normally attributed to Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege, the traditional approach holds that propositions are those entities that are the primary bearers of truth-value, the objects of our attitudes, and the meanings of sentences. Frege and Russell draw a very close relationship between the structure of sentences and the structure of propositions. Propositions are complex structures composed of the meanings of the constituents in sentences, and we access propositions through these sentences.

Under this conception, propositions are taken to be timeless unchanging entities, which we are acquainted with by a passive intellectual awareness (Soames, 2014a: 25-26, explaining this traditional approach). The fact that propositions represent things in the world and are bearers of truth-value does not derive from the prior activities of agents. Rather, it is part of their nature, independent of human minds and language. And since propositions are the primary bearers of intentionality, the intentionality of cognitive acts must be explained in virtue of the relations we bear to propositions. In other words, Frege and Russell distinguish what is judged or believed, for example, from the cognitive events of judging and mental states of believing.

Anti-propositionalists adhere to parts of the traditional approach of propositions; they draw a close structural relationship between propositions and sentences. The syntax constraint in particular falls out of treating propositions as those entities expressed only by sentential objects; whether these are natural language sentences or other objects with syntax or established conventions, like maps and diagrams.

However, the traditional approach to propositions faces problems. First, it's unclear what makes propositions representational and hence bearers of truth, and the meanings of sentences. Since the traditional conception sees propositions as structures having intentional properties independently of agents, a logical unifying relation that holds the constituents of the formal structure of the proposition together needed to be found. That is, there is more to the proposition *that A differs from B*, than the constituents A, B, and the relation of

difference. In a mere formal list of constituents and relations, nothing is predicated of anything, and so cannot represent things as such. There is nothing inherent in such a formal structure that makes it representational and so capable of being true or false. Indeed, Russell notoriously struggled to find this relation. We cannot say that it's the endowing of representation to the formal structures that makes them representational; since for Russell propositions aren't things that *have* meanings, they *are* meanings. So the idea that propositions are to be identified with a mere formal structure is a problematic starting point (Soames, 2014a: 26-32).

Second, there's a lack of explanation as to how agents access these entities, and how we bear attitudes to them. If propositions are representational by their natures and independently of agents, it becomes mysterious how exactly agents bear cognitive attitudes to them.

And third, if propositions are representational independently of agents and experience, it becomes mysterious how an uttered sentence expresses a proposition. It's unclear how propositions become attached to sentences, and merely positing an otherworldly *expressing*-relation further mystifies this relationship.

So the anti-propositionalist's arguments rest on a problematic conception of propositions. They might want to bite the bullet and accept this underlying traditional approach. However, as I will show, there's a more attractive proposal that bypasses the problems that the traditional conception faces. Once this new view is considered, I hold, the anti-propositionalist's three problems can be solved or dissolved, and the proposition theory of art gains new support. I now turn to one of these new theories of propositions.

4.2. *Propositions as cognitive event-types*

According to Scott Soames (2014b), we must avoid positing propositions in a platonic realm beyond agents, with no explanation of how we bear attitudes to them, contrary to the traditional approach. Moreover, we can't characterise propositions as simply talk about sentences, because "propositions have a life beyond language" (2014b: 92).

We should instead identify propositions with the cognitive actions of agents. Consider Mark who says, 'Jeremy has a green coat.' Here, Mark is predicating the colour green of Jeremy's coat, which we can call a 'cognitive action' or a 'cognitive event.' For Soames, propositions are the *types* of cognitive events that agents perform. So, the proposition *that o is green* is "the minimal event type" where an agent predicates *being green* of an object.

Entertaining a proposition is the most basic attitude we can bear to a proposition, and forms the basis of other instances of event types such as asserting, judging, and seeing. All of these attitudes are instances of cognising an object in a certain way (Soames, 2014d: 229), for example, predicating greenness of a coat. Propositions are therefore kinds of cognitive doings, and entertaining them isn't thinking about them in special ways, but "embodying" them in one's cognitive life.

This 'event type', i.e. proposition, is representational because every instant of it is where an agent represents something to be such-and-such, such as Mark representing Jeremy's coat as green. What the proposition represents is what is representationally common to all such cognitive instances. Since in each instance an object like Jeremy's coat is represented as green, we speak derivatively of the proposition itself representing that object as green (Soames, 2014b: 96). In other words, to entertain the proposition *that o is green* is to predicate greenness of *o*, and this is an instance of the event type that is the proposition.¹¹

For Soames, propositions represent things as being a certain way, and so are the contents of cognitive states like belief, doubt, or uncertainty that something is the case. He claims that propositions are also the content of many perceptual states: seeing and hearing constitute relations between an agent and something else.¹²

According to Soames, propositions are the content of sentences, thought, and perception. The latter two are talked about using sentences, so the same propositions can function as content for all three. That is, we choose sentence *s* that expresses proposition *p* that is part of the cognitive or perceptual state we want to articulate (2014b: 93).

Soames's account is attractive because it solves the three problems that the traditional account of propositions faces. First, an account of propositions needs to explain how propositions represent the world and so have truth conditions. According to the traditional approach, propositions have intentional properties inherently and independently without need of interpretation by agents, but they therefore cannot be explained by the relation they bear to agents. Soames's account bypasses this problem. The intentionality relation that

¹¹ For Soames, the truth conditions of the proposition are due to the representational features of their possible instances. To entertain the proposition *that o is green* is to simply predicate greenness of *o* and represent it as such. From this we get truth conditions: the proposition is true iff *o* is represented to be a certain way, and is that way, and false iff *o* isn't that way. Moreover, these conditions can modalise: for every metaphysically and epistemically possible world state *w*, the proposition *that o is green* is true at *w* if at *w*, *o* is green. Consequently, the perception of an apple as green will have a true or false proposition as its content (Soames, 2014b: 95).

¹² I won't defend the claim that perceptual experience has propositional content, though it's likely that being a propositionalist about art comes hand in hand with being a propositionalist about perceptual experience.

propositions bear to agents is not to be identified with being interpreted by agents, but with having instances *in which* agents represent things. Since the proposition *that o is green* is the event type of an agent's action of predicating greenness of *o*, it represents as such because the instances themselves are representations. Thus, the event type couldn't be what it is without bearing its intentional properties; it can be inherently intentional and be the interpretation of sentences, without itself being the sort of thing that needs interpretation (96-97).

Second, Soames's theory explains our epistemic relations to propositions. When we predicate properties of objects, and thereby entertain propositions, this is done before our knowledge of the concept of propositions. Rather, we gradually understand the concept through performing cognitive actions, thereby making propositions the objects of thought and attitudes.

And third, Soames's account also goes some way to demystifying the *expression*-relation between a sentence and proposition. For Soames, sentences are similarly event types, instances of which are utterances. Utterances are concrete events at certain times and places where the agent produces auditory, visual or tactile tokens endowed with semantic and syntactic properties. For example, when Mark utters, 'Jeremy's coat is green', he is in that context uttering the sentence 'Jeremy's coat is green'. Sentences and propositions are both event types, but the event type proposition *p* (the performance of a propositional act such as referring) differs from the event type sentence *s* (the performance of the sentential act of using *s* to refer):

When an event is an instance of both a sentential and propositional type, there is no extra inner event of grasping the proposition over and above using the sentence meaningfully (Soames, 2014b:105).

This means that a sentence *s* expresses a proposition *p* when the agent who understands *s* can entertain *p* by uttering *s*. For example, Mark expresses the proposition *that Jeremy's coat is green* when he says 'Jeremy's coat is green', because he is entertaining that proposition by uttering that sentence. The *expressing*-relation should therefore be conceived as being grounded in a *by*-relation. This *by*-relation holds between two things that are done when the agent can do one of those things by doing the other: entertaining *p* by uttering *s*.

In sum, under Soames's account, propositions are not tied to language and are prior to syntax and established conventions and systems. He points out that there are many actual

and possible agents, including humans, who bear propositional attitudes to propositions presented to them in “perception and non-verbal thought” that seem not to be presented in any sentential form (2014c: 174). Moreover, languages are complex social institutions, and to engage in them one must have beliefs and desires. So there is no speaking a language without possessing a rich store of propositional attitudes. Without the existence of propositions prior to language, it becomes unclear how language is even born (175). It is thus a mistake to start with a “thoroughly linguistic account of propositions expressed in language, with the hope of grafting it on later accounts of those with which we are non-linguistically acquainted” (177).¹³ Instead, we should begin with an account that isn’t tied to a single “mode of presentation” such as language or other sentential objects.

Soames’s account of propositions can only help us if it can be used to explain how artworks have propositional content. In the next section I try to show that it does. In fact, the proposition theory of art might even be a natural development of Soames’s proposition account.

5. A sketched Soamesian proposition theory of art

This section uses Soames’s conception of propositions as cognitive event-types to sketch a proposition theory of art that avoids the anti-propositionalist’s three problems.

5.1. Artworks and cognitive events

Within art theory, artworks are often regarded as kinds of events or actions, rather than mere representations or illustrations. For example, an artwork is considered a “bundle of affects” (O’Sullivan, 2001: 125), or an “instantaneous occurrence”, as Jean-François Lyotard writes of Barnett Newman’s abstract colour-field paintings (1984: 241). In this spirit (but by no means letter), I want to suggest that artworks are manifestations or triggers of artistic cognitive event-types, the events of which are performed by either the artist and/or the viewer of the work. This is a new way of understanding how artworks might express propositions.

¹³ This point of Soames’s was originally presented as a criticism of King’s “logo-centric” account of propositions.

In 1889, Vincent van Gogh painted the view from his east-facing window in the Saint-Remy-de-Provence hospital, resulting in the famous painting *The Starry Night* (1889) (Figure. 5).



Figure. 5

Recall that propositions are the types of cognitive actions performed by agents. For instance, when van Gogh looked up at the sky and saw that it was starry, in his mind he predicated starriness of the sky. The type of action performed here, predicating starriness of an object, is the proposition. So, van Gogh entertained that proposition when he gazed at the magnificent night-sky. He might have performed this cognitive action out loud as well, by uttering the sentence, ‘The sky is starry tonight’ to himself. There too, he was entertaining the proposition by uttering a specific sentence. Another way he entertained that proposition was by creating the painting *The Starry Night*. When he painted swirls and spirals into the painting of the night-sky, he was cognising, and in some situations specifically predicating, swirls and spirals of that night-sky. So too when he painted the glowing and exploding balls of fire, he was representing various properties of that night-sky.

The resulting artwork *The Starry Night* forms a trace of van Gogh's cognitive actions. As a result of what he did with the paintbrush, the work represents the night-sky in various ways: the painting predicates spirals and glowing balls of a sky, and predicates a deep green of the cypress tree in the foreground, derivatively on the artist's painterly actions.¹⁴ The work itself is a manifestation of various cognitive actions of the artist. Indeed, this notion is reflected in Immanuel Kant's (1790) claim that an artwork is the product of a rational *doing* (*facere*), in contrast to the effects of nature:

Art is distinguished from nature as doing (*facere*) is from acting or producing in general (*agere*), and the product or consequence of the former is distinguished as a work (*opus*) from the latter as an effect (*effectus*). By right, only production through freedom, i.e., through a capacity for choice that grounds its actions in reason, should be called art (Guyer & Wood (eds.), 2000: 182).

The proposition *that the sky is starry* is the content of a cognitive state, for example, whenever an agent (say van Gogh) predicates *being-starry* of an object *o*, here, the sky. When van Gogh does this whilst painting, two concrete events – the artwork and van Gogh's cognitive state – occur at a certain time and place. This suggests that the proposition, the event-type *that the sky is starry*, is manifested in the painting as it predicates *being-starry* of the sky. This event-type is representational because every instant of it is where the artwork represents something to be such-and-such. *The Starry Night* is to be seen, then, as a way of cognising the sky as spirally, and has as its content the proposition (the event-type) *that the sky is starry*.

More precisely, under my sketched view, the following all have the same propositional content, roughly *that the sky is starry*:

1. van Gogh's utterance of the sentence 'It's a starry sky';
2. van Gogh's cognitive experience of the night-sky during his stay at the hospital;
3. van Gogh's painting *The Starry Night*.

¹⁴ Matravers also hints at this idea when writing about the expression of emotion in the arts: "[often] we see the paint as the product of the actions of (for example) an anguished person...we see the painting as the result of an action performed in a certain manner" (2009: 627).

It should be noted, however, that van Gogh needn't have explicitly intended to make manifest certain cognitive event-types or propositions in his painting, for the painting to manifest these cognitive event-types. When he painted the starriness of the sky, or the deep greenness of the cypress tree in the foreground, he needn't have been consciously making such predications. The painting, if executed in the appropriate way – for instance, by placing the stars in the sky and not in the earthy ground – will still be manifesting such predications.

The reason for this is because the painting can still be interpreted by the viewer as manifesting certain cognitive actions. Perhaps by hypothesising what the agent who created the work was doing with the colours and shapes in the work, the viewer can decipher or cognise such a predication when inspecting the work.¹⁵ When she engages with *The Starry Night*, the viewer can detect the work's basic (or shallow) elements, such as its visual and compositional placement of the colours yellow, blue, and green with various represented objects such as the sky, stars, and trees. Through this comprehending, the viewer simultaneously predicates those colours of the sky and trees, which are cognitive actions, and therefore propositions. The viewer thereby entertains these basic propositions, such as *the sky is starry* and *the cypress tree is green*. In other words, the viewer can entertain or grasp this type of cognitive action which forms a content of the painting, for instance, the predication of glowing yellow stars to a night-sky. The viewer entertains and so interprets that proposition when viewing the painting, without the artist necessarily intending to make that particular predication with his medium.

So far, I've dealt with basic cognitive actions such as predicating colours of objects. These give us shallow propositions. But, as noted earlier, artworks generally have a meaning that goes beyond such shallow content. *The Starry Night* doesn't just represent a night-sky.

Interpretations by art historians tend to focus on van Gogh's mental health at the time of creating the work, as well as his beliefs about religion and the afterlife. For example, Sven Loevgren argues that the painting embodies "a never-to-be-forgotten sensation of standing on the threshold of eternity" and symbolizes "the final absorption of the artist by the cosmos" (1971: 182). This is backed up by the observation that the cypress tree in the foreground is a symbol of death (a common symbol in Mediterranean countries) (1971: 184), and Wojtech Jirat-Wasiutynski's assertion that the cypresses in the painting "separate the nocturnal vision from the fore-ground and yet act as a visual link with the heavens" (1993: 661). Moreover,

¹⁵ This idea is again loosely hinted at by Matravers when he writes about the expression of emotion in the arts: "We do not have to believe that we are looking at the externalisation of the inner state of the actual artist (although we often do)...we might simply hypothesise that the artist painted in this way" (2009: 627).

Lauren Soth sees *The Starry Night* as “a religious picture, a sublimation of impulses that, since Van Gogh’s loss of faith in the Church, could not find their outlet in conventional Christian imagery” (1986: 301), where the colours contribute to this deeper meaning: “The blue for Christ and the citron-yellow for the angel became the sky, and the stars and moon” (1986: 312).

These themes constitute *deeper* messages of the work about the artist’s well-being and religion. But how are such deep messages generated? How do we get propositions about the afterlife, for example, from basic cognitive actions such as predicating colours of objects, or predicating stars of skies?

My Soamesian picture can also explain the expression of deep propositions. Deep propositions are still propositions and so are also types of cognitive action, but just more complex. For example, the artist might predicate religious properties to the earth and nature via their painterly decisions, which the viewer grasps and thereby performs themselves. The difference with shallow propositions is that these deeper propositions are generated by what is depicted (and so also the shallow propositions), but also by what I’ll call ‘extra-aesthetic’ information and knowledge. We first have minimal shallow propositions: the work has shallow content informed by the artist’s cognitive manipulation of composition, pigment, size, shape, and medium, amongst other things. Coupling these shallow building blocks with extra-aesthetic information enables other cognitive event-types – propositions – to be expressed, which go beyond those that manifest shallowly in the work, and beyond the cognitive actions that the artist specifically had in mind. These mechanisms can help generate deep content from this shallow content.¹⁶

The notions of building-blocks and extra-aesthetic content can be found in the literature on the proposition theory of art. For instance, Weitz (1950) argues that:

Painting can make certain truth claims mainly through its constituents of the symbol, the subject, or both working in relation to the plastic expressive elements (1950: 149).

In my terms, the ‘subject’ and ‘plastic expressive elements’ here are shallow content, and the ‘symbol’ here constitutes extra-aesthetic features. These work together to form propositions, or what Weitz calls “truth-claims”. He gives the following examples:

¹⁶ Other pictorial pragmatic mechanisms might include implicature (Abell, 2005) or presupposition (Bantinaki, 2008).

In Hobbema[‘s landscapes], it is the subject and its traditional transparently symbolic associations that embody the truth claim. The subject of the landscape is usually the representation of old, decaying trees being contrasted with the representation of young, powerful-looking, new trees. We interpret this subject as a sign of certain objects and concepts; these concepts have certain traditionally associated meanings; these meanings comprise the assertional propositional claim that nature is the struggle between the old and the new, the decaying and the living (149-150).

In the “Resurrection,” by Piero della Francesca, there is present, as one of the constituents, the truth claim that man is in ignorance and darkness whereas God is in Truth and Light...we may say that the picture contains this truth claim through the very simple device of flooding the representations of Christ and the sky with tremendous light, and leaving the representation of man on the earth in relative shadow and darkness. All of these elements, with their transparently symbolic associations, add up to the assertional truth claim (150).

In the “Guernica,” by Picasso, there is being asserted, among other things, that the victory of Fascism is the brutal destruction of everything. The painting asserts this through the bull, who symbolizes Fascism and who is relatively intact, and the other subjects — the soldier, the horse, the women, the children, and the houses — which are torn to pieces. All of these elements serve as a collective sign of the assertional proposition or truth claim regarding the nature of Fascism...“That Fascism means the brutal destruction of everything” (150-151).

In these examples, the depictive content at the shallow level includes particular representations of old and young trees, of people in darkness and divine figures bathed in light, and of certain animals and destructive scenes. The objects that have been depicted carry certain “symbolic associations,” which we can describe as our ‘extra-aesthetic’ information. There is also the notion of these factors ‘adding up to’ or ‘serving as a collective sign for’ deeper propositional messages.

More precisely, we can understand this ‘adding up to’ by defining a function that takes as arguments a work’s shallow content, and extra-aesthetic factors such as symbolic associations, and gives as a value a deep message. In Soamesian terms, we start with simple cognitive actions such as predicating colours of objects, and from this we build more complex cognitive actions such as cognising celestial skies as religious. These deeper messages are generated by the work’s shallow propositions and extra-aesthetic information.

For example, the depicted stars and sky in *The Starry Night* are painted with yellow and deep blue hues. The artist and viewer predicate these colours of the depicted objects. This gives us shallow propositions. But in these predications the viewer and possibly the artist can contribute extra-aesthetic information regarding the symbolic associations of these colours. Under one art historian's interpretation, this generates propositions about religion, or more precisely, cognitive actions such as predicating Christ and angels of the night-sky.

I won't go into detail here, but one such function that generates deep artistic propositions could be a metaphor relation.¹⁷ Consider *Guernica*. Picasso has depicted a light bulb in the sky by using an elliptical form. He's also depicted the horse's screaming mouth as containing an elliptical bomb-like form. According to one art historian, the two depicted forms fuse together to create a "metaphorical connection": associations of technological sources of power (the light bulb) are linked with associations of war and weapons (Green, 1985: 67). Here, the shallow contents expressed by the light bulb and the bomb are fused together to create deeper messages. And some metaphors have been ascribed to *The Starry Night*, for instance its "celestial metaphor for eternity" (Jirat-Wasiutynski, 1993: 658). Art historian Judy Sund writes:

Its genesis in the artist's mind suggests the metaphorical intent of *The Starry Night*; it is a picture that seems to reflect Van Gogh's unconventionally upbeat meditations on death. ...For Van Gogh, starry skies...bespoke the infinite...and wakened deep-seated religious sentiments...The vertical projections of [*The Starry Night*'s] cypress and steeple are images of aspiration; the flame-like tree extends to the picture's upper edge, touching and enframing the stars as it goes, and the elongated church spire echoes and underscores this upward movement - which wishfully forecasts the artist's escape from earthly darkness into astral light (1988: 672-673).

The artist might not foresee these deep meanings, but these meanings are still propositions because they are types of cognitive actions, for example: of ascribing destruction to power-sources, or predicating eternity of life. Such metaphorically expressed cognitive event-types needn't be directly tied to the artist's decisions and conscious cognitive actions. Rather, they are generated by what the artist has given us in the artwork on a shallow level, combined with extra-aesthetic knowledge about the context of creation or reception, and historical

¹⁷ For more on this see Chapter 4.

resources. Metaphor is just one example of a function that takes us from the work's minimal aesthetic content to these more interesting and powerful messages.

An analogy with language might help. In the same way that Gricean implicatures have propositional content, which are generated by the combination of literal propositions expressed by uttered sentences and speaker intentions and contextual elements (Grice, 1975), an artwork's deep contents are also propositional in that they are partially generated by shallow propositions and extra-aesthetic information, as well as their being cognitive actions. Furthering this analogy, we can think of minimal, shallow aesthetic content as similar to the semantic content of an uttered sentence, and extra-aesthetic information as similar to extra-linguistic or extra-semantic information.¹⁸

So how do artworks *express* propositions? Recall that Soames sees the *expression*-relationship between sentences and propositions as being grounded in a *by*-relation: we entertain *p* by uttering *s*. Mark entertains *that Jeremy has a green coat* by uttering the sentence 'Jeremy has a green coat.' This can be extended to the relationship between artworks and propositions. A person entertains a certain proposition *p* by creating (if they're the artist) or understanding and viewing (if they're the viewer), the artwork. So an artwork expresses a proposition when a person entertains that proposition *by* creating, or *by* viewing, that artwork.

Under this sketched view, artworks are traces or manifestations of cognitive events, the types of which are propositions. Just like when Mark verbally predicates greenness of a coat, which constitutes an instance of predication and thus an event-type of predication (a proposition), *The Starry Night* materially predicates spirals of a sky through paint, and through this, predicates religious properties to the natural world. In other words, artworks are composed by physical or material cognitive actions or 'doings' by the artist; intended or not, but at the very least, decipherable by the viewer. Since it's widely agreed that artworks are necessarily the products of an agent's creation¹⁹, all artworks are therefore products of cognitive action, and so capable of expressing propositions in this way.

In sum, artworks are products of an agent's action. Artworks therefore can represent states of affairs, either by imitation or abstraction techniques, thereby manifesting predications of properties to objects, for example, spirals of a sky. An artwork expresses

¹⁸ I take this to be only a loose analogy. But, the notion of an implicature has been applied to pictures. See Abell (2005).

¹⁹ See Gover (2018: 3).

shallow and deep propositions by being a method, in addition to sentences, by which we entertain certain propositions.

It should be noted that I don't take the above to mean that artworks therefore *depict* propositions. Rather, artworks have propositional content, and I take it that there's a difference between an artwork depicting a proposition and that artwork having propositional content. Drawing an analogy with propositional attitudes from Grzankowski (forthcoming) can help make this clear. While we don't typically desire or fear propositions themselves (see Prior, 1963; 1971 and Rundle, 1967), theorists are attracted to the idea that some of our desires and fears are propositional attitudes. Grzankowski locates the difference between a desire having propositional content and the desiring of a proposition in the notion of 'representing-the-same-as':

My belief that grass is green has the proposition that grass is green *as its content*. Notice that both the belief and the proposition represent the same as each other... Schematically, one V's that *p* iff one is in a V-state that has the proposition that *p* as its content iff one is in a V-state that represents the same as the proposition that *p*... Notice that this suggestion allows us to differentiate fearing the proposition that *p* from fearing that *p*. When I (perhaps irrationally) fear a proposition, I need only represent *it* but I need not represent *the same as it* (forthcoming).

Similarly with depiction, a painting might depict an object whilst having a shallow or deep proposition as at least part of its content. For example, at least part of what is depicted in van Gogh's *The Starry Night* is that there's a starry night-sky with a church steeple, small town, and cypress trees below (amongst many other things). But the painting doesn't depict a proposition. Rather, the proposition forms at least part of the content of the painting in that the painting represents the same as what the proposition (in my case, the cognitive action) represents.

In other words, an artwork *A* depicts *that p* iff *A* is a depiction that represents the same as the proposition *that p*.²⁰ According to my account, the reason why an artwork can depict *that p* is because the work is a product and stimuli of a collection of cognitive actions. What is depicted will be relevant to determining what the artwork expresses. For example, *The Starry Night* depicts a vibrant night-sky, and expresses the shallow proposition *that the sky is starry* (or something similar). The depiction of the object and the corresponding shallow

²⁰ I thank Alex Grzankowski (p.c. 16th March 2019) for this way of clarifying the idea.

proposition will then help towards generating deeper propositions such as *death is effervescent* (or something similar).

5.2. *Shallow propositions and depiction theories*

While I don't think that visual artworks *depict* propositions, my propositional theory of art should still be placed in the depiction literature, specifically in relation to shallow propositions, which are more intimately related to depiction than deep propositions are. Recall my claim that the viewer ascribes cognitive doings to the painting derivatively on the artist when engaging with the artwork. At least at the shallow level, this invokes a particular "standard of correctness" within depiction (Abell & Bantinaki, 2010). This standard is a necessary condition for depiction: it is needed in order to explain how something forms a depiction of something else, rather than it happening to resemble something else or accidentally invoking a particular experience in the viewer. Recall that there are two approaches to this standard: the first being that something must have been intended by its maker to bear certain relations – resemblance or experiential, for instance – to its object; the second being that the picture must be somehow causally connected to its object.

How does my approach to how artworks express propositions relate to this standard of correctness? According to my account, artworks are products of cognitive actions of the artist which are detected by the viewer, so mental states and intentions play a role in determining pictorial content. Consequently, regarding a work's shallow propositions at the level of depiction, I invoke a broadly intention-based line of thought for such a standard: the artist needs to have intended to make a depiction in the first place for their work to be a depiction in general. But, my account doesn't invoke an intentional standard regarding *what* ends up getting depicted. My account does not rely purely on the conscious intentions of the artist, but invokes ascribed intentions on the part of the viewer as well.

This therefore invokes an amended intentional standard of correctness, whereby something depicts something else when it has been made with the express intention to broadly represent or depict something, but *what* it ends up actually depicting can be independent from the artist's intention, and determined by the viewer ascribing an intention to the artist in a well-informed way.²¹ This will likely involve drawing on background

²¹ This is somewhat similar to Lopes's thoughts on artist intention and depiction: "Intending to depict an object is not necessary or sufficient for depicting it; nor is knowing what the artist intended to depict necessary or sufficient for understanding her picture" (1996: 159).

information about the kinds of thing that exist, what's generally depicted in the work, techniques of picture production, and direct perception of the artwork itself (Hopkins, 1998: 137-138). For example, given that we know that van Gogh was deliberately trying to partially capture the view from his window at the hospital, and given his general oeuvre at the time of composition and his experiments with colour, it will be legitimate to ascribe an intention to him that he was meaning to depict that scene in a particular way. And under my theory, this act of depiction partially involves the artist performing and expressing a cognitive action in their artwork, thereby generating at least a shallow proposition in the process.

The two broad theories of the correctness standard governing depiction – intention-based and causality-based – form a choice point for depiction theorists. As for the *other* relations or conditions that are necessary for depiction, recall that there are three diverging approaches: resemblance-based, convention-based, and psychology-based. Where does my proposition theory of art sit in relation to these? Crucially, my theory about how artworks express propositions doesn't constitute a new or unique theory of depiction in itself. This is because I don't think that artworks *depict propositions*, so I do not thereby invoke a new depiction theory altogether, and my theory could at first sight be treated as sitting alongside existing positions about what depiction involves. Indeed, the mere claim that a work's content is propositional (at least at the shallow level) doesn't necessarily point towards a particular theory of depiction: Grzankowski suggests that his claim that depictive content is propositional can sit alongside resemblance-based theories as well as psychological approaches (2015: 151-159).

But, a particular theory of *how* exactly visual artworks express propositions will likely have links to certain theories of depiction. And on closer inspection, my theory seems to sit more comfortably in a broadly psychological theory of depiction, because I partially rely on a spectator performing certain types of cognitive actions (predication for instance) when engaging with a work of art.

Recall that a broadly psychological approach to depiction has two main strands: experiential theories and recognitional theories. An experiential theory holds that for something to depict an object it must elicit in the spectator "a perceptual experience with a certain phenomenology" (Abell & Bantinaki, 2010: 5). In contrast, a recognitional theory holds that for an object to depict something it must "engage those mechanisms that are responsible for our ability to recognise that object in the flesh" (2010: 6).

My theory of how artworks express propositions, specifically at the shallow level, may call specifically for at least a recognitional theory of depiction. According to recognitional theories of depiction, for something to depict an object it must invoke our capacities for recognising objects in ordinary visual perception (Lopes, 1996; 2005, Schier, 1986).

Under my theory, the viewer sees in an artwork that various properties have been predicated of certain objects by an agent. For example, she sees that colours have been predicated of objects such as vegetation, sky, buildings. She sees that stars have been predicated of a sky, that a church with a steeple is in a village, and so on. These predications are traces of cognitive actions of the artist. The viewer therefore (as well as the artist when creating the painting) requires certain recognitional skills: she needs to recognise that a tree and a star are somehow in the work in order for her to perform the required cognitive actions which constitute the shallow propositions (which can then form a basis for deep propositions). In order to entertain the proposition *that the sky is starry* which forms a shallow content of the painting, the viewer must be able to perform the cognitive action of predicating stars of the night-sky when viewing the painting. In order to do this, she must be able to first recognise that these objects are in the work by using processes normally used in everyday perception of non-pictures, for instance: of skies, trees, and steeples in the flesh. This process involving cognitive action echoes Lopes's thought that:

To understand a picture is, in basic cases, to entertain a thought which links the visual information presented by the picture with a body of stored information from its subject (1996: 157-158).

Given that my theory calls for such capacities in the viewer suggests that it sits well with a depiction theory that makes use of 'sub-personal' processes. Whether or not my theory requires *more* than these sub-personal processes, and that the experience in the viewer needs to be consciously felt in some way as per phenomenological approaches, remains to be seen.

In sum, I haven't set out here to *argue for* a particular theory of depiction. Rather, I've noted that because my proposition theory of art makes use of agents performing cognitive actions, this suggests that it invokes a broadly psychological theory of how exactly a picture depicts an object at the shallow level, and has obvious links with at least recognitional approaches.

5.3. Solving the three problems

The anti-propositionalist's *disanalogy problem* was that only objects possessing syntax or strong, static conventions can express propositions, and since art doesn't possess these features, it does not have propositional content.

This problem can be dissolved because it is misconceived about the nature of propositions. Under the Soamesian account, propositions – which are cognitive doings – existed before language, and so are conceptually prior to linguistic elements like syntax. To therefore tie propositions closely to syntax is misconceived. Now, artworks do make heavy use of convention in both their creation and interpretation. For example, there are many established depictive conventions in art.²² For instance, we know that when an artist paints a tree green, they are likely predicating that colour of that tree, perhaps either for purposes of imitation or of symbolism/metaphor. However, we don't need to make the stronger, and perhaps less plausible, claim that artworks employ *syntaxes*. For even without this feature, artworks cannot be ruled out as vehicles of propositions in this way. The anti-propositionalist's syntax constraint, and so the disanalogy problem, misconstrues the nature of propositions and so misses the mark as an argument against the propositionalist.

Second, the *(in)determinacy problem* was that propositions are determinate but artwork meaning at both the shallow and deep level is indeterminate. When trying to establish what an artwork says or means, it seems indeterminate which meaning we give to a work. The set of interpretations will be very large. Because of this, it becomes arbitrary or artificial which candidate interpretations we accept as the meaning of the work. The indeterminacy of artwork meaning suggests, then, that artworks don't have propositional content.

This problem can be solved by conceding that artwork meaning tends to be indeterminate, but showing that it doesn't follow that its content isn't propositional. Rather, a large set of propositions can be expressed, and, particularly at the deep level, context will make some of these propositions more salient than others.

First, it should be noted that the mere fact that artworks express many things doesn't in itself preclude this content from being propositional. Similarly, another way that visual artworks may differ to language is that they have expressive *limitations* in not being able to express certain propositions (such as negated ones, perhaps).²³ But, as Grzankowski argues,

²² For example, see Hyman (2006) and Panofsky (1955).

²³ For more on this see Grzankowski (2015: 158) and Schier (1986).

this doesn't entail that the contents that pictures *do* express are not propositional. It merely entails the claim "that there are some propositions pictures don't express. It does not follow that all contents pictures *do* express fail to be propositions" (2015: 158).

An artwork, which, on my sketched view, manifests cognitive event-types, can be simultaneously an instance of many cognitive event-types, i.e. it can express many propositions. Indeed, the reason many artworks cause a stir is because "their messages are vivid, direct, and independently comprehensible" (Korsmeyer, 1985: 261). The fact that artworks do tend to assert many propositions of varying levels of generality explains why they invite so much curiosity and rich interpretation across different contexts. This open-endedness however doesn't preclude artworks from expressing propositions, or articulating statements, as Korsmeyer argues (1985: 265). So, we can concede that artwork meaning is normally indeterminate at its shallow and deep levels, but this is because artworks express a large set of propositions.

Despite this, we can still show how what an artwork expresses, at least at the deep level, can be narrowed down. Consider *The Starry Night*, which, on my sketched view, is an instance of several event-types that are propositions. How do we avoid the artificiality of picking one proposition over another to be a candidate in the expressed set? To do this we need to take a small detour, looking at similar cases that occur in language.

The utterance of a certain sentence can, depending on the context, express a multitude of propositions. Which one is 'salient', that is, which one is to be the accepted meaning of the utterance, depends on various elements of the context of utterance and context of interpretation. This is familiar with utterances of ambiguous sentences, where certain parameters of the context of utterance restrict what is said. According to one theory, *speech act pluralism*, an utterance of a sentence expresses a set of propositions relative to a context of interpretation. A minimal proposition is always expressed, forming 'what is said', but several other propositions are pragmatically implied, which may form what is saliently said by the utterance, determined by the context of interpretation. A consequence of this is that:

...speakers don't have first person authority over what they say. By uttering a sentence, they might end up saying things they are not aware of having said—they might even end up saying things they would deny having said (Cappelen, 2008: 271).

Relating this back to visual art, within the set of propositions expressed, only specific ones will be salient and therefore 'said' by the artwork depending on the context. Following the

analogy with language (but by all means not necessarily the specific theory of speech act pluralism), in many cases the shallow content of an artwork can be construed as ‘what is said’ at a minimal level by a work. That is, this content will likely be stable across contexts. For instance, Picasso’s *Guernica* will shallowly express in most contexts that *Guernica was destroyed in the Spanish Civil War*, and roughly, *the horse is in pain*, and *the woman holds her dead child*, and so on. Several other propositions will be generated, many of them deep messages, forming what is saliently said by the artwork, determined by its context.

While a single artwork might say a myriad of things, in many cases it is not hard to narrow down the contenders for what is expressed. Choosing a candidate proposition to be a member of an artwork’s expressed set of messages will only be an artificial choice if the interpreter ignores the context containing relevant knowledge surrounding the artwork, just as with language cases. For instance, *Guernica* was first shown to the public in 1937 soon after the ancient town was destroyed in the tenth month of the Spanish Civil War, and was displayed in the entrance hall of the Spanish Republic’s pavilion at the Paris World’s Fair. The show was curated such that *Guernica* sat opposite a large commemorative photograph of Garcia Lorca, the socialist poet who was executed during the outbreak of the war, and outside the pavilion was a cinema showing graphic films of the war (Clark, 2013: 240-242). Armed with this context it seems appropriate to say that *Guernica* was expressing the deep proposition *that war is barbaric*. It is these particular curatorial and historical contexts, making salient certain expressed propositions, which are important for interpreting the meaning of an artwork. In natural language we are always careful to do this, so it shouldn’t be any different with art.

And last, the expression problem was that propositionalists look as if they’ve confused content about (describing) artworks with content in (expressed by) artworks. Propositionalists leave it mysterious how exactly artworks “express” or “contain” propositions.

This problem can be solved when we understand the relationship between artworks and propositions within a Soamesian framework, by rethinking our concepts of propositions being “in” something, or “expressed” by something. If, as I’ve argued, artworks are instances of cognitive doings, then they are just another way or method, in addition to sentences, to articulate or entertain the event-types that are propositions. Soames writes that a sentence *s* expresses proposition *p* when the person who understands *s* can entertain *p* by uttering *s*. Something similar can be said of artworks. A person entertains a proposition *p* by creating

(if they're the artist) or understanding and viewing (if they're the viewer) the artwork. So the artwork expresses p when an agent entertains p by creating, or viewing, that artwork.

Propositions are embodied in the cognitive life of agents. Artworks are just one of the ways in addition to sentences to entertain these propositions. In sum, I hope to have shown that treating propositions within a Soamesian framework, and conceiving of artworks in relation to this conception, helps solve the three problems that faced proponents of the proposition theory of art.

5.4. An objection

My sketched Soamesian proposition theory of art might seem unappealing because it might look like it is committed to the view that an artwork means whatever its artist intends it to mean, even when that intention is not supported or detected in the work itself. Recall that this 'identity thesis', maintained by a position about artwork meaning called *Extreme Actual Intentionalism*, is widely rejected in the philosophy of art. It might be argued that because under my view artworks are composed of the cognitive actions of artists, this restricts what a work can mean propositionally. It may only express those propositions which are the types of the *artist's* cognitive actions. Accordingly, the types of cognitive actions might only be those that are intended by the artist. This may have the undesirable consequence of 'Humpty Dumptyism', the view that a speaker can mean anything by their words merely by willing it irrespective of whether they can be understood. Similar constraints appear in art as well: *The Starry Night* could not be about donkeys just by van Gogh's willing it so. But because I've argued that artworks are composed of the cognitive actions of the artist, it might be objected that the artist can mean anything they wish by their art. If true, then my view entails a kind of identity thesis about artwork meaning, and so should be rejected.

In response, my sketched view does *not* entail an identity thesis about artwork meaning because, just like with language, the artistic vehicle expressing the proposition must be communicable to the viewer. To express a certain proposition in language I have to use the correct sentence. So too in art: the meaning of an artwork isn't determined alone by the artist's mind. Rather, the meaning of an artwork is partly determined by what we're given in the painting itself: by what's been depicted, as well as the symbolic and metaphoric associations of what is depicted at this shallow level.

According to my view, it's not the case that the artist predicates something of an object in her mind, and then paints anything whatsoever, and that the painting thereby expresses

the type of action performed merely in the artist's mind. Even if van Gogh performed in his mind the cognitive action of predicating donkeys of the sky that night, it's not the case that his *The Starry Night* consequently depicts this or expresses the proposition *that there are donkeys in the sky*, or any deeper propositions related to this donkey-content such as *that the sky is an agent for Yahweh* (or any other symbolic association of donkeys specifically).²⁴

For *The Starry Night* to express these donkey-related propositions at either the shallow or deep level, the correct actions in creating the painting would need to be executed, for instance, putting down the correct painterly marks. The artist cannot merely make the decision to do something, but also must actually execute this in the work, which is then visually presented to the viewer. That is, the artist's cognitive action must be capable of being *communicated* to a suitable audience. The act of cognising that does form an artwork's propositional content is the one that the artist actively and actually produces with the paintbrush. There must be a successful depiction of something, which can then be used as a springboard for deeper propositions. The viewer can then entertain or grasp the type of cognitive action, such as the predication of spirals and not donkeys to a sky. This communicability condition prevents my sketched view from generating any kind of identity thesis about artwork meaning.

Upholding this communicability condition may look to invoke a broadly *Moderate Actual Intentionalist* position about artwork meaning, according to which artwork meaning is determined by the artist's *successfully* realised intentions. Under this position, in order for the artist's intention to determine the meaning of the artwork, it must be communicable to the viewer through the artwork (thereby avoiding the Humpty Dumptyism of Extreme Actual Intentionalism).

But there are other options available. As I've argued, for such cognitive actions or propositions to be decipherable in the work itself it needn't be the case that the artist actually intends to express these cognitive actions with the artistic medium. This is because the painting can still be interpreted by the viewer as manifesting certain cognitive actions: perhaps by hypothesising what the artist might have been doing with the colours and shapes, the viewer can decipher or cognise such predications, simple and complex, when inspecting the work.

My Soamesian proposition theory of art is therefore also compatible with a broadly *Hypothetical Intentionalist* treatment of artwork meaning, according to which an artwork's

²⁴ See Way (2011: 199) and Bough (2013: 141).

meaning is determined not by the artist's actual intentions, but by a suitable audience's hypotheses of the artist's intentions (Levinson, 1996; 2010). Given that the artist's cognitive actions manipulate the artistic medium (such as the paint on a canvas), thereby expressing propositions, this doesn't mean that the artist must possess the relevant intentions to determine such propositions. Rather, the viewer uses relevant information and evidence to hypothesise what the artist might have been intending to do with the artistic medium, and impute these intentions; hence the particular standard of correctness of depiction that I invoke above. With *The Starry Night*, viewers can ascribe cognitive actions to van Gogh when he produced the painting.²⁵

6. Conclusion

I have defended the proposition theory of art – the view that artworks express shallow and deep propositions – by showing that once we rethink the nature of propositions, far more weight is given to this view. In doing this, I've attempted to show *how* artworks might express propositions. Using a Soamesian framework of propositions as cognitive event-types, I sketched a new proposition theory of art with a Soamesian twist that avoids the problems raised by the anti-propositionalist. This sketch of how artworks express propositions is only a starting point, but I think one that merits further investigation.

To conclude, some general upshots. First, I've only considered Soames's theory of propositions, but this isn't the only new and interesting theory of propositions currently out there. It would be fruitful to further the debate by considering these other new theories and seeing how they fare in the artworld. Second, Soames's theory potentially faces problems that I haven't dealt with in the present chapter. However, I do hope to have at least shown that once we reanalyse what propositions are, and in particular reject traditional accounts that tie the nature of propositions to language, the proposition theory of art gains far more credibility. And last, my sketched view of Soamesian propositions in art might invoke a specific framework of artwork meaning in general: perhaps a broadly Hypothetical

²⁵ It should be noted that chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5 in this thesis deal with other artworld agents beyond the viewer and artist, i.e. the curator, contributing to the meaning of an artwork. Perhaps we should therefore make room for cognitive actions performed by collectives or plural agents – a fusion or joint cognitive action performed by the artist, viewer, and curator, for instance – thereby generating propositional content in a work. This deserves more consideration than I've given it.

Intentionalist treatment of artwork meaning. But it should be noted that what I've said in this chapter is by no means an argument *for* such a position, and should rather be seen as an application of one theory of artwork meaning to analyse the manifestation of cognitive event-types in an artwork, and this of course requires further investigation and defense.

Chapter Four

4. Metaphor in Art

Abstract

Visual artworks tend to say a lot more than what they merely depict. For instance, van Gogh's oil painting A Pair of Shoes (1896) has been taken to say things about the nature of labour and the life of the peasant. But a problem arises: how are such messages expressed, when all is depicted is a pair of boots? It might be argued that it's unclear how artworks can express such 'deep' meanings without words, and how familiar pragmatic mechanisms used to express deep meanings in verbal conversation might translate to the artworld. Chapter 4 argues that metaphor can help explain how an artwork expresses these deeper messages. I first explore how we should understand metaphor in art more generally. I consider a seemingly obvious contender, that of visual metaphor (Carroll, 1994), but I argue that this should be rejected. I then develop an alternative proposal, which aims to do justice to a neglected phenomenon in the generation of metaphors in art: an artwork's historical context and its curation can help generate metaphors in the artwork. This power to draw on metaphor is one way that artworks can convey their deeper meanings.

1. Introduction



Figure. 6

Vincent van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes* (1886) (Figure. 6) depicts two undone boots on the ground, with their laces tangled over their haggard leather. Taken at face value, the work just depicts two old boots. This is its surface meaning – its 'shallow' content, generated at the "subject level" (Lamarque, 2009: 150) or "descriptive level" (Korsmeyer, 1985: 203) of the work. To take another example, the subject or descriptive level of Titian's *Rape of Europa* (1559-62) (Figure. 3) consists of a woman being abducted by Jupiter, who is disguised as a bull. This in turn expresses a surface or 'shallow' message, such as *Jupiter abducted Europa*.



Figure. 3

However, paintings like *A Pair of Shoes* and *Rape of Europa* seem to say far more than what they merely depict. For example, Heidegger wrote about *A Pair of Shoes* in his “The Origin of the Work of Art”:

A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet. From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind...In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth...(Heidegger, 1950: 101).

Heidegger’s interpretation of van Gogh’s painting highlights what might be called the ‘deep’ content or messages of the work: *A Pair of Shoes* seems to express a deep message about the nature of labour.¹ One might likewise argue that the way Titian depicts the abduction in

¹ See Chapter 3 for an argument that these shallow and deep messages are propositional.

Rape of Europa – the way the shallow level is given – serves to express certain deep messages about rape. Perhaps it expresses certain rape-myths, for example, *rape satisfies a woman's secret desires*.² And what we often find most effective or profound about an artwork is its deep messages. While “sometimes shoes are just shoes”, a rich artwork might say or convey many deep messages through its shallow content: “the visitor coming away from [van Gogh's still-life] may realize that a pair of shoes can contain an entire universe”, as a viewer puts it.³

But a problem needs to be solved in order to make tenable this claim that an artwork can have deep meaning: how exactly are deep messages of an artwork expressed or conveyed? How does *A Pair of Shoes* say things about labour when all that is depicted is a pair of boots?

There may well be several mechanisms that artworks use to generate their deep content. I wish to suggest that metaphor is one such mechanism. I argue that metaphor can help explain how art expresses deep messages. In order to do this we need an account of how visual artworks might be metaphorical in a non-verbal way. Artworks could of course easily use *verbal* metaphors, for instance where a verbal metaphor is scrawled over a painting as part of the work's composition. But I want to look at how visual artworks use metaphors which are distinctively non-verbal. For instance, *A Pair of Shoes* contains no words at all, metaphorical or otherwise. But this doesn't mean that it cannot be metaphorical in some way.⁴ If we have a successful account of metaphor in art more generally, we can use this to partially explain art's deep meaning.

Section 2 argues that metaphor should be seriously considered as one of the mechanisms by which art expresses deep content – a ‘metaphor-based account’ of deep content. Here I outline what we should want from a metaphor-based account. I then consider two candidates for explaining how artworks use metaphors in the first place. Section 3 considers a seemingly obvious contender, that of *visual metaphor*, but I argue that this should be rejected. Section 4 develops an alternative proposal, which aims to do justice to a neglected phenomenon: factors of an artwork's historical context and even its curation can

² For a study of this painting, see A. W. Eaton (2003).

³ Horton (2009).

⁴ That we use metaphors in *describing* art is uncontroversial: language in art criticism is frequently metaphorical (see Baxandall, 1991). For instance, describing a painting as ‘sad’ even though the painting cannot literally be sad. I'm concerned instead with metaphors *in* artworks, and the metaphorical nature of artwork meaning.

help generate metaphors in the artwork. This power to draw on metaphor is what enables artworks to convey their deeper meanings.⁵

2. Metaphor-based accounts of deep content

Metaphor can go some way in explaining art's deep content, I shall argue, and here I shall outline what we need from such an account.

Metaphor is a non-literal use of language, a device “in which one thing is represented (or spoken of) as something else” (Camp & Reimer, 2008: 846). This is familiar in literary artworks, and everyday speech:

- (a) Our brains ache in the merciless iced east winds that knive us⁶
- (b) Alison has a heart of gold.

Here, the wind is represented as knives, and Alison's personality is represented as golden. Metaphor often draws a resemblance between two or more things not normally associated: the cold wind described by Wilfred Owen does not contain actual knives. Rather, ‘knife’ is used metaphorically to express the extremity of the cold. One way of achieving this is by applying a property to something to which such labels do not normally apply; “calculated category mistakes” as Nelson Goodman calls them (Goodman, 1968: 73).

The representation achieved by a metaphor is often understood as involving a ‘source domain’ and a ‘target domain’.⁷ The target domain consists of the object or concept to be described, like the wind. The source domain consists of the object or concept whose features are to be mapped on to the target domain, like knives. Features from a source domain are mapped on to a target domain, forming a new meaning binding the two domains. For instance, the features of knives (sharpness, danger, pain) are mapped on to the wind, resulting in an effective way of describing the wind as extremely cold. *A* is represented as *B*, which yields the metaphorical meaning, *C*.⁸

⁵ I restrict my scope to visual art (paintings, sculpture, film, installation). Henceforth read ‘art’ as ‘visual art’.

⁶ From Wilfred Owen's “Exposure” (1914).

⁷ See Lakoff & Johnson (1980). Source and target domains have also been referred to as ‘vehicle’ and ‘tenor’ (I.A. Richards, 1937), or ‘home realm’ and ‘target realm’ (Goodman, 1968).

⁸ I will not address the precise relationship between literal content and metaphorical content. For more on this in the philosophy of language see Borg (2001) and Camp & Reimer (2008).

There might also be *non-verbal* metaphors in art, which operate in similar ways. Indeed, a theory of how art uses non-verbal metaphor will need to include the mechanisms of source and target domain, in order to capture a defining aspect of what metaphor is. An artwork might constitute a whole metaphor itself, or it may use metaphors within its composition. Art criticism frequently draws attention to the metaphors used in art to express messages. A. W. Eaton writes that some artworks use metaphor to suggest an analogy between a person and an inanimate object through “visual similarity and proximity”. Often, a woman is compared to an inert object, which is to be consumed or used, such as in Titian’s *Venus and Music* (1547) or May Ray’s *Le Violon d’Ingres* (1924) (Eaton, 2012: 288). Van Gogh’s work in general has been considered “not only a metaphor, but a bundle of metaphors or metaphorical expressions” (Rough, 1975: 366), and Picasso conceived of his own work as “plastic” metaphors (Gilot & Lake, 1964: 296-297).

Metaphor is frequently used in art as a political tool. In 2014, Banksy created a small mural in Clacton-on-Sea, Essex, consisting of five pigeons holding up signs reading “go back to Africa”, “migrants not welcome”, and “keep off our worms” towards a colourful migratory swallow. The piece was created a week ahead of a by-election in the town triggered by the local Conservative MP’s defecting to the UK Independence Party (UKIP). The piece has been interpreted as a potent and satirical non-verbal metaphor: while the piece does use words, its metaphor isn’t verbal. But it succeeds potently in mocking the rise of anti-immigration sentiment in Britain today. It’s clear that UKIP and its sympathisers are being represented as pigeons, and migrant populations as swallows.

Art and metaphor have something in common: they have a ‘meaning-range’ (Jessup, 1954) that is not wholly determined by intentions, yet which abides by certain constraints. I shall suggest that, at least in some cases, this is more than just a similarity: the meaning of the artwork depends on the meaning of the metaphor it contains.

To fill out some details in these aspects of meaning-range: first, *the speaker’s or artist’s intention alone doesn’t determine the meaning of their metaphor or artwork*. A metaphor cannot mean just whatever a speaker intends it to mean; what is said is constrained by the sentence uttered and the context of utterance. I cannot mean by mere will that my utterance of, “Alison has a heart of gold” means that *London’s Shard is very tall*. As Emma Borg notes, “a speaker can intend to mean p by her metaphorical utterance of ‘s’ as much as she likes, if p is not one of the possible metaphorical interpretations of ‘s’, then she cannot succeed in conveying it” (Borg, 2001: 232). Similarly, an artwork cannot mean just whatever the artist intended. *Guernica* (1937) could not be about a child’s tea-party just if Picasso

wills it so. For the artist's intention to be relevant in interpretation, it needs to be supported by the artwork's shallow content and other evidence, perhaps about the artist and the context in which the work was made.

Second, *the meaning of a metaphor or an artwork can depart from the speaker's or artist's intention*. Even if a speaker uses a metaphor with proper meaning conventions, the conveyed metaphorical meanings can depart from and go beyond what she intended. Rich and interesting metaphors in particular tend to have a myriad of meanings (it is not the case that a metaphor always has just one single correct interpretation) and these can go well beyond what the speaker specifically had in mind. Indeed, the extent to which a metaphor can be paraphrased – i.e. adequately translated or captured in literal language – depends on how novel or rich it is. For example, in Stanley Cavell's defence of his claim that metaphors can be comfortably paraphrased, he uses a rather simple or haggard metaphor "Juliet is the sun":

Now suppose I am asked what someone means who says, "Juliet is the sun." ... I may say something like: Romeo means that Juliet is the warmth of his world; that his day begins with her; that only in her nourishment can he grow...and so on. In a word, I paraphrase it...Metaphors are paraphrasable (1969: 73).

Cavell's addition of "and so on" here nicely captures the expanse of the meaning-range of a metaphor: the "pregnancy" of its meanings as William Empson said. However, it should be noted that while metaphors can to some extent be captured by literal language, I agree with Max Black that a *complete* paraphrase is likely not going to be possible because something always seems to be lost in such complex paraphrases:

...up to a point we may succeed...But the set of literal statements so obtained will not have the same power to inform and enlighten as the original... [the literal paraphrase] fails to be a translation because it fails to give the insight that the metaphor did (Black, 1962: 46).

Even with simple and familiar metaphors like "Juliet is the sun", the list of literal expressions will likely be endless. So, at least for many metaphors, they cannot be *entirely* compacted into a list of literal language expressions; a paraphrase.⁹

⁹ For a comprehensive outline of the history of metaphor and paraphrase, see Stern (2001).

Similarly, the meaning of an artwork can have autonomy from what the artist intended. To properly interpret an artwork we must take into account at least the artist's oeuvre and the work's surrounding political and moral context. This will yield many acceptable and plausible meanings of the artwork, that frequently depart from what the artist intended.

And third, it's not the case that just anything goes. *There are restrictions on what meanings are expressed by a metaphor or an artwork.* While metaphorical meaning has autonomy from the speaker's intentions, and there can be a plenitude of legitimate meanings, these are still constrained. There are correct and incorrect interpretations of what a metaphor means: not *anything* goes (Borg, 2001: 234). Knowledge about the relevant society and its language conventions will restrict the meaning possibilities of a metaphor. For example, contextual considerations will limit what is communicated by "Alison has a heart of gold". Depending on the society in which the metaphor is uttered, 'gold' as applied to someone's heart will have certain associations; in this case, positive associations such as kindness, and not negative associations such as selfishness. Similarly, while the meaning of an artwork has autonomy from the artist's intentions, and there can be a plenitude of legitimate meanings, these are still constrained. Depending on its context of creation or display, there are correct and incorrect interpretations of what an artwork means: not *anything* goes. Amongst the several meanings of *Guernica*, that the work celebrates war is not one of them; when interpreting the work we should consider the origins of the painting as a response and denouncement of the bombing of the Basque town.¹⁰

These three features common to artwork meaning and metaphorical meaning comprise a *range* of meaning: both artworks and metaphors can, and normally do, have a large set of meanings, but this set is restricted by various features such as the content of the sentence uttered/the painting's shallow content, and relevant contextual considerations and world knowledge. In other words, metaphors and artworks express a set of meanings with a *range*, and do not express a *singular* meaning, and do not express *unlimited* meanings where anything whatsoever goes.

An artwork, which already has a meaning-range, can contain a metaphor, which itself has a meaning-range. Here, the overall meaning of the artwork will be influenced by the

¹⁰ This chapter is neutral on whether an artwork's context of creation is the *only* context we should consider when interpreting a work's meaning. There might be legitimate interpretations that are a result of analysing a work against a different context. See Chapter 5 for defence of this latter claim. For more on this see Davies (1996: 20-35) and Davies (2006b). In either case, there will still be correct or incorrect interpretations of a work's metaphor which will be affected by the context of display.

meaning of this metaphor. Containing a metaphor, I want to suggest, is one way that deep messages can be expressed by artworks – one way an artwork can express meaning that goes beyond its depicted surface is by its use of metaphor. When trying to understand this, we should respect the feature of meaning-range. And, as becomes clear later on, while I argue that some of a work’s deep content can be generated by the work’s use of metaphor, by this I don’t mean that the content of the metaphor in the artwork can be entirely and fully captured in language, i.e. paraphrased. Non-verbal metaphors in art are unparaphrasable in the sense that a *complete* paraphrase in language will not be forthcoming. I return to this point in Section 4.

To partly model deep content in art as metaphorical content, we need to understand how artworks use non-verbal metaphors in the first place. The next section considers a seemingly obvious contender, which has been described simply as *visual metaphor*. But I shall argue that, whatever its interest, visual metaphor cannot fulfil the task assigned.

3. *Visual metaphor*

According to this first proposal I want to consider, visual artworks use non-verbal metaphors only when they use *visual metaphors*.¹¹ A visual metaphor is a composite image¹²: a deliberate fusing together of at least two disparate visually recognizable objects, typically by superimposing one image over another image, combining, for example, the image of a priest, and a pig (as in Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Temptations of Saint Anthony* (1501) (Figure. 7)); or the image of a woman, and of a violin (as in Man Ray’s *Violon d’Ingres* (1924) (Figure. 8)). Both these artworks are visual metaphors because they display this technique of assembling disparate elements into one visual field: a technique I call *pictorial fusion*.^{13, 14}

¹¹ I take Carroll’s ‘Visual Metaphor’ (1994, in his 2001) as representative of this view.

¹² ‘Image’ here should be interpreted loosely as including painting, drawing, sculpture, installation, and film.

¹³ This is my own term. Carroll (1994) uses “homospaciality”.

¹⁴ For a different construal of what a visual metaphor is, see Aldrich (1968), though my arguments in this chapter also apply to Aldrich’s account.



Figure. 7



Figure. 8

To be a visual metaphor, the elements fused together in the image must be “recognisable by looking” (Carroll, 1994: 362): they need to be salient for the viewer to negotiate the visual metaphor. Moreover, the separate elements that are visually unified must be physically noncompossible: the unified object into which they fuse cannot physically exist (Carroll, 354). This requirement captures the felt tension in metaphors: the application of one property or label onto something to which it is not normally associated.¹⁵ Furthermore, for an artwork to be or use a visual metaphor, according to Carroll, the artist must *intend* to create this salient pictorially fused image. Moreover, *uptake* of this intention in the audience is necessary for the successful communication of the metaphor (Carroll, 367).

Just as with verbal metaphor, one depicted object forms the *source domain*: a pig or violin, and the other depicted object forms a *target domain*: a priest or a woman. The viewer is then prompted to map the associations of pigs (source domain) on to priests (target domain) (Carroll, 355). This conceptual mapping exposes the supposed piggish features of priests such as selfishness, or the supposed instrumental features of women such as being objectified or ‘played’.¹⁶ According to this account, visual metaphor offers the only way to

¹⁵ See Forceville (2002: 9) for further discussion of this point.

¹⁶ This has been considered the result of “homospacial thinking”, which “consists of actively conceiving two or more discrete entities occupying the same ‘space’, a conception leading to the articulation of new identities” (Rothenberg, 1980: 18).

understand non-verbal metaphor in visual art. We can summarize the visual metaphor account as follows:

VISUAL METAPHOR: A visual artwork contains a non-verbal metaphor *iff* it contains ‘visual metaphor’, i.e. when a source domain and target domain are deliberately and successfully given by the artist through the work’s *pictorial fusion* of salient non-compossible elements.¹⁷

VISUAL METAPHOR has several virtues as an account of metaphor in art. First, it captures the important pictorial element of visual artworks by claiming that the source and target domains must be given by pictorial fusion in the work. Second, it captures artworks that we intuitively think are metaphorical, such as *Violon d’Ingres*, and perhaps even Banksy’s mural, for this work seems to pictorially fuse pigeons with UKIP supporters, suggested by the signs held by the pigeons. And third, the account remains faithful to how metaphor works more familiarly in language: it makes use of the mechanisms of source and target domain, and captures the fact that a metaphor fuses together disparate elements.

Despite its initial appeal, though, it should be rejected as an account of metaphor in visual art more generally because it neglects the crucial role that context plays in supplying a source or a target. In its explanation of how art uses metaphor, VISUAL METAPHOR claims that the source and target domains must be given exhaustively and deliberately by the work’s visual content, i.e., by what it depicts, contained within the artwork itself. But this doesn’t leave room for *context*. Specifically, it leaves no room for the source and target domains to be influenced by factors external to the artwork.¹⁸

‘Context’ here will be understood as the collection of circumstances or parameters surrounding an artwork. There will likely be several types of external factor that can generate metaphors in art, but I’ll focus on just two types of parameter that have been hitherto neglected in relation to metaphors in art. First, the *curation* of the artwork, i.e. the

¹⁷ The ‘iff’ in this account may seem strong, though Carroll does appear to hold this kind of view: while he doesn’t explicitly *say* that the only way artworks can be non-verbally metaphorical is by using visual metaphor, he does gesture towards this (2001: 360-61). However, even if it turns out that Carroll does not hold this strong view, VISUAL METAPHOR can still be seen as just a dialectical move and remains a possible position to be refuted.

¹⁸ Carroll acknowledges the effects of context to some extent: an image with pictorial fusion may be presented in a context where it shouldn’t be taken metaphorically, for instance in a science-fiction context where the two visual elements are not technically physically noncompossible (1994: 362-363). However, in section 4, I make the different and further claim that context can also *provide* a source or target domain and thus have a direct role to play in determining metaphors in art.

exhibition or event in which the work is shown. And second, the *history* of the artwork, i.e. its style in relation to other works in the artist's oeuvre and to other similar works within art-historical movements, and the wider context that the work was responding to or in which the work was created.

Many artworks use non-verbal metaphor, even though they entirely lack pictorial fusion; and this cries out for explanation. For instance, sources of light in Picasso's *Guernica* have been interpreted as metaphors for life, destruction, truth, and deception (Green, 1985: 67), and Ai Weiwei's installation *Sunflower Seeds* (2010) has been interpreted by many as a metaphor for the downtrodden Chinese populace under Mao Zedong.¹⁹ According to VISUAL METAPHOR, these examples are not metaphors at all, for they contain no clear pictorial fusion. But this result is odd. In particular, Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* seems to be a paradigmatic case of metaphor in art. Indeed, the use of metaphor in the interactive installation explains its political and moral power, inviting the viewer to see the Chinese people under Mao *as* sunflower seeds, expressing a myriad of meanings about famine, individuality, and oppression. And to return to our original examples, VISUAL METAPHOR rules out van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes* and Titian's *Rape of Europa* as being non-verbal metaphors, for they don't use pictorial fusion either.

For Carroll, the idea that *all* artworks are visual metaphors "strains credulity" (Carroll, 1994: 360). This is because even if there is some sense in which all artworks invite a kind of exploration of meaning, this isn't sufficient for it to count as metaphorical: there must be a visual interaction between the source and target domains (Carroll, 361). Carroll is correct that not every artwork is a purely *visual* metaphor, partly because a source and target domain are not always visually detected. For a metaphor to be entirely visual, maybe there does need to be pictorial fusion in the artwork. But most artworks do not exhibit this pictorial fusion and so, according to VISUAL METAPHOR, do not use non-verbal metaphors. This exhaustive focus on a work's visual elements, and the consequent exclusion of context in theorising about the work's metaphors, would leave out much of the metaphor in art.

So an account that excludes context in its theorising, like VISUAL METAPHOR, is thus too strong to accommodate non-verbal metaphor in art, for it accommodates very little and excludes most art. In doing this, VISUAL METAPHOR leaves unexplained many instances of artworks that do seem metaphorical but do not use pictorial fusion. Therefore, to correctly

¹⁹ For example, see Cunningham (2011) and Chayka (2010).

predict the large domain of artworks that are metaphorical or use metaphors in some way, context should play a role in our theorising.

This shows that an account of metaphor in art that neglects contextual elements such as curation and history in its theorising undergenerates and consequently lacks explanatory power. The argument goes: if context does not play a role in determining metaphors in art, then only a very small number of artworks are yielded as metaphorical. However, more artworks seem metaphorical than this small number, and this intuitive fact ought to be explained. Therefore, context should play a role when we theorise about metaphors in art. Call this argument *Undergeneration*.

Recall, furthermore, that metaphors and artworks both have meanings with a *range*. If we don't include context in our theorising when determining metaphors in art, then this meaning-range of the work's metaphor, and so the overall meaning-range of the artwork, isn't accommodated. This is because context is needed to both expand and restrict this meaning-range.

First, curatorial and historical-related parameters of the context are needed to *expand* an artwork's meaning-range: to give the meanings of the metaphor in the artwork autonomy. When interpreting sentences in a language, it is insufficient to use just the sentence's form and the speaker's intentions: we also normally inspect the context of utterance in our theorising. Equally, the artist does not have complete authority over what their art means, specifically over whether there are any metaphors in the artwork, and what they might mean. Metaphors in art should be considered in relation to the context of display or in relation to the work's history. VISUAL METAPHOR leaves no room to interpret other types of source or target domains not deliberately put there by the artist. Indeed, VISUAL METAPHOR posits as a necessary condition the artist's intention to create a metaphor for an artwork to be or use visual metaphor. But this is wrong: we should want our account of metaphor in art to allow for the possibility of *accidental* metaphors: those expressed metaphors that were unintended by the artist.²⁰ Identifying contextual factors surrounding the work, such as its curation or information about the work's history, would enable the viewer to interpret a work's metaphors in a way not envisaged by the artist, allowing the work's set of meanings to expand.

²⁰ It might be the case that intentional metaphors are the default, "Usually when we interpret something as a metaphor, this something was probably *meant* to be construed as a metaphor..." (Forceville, 2008: 468-469), but this doesn't entail that metaphors *must* be intentional.

Second, curatorial and historical-related parameters of the context are needed to *restrict* the myriad interpretations of a given work. Depending on the exhibition in which the work is shown, and depending on the artist's oeuvre and the work's history, certain interpretations will be legitimate and others will not. Context is needed to capture the fact that 'not anything goes'. It might be the case that VISUAL METAPHOR could place appropriate restrictions on what meanings are generated through the pictorial fusion in a work. However, information about the work's genre and its general history, as well as the way the work has been curated, will still be needed to restrict the range of meanings expressed by the work and its metaphors.

An account of metaphor in art should accommodate the fact that artworks and metaphors have a meaning-range. If it doesn't, the account won't reflect legitimate interpretation practices in metaphor theory, art theory, and art history. Indeed, one of the apparent virtues of VISUAL METAPHOR was that it remained faithful to how metaphor works more familiarly in language, i.e. its use of source and target domains. But metaphors in language also have a meaning-range. So by not capturing the fact that artworks and metaphors have a meaning-range VISUAL METAPHOR falls short of being faithful to how metaphor actually works.

So, this second argument goes: if context does not play a role in determining non-verbal metaphors in art, then the fact that artworks have a meaning-range isn't accommodated. But this fact should be accommodated. Therefore, context should play a role when we theorise about metaphors in art. Call this argument *Meaning-range*.

While the pictorial fusion requirement in VISUAL METAPHOR might successfully capture *visual* metaphor – for a metaphor to be entirely visual, perhaps there does need to be pictorial fusion – VISUAL METAPHOR should be rejected as an account of metaphor in art more generally, for it neglects context in its theorising, and consequently undergenerates and doesn't capture a fact about the meaning of art and metaphors.

4. Artistic metaphor

According to VISUAL METAPHOR, van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes* is not a metaphor, nor contains metaphor. This is because it contains no pictorial fusion: there is no salient fusion of two disparate images. All we are given is a pair of boots.

We can agree that *A Pair of Shoes* is not a *visual* metaphor, but it can still be a kind of non-verbal metaphor. Let us call it an ‘artistic metaphor’, which uses different modes of input for the source and target domains which are not purely pictorial, but are not linguistic either. Rather, the inputs are *contextual*. Typically, the source domain can be provided by the shallow content of the artwork, and the target domain provided by contextual parameters surrounding the work, such as the work’s curation and the work’s own history.^{21,22} Crucially, the aspects fused together in a metaphor in an artwork needn’t both be visually present in the work. The target domain can be something outside the work itself. So, an artwork need not be a visual metaphor or use visual metaphor to have non-verbal metaphorical content. This section will focus on the work’s curation and the art history of the piece as particular contextual parameters, but it’s likely that there are further types.

4.1. Curation as a contextual parameter

First, the context of display such as an exhibition with certain curatorial strategies can offer and bring the target domain, composed of an object, group of people, or even a concept, into fusion with the artwork. In other words, *curation provides the target domain*. Consider an example.

Exhibition: centred upon van Gogh’s several paintings of shoes, this show is curated with statements about labour and peasant life in France in the 19th century.

Here, the activity of **LABOUR** will be fused with the depicted object of battered boots, where only the boots are strictly visible in the painting, and **LABOUR** is made salient by surrounding knowledge and curation. Taken in isolation, *A Pair of Shoes* gives us a source domain: two thickly painted boots in earthy tones. When shown in a context that makes salient **LABOUR**, the features of this source domain are mapped on to features of the target domain by the audience’s conceptual act of fusion. Here, we’re asked to represent labour as van Gogh’s pair of old boots, which are painted in a particular way: *A Pair of Shoes* becomes a metaphor

²¹ The idea that the source and target domains needn’t be co-present visually to form a metaphor in art is not new: Forceville has argued that the source and target domains within a metaphor in a visual work can be cued by using sound, or even by olfactory, tactile, or gustatory techniques “...thereby turning the metaphor into a multimodal one” (2008: 468). I agree with Forceville, but I make the further overlooked claim that the source – but most likely target – domain of a metaphor can be informed by *contextual parameters* such as a work’s curation and its historical factors.

²² Curatorial devices and historical factors will overlap in many instances.

for labour. The target domain is not explicitly visible or depicted in the painting but is detected in the surrounding curated context.²³

4.2. *Art history as a contextual parameter*

Another closely related way the target domain can be provided is through knowledge about the work's history. This knowledge will be constituted by a variety of variables, such as accepted connotations of the symbolism²⁴ of what is depicted in the work, and historical factors pertaining to the work's creation and the events to which it was a response. We know that van Gogh painted many works to do with labour and peasant life. He created series of wheat fields, peasants, and shoes, and frequently studied miners, capturing these everyday subjects in a vibrant, often dramatic, raw style. Vincent van Gogh's expressive style frequently sought to convey emotions:

They're immense stretches of wheat fields under turbulent skies, and I made a point of trying to express sadness, extreme loneliness [...] I'd almost believe that these canvases will tell you what I can't say in words, what I consider healthy and fortifying about the countryside [part of a letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger, Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890].²⁵

Once we consider these works in relation to their history and to one another, we see that together they make salient the activity of labour, and feelings of toil and solitude. Such paintings can then form source domains, the features of which are mapped on to the targets made salient by this art historical knowledge. In other words, *art history provides the target domain*. Taken in isolation, *A Pair of Shoes* gives us merely a source domain: two worn-out boots. But when considered in relation to the artist's other still-life paintings of shoes, the motif of labour and toil becomes apparent, and forms a target domain. The features of the source domain are then mapped on to the target domain by the audience's conceptual act of fusion. Again, we're asked to represent labour as van Gogh's pair of old boots. *A Pair of Shoes* becomes a metaphor for labour.

²³ Again, the idea that curators bring artworks into new narratives echoes Ventzislavov's claim that curation "engenders ever new narratives for artworks to dwell in" (2014: 90).

²⁴ More of course needs to be said on what will count as 'accepted symbolism' of the time; this will likely vary depending on what society is currently relevant to interpretation.

²⁵ Royal Academy of Arts (2010)

4.3. *Some normative constraints*

The artistic metaphor is a result of the viewer's conceptual action of fusing the two domains together. This echoes Lakoff and Johnson's claims that, "Metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action, and only derivatively a matter of language" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 153), and "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (op. cit., 5).

Whether an artwork is a non-verbal metaphor depends on whether a source and target domain can be reasonably detected, and whether these can be appropriately fused together. If these two domains can be appropriately detected, artist intention becomes somewhat redundant, *contra* VISUAL METAPHOR. An artwork can be placed in a certain context which may provide a target domain not envisaged by the artist. For example, even if van Gogh did not intend *A Pair of Shoes* to be taken metaphorically about labour and peasant life, a target domain formed of **LABOUR** could still be provided by his oeuvre, or provided by an exhibition about peasantry life. This target domain could be appropriately fused with the source domain provided by the depicted battered boots. Here, given the evidence of the work's history and genre, and its curation, the metaphor can be reasonably interpreted even if van Gogh did not have it in mind and was merely treating the boots as a still life exercise.

The legitimacy of the viewer's conceptual fusion has restrictions. Viewers should not haphazardly detect the target and source domains: they should not posit objects to form target domains that are wildly different to the ones that are clearly salient. Consider again *Exhibition*. The central piece is *A Pair of Shoes*. The show provides information about van Gogh's series of works to do with peasant life, informing the viewer about the work's genre and history. It would be inappropriate for a viewer at this show to posit a target domain consisting of something wildly different such as **EUTHANASIA**, in light of all the preceding evidence to the contrary in the exhibition, which clearly suggests that **LABOUR** should be considered, or something similar. Here, it would be wrong to specify **EUTHANASIA** as the target domain, and so it would be wrong to map features of the source domain in *A Pair of Shoes* on to **EUTHANASIA**, and thus wrongly interpret the work's metaphors. So, a target domain and source domain must be *appropriately* detected.

Similarly, there will be restrictions as to what the curator can bring into fusion with the artwork. For instance, in relation to *A Pair of Shoes*, labour or loneliness will be more appropriate contextual factors compared to the activities of hiking or boot-making. This is

because we're explicating the metaphor within van Gogh's *artwork* and not just any old image of boots.

As Chapter 5 will show, the history of an artwork is integral to its identity and meaning, and curation must respect this when placing the work into new situations. As such, the activities of hiking or boot-making look irrelevant to the artwork *A Pair of Shoes*, and so will likely be unsuitable candidates for target domains. The specific constraints deserve more attention than I've given here, but the thought is this: just as viewers must be sensitive to the context in which a work is shown, curators also must be sensitive to the work's history and what the potential meanings latent in the work might be. Taking an artwork *too* far away from its historical origins risks treating the work as any old image of boots, thereby no longer using the artwork but merely a canvas with certain painterly marks. And as Chapter 5 will show, artworks cannot be reduced to their mere material parts.

4.4. Artistic metaphor and deep content

With all of this in mind, my proposal can be summarised below:

ARTISTIC METAPHOR: A visual artwork contains a non-verbal metaphor *iff* it contains artistic metaphor, i.e. when a source domain and target domain are appropriately detected, where *at least one* of these domains is visible in the artwork itself, and the other may be outside the work, and determined by external contextual parameters such as curation or art history.^{26, 27}

How might ARTISTIC METAPHOR form an account of deep content in art? The key is in the mapping from the source domain to the target domain, but *contra* VISUAL METAPHOR, this needn't happen through pictorial fusion. Provided that a source domain and target domain are appropriately detected, where at least one of these domains is visible in the artwork itself (this will normally be the source domain), and the other (normally the target domain) is

²⁶ ARTISTIC METAPHOR does not stipulate that the mapped features from the source domain to the target domain must be physically noncompossible, but they usually will be (labour is not literally a pair of boots). Moreover, artist intention to create a metaphor is, I hold, not necessary for an artwork to use artistic metaphor.

²⁷ For now I leave it indeterminate whether this relation is symmetric: perhaps a source domain can be provided by the context and the target domain be provided by the artwork. The crucial point is that at least one of the domains must be detected in the artwork. My account differs somewhat from A. W. Eaton's observations about metaphor in art (mentioned earlier), in that my account allows one of the domains to be provided externally to a work, whereas Eaton draws on examples where both domains are visible in the painting itself.

offered outside by the work's curation or history, the viewer is prompted to map features from the source domain on to the target domain. This results in *A* being represented as *B*, which conveys certain messages, i.e. *C*, depending on what fusion is taking place.

Consider two illustrations of this explanation. First, if the target of **LABOUR** is made salient with *A Pair of Shoes*, then labour will be represented as van Gogh's painted pair of rugged boots. This asks us to consider particular boot-features from van Gogh's still life (source domain) and apply them to the nature of labour (target domain):

[van Gogh's boots _(SOURCE)] are rugged and timeworn, but provide comfort and safety
 ***[LABOUR** _(TARGET)] is rugged and timeworn, but provides comfort and safety.

The distinctive quality of the source domain, which is given by the way van Gogh has depicted the boots, contributes to the qualities to be mapped on to the target domain. Indeed, it's been observed that in our experience of many pictures we tend to see the medium as well as the object depicted. In this way, pictorial experience is considered a two-folded one, incorporating a "configurational dimension" relating to the picture's medium, and a "recognitional dimension" relating to the picture's subject (Abell & Bantinaki, 2010: 12).²⁸ In our case, van Gogh's subject has been painted with liberal brushwork and impasto (Hendriks & Tilborgh, 2011: 257, 260), which, together with the earthy tones combine to create a depictive 'mud' of the depicted boots. This style forms the end of van Gogh's 'Nuenen period' where he "Languish[ed] in the sullen blacks and browns that express the 'human all too human' side of things" (Estienne, 1953: 22), and, "Living as he did in a rough, gloomy countryside with overcast skies [he] restricted his palette mainly to sepias and bitumens" (Estienne, 92). These muddy and battered textures of the source domain combine with the target domain of labour, generating the deep content relating to ruggedness and the timeworn. The starred claim about labour (the metaphorical meaning *C*, i.e. the fusion of the source and target domains) comprises a deep message about the nature of labour, which will serve as a springboard for further deep messages.²⁹

Second, we can see how Titian's *Rape of Europa* – which isn't considered metaphorical under VISUAL METAPHOR – might, under ARTISTIC METAPHOR, use metaphor to express deep messages about gender inequality, and about rape. In the painting, a bull abducts a woman across the sea. Background knowledge of history and genre, and perhaps

²⁸ See Gaut (2007: 71-86) for more on artistic means of expressing an attitude in a painting.

²⁹ See Chapter 3, section 5.3 for issues of indeterminacy of deep content.

curation, tell us that the bull represents the god Jupiter: the supposed epitome of the male sex. The painted bull forms a source domain, and the character of Jupiter forms the target domain. Features of Titian's bull can be mapped on to Jupiter. However, this character of Jupiter can also form a source domain itself, having **THE MALE SEX** as *its* target domain. Features of the bull in the painting (Jupiter), then, can be mapped on to our concept of the male sex.

The distinctive properties of the source domain, which are given by the way Titian has depicted the bull in the abduction, contributes to the qualities to be mapped on to this target domain of the male sex. Consider Charles FitzRoy's description of the painted scene:

The bull dominates the dynamic composition, surging across the waves, with the hapless figure of Europa lying in a position of abandonment on his back. There is a palpable, erotic charge to the painting, not only in the way that the princess clutches the bull's horn, her arm encircling his neck. But also in the way the flying and swimming cupids gaze at the dishevelled clothing scarcely covering the princess' genitalia, while the fiery colours in the sky seem to match the strength of the animal's lust (2015: 2).

On close inspection of the painting, the lustful bull is dragging Europa away against her will, but he looks *on the surface* rather docile. Garlanded with flowers, the bull doesn't look particularly aggressive; he's calm, but crucially, he's *in control*. While Europa is haplessly splayed on his back, he moves in a way which is collected, cool-headed, and determined. His control, quiet confidence, and dominance over the situation are accentuated by the fact that he looks out at the viewer, dewy-eyed, in sharp contrast to Europa whose face is obscured and difficult to read. The bull's harnessing of the viewer's gaze is a "standard artistic device for psychological identification" (Eaton, 2003: 178), wherein the viewer is called to adopt the perspective or point of view of the character looking out of the artwork.

These painterly features of Titian's treatment of the bull create an effective yet sinister selection of source qualities – desire, lust, control, yet supposed harmlessness – which are mapped on to our target domains.

[Titian's bull _(SOURCE)] is powerful yet harmless, and epitomises lust, dominance, and masculinity

*[Jupiter _(SOURCE/TARGET)] is powerful yet harmless, and epitomises lust, dominance, and masculinity

*[**THE MALE SEX** _(TARGET)] is powerful yet harmless, and epitomises lust, dominance, and masculinity.

The starred claim about the male sex (the metaphorical meaning *C*, i.e. the fusion of the source and target domains) comprises a deep message about the male role in society. The ominous combination of the seeming serenity in the bull's expression and the fact that he's abducting an unwilling victim, generates source qualities from the painting that give our target domain of the male sex a sinister air.

Once we relate the bull metaphor to the depicted rape in the painting, other deep messages will be conveyed about the nature of rape, which may perpetuate gender injustice and inequality.³⁰ More specifically, this bull metaphor is put to a certain use in the work's eroticising of rape:

...the painting depends upon our sympathy for its 'rough hero', the god in the taurine disguise who looks out at the viewer, a standard artistic device for psychological identification. It is his attitude toward Europa's rape that we are supposed to adopt: that is, the work calls upon viewers to be sexually aroused by Europa's helplessness, fear, and vulnerability; to find her both terrified and sexually excited, willing and resisting, and so on (Eaton, 2003: 177-178).

The "light-hearted feel" of the bull (FitzRoy, 2) contrasted with the ambiguity of Europa's mental state in the painting, accentuate rape myths such as "rape satisfies women's secret desires to be taken and ravished..." (Eaton, 163). In the painting, "This fantasy is at odds with itself, fluctuating between the victim's resistance and consent, innocence and guilt, unwanted terror and sexual pleasure" (Eaton, 164). In other words, the bull is depicted in a way that purportedly justifies his act: the victim is being abducted and then impregnated against her will, but the bull performing this action is actually harmless and 'knows what's best' for the victim. This quiet control and dominance of the bull with corresponding

³⁰ Other mechanisms will generate these further deep messages. See Eaton (2003; 2012) for more on how they might get expressed by the painting (though she does not analyse the painting in terms of 'deep messages').

pernicious undertones translate into our target domain of the male sex, and contribute to the dangerous nature of the metaphor and the work in general, which has an “ethically defective vision of rape” (165).³¹

Recall I said in Section 2 that metaphors in art will likely be unparaphrasable, in the sense that a *complete* paraphrase of their meaning into literal language won’t be forthcoming. Now, my linguistic renderings of the content of the artistic metaphors in both the van Gogh and Titian examples above (their metaphorical meanings *C*, regarding labour and the male sex) can be seen as ‘paraphrases’ of the artistic metaphors. This is, though, compatible with the general unparaphrasability of metaphors in art. What I’ve done here is merely offer a first stab or small sample of what the artistic metaphors are conveying – comprising some of the work’s deep content – and this can be done while acknowledging that a complete and adequate paraphrase won’t be forthcoming. In a similar vein, Carroll notes about visual metaphor (which can be seen as a close cousin of artistic metaphor):

...it is not evident that one can really paraphrase all the relevant visual correspondences that the visual metaphor raises in language. [There are cases where] it is very hard to reduce the visual metaphor to a linguistic statement. Indeed, it may be practically impossible (Carroll, 1994: 358).

I won’t attempt to fully explain why artistic metaphors resist complete paraphrase, but I’ll gesture at a couple of reasons. First, linguistic metaphors in general are difficult to paraphrase adequately (Stern 2001: 191, Carroll 1994: 358), so artistic metaphors are going to be even more difficult, given that they don’t offer a source or target domain in the same medium in which the paraphrase would be given. Moreover, when we write or say out-loud an artistic metaphor (“labour is this pair of battered boots”) they’re likely going to be unfamiliar and ‘fresh’, and so their content will be difficult to capture in literal language.

Second, the distinctive nature of the domains in an artistic metaphor will complicate matters. The surface features, or medium, of the painted or sculpted artistic metaphor, give the metaphor a distinctive quality. For instance, the metaphor in van Gogh’s *A Pair of Shoes* is, minimally, “labour is this pair of boots”. But when we inspect the painting, we see that the boots have been captured and depicted with expressive and lively marks, with thick, dark brown and yellow tones, which all contribute to the texture of the battered and haggard

³¹ See Eaton (2003) for a compelling argument for this interpretation.

leather. These depictive features that comprise the source domain of the metaphor will be difficult to capture adequately in a linguistic statement.

Moreover, consider the work's genre, its history, and the artist's identity which also form target domains (for instance, van Gogh's isolated life and his interest in peasant existence). These all feed in to how we interpret and experience the painting and its metaphor, and will enrich the metaphor expressed. Some of these artistic features of the work's source and target domains will likely be lost in literal language; because of the distinctively artistic means of expression in the artwork, its metaphor cannot be *entirely* crystallised into language.

The crux of ARTISTIC METAPHOR is that we shouldn't analyse artworks in isolation when considering whether they are non-verbal metaphors. Rather, they must be considered in relation to the artist's oeuvre and the work's general history, and/or the context of display involving curatorial strategies in different exhibitions which respect the work's history and artistic style. Whether artworks are non-verbal metaphors, and determining the metaphorical meanings expressed by them, is sensitive to such contextual details. This is different to the VISUAL METAPHOR account, which saw metaphor in art as being a function of purely visual elements in an artwork.

Because the ARTISTIC METAPHOR account of deep content in art makes much needed room for context, it has two welcome consequences. First, it accommodates and explains many more examples of artworks which do seem to use metaphor. Rather than under-generating and excluding most art like VISUAL METAPHOR does (as per my *Undergeneration* argument), ARTISTIC METAPHOR accommodates all the artworks that VISUAL METAPHOR accommodates, and more. Artistic metaphors can be visual metaphors, but not all artistic metaphors will be visual metaphors. More precisely, the fusion of domains can be purely visual within the artwork; in which case we'd have an artistic metaphor and specifically a visual metaphor (like Man Ray's *Violon d'Ingres*), or the domain fusion can be partly contextual; in which case we'd have an artistic, but not purely visual, metaphor. For instance, under my proposal, Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* is an artistic metaphor. The target domain consisting of the oppressed Chinese peoples, which is offered by the curated exhibition and surrounding knowledge about Ai Weiwei's work and Chinese history, is fused with the source domain consisting of tiny sunflower seeds strewn across a large expanse of space in their millions. But it is not a visual metaphor, for no pictorial fusion occurs in the work (pictorial fusion would be achieved here if the 'seeds' were, on closer inspection, constructed as tiny Chinese people).

By assigning a role to context in determining metaphors in art, most artworks consequently have the capacity to be or use metaphors, for they can always form a source domain, the features of which can be mapped on to a contextually provided target domain. This frees up art's ability to be metaphorical, rather than restricting metaphor in art to purely visual mechanisms. My proposal therefore has more explanatory power than VISUAL METAPHOR.

Second, ARTISTIC METAPHOR accommodates the fact that artworks and metaphors have a meaning-range. First, it gives the needed expansion of this range. Because a source and target domain can be appropriately detected using the artwork itself and its surrounding context, artist intention consequently does not determine the presence or extent of the metaphors, or their meanings. This allows the possibility of accidental metaphors in art, and for the metaphors themselves to be more open-ended. My proposal also gives the needed restriction of this meaning-range. That the audience and the curator should not attempt to detect or create source and target domains haphazardly, but must do so as an enlightened response to the information and evidence offered, captures this restriction: not anything goes.

5. Conclusion

I've considered the mechanism of metaphor as providing a partial solution to the problem of how an artwork's deep messages are expressed. I first sought an account of how artworks use non-verbal metaphors: I argued against the VISUAL METAPHOR account, and then developed an alternative proposal, ARTISTIC METAPHOR. Using this, I tried to show how it helps explain deep meaning in art. In sum, a source domain is provided by the shallow content of a work, and a target domain can be offered by contextual parameters surrounding the work, such as curation and the work's history. Deep messages are generated by the mapping of features from the source domain on to the objects in the target domain. *Artistic* metaphor, then, is one way that artworks like *A Pair of Shoes* can "contain an entire universe."

My account of metaphor in art has implications for the Intentionalist Debate in aesthetics, which asks how we should detect and interpret the meaning of a work of art. To conclude, I want to outline these implications.

Recall that the Intentionalist Debate can be divided into two main camps: Originalist and Anti-Originalist. According to Originalists, the facts that determine the meaning of an

artwork are exhausted by the (relevant) facts about the work's original context, i.e. the context in which it was created. Anti-Originalists deny this claim: it is *not* the case that the facts that determine the meaning of an artwork are exhausted by the (relevant) facts about the work's original context. Various positions fall under each of these camps, each one assigning different roles to the artist's intentions in determining artwork meaning.

Recall that Originalist positions include (i) *Actual Intentionalism*, (ii) *Hypothetical Intentionalism* and (iii) *Conventionalism*, and recall that a traditional Anti-Originalist position was adopted by the 'The New Criticism': an Anti-intentionalist movement in aesthetic theory which spelled the 'death of the author'. The New Critic not only denies the Originalist claim, but makes the additional move of *entirely* rejecting a work's original context as informing its meaning; historic facts such as facts about the society in which the work was created are irrelevant to work meaning.

My account of metaphor in art should be placed in this Intentionalist Debate. According to ARTISTIC METAPHOR, metaphors in art are generated by the fusing together of the source domain and target domain. The target domain can be determined by external contextual parameters, such as curation of the work, or the work's history. The 'curation' of the artwork consists of the exhibition or event in which the work is shown. And the 'history' of the artwork consists of its style in relation to other works in the artist's oeuvre and to other similar works within art-historical movements, and the wider context that the work was responding to or in which the work was created.

ARTISTIC METAPHOR is therefore incompatible with all of the Originalist positions: Actual Intentionalism, Hypothetical Intentionalism, and Conventionalism. This is because it is an Anti-Originalist position: it allows curation to provide new target domains, and, crucially, leaves open the possibility that the curator draw on facts from new, *non*-original contexts that depart somewhat from the context in which the work was created. Allowing the possibility that the curator draw on new events from later periods when generating new target domains thereby allows non-original contexts and new events to potentially affect the meaning of the artwork in question, in this case, affect what metaphors might be expressed by the work.

Moreover, my position is also incompatible with the New Critic Anti-Originalist position. This is because my account also allows the work's history, i.e. facts about the historical setting in which it was created, to provide target domains, thereby allowing the work's original context to affect the overall meaning of the artwork, specifically what

metaphors are generated. While Anti-Originalist, ARTISTIC METAPHOR still acknowledges the importance of a work's original context in determining that work's meaning.

So if my arguments about metaphor in art are correct, then Actual Intentionalism, Hypothetical Intentionalism, and Conventionalism are all ruled out, for these are all Originalist positions. The existing Anti-Originalist approach – that of the New Critic – is also ruled out, because my approach still gives a work's original context theoretical importance in determining artwork meaning. This leaves us with a need to carve out new space in the debate, and I'll sketch one possible path.

Under ARTISTIC METAPHOR, the source and target domain must be reasonably detected, and so appropriately fused together. This process could be understood under a *partial* Hypothetical Intentionalist framework, as involving the audience detecting a metaphorical fusion by either hypothesising what the artist might have intended, via the work's history, or hypothesising what the *curator* intended, given the show's curatorial narrative and concepts. The reason a partial *Hypothetical* Intentionalist approach should be used here is because my position is incompatible with the whole of Actual Intentionalism. Because curation can offer new target domains not envisaged by the artist, my account treats artist intention as redundant. It is not necessary that the artist intend their work to be metaphorical for it to be metaphorical, nor does what a metaphor convey depend on what the artist intended. This captures part of the meaning-range of a work of art, namely, that the meaning of an artwork, and metaphorical meaning in general, can go beyond what the artist or speaker had in mind.

ARTISTIC METAPHOR thus carves out space for at least an Anti-Originalist variant of Hypothetical Intentionalism which draws on the curator in non-original contexts. Under this *expanded* Hypothetical Intentionalism, we needn't hypothesise just what the artist was doing with their work, but rather what the curator, broadly speaking, was doing with the work.

Who we hypothesise about will depend on context. When viewing *A Pair of Shoes* at the van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, we'd likely hypothesise about van Gogh's intentions for the work, using evidence drawn from the show, which would include public biographical and art historical information: perhaps van Gogh had the target concept of **LONELINESS** in mind. There, the target domain would be provided by the work's general history (which has been provided in a broadly curatorial way). But, if we were at a show about the nature of contemporary labour and toil, and not a show about van Gogh's work and life, then we'd likely hypothesise about the curator's goals and intentions for the show using evidence drawn from the exhibition, which could be provided by new narratives and events. There,

any target domains to be fused with the painting (which forms the source domain) would be provided by the work's progressive curation.

ARTISTIC METAPHOR is thus an Anti-Originalist position, but not as strong as the New Critic approach, for it invokes a two-dimensional theory of artwork meaning: it allows both the original context and non-original contexts (via the curator) to play a role in generating metaphors in art, and so play an overall role in determining the work's meaning.

Chapter Five

5. Alter-Pieces: Against Originalism in Art

Abstract

All but one of the preceding chapters have made use of the mechanism of curation. Chapter 1 acknowledged how curation can help facilitate a work's performance of certain illocutionary acts, Chapter 2 argued that the way a work is curated can affect whether or not the work lies, and Chapter 4 offered an account of metaphor in art that assigns the curator a role in providing target domains when generating the metaphors. In sum, I've claimed that curation can affect the meaning of an artwork. If this is true, then artwork meaning can shift over time: different curators will have different beliefs and different agendas about the curated works, thereby affecting what the work does and says.

However, this flies in the face of a dominant view in the philosophy of art: what I call Originalism. Originalism in art is the view that the meaning of an artwork is fixed by factors that held at the time of the work's creation: artworks cannot change in meaning. Over time and through different curation, their meaning remains fixed. If Originalism is true, and artwork meaning cannot change, then curation cannot affect artwork meaning.

This final chapter, 5, argues against Originalism, and shows that artworks can change in meaning, given certain conditions (I call this view 'Constructivism'). A typical motivation behind Originalism is the plausible ontological claim that an artwork is a historically indexed object; its meaning is informed by its original context, and typically, Constructivist views don't do justice to this. I argue for a version of Constructivism that does do justice to this nature of artworks: an artwork receives its meaning in its original context, but the work can accumulate (alter) in meaning in subsequent contexts. Given that artworks can change in meaning, then, the curator is therefore not ruled out as playing an important role in determining artwork meaning.

1. Introduction

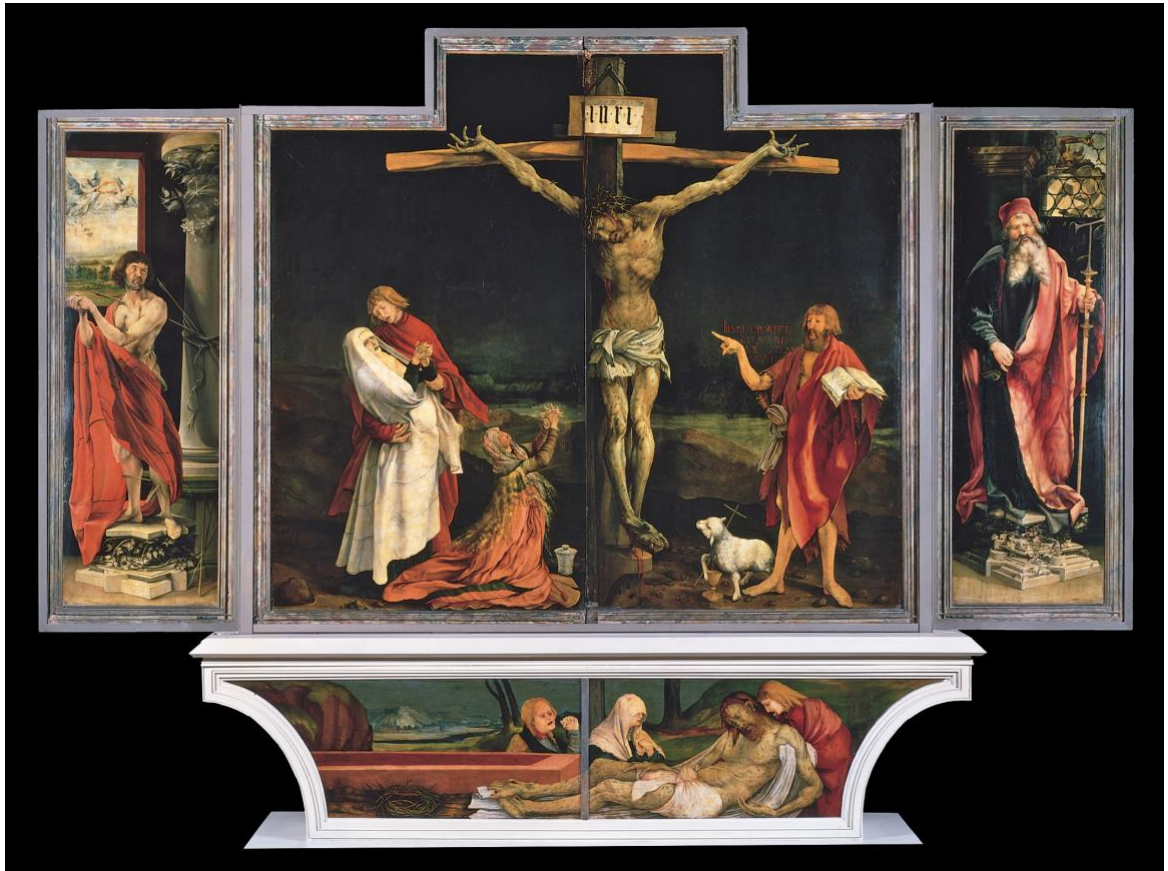


Figure. 9

Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1516) (Figure. 9), which originally stood in the Monastery of St Anthony during the 16th century, is a startling depiction of the Crucifixion. The large painted panels depict various biblical scenes and life-sized figures, including the Crucifixion, St Anthony being tormented by demons, and the Lamentation where Christ's body is removed from the cross.

The Monastery of St Anthony was a hospital, devoted to caring for the sick. The order was known for caring for those afflicted with 'Saint Anthony's Fire' (Hayum 1977: 507), a disease with horrific symptoms including intense burning of the limbs, gangrene, hallucinations, and muscle cramps which led to disfiguration and amputation (its cause was discovered to be poisoned rye).

It is believed that the altarpiece was commissioned specifically to aid the healing program at the hospital, and that it contains as central to its meaning themes of disease and

healing, and specifically, references to Saint Anthony's Fire (Hayum, *ibid*).¹ Each day patients would assemble before the imposing altarpiece, seeking comfort in its identification of the crucified Jesus with the patients, and with their disease and agony (505). This identification echoed the theological doctrine according to which Jesus is identified with those in need:

... 'I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me'... 'Lord, When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'... 'The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me"' (Matthew 25: verses 35, 37, 40).

However, several centuries later, the altarpiece seemed to change in meaning. Or at least, it appeared to acquire a meaning in addition to its specific Saint Anthony's Fire meaning. The altarpiece was brought to Munich for restoration, and was then exhibited to the public there at the Alte Pinakothek for almost a year, during the unsettled time between the German Armistice in November 1918, and the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919. In that year, the altarpiece apparently came to symbolise the 'German spirit', denoting the pain inflicted on German soldiers at the Front in trench warfare (Stieglitz, 1989). Injured soldiers who had experienced the horrors of the trenches would come from far and wide to gaze upon the altarpiece, which "bore witness" to the suffering of the German people (Stieglitz, 93). Now, Christ in the altarpiece seemed to be identified with the injured German soldiers and the German people: *their* suffering and agony was identified with Christ's suffering and agony.

Did the altarpiece alter in meaning? If you were an *Originalist*, your answer to this would be: "No. The meaning of an artwork is fixed by factors that held at the time of the work's creation: the 'original context'. Artworks cannot change in meaning: as time goes by, their meaning remains rigid." But if you were a *Constructivist* your answer would be: "Yes. An artwork's meaning can change in subsequent contexts over time: artwork meaning can develop autonomy from the artist and the political and social context in which she created the work."

The aim of this chapter is to argue against Originalism and argue for Constructivism: I try to show that the Originalist claim that artwork meaning is rigid and cannot change, is false. Focusing on the *Isenheim Altarpiece* as a case study, I argue that artworks can change

¹ This is also supported by Henning & Rasmusen (2001: 667).

in meaning. However, a typical motivation behind Originalism is the plausible ontological claim that an artwork is a historically indexed object; its meaning is informed by its original context, and typically, Constructivists don't do justice to this. I argue for a version of Constructivism that does do justice to the importance of a work's origin: an artwork receives its meaning in its original context, but the work can accumulate (alter) in meaning in subsequent contexts. Section 2 makes some preliminary distinctions. Section 3 outlines the two rival theories, and Section 4 develops the altarpiece case study. Section 5 considers a candidate response from the Originalist, namely, that what changed in the altarpiece in Munich was not its meaning but its 'significance'. Section 6 argues that this response does not accommodate my example, and that the altarpiece did in fact change in meaning. Section 7 concludes by developing a Constructivism that does justice to the importance of a work's origin.

2. Preliminaries

As with the previous chapters, the 'meaning' of artworks will be understood as having two components: *content* and *force*, where the former is further divided into shallow and deep content. Just as in ordinary language, artworks express contents,² and put forth such content with certain illocutionary forces.³ These two components in art combine to create shallow or deep messages, informing the overall meaning of the work.

Shallow and deep messages can be general or specific. For instance, *Guernica* has been taken to be an anti-war symbol more generally, comprising deep messages about the nature of war. But specifically it depicts the bombing of the Spanish town – this could be construed as shallow – and specifically the painting expresses horror towards that awful event – this could be construed as deep. The same can be said about the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. The altarpiece's content generally represents the Crucifixion, and specifically Saint Anthony's Fire. The former expresses deep messages about Christ's humanity and human salvation more generally, and the latter expresses deep messages about Christ bearing the suffering of the patients in the hospital, specifically taking on *their* pain, and healing the Saint Anthony's Fire disease (Hayum: 509, 512).

² See Chapter 3 for an argument that this content is propositional.

³ See Chapter 1 for an argument supporting this claim.

How might artworks express such messages? One method is their use of symbols. Symbols are tools for expressing meaning: they can denote or refer⁴ to things, and have illocutionary force; they can do things. Roughly speaking, a symbol is anything that stands for something else. When something *x* stands for something else *y*, *x* represents *y* or is a symbol for *y*, where *y* is the referent or denotation of that symbol (Hospers, 1946: 29). Language is the most familiar symbol system, but symbols can also be purely visual.

Evidenced by iconographic discipline, art is full of visual symbols. For instance, in Christian paintings, the halo is a *conventional* symbol for divinity, and the colour white is a *semi-conventional* symbol for purity (Hospers, 38). ‘Conventional’ here means that the symbol stands for its referent or denotation only because of a common convention; the relation between the symbol and what is symbolised is an arbitrary one (words fall into this category). ‘Semi-conventional’ here means the fact that one convention was selected rather than another “is not an accident” but the result of some ‘natural relation’ or resemblance between the symbol and the referent or denotation (such as white and purity) (Hospers, 1946: 33). Such symbols require prior understanding of certain conventions, without which the viewer cannot go far in interpreting the work. Moreover, parts of artworks will also *naturally* symbolise or represent things, primarily by depicting something else, perhaps with some degree of resemblance (Hospers, 49-50). For instance, sheep in a painting will depict or be a natural symbol for sheep in the world.⁵

The relationship between visual symbols, depiction, and denotation should be noted. Visual symbols in art can denote things as well as depict things, but such a claim needn’t involve a commitment to a conventionalist theory of depiction (a theory held by Goodman, 1968 and Kulvicki, 2006). A visual symbol may denote or refer to an idea, theme, or object, because of pre-established conventions: for instance, the halo symbol will denote divinity. ‘Conventional’ symbols do this. But this doesn’t necessarily mean that the halo symbol *depicts* divinity via a convention. Rather, the halo symbol can depict the *object of a halo* via some other relation such as resemblance.⁶ Such symbols can indeed denote things while

⁴ This relation may be one of denotation or reference, but my argument doesn’t hinge on this detail.

⁵ Some theorists hold that such ‘natural’ symbols in art are also conventional: “Realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for the given culture or person at a given time” (Goodman, 1968: 37). Whether a picture is realistic to nature or not “depends at any time entirely upon what frame or mode is then the standard” (ibid). Alternatively, ‘natural symbol’ has been considered to refer to depiction via non-conventional relations (Hyman, 2006: 161-162). I won’t take a stand on this dispute.

⁶ Grzankowski makes a similar point (2015: 151). For issues about depictions of non-existent objects, see Abell (2009) and Hyman & Bantinaki (2017).

depiction may be governed by non-conventionalist principles.⁷ In other words, it is possible to treat denotation and depiction as distinct relations *contra* Goodman (1968). For instance, a visual symbol of Christ on the cross in visible agony will depict (but needn't denote) the dead person Jesus Christ, but denote (and not depict) the theme of Christ embodying the suffering of humanity. This illustrates a potential case where the extensions of the relations come apart, which would be enough to show that they are distinct relations.

This model can be used to explain Hospers' notions of 'conventional', 'semi-conventional', and 'natural' symbols. Conventional symbols will be ones that denote an object, idea, or theme *x* (such as divinity) by depicting a different object *y* (such as a halo). Semi-conventional symbols will be ones that denote *x* and depict *y*, but where there is a connection between *x* and *y* i.e. the appearance of *y* might partially explain the corresponding denotation of a certain theme. For example, the doctrine of humanity's suffering might have non-conventional connections with the depiction of Christ in pain. And lastly, a natural symbol needn't denote anything at all if we don't want to be conventionalists about depiction. Here, the symbol will merely depict an object via a non-conventional relation such as resemblance.⁸ The lesson here is that we needn't be committed to a conventionalist theory of depiction in order to help ourselves to denotative symbols in works of art.

As well as having contents (whether these be denotations or depicted objects), visual symbols can be used with illocutionary forces, just like linguistic symbols: we can do things with words, and pictorial symbols are also tools to do things with. For instance, some road sign symbols *warn* drivers about potential hazards, and the Crucifix symbol *glorifies* Christ, and in churches *invites* people to pray. So, just like with language and artwork meaning more generally, a visual symbol's meaning is composed of its content and force.

Meaning – comprised of content and force – in linguistic situations is normally informed by the context of utterance. For example, we need to consult the context of utterance in which a speaker says, "I'll take that one", to fully parse the sentence's content and force (what does the demonstrative 'that' refer to, who is the speaker, and is this an order or request?). Similarly for artwork meaning, it's generally accepted that a work's content and force is informed by its context. Grounding interpretation in the perceptual properties of a work alone, or the artist's intentions alone, is too limited to make sense of

⁷ See Lopes (1996: 57) for more on this thought.

⁸ For more on this see Hyman (2006: 161-162).

how we engage with art. Indeed, it's been argued that the formal qualities of a work are connected to historical facts (Walton, 1970; Davies, 2006b: 60), and concentrating on artist intentions alone has absurd consequences for meaning more generally.⁹ So, when determining artwork meaning, the context needs to be consulted in some way. What kind of context that might be, forms the focus of the next section.

3. *Originalism and Constructivism*

According to a dominant view in aesthetics, Originalism, the meaning of an artwork is fixed by factors that held at the time of the work's creation (Davies, 1996: 20).¹⁰ More precisely, the facts that determine the meaning of an artwork are exhausted by the (relevant) facts about the work's original context, i.e. the context in which it was created. This means that once a work is created, its meaning is informed by that context only. For example, the meaning of *Guernica* is restricted to the period in which Picasso created the work, i.e. as a response to the bombing of Guernica.

Forming the backdrop of the 'Intentionalist Debate' – which asks what determines artwork meaning and how ought we interpret art – recall that Originalism manifests in at least three positions, each of which assign factors in the original context different importance. For instance, according to *Actual Intentionalism*, what determines an artwork's meaning is the artist's actual intentions that are supported by the work and recognised through the conventions that held in the work's original context (Carroll, 2000; Davies, 1996: 21). Alternatively, *Hypothetical Intentionalism* holds that an artwork's meaning is determined by a suitable audience's ascribing to the artist certain intentions, drawing on evidence based on the linguistic and artistic conventions that held in the work's original context. And *Conventionalism* holds that knowledge about the conventions of language and art that were in effect when the work was produced is sufficient to secure the meaning of the artwork (Davies, *ibid*). Conventionalism has been interpreted as a brand of 'Anti-

⁹ Allowing artist intentions to entirely determine the meaning of an artwork results in a failure to recognise the distinction between what the artist intends and the meaning the work conveys. *Guernica* could not be about a child's tea party by Picasso willing it so. For more on this see Carroll (1992).

¹⁰ Originalism has received different names in the literature. Davies (1996) calls it 'Original Context Theory', and Levinson (1990) calls it 'Traditional Historicism'. Originalists include Davies (1996; 2006a; 2006b), Stecker (2003), and Levinson (1990).

intentionalism', because it holds that while factors about the work's origin are relevant, the artist's intentions have no relevance at all to artwork meaning, and interpreters should entirely dispense with the artist's intentions giving the work complete autonomy from the beliefs of its creator.

These three alternative positions about artwork meaning have in common a core claim: "the meaning of a work is determined by circumstances obtaining at its creation" (Davies, 1996: 22).

A plausible metaphysical view about the nature of art tends to come hand in hand with Originalism; namely, that an artwork is a historically informed object. An artwork – literary or visual – is partly composed of a text, or a bundle of colours, lines, and shapes on a canvas (its visual forms). But artworks are more than this. They are created by people with identities within historical parameters, and the artworks consequently have such parameters built into their identity and meanings. As Davies writes: "...the art that is produced is historically indexed, because its identity and content depend on relations tying it to the setting in which it was created" (2006b: 127). In other words, there is more to a poem than its text, and there is more to a painting than the way its visual forms are put together on a canvas or wooden panel.

Both the text of a literary work, and the colours and shapes in a painting, can be understood as 'types' (Stecker, 2003: 69): their abstract form can be detached from the artwork, and can manifest in different artworks with different meanings. This is evidenced by the fact that two visually or lexically identical artworks would actually be *different* artworks and have their own distinct meanings if they were created by different people, within different genres, or within different cultural and historical environments (Davies, 1996: 22). For instance, Allen Jones's group of three sculptures – *Hatstand*, *Table*, and *Chair* (1969) – consist of three minimally dressed women transformed into pieces of furniture, and are taken to objectify women. However, if a female feminist artist had created the very same sculptures in the 21st century, it's plausible that we'd have a very different artwork, one that did not itself objectify women, but rather exposed and protested against the objectification of women. So, the same constructed sculptural forms – the same type of composition – would manifest in two different artworks. In particular, the works would have different contents and illocutionary forces depending on their historical origins. This demonstrates the

importance of a work's origin to its meaning and identity, indeed, to its being an artwork at all. Call this claim about the nature of artworks the **Origin Principle**.¹¹

This view about the nature of art has implications for how we should practice art interpretation. Given that an artwork is a historically informed object, if we want to enquire into the meaning of an artwork, we should interpret the artwork *as a particular historically informed object*. That is, when enquiring into the meaning of a painting *qua* artwork, the object of interpretation we're concerned with is not the painting's visual forms alone, but the painting as a whole with its historical identity, i.e. the artwork. Alternatively, interpretation of a bundle of visual forms on a canvas, or a text, is far less constrained than interpretation of the artworks in which they manifest. As Davies remarks about texts as opposed poems, a text can be *used* for many things (2006b: 110), and playful approaches to the text are fine, since interpretation as a practice:

...need not confine itself to providing consistent, integrated accounts of artists' works...as opposed to the texts associated with those works, which may be taken up by the interpreter and used for their own purposes (Davies, 2006b: 124).

But if we're concerned with the meaning of an *artwork*, then it's plausible to insist that our object of interpretation be that artwork. Call this claim the **Interpretation Principle**.

These two principles, the first about the nature of art, the second about the practice of interpretation, typically form motivation for the Originalist position. Given that artworks are historically informed objects, and given that in discovering an artwork's meaning the object of interpretation should therefore be this historically informed object, Originalists insist that interpreters must confine themselves to the practices of language and visual form, and events, within which the artist worked. If we attempt to interpret an artwork using conventions, theories, or events that couldn't have been used by artists of the time, argues the Originalist, then we are not actually interpreting *that* artwork (Davies, 1996: 22). Rather, we're just interpreting a bundle of visual forms on a canvas, or a text, which are not tethered to the work's original historical parameters; much like how a sentence in language can relate in different ways to different contexts.

¹¹ Davies refers to this claim as 'ontological contextualism': "an artwork's identity and contents are generated in part by relations it holds to aspects of the socio-historical setting in which it was created" (2006b: 81). For further arguments in favour of this position, see Davies (2006b: pp. 50-87).

The meaning of an artwork is thus fixed by factors that held at the time of the work's creation, and *cannot change or develop over time*. As Jerrold Levinson writes: "...an artwork's basic content can only be a function of what precedes or is coeval with it[s creation], and thus that such content does not suffer continual revision after creation" (1990: 201).¹² Call this the ORIGINALIST CLAIM – this is the claim that I'll be arguing against. It should be noted that Originalists accept that some of an artwork's properties can and do change across time, such as their *age*, *how they're interpreted*, or *level of damage*. However, they argue that such changeable properties are not "crucial to the work's identity", and that those properties that *are* crucial to the work's identity, such as its meaning, do not alter over time (Davies, 2006b: 95-96).

But it seems that artworks often react to subsequent events over time and in a way that *is* relevant to their identities: "We have a tendency, admittedly, to regard an artwork as an organic thing, with a life and a development, which evolves progressively with its surrounding environment" (Levinson, 1990: 180). Originalists claim that such sentiments are mistaken, and reflect "the myth of the living artwork" (Levinson, *ibid*).

But the rival (and more controversial) view, Constructivism, holds that such sentiments are not mistaken: the content and force of a work, i.e. its meaning, can indeed change over time.¹³ The view holds that artworks are 'historically constructed': "...an artwork is historically constructed if changes that occur in a work's historical or cultural context change its meaning (Stecker, 2003: 140).¹⁴ Constructivists hold, then, that rather than remaining fixed across time, the identity of an artwork can evolve through its alteration in meaning. Constructivism is therefore *Anti-Originalist*, denying the Originalist claim: it is *not* the case that the facts that determine the meaning of an artwork are exhausted by the (relevant) facts about the work's original context.

Some versions of Constructivism hold that interpretations are what change the meaning of the artwork: each interpretation changes the meaning of its object (Davies, 2006b: 125, Stecker, 2003: 141).¹⁵ I won't adhere to this version, but rather a version that

¹² For Levinson, the 'basic content' of an artwork refers to a work's aesthetic qualities (gracefulness), artistic properties (originality, revolutionariness), representational properties, and its meaning properties (1990: 184). It's the last of these that this chapter, and indeed the whole thesis, is concerned with.

¹³ Constructivism has received different names in the literature. Davies (1996) calls it 'Modern Context Theory', Stecker (2003) calls it 'Historical Constructivism', and Levinson (1990) calls it 'Revisionist Historicism'. For variations on the theory in general see Stecker (2003). For proponents of the theory in its various forms see Margolis (1991), McFee (1980; 1992), Shusterman (1992), and Krausz (1992).

¹⁴ Stecker, as an Originalist, denies that artworks are like this.

¹⁵ Krausz (1992) and Margolis (1991) hold this version, but see Levinson (1996: 197) for problems with it.

sees interpretation as *discovery* of the changing artwork meaning, which changes as a result of “historically shifting variables” which “impinge on and change the meaning of the work” (Stecker, 2003: 141). This change in meaning can be understood in two ways: (i) artworks can *accumulate or alter* in meaning: new meanings can be added to the original meaning of the work, or (ii) artworks can *entirely change* in meaning, where the work ceases to possess its original meaning altogether, and then means something else.¹⁶ My arguments in this chapter support option (i), and I remain neutral about whether option (ii) is possible. So, *given certain conditions, a work can change in meaning over time, where this is understood as an accumulation or alteration of meaning*. Call this Constructivism’s ALTER CLAIM – this is the claim that I’ll be arguing for.

Constructivism gained purchase after the dawn of, and so generally combines with, ‘The New Criticism’; the movement in aesthetic theory which released the artwork from its maker, dismissing facts about the work’s origin. The New Criticism is a type of Anti-intentionalism, because it holds that artist’s intentions have no relevance at all to artwork meaning, and interpreters should give the work complete autonomy from the beliefs of its creator.

The New Criticism school is also Anti-Originalist, and not only denies the Originalist claim but also makes the additional move of *entirely* rejecting a work’s original context as informing its meaning; historic facts such as facts about the society in which the work was created are irrelevant to work meaning. New Critics focus instead on the text or formal elements of works, releasing these elements from the artist’s intentions and the work’s original context. This consequently reduces the artwork to its bundle of colours and shapes on a canvas, or its text, rather than an object that contains fixed historical parameters. Divorcing an artwork’s meaning from its original context and the intentions of its creator supposedly explains how works apparently gain new meanings after their author or artist has died (Beardsley, 1992: 26).

But the New Critic approach is problematic, for it confuses an artwork with its mere form; its bundle of colours and shapes on a canvas, or its text. As we saw, an artwork’s historical origin is part of its identity and meaning, as per the **Origin Principle**, and treating a painting qua artwork instead as a mere collection of pigment and shapes on a canvas is no

¹⁶ Stecker describes this differently: “Such changes can be either accretions in meaning, that is, simply add to the current meaning of a work, or they can be alterations in meaning, that is, bring it about that a work ceases to mean one thing and begins meaning something else” (2003: 140). I use the term ‘alter’ to refer to a mere accretion in meaning, for this counts as a small alteration but not an *entire* shift in meaning.

longer dealing with the artwork. Consequently, the critic is no longer interpreting the artwork, but is instead interpreting the work's visual forms alone. The object of interpretation shifts from the artwork, to its associated visual forms or text. Of course, there are many practices of interpretation, some involving artworks, and some involving just the works' associated visual forms or texts. And it might be the case that a New Criticism interpretation method is the most worthwhile one as regards aesthetic appreciation. But if we're concerned with determining an *artwork's* meaning as opposed to the potential meanings of its visual forms or text alone, we need to be careful that the artwork is our object of interpretation; we must abide by the **Interpretation Principle**.

An artwork's identity is informed by its original historical setting, and interpretation of the artwork should therefore respect this. So if we want to be Constructivist about *artwork* meaning, where one and the same artwork can be reactive to new events and so change in meaning, we should abide by the **Origin Principle** and **Interpretation Principle**, and reject the New Critic approach to art and interpretation. The following sections attempt to show that *artworks* can change in meaning: both their content and force can alter, given certain conditions. That is, I argue for a Constructivism that does justice to the nature of art and interpretation, and leaves behind the problematic New Critic approach. We can be Constructivist – and so Anti-Originalist – without being New Critics.

4. Against the ORIGINALIST CLAIM

Using the *Isenheim Altarpiece* as a case study, this section argues for Constructivism's ALTER CLAIM and against the ORIGINALIST CLAIM: artworks can change in meaning. I first explore the altarpiece's meaning in relation to its original context. I then argue that the altarpiece gained a new meaning when it was displayed in Munich in 1919. I do this by showing that the visual symbols specifically in the altarpiece, when displayed in Munich, accumulated in meaning, and that the altarpiece overall therefore accumulated in meaning.

4.1. Saint Anthony's Fire

There is abundant evidence for the hypothesis that the altarpiece's meaning is to do with the Saint Anthony's Fire disease and the 16th century hospital patients at the monastery. Evidence is found in the altarpiece's imagery and the specific symbolic parts of the painting, and in the original context in which it was created, including the fact that similar altarpieces

sharing the same medicinal function were created around the same time.¹⁷ I'll note a handful of such evidence.

First, the wings in the piece's closed state depict the saints Sebastian and Anthony. By the 16th century, St Sebastian was a long-standing symbol for warding off the plague. St Anthony, because of the order, by this time symbolised the miraculous cure of the Saint Anthony's Fire disease (Hayum, 503). Moreover, he is shown in the painting holding a tau-shaped cross, treated by many late 15th century prints as a symbol of healing. In the hospital context, these symbolic elements of the painting comprised deep content about healing.

Second, the *predella* of the piece (the bottom landscape panel, see Figure. 10), which depicts the Lamentation of Christ, has a visible panel split just below Christ's knees. Amputation procedures were common at the hospital, and the monks displayed amputated limbs around the monastery. Here in the altarpiece's *predella* Christ himself appears represented as an amputee (509), comprising deep content about the identification of Christ with the hospital's patients and their disease.



Figure. 10

Third, the right-hand wing in the piece's open state depicts the *Temptation of St Anthony* (Figure. 11). The depicted demon-figure to the bottom left is interpreted as a graphic symbol of the diseased state of Saint Anthony's Fire. Gruesome and helpless, the demon's head lolls back whilst his withered arm clenches in agony. The *cartello* opposite the figure reads, "where were you good Jesus...why were you not there to heal my wounds?" which has been interpreted as a verbal accompaniment to the visual embodiment of the disease (507).



Figure. 11

¹⁷ For example, Roger van der Weyden's *Beaune Altarpiece* (Hayum, 503).

Again, these shallow visual elements with their symbolic connotations comprise deep content about the nature of the patients' disease. As the art historian Andrée Hayum writes:

All the symptoms of Grünewald's demon have been variously associated with Saint Anthony's Fire and, given the professed goals of the monastery, we can assume that the artist meant to show him as suffering from this disease (507).

Both the general and specific contents in the altarpiece, given by its symbols, are put forth with illocutionary forces. For instance, the general content about the Crucifixion is put forth with forces familiar to Crucifixions in this period: the Crucifix symbol was taken to *assert* that Christ died for our sins, and was an *invitation* to pray and believe. The altarpiece's specific content about Saint Anthony's Fire is also put forth with certain forces: the work functions as a *plead* for a cure of the disease, a *protection* against the disease, a *relieving* of the patients' pain, and the *promise* of a disease-free afterlife (Williamson, 2004: 40). The shallow and deep contents coupled with their illocutionary forces thus expressed, in the hospital, shallow and deep messages about Saint Anthony's Fire, healing, and salvation. As Hayum writes:

Thus the viewers at Isenheim, through their common experience of local texts and illustrations, could attach this reassuring level of meaning to the crucifixion on the altarpiece (510).

That Grünewald chose to transcribe a presumably predetermined program into visual language that touches the experiences of these patients only brings out more dramatically...his extraordinary capacity to be affected by this context and his evident need to communicate with this special group of viewers (516).

Originalists would be happy with this arrived-at meaning. Given that we know little about Grünewald, we can only use the information we have: the piece itself with its visual symbols, and the context in which it was created, or commissioned for.

4.2. *The German Spirit*

However, several centuries later in 1919, the altarpiece was exhibited in Munich. There, it apparently came to symbolise the ‘German spirit’, and was interpreted as representing the pain suffered by the German soldiers at the Front. There, “The self-image of a martyred people [was] thus equated with the ‘tragic tale’ of the Isenheim Altar” (Stieglitz, 1989: 99).

How can we explain this apparent alteration in meaning? Recall that artwork meaning is composed of content and force. In language, the content and force of a sentence is frequently informed by the *context of utterance*. For instance, some linguistic expressions such as the demonstrative ‘that’ are context-sensitive: their content varies with the context of utterance. Moreover, the illocutionary acts that we perform with our words are also affected by the context of utterance. For instance, whether ‘Be quiet!’ counts as an act of giving an order depends on certain contextual conditions, such as the authority of the speaker.

Visual symbols are also context-sensitive, and thus liable to shift in meaning across contexts. So if the altarpiece’s symbols can change in meaning across contexts of utterance, then it looks like the piece as a whole can develop in meaning too. I’ll now argue that the meaning of the altarpiece altered when placed in a certain context of utterance, i.e. the exhibition in Munich. I do this in two steps: (1) I outline how the Munich exhibition constituted a context of utterance; (2) I show how through its symbols the meaning of the altarpiece related in a new way to this context of utterance.

(1) The Munich exhibition

A context of utterance is generally understood as:

...the set of circumstances in which a sentence is spoken or written; it will typically include the identity of the speaker, the identity of the addressee (if any), the place and time of the utterance, and perhaps other things (Elborne, 2011: 112).

What we say and do with our words is sensitive to such extra-linguistic parameters. The context provides crucial elements of meaning to our sentences, and as the context changes, the meanings of our sentences can change.

Artwork meaning has been frequently understood by drawing on analogies with language. For instance, interpretation theorists such as Actual Intentionalists and

Hypothetical Intentionalists draw a distinction between what the artist intends their work to mean, which they call ‘utterer meaning’, and what the work actually ends up conveying, which they call ‘utterance meaning’. This analogy with language can be extended to the contexts in which artworks express their meanings. In general, contexts of utterance in the artworld can be understood as the set of circumstances in which an artwork is *displayed*, which will typically include the identity of the artist, the identity of the audience, the place and time of the display, and perhaps other things.

Contexts of utterance in the artworld can be divided into two types: an artwork’s *originating context of utterance*, and its *subsequent contexts of utterance*. The former comprises the original context in which the artwork was created and shown. It contains as parameters the identity of the artist, the broad identity of the original audience, and the place and time (i.e. political or moral environment) in which the work was created and displayed. For instance, the originating context of utterance of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* consists of the time period in which it was displayed to the patients in St Anthony’s Hospital.

But artworks continue to be displayed in different exhibitions in time periods and locations subsequent to their originating contexts of utterance. These subsequent public showings of a work can be construed as a work’s *subsequent contexts of utterance*. This type of context can be further divided, into two sub-types: *homage* contexts of utterance, and *contemporary* contexts of utterance.

Presumably according to Originalism, any subsequent context of utterance or displaying of a work – against which we analyse the work’s meaning – should approximate its originating context of utterance: it must pay homage to it. So, even in exhibitions in the 21st century, we should still analyse the *Isenheim Altarpiece* against its original contextual parameters, i.e. in a *homage* context of utterance. Indeed, curators tend to recreate and reflect on the originating context of utterance in subsequent showings of famous works, by giving information about the work’s originating circumstances. For example, when *Guernica* has been exhibited in shows decades after the Spanish Civil War, its curation tends to give information about the war and how the painting was a response to the Guernica bombing.

While subsequent contexts of utterance in the artworld do frequently curatorially draw entirely on the parameters of a work’s originating context, this does not mean that this is the only way of generating subsequent contexts of utterance in the artworld. Other sets of circumstances, which occur after the originating context, can be established as *contemporary* contexts of utterance, perhaps facilitated by the curator. These contexts

include as parameters the artist's identity, the *contemporary* audience's identity, and the place and time (i.e. the contemporary political or moral environment) of the work's *current* curated display. Here, artworks can be displayed in exhibitions with narratives different to those in the originating context of utterance of the work: narratives that, for instance, draw on current affairs rather than past affairs. Crucially, we can and do analyse artworks, such as the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, not only against their originating or homage contexts of utterance, but also against their contemporary contexts of utterance generated by current events.¹⁸

I'll now show that the exhibition of the altarpiece at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, within its wider WWI context, facilitated a contemporary context of utterance. This was achieved because the following parameters were publicly in place: (i) Grünewald's identity, (ii) the contemporary audience's identity, and (iii) the place and time of the work's current curated display i.e. its contemporary political or moral environment. I'll explain these in turn.

The first parameter constitutes Grünewald's (supposed) identity. By the end of WWI, Wilhelm Worringer's art book *Formbrolene der Gotik* (1911) was promoting and perpetuating "spiritual racism" in Germany: the belief that the Aryan race was special (Stieglitz, 87-89). The art book was part of a wider right-wing discourse on German cultural regeneration after the end of WWI, expressing chauvinistic and xenophobic messages (Stieglitz, 99). Because little was known about Grünewald, writers of this book constructed an image of the artist as being "ultra-German" (91), representing the 'German spirit' in the face of adversity.

The second parameter constitutes the contemporary audience's identity, which in this case was Germany as a society, and specifically the German soldiers who had fought in the trenches. This particular audience was exposed to public discourse surrounding the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, in the form of writing, education, and print distribution. The exhibition of the altarpiece triggered polemical articles which filled the newspapers, resulting in Munich becoming a place of 'pilgrimage' for the public (Stieglitz, 93). Moreover, the Alte Pinakothek had been giving courses on art before and after the war, and enabled wounded soldiers, many limbless, to visit the galleries (ibid). This discourse about the altarpiece and its effects on post-war Germany also influenced how it was photographed. For example,

¹⁸ For instance, the art exhibition *Age of Terror: Art since 9/11* (2017) at the Imperial War Museum did this by curating artworks as a reaction to terrorism, even though some of the works hadn't been created with this purpose in mind.

great importance was placed on photographing Christ's hands and feet in the altarpiece. This further conveyed the graphic severing of the limbs: "a dismemberment uncannily close to the realities of the people viewing the altar" (95). Formed into prints, these photographs were distributed in the media, enabling the altarpiece to reach many German people outside of Munich.

Moreover, at the time of the altarpiece's display in Munich, this particular audience shared surrounding general knowledge about the German soldiers' psychological and physical experience of the war and trench warfare, which was conceptualised at the time as *Fronterlebnis*: the traumatic experience of the Front (93). The graphic and intense naturalism of the painted body of Christ in pain in the altarpiece, with its emphasis on the skin's surface – wounds, lacerations, puss, sores, the crown of thorns digging into his head, the nails cutting through bulging tendons – "was like a mirror to the wounds inflicted in the trenches" (94). Grünewald's representation of Christ became uncanny to this new, contemporary audience. Furthermore, because of the print and article distribution, the altarpiece's *predella* now seemed to signify the severing of limbs in the trenches. All of this "definitively changed the way people saw and wrote about the altar" (93). The altarpiece thus became a "sanctuary" for a war-torn country, and "bore witness to the suffering of Germany's people" (93), and was considered a "cathartic experience" for the soldiers (95).

The third parameter, consisting of the altarpiece's contemporary political or moral environment, was a particularly dark Germany. The country had just lost the war, and as well as the emotional effects of accepting responsibility for the war, the country faced starvation and drastically reduced military and territorial power. This difficult time for the people of Germany between 1911 and 1919, and the growing spiritual racism amongst certain political parties, formed an anxious and distressed backdrop to the exhibition of the altarpiece in Munich.

These three parameters constituted a contemporary context of utterance, into which the altarpiece was displayed. I'll now argue how, within this contemporary context, the altarpiece expressed the same general messages as it did in its originating context of utterance (the monastic hospital) – about general pain and Christ – but its *specific* messages had accumulated, affecting the altarpiece's overall content and force.

(2) *A new meaning*

Much like context-sensitive linguistic expressions, the referents or denotations of at least conventional and semi-conventional visual symbols can change across contexts of utterance. Moreover, much like the illocutionary force of our words is sensitive to the context of utterance, so too can the force with which a visual symbol is used also change. This might be due to a new stipulated convention in a society, or because of a particular use of the symbol in a certain context. As Hospers writes, “what precisely is symbolised in each case can be determined only by the context” (1946: 36).

It is uncontroversial that the meanings of symbols change across time, place, and culture. Some symbols lose their original meaning entirely; for instance, mistletoe used to be a symbol of ritual castration but now just signals a convention to kiss beneath it. But some symbols manage to retain their original meaning but accumulate across time; holding a collection of meanings at one time, becoming an ‘aggregate’ symbol. For instance, the swastika is an ancient symbol which is still taken to mean good fortune in the East, but because of the Nazi’s use of the symbol, refers to or denotes in much of the Western world ‘Aryan race superiority’. And the hand symbol that signals ‘ok’ or ‘fine’ in some countries, is also offensive in most of Europe, indicating that the person it’s directed to is a ‘zero’, and in South American nations it symbolises the anus (Armstrong & Wagner, 2003). And the inverted cross symbol is simultaneously a pro-Christian, anti-Christian, and anti-authoritarian symbol, symbolising the crucifixion of St Peter on an upside down cross, but also used by rock music, and horror films, such as *The Omen* (1976).

In particular, the illocutionary force of a symbol can change. The first known representation of the Crucifixion – a piece of 2nd century Roman graffiti depicting a man worshipping a crucified donkey – was a satire. The Crucifix symbol was here denoting the death of Jesus, but was put forth in the form of an *insult* towards growing Christianity (Viladesau, 1995: 46-47). Now, the Crucifix symbol is generally taken to *glorify* Christ and *celebrate* Christian faith, though has since been used by artists with different illocutionary forces such as *protest*.¹⁹ As Nelson Goodman writes of symbols:

¹⁹ For instance, the artist Chris Burden crucified himself to a Volkswagen in 1974, and Robert Cenedella in 1997 painted a crucified Father Christmas, protesting against the commercialisation of Christmas.

...what we read from and learn through a symbol varies with what we bring to it. Not only do we discover the world through our symbols but we understand and reappraise our symbols progressively in the light of our growing experience (1968: 260).

The above observations about visual symbols and their meanings help explain how the symbols in the *Isenheim Altarpiece* developed in both content and force. I'll focus on two such symbols.

First, recall the image of the Lamented Christ in the altarpiece's *predella*, with a visible panel split just below his knees (a semi-conventional symbol).²⁰ In the 16th century hospital, this symbol in the *predella* denoted the loss of limbs in the amputation procedures on diseased patients. Christ himself appears represented as a diseased amputee, perhaps comprising an assertion that Christ bears the patients' pain, echoing the theological identification of Christ with the diseased patients. But in the new, contemporary context of utterance in Munich, people who visited the altarpiece or read about it, encountered the piece against the backdrop of the political events of the time, and knowledge about the soldiers' experience at the Front. Because of this, this Christ symbol in the *predella* came to stand for the loss of the *German soldiers' limbs in trench warfare*.²¹ There, Christ was identified with the wounded soldier: "like a mirror to the wounds inflicted in the trenches" (Hayum, 95). The symbol was now asserting a connection specifically between Christ and the horrific effects of WWI trench warfare, something it couldn't have done in the 16th century.²²

Second, consider the Crucifix symbol in the main panel of the altarpiece, depicting an emaciated Jesus on the cross (also a semi-conventional symbol).²³ In the 16th century hospital, this symbol stood for Christ bearing the *patients' pain*, but in the Munich exhibition, the symbol came to stand for Christ bearing the pain of *Germany and its soldiers*. There, the symbol was a promise of *a better society*, it glorified the '*German spirit*' and

²⁰ This is because it requires prior knowledge about the conventional use of Jesus to represent the suffering of humanity, but it's not entirely conventional for the relation between it and its object is not arbitrary: there is a natural relation or resemblance between the painted symbol's denotation and its depicted object, Christ.

²¹ To continue our non-commitment to certain depiction theories, we can say that while denotations of visual symbols can shift, their depicta can remain the same. In our case, the visual Christ symbol in the *predella* when displayed in Munich still depicted Christ's dead body, but what it *denoted* had now altered.

²² This blocks a standard Originalist response, namely, that a work's *apparent* new meaning was actually there all along in the work, and subsequent events just enabled it to be revealed to us (see Levinson (1990: 181, 187, 203) and Davies (2006b: 97)). The *Isenheim Altarpiece* in the 16th century could not have originally been about WWI all along.

²³ This may be a case where the depiction and denotation relations coincide in their extensions: the Crucifix symbol on one level depicts the death of Jesus Christ, but it might also constitute a conventional symbol for his death, thereby also denoting this significant event.

functioned as a protection against *the post-war starvation and poverty of Germany*. Moreover, the symbol appeared to gain new types of illocutionary force altogether: perhaps it was then being used to *criticise* the Allies' role in the Treaty of Versailles, an illocutionary force that was not evident in the altarpiece in the 16th century.

It's plausible that in the Munich exhibition at least these two symbols in the altarpiece retained each of their meanings, both original and new, thus becoming 'aggregate symbols' with a collection of meanings. That is, each symbol accumulated in meaning across time, rather than the new meaning entirely replacing the original one. Given that visual symbols in general can do this, there's no reason why those specifically in the altarpiece didn't do so.

My argument that artworks can accumulate in meaning across time, and so alter in meaning, can thus be stated:

- (1) Visual symbols can accumulate in meaning across time
- (2) An artwork's meaning is partly informed by the meaning of its visual symbols
- (C) Artworks can accumulate in meaning across time.

The *Isenheim Altarpiece* is an instance of the above argument. The altarpiece's symbols related in new ways to the parameters provided by the contemporary context of utterance. Given that the altarpiece is comprised of such symbols, and given that these symbols manifested in new shallow and deep messages in Munich, it seems reasonable to claim that the work as a whole thus altered in meaning in the Munich exhibition.

The Originalist will likely be uncomfortable with the notion that symbols as part of a painting can change in meaning. Given that they think artworks as a whole cannot change in meaning, they will equally push back that a work's symbolic *parts* cannot change either.

However, my argument has specifically concerned such symbolic parts of an artwork. As I've shown, symbols in general have an adaptive behaviour, displaying an ability to change in meaning. They can do this when placed in contexts of utterances: when symbols are placed in new contexts of utterances, they can gain new denotations. This much is uncontroversial. I then showed that the Munich exhibition of the altarpiece constituted a contemporary context of utterance. The symbols *as they appear in the altarpiece* were then able to gain new denotations. This is evidenced by the public's informed interpretation of these particular symbols, and by the general behaviour of symbols when placed in a public context.

The burden of proof is thus on the Originalist to argue that a work's symbolic parts are not sensitive to new contexts. But this looks like a large burden: given that symbols in general are sensitive in this way, and given that the Originalist will concede that a work's particular symbols are sensitive to the work's *original context* (indeed, they'd need to be to gain meanings in the first place), the Originalist will be hard pressed to deny that these same symbols in the altarpiece are not sensitive to new contexts as well.

In sum, the altarpiece was commissioned specifically with the Order's patients in mind. When placed in a new context of utterance – the Munich exhibition during post-war Germany – the work's general messages about pain and redemption remained largely the same. And the painting still depicted the dead body of Jesus, as well as other biblical people and objects. But, the specific messages (or contents), and the forces with which they were expressed, had accumulated. Now not just about Saint Anthony's Fire, the altarpiece expressed deep messages about trench warfare, about Christ bearing the suffering of the German soldiers and post-WWI Germany, and about the healing of WWI psychological and physical trauma. This poses a serious problem for Originalism, for it falsifies their ORIGINALIST CLAIM: artwork meaning can alter over time, and so the Constructivist's ALTER CLAIM is true.

5. Originalist response: significance shift, not meaning shift

Some Originalists have anticipated the kind of counterexample I've given. For instance, according to Stecker, we might think that *Hamlet* means something different to us now than it did for its original audience, maybe because we use different concepts to those of the Elizabethans (2003: 124). However, Stecker explains away this supposed change in meaning as a mere case of change in significance, and meaning is distinct from significance:

...it is inevitable that *Hamlet* has a different *significance* for each of us today than for Shakespeare's contemporaries, but from this it does not follow that its *meaning* has changed (Stecker, 125, my emphasis).

So, while an artwork's meaning does not change throughout time, its "significance can alter markedly" (Davies, 2006b: 124).

How should we understand this distinction between meaning and significance? According to Originalists, ‘significance’ is understood as the idiosyncratic and precarious content something has for someone; and with art, a “way a work is taken” by a certain audience (Stecker, 60). The significance of an artwork, as opposed to its meaning, can be defined as a kind of function:

...that takes as arguments any given artwork with its determinate art-content and any object or situation outside the cultural and temporal context that determines that content, and gives as a value the salient similarities, echoes, or parallelisms discernable between the given work and the external matter with which it is brought into comparative relation (Levinson, 1990: 190).

So, the significance of an artwork is a relation between its already existing meaning, and the viewer. For example, when looking at van Gogh’s painting *The Yellow House* (1888), it might remind you of your grandmother’s house. The painting can have this significance for you, but it doesn’t follow that the painting is about your grandmother’s house: it doesn’t refer to or say anything about your grandmother’s house.

Artwork *meaning* on the other hand is determinate, objective, and public. It is not a way a work is merely taken subjectively by a viewer, but is secured by the work’s publicly manifest “semantic, symbolic, or other properties”, and objective, public features of the context in which the artwork is created (Davies, 2006b: 125). For example, *The Yellow House* is about the house, or represents the house, that van Gogh worked and lived in at the time when his mental health was deteriorating, and where he severed his ear. The meanings expressed by the painting will thus relate to these facts, and not to the whimsical thought of your grandmother.

Originalists see interpreting artwork meaning not as “the pursuit...of shadowy, private ephemera, but of meanings successfully carried though to, and revealed in, the public action” (Davies, 1996: 25). They see the artwork as a public object with a meaning that is determinable, and not one that is private, idiosyncratic or subjective. Artwork meaning is not equivalent to the significances it elicits.

Originalists can apply this distinction to try explain away the *Isenheim Altarpiece* case. When the altarpiece was exhibited in Munich, it developed a new significance, not a new meaning. Given their experiences at the Front, the soldiers read into the altarpiece references to the horrors of trench warfare. But it does not follow that the work expressed this new

German WWI-related meaning; the work is about Saint Anthony's Fire, and not about WWI German trench warfare, or the 'German spirit'. Rather, the exhibition at Munich prompted an idiosyncratic way of regarding or taking the work: the soldiers' reactions to the altarpiece – when they considered the relation between its meanings and *them* – were just different to the reactions of the 16th century patients.

So the *Isenheim Altarpiece* isn't really a counterexample to the Originalist's ORIGINALIST CLAIM. Originalism can supposedly accommodate it by claiming that what shifted was the altarpiece's significance, and significance is not the same as meaning. Any counterexamples like the one I've offered can be explained by those works' significance shifting, but their meanings remaining fixed by their original context. Call this the Originalist's SIGNIFICANCE REBUTTAL.

6. *Against the Originalist's SIGNIFICANCE REBUTTAL*

Recall that the distinction between significance and meaning roughly reduces to the distinction between a subjective way of taking something, and an objective, public, and determinable expressed content.

But, my argument deals with *symbolic meaning* as opposed to mere significance: the *Isenheim Altarpiece* altered in meaning because its symbols altered in meaning. And symbols, when shown in a context of utterance, express objective, public, and determinable content, i.e. *meaning*. While there is a link between meaning in general and significance, symbolic meaning cannot be reduced to subjective whimsical reactions. Symbols are independent of "subjective fancy" either because of their recognised underlying convention, or because of their natural relations to their referents or denotations, both of which are objective and public amongst a considerable body of people in a society (Hospers, 49). In other words, it's not a matter of idiosyncratic whim that public symbols refer to or denote the objects they do, and that they have certain illocutionary forces, i.e. it's not a matter of significance. As Hospers notes:

...there are subjective overtones of meaning, but we generally refer to these differently: we say "the word 'snake' means (*symbolises*, represents)...a biological species, but to me it expresses (not *symbolises*) everything that is horrible" (1946: 49, my emphasis).

According to their own lights, Originalists should treat the *Isenheim Altarpiece* case as a change in artwork meaning and not a change in mere significance, for I am treating meaning and significance just as they do. Originalists argue that the pursuit of artwork meaning is “not of shadowy, private ephemera, but of meanings successfully carried though to, and revealed in, the *public* action” (Davies, 1996: 25, my emphasis). Moreover, Originalists hold that artwork meaning is possessed “in virtue of [the work’s] semantic, *symbolic*, or other properties” (Davies, 2006b: 125, my emphasis), and is not something private, subjective, or idiosyncratic (Davies, 1996: 25).

The case of the altarpiece in Munich is certainly not an example of a painting eliciting just “shadowy, private ephemera”: it was not just taken in a private and idiosyncratic way by its viewers. Rather, the work’s messages about Germany and trench warfare were determinate and objective because they were expressed by the altarpiece’s symbols in a contemporary context of utterance. This is thus an example of an artwork expressing meanings which were “successfully carried though to, and revealed in, the public action”. There in Munich, the meanings of the altarpiece’s symbols were not reduced to whimsical reactions but remained conventional, semi-conventional, or natural. There, the altarpiece “bore witness to the suffering of Germany’s people” (Stieglitz, 93), which was something public, shared, and objective i.e. it was a case of *meaning*.

The piece as a whole, then, was able to acquire a new meaning at the Munich exhibition, and not merely a new significance. The Originalist’s claim that the altarpiece just changed in significance therefore does not capture the public and objective nature of my case study. The Originalist’s SIGNIFICANCE REBUTTAL fails.

7. A faithful Constructivism

Recall the **Origin Principle** and the **Interpretation Principle**: an artwork’s identity and meaning is informed by its original historical parameters, and when interpreting artwork meaning we should analyse this historically informed object.

My argument in this chapter has involved interpreting an artwork – the *Isenheim Altarpiece* – using events that couldn’t have been known by Grünewald and the artwork’s 16th century audience, i.e. WWI and its effects on Germany. Moreover, I draw on analogies

with language, specifically, context-sensitive terms. Since these change in meaning across contexts, I argue, so too do visual symbols.

But visual symbols and linguistic expressions are considered as types, tokened in certain situations or utterances to express meanings. Consequently, the Originalist might object that I'm treating the altarpiece not as a historically informed object (i.e. as an artwork) but as a mere collection of its formal elements, or symbols, on wooden panels. Given that artworks are not reducible to their material parts, i.e. their visual or textual forms, the Originalist could object that I am not interpreting the *Isenheim Altarpiece* qua artwork at all, but merely its material parts as applied to a new context. Consequently, I have not shown that the *Isenheim Altarpiece* changed in meaning when it was displayed in Munich. Rather, I've merely shown that its visual forms gained a new meaning, which is not what is disputed between Originalists and Constructivists. The dispute is rather over whether one and the same *artwork* can develop in meaning. So it looks like I'm not abiding by the **Origin Principle** or **Interpretation Principle**: I've fallen afoul of the problematic New Critic approach that typically comes hand in hand with a Constructivist position; an approach that we wanted to dispense with.

However, the Constructivist need not be forced down this thorny path: we can be Constructivist and still abide by the **Origin Principle** and **Interpretation Principle**. Recall that visual symbols can accumulate in meaning. Rather than a new meaning entirely replacing the original one, both meanings can coexist for a single symbol. In the *Isenheim Altarpiece* we saw at least two of its symbols gather a new meaning when shown in a contemporary context of utterance, accruing on top of the original Saint Anthony's Fire-related meaning. When a visual symbol gathers new meanings throughout time, a chain of meanings, or a 'history of meaning' is established for the symbol. Given that an artwork's meaning is partly informed by the meanings of its visual symbols, so too, then, can artworks possess a history of meaning.

So how can the very same artwork alter in meaning, and thus have an evolving identity? The key is in the accumulation picture of Constructivism, where artworks can have growing histories. I've argued that artworks have a history of meaning. And because the new meanings through time accumulate *on top of* the work's original meaning, this history of meaning begins, and is 'rooted', in a work's original context of utterance: the work's original meaning forms a ROOT. All the different ways a work is displayed in contexts subsequent to its originating context can contribute to this history of meaning, which is anchored to the original meaning, the ROOT. For instance, consider Figure. 13 which shows a chain of

contexts of utterance taking place at locations $L=\{l_1,\dots,l_m\}$ and times $T=\{t_1,\dots,t_n\}$ for the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, where ‘ a ’ refers to one of the altarpiece’s symbols, namely, its Christ symbol in the *predella*, and ‘ $*$ ’ is affixed to the ROOT meaning:

$\langle l_m, t_n \rangle$	<i>Subsequent</i> (contemporary)	a denotes: + $\mathbf{C}(\langle l_m, t_n \rangle)$ + WWI trench warfare, and the soldiers/people <u>*Saint Anthony’s Fire and the hospital patients</u>
$\langle l_2 = \text{Munich}, t_2 = 20^{\text{th}} \text{ century} \rangle$	<i>Subsequent</i> (contemporary)	a denotes: + WWI trench warfare, and the soldiers/people <u>*Saint Anthony’s Fire and the hospital patients</u>
$\langle l_1 = \text{Monastery of St. Anthony}, t_1 = 16^{\text{th}} \text{ century} \rangle$	<i>Original</i>	a denotes: <u>*Saint Anthony’s Fire and the hospital patients</u>
Location and time	Context type	Symbol a in the <i>Isenheim Altarpiece</i>

Figure. 13

where the location-time pair $\langle l_m, t_n \rangle$ refers to any context of utterance at a time subsequent to t_2 , and where \mathbf{C} is a function from a location-time pair to the salient and artistically relevant parameters of that context of utterance. For instance, the *Isenheim Altarpiece* could today be exhibited amongst the rubble in Aleppo after the ancient city was extensively damaged by the intense bombardment by the Syrian government in 2016. Just like the exhibition in Munich, if a public contemporary context of utterance were established via wider contextual parameters, perhaps including curation, then the altarpiece’s symbols, and thus the piece as a whole, could alter in meaning by denoting the catastrophic 2016 bombings.

Given that the ROOT of an artwork is what makes that artwork the same artwork across time (given the **Origin Principle**), the *Isenheim Altarpiece* remains the same work as it persists through time, even though its meaning changes, because it remains fixed to this ROOT. New meanings can be added on top of this meaning, altering its identity, whilst it remains the very same work across time. This makes sense of statements like:

[Uttered in 1518] “The *Isenheim Altarpiece* is about Saint Anthony’s Fire”

[Uttered in 1918] “The *Isenheim Altarpiece* is about Saint Anthony’s Fire **and** post-war Germany”

[Uttered in 2018] “The *Isenheim Altarpiece* is about Saint Anthony’s Fire **and** post-war Germany **and** the 2016 Aleppo bombings”.²⁴

²⁴ Given certain conditions, of course.

Here, the object of interpretation remains the very same artwork across contexts as it accrues in meaning. Only if the *Isenheim Altarpiece* continues to be about Saint Anthony's Fire in the 16th century through time will it remain *that* artwork.

But is it even possible for the *Isenheim Altarpiece* to cease being about Saint Anthony's Fire? Unless this ROOT is kept 'alive,' perhaps by historians and curators referring to and referencing the original context and original meaning, this ROOT could be lost if every living person forgot the *Isenheim Altarpiece*'s original meaning. Would this entail that the work would actually lose its original meaning and cease to be that artwork? Or would the altarpiece still be about Saint Anthony's Fire even if no one knew?

This presents a choice-point, and one that I won't take here, but I will sketch it out for interest. If the altarpiece's original meaning was 'lost' in the epistemic sense of the word, then there are two possibilities: (i) either the work would still possess this original meaning nonetheless, and so remain the very same artwork, or (ii) it would actually lose its original meaning and so cease to be that artwork. The less radical option (i) would make use of the notion that aboutness facts can still hold of something even if that something no longer exists (a poem about my grandfather is still about my grandfather even though he died years ago). Similarly, an artwork cannot be metaphysically 'uprooted' just because we don't know what it originally meant. The more radical option (ii) would rely on the notion that the epistemic qualities of something can determine its metaphysical qualities: given that artworks are objects of communication, an artwork's meaning depends somewhat on people actually knowing and understanding this meaning. As I said, this forms a choice-point but one I won't take here.

It should be noted that my Constructivism invokes a particular kind of ontology of art, one which is normally used to explain the persistence through change of the identity of living creatures like trees and people. Even though living things change over time, they retain their identity: "An oak tree can be one and the same as a past acorn with which it shares few properties. A given person can, at different times, be young and blond and old and bald" (Davies, 2006b: 95).²⁵ An upshot of my view is that artworks should be treated like this as well.²⁶

²⁵ Davies argues that artworks are not like this, *because* their meanings don't alter across time (2006b: 95-97). Given that I've argued that artwork meaning *can* alter across time, then, suggests that this kind of ontology is indeed appropriate for artworks, as well as for living things.

²⁶ See Newman et al (2014) for recent studies that show that "in terms of judgments about identity continuity...there are important ways in which judgments about ART appear to be more similar to judgments

Originalists accuse Constructivists of succumbing to the ‘the myth of the living artwork’. But this metaphor can be used to the Constructivist’s advantage. Just like vegetation grows from its root, and develops and matures over time, artworks grow from their originating context of utterance. What makes the *Isenheim Altarpiece* the same artwork in the 16th century and in the 20th century (and subsequent centuries), rather than a collection of colours and shapes on wooden panels, then, is the piece’s own particular chain of meaning; its own history of accumulating content, anchored to its ROOT which began in a 16th century monastery.

My argument in this chapter therefore remains faithful to the **Origin Principle** and **Interpretation Principle**, and does not reduce an artwork to its visual formal elements. To argue that an artwork can develop in meaning does not entail that the artwork itself is lost, as long as we acknowledge an artwork’s own unique history of meaning and ROOT as its identifying character. The myth of the living artwork, then, is no myth: artworks are organic and reactive objects. Of course, I haven’t devoted anywhere near enough time to the potential mileage of this particular ontology of art that my argument incurs; exactly what specific ontology should be invoked here requires further investigation.²⁷

8. Conclusion

I have argued that the ORIGINALIST CLAIM – that artwork meaning is fixed to its original context and cannot change – is false. Given that this is the defining claim of Originalism, Originalism is therefore false. Using the *Isenheim Altarpiece* as a case study, I tried to show that the Originalist’s SIGNIFICANCE REBUTTAL – that what is shifting in the altarpiece is not its meaning but its significance – fails. If a contemporary context of utterance is established, a work’s representative content, in this case its symbols, can gain new meanings. When this happens, the work as a whole then expresses new meanings in this new context. The Constructivist’s ALTER CLAIM is true. Given that artworks *can* change in meaning over time, then, the curator is thus not ruled out as playing a central role in generating, and developing, artwork meaning.

about PERSONS (in their reliance on sameness of substance) than judgments about other kinds of artifacts” (2014: 658).

²⁷ For instance, whether artworks persist through time by ‘enduring’ or ‘perduring’. For more on this see Hawley (2015).

Given that Originalism forms the assumed backdrop for the Intentionalist Debate in aesthetics, this chapter is thus a call that we take more seriously a Constructivist view, but one that remains faithful to the **Origin Principle** and **Interpretation Principle**. An artwork does receive its identity and meaning in the context in which it is created, but that same artwork can mature, or alter, in meaning through time. This explains how old and revered artworks like the *Isenheim Altarpiece* can maintain relevance and power over time, and continue to speak to us in new and dynamic ways.

My Constructivist position is therefore Anti-Originalist – it is *not* the case that the facts that determine the meaning of an artwork are exhausted by the (relevant) facts about the work's original context – but it still gives an artwork's original context theoretical importance in determining work meaning. Consequently, my position rules out most if not all of the main players in the Intentionalist Debate: Actual Intentionalism, Hypothetical Intentionalism, and Conventionalism, are all ruled out, for these are all Originalist positions. But, my position also rules out the existing Anti-Originalist Anti-intentionalist approach – that of the New Critic – because my approach still gives a work's original context theoretical importance in determining artwork meaning.

This thus carves out new space in the debate: we should acknowledge an Anti-Originalist two-dimensional theory of artwork meaning that captures the importance of a work's original context, but also allows a work to accumulate in meaning by being influenced by *non*-original contexts. Traditionally, to be Anti-Originalist was to be a New Critic. But it's possible that there are also at least Anti-Originalist variants of Actual Intentionalism and Hypothetical Intentionalism, which draw on non-original contexts, including the role of the curator. These two expanded intentionalist positions would ideally capture the importance of the original context to artwork meaning, but also capture the flexibility of artwork meaning in new, non-original contexts. This is of course only a starting point, but I think one that merits further investigation.



Figure. 12

Conclusion

1. Artworks as shifting speech acts

This thesis has made two main arguments. First, it argues that artworks are speech acts: given certain conditions, artworks possess illocutionary force and propositional content. This explains how artworks can ‘speak’ to us without using words – the puzzle with which we began this thesis.

As we saw in Chapter 1, artworks can perform illocutionary acts due to their use of established and conventional methods of depiction and expression within their formal elements, and due to uptake being secured in the viewer. This makes sense of the claims that Picasso’s *Guernica* is a “generic plea against the barbarity and terror of war”, and “a bold visual protest” forming a “powerful anti-war statement,” since according to my adapted speech act theory, the artwork performs the illocutionary acts of pleading, protesting, and stating. And as we saw in Chapter 3, artworks possess propositional content. I offered a theory of how artworks express shallow and deep propositions, where a work communicates to its viewer types of basic or more complex ‘cognitive actions’. On this view, *Guernica* can ‘say’ true things about the nature of war because the painting expresses propositions about war, which bear truth-values.

Second, this thesis argues that what artworks say and do is sensitive to the curated context in which they sit. As we saw in Chapter 2, artworks can tell shallow or deep lies, but only under special conditions. Titian’s *Rape of Europa* can only lie about the nature of rape if it is knowingly curated in a special way, and if Titian or the curator believes that what the painting says is false. As I explained, lies in art are thus more difficult to come by than perhaps first thought. And we saw in Chapter 4 that one way that artworks can express deeper meanings is by using the mechanism (or function) of a metaphoric relation, a mechanism which is dependent on the context in which the artwork is displayed. What a work is a metaphor for is informed by contextual parameters surrounding the work, such as the work’s curation and the work’s history. And lastly, we saw in Chapter 5 that artworks can accumulate or alter in meaning over time, by responding to new events. For example,

Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* possessed a different force and content in a desolate post-war Germany in the early 20th century than it did in the Monastery of St Anthony in the 16th century. This particular Constructivist view invokes a specific ontology of artworks, treating them as objects with the disposition to have growing histories, beginning with their original meaning, or 'ROOT.'

I have intentionally developed all of these arguments and accounts with a *neutral* backdrop of what depiction consists of (resemblance-based, conventional, or psychological), whilst noting that my proposition theory of art specifically may invoke a broadly psychological account of depiction; though I don't intend this thesis to be an argument for such an approach to depiction.

So artworks not only speak to us, but also are sensitive to their surroundings and new events that unfold around them. Old works can gain new import and gravitas, helping us make sense of contemporary trials and tribulations, while maintaining their own origins and histories with depth of meaning.

The key figure facilitating this reactivity to contemporary situations, I argued, is the curator. Drawing on the curator's growing visibility and power in the artworld, I argued that the curator is a central force in creating artworld situations which specifically (i) facilitate the performance of illocutionary acts by artworks, (ii) control whether artworks can lie and, if so, at what different levels, (iii) generate target domains that compose artistic metaphors, and (iv) help establish new contexts of utterance in which a work's visual symbols can gain new denotations, thereby developing the artwork's contents and illocutionary forces.

Together, these arguments comprise my overall Anti-Originalist thesis that artwork meaning is *active*, and *flexible*. Artwork meaning is active because artworks can possess illocutionary force: they can *do* things. And artwork meaning is flexible because it's sensitive to the curative and wider social context in which the work is displayed, and so the work can develop in meaning over time. This is an Anti-Originalist thesis because it denies the Originalist claim: it's *not* the case that the facts that determine the meaning of an artwork are exhausted by the (relevant) facts about the work's original context. The (relevant) facts about the work's original context do indeed play a role in determining the overall meaning of an artwork, but the flexible nature of artwork meaning is influenced by factors *outside* the work's original context, specifically, the curative and wider contemporary social context. So, (relevant) facts from *non*-original contexts can influence the meaning of an artwork as well. This forms a two-dimensional picture of artwork meaning that captures the importance

of a work's original context, but also allows a work to accumulate in meaning by being influenced by events subsequent to the work's original setting.

2. Upshots and future work in the philosophy of art

If the central arguments of the thesis outlined above are correct, then the thesis has broad consequences for the philosophy of art. I will conclude by sketching these out, and I will gesture to what I take to be promising directions for future research in these topics.

2.1. The Intentionalist Debate and the '-isms'

Recall that the Intentionalist Debate can be divided into two camps: Originalist and Anti-Originalist. Traditionally, Actual Intentionalism, Hypothetical Intentionalism, and Conventionalism (an Anti-intentionalist position) fall within the Originalist camp. And the New Criticism method of interpretation (also an Anti-intentionalist position) falls within the Anti-Originalist camp.

While the thesis is not directly about the Intentionalist Debate, through the lens of this debate the thesis can be seen as dividing into two halves. First, what I say in each chapter has some upshots for the existing positions in the debate. Second, my thesis creates space for novel Anti-Originalist positions. I'll take each of these halves in turn.

First, let us consider some general upshots. Chapter 1, which argues that artworks can perform illocutionary acts, is neutral on the Intentionalist Debate. The specific role that intention plays in a work's performance of illocutionary acts was left open. But I argued for a derivative picture, and one that uses a 'distant speaker', considering three treatments of the role of intention by drawing on Actual Intentionalist, Hypothetical Intentionalist, and broadly Anti-intentionalist (both Originalist and Anti-Originalist) pictures of artwork meaning, noting some consequences along the way.

However, given my argument in Chapter 2 that artworks can in fact lie (though with difficulty) this is problematic for Anti-intentionalist positions, both Originalist and Anti-Originalist. For if reference to the intentions and beliefs behind a work is excluded in theorising about artwork meaning, then artworks, under this Anti-intentionalist framework, consequently *cannot lie*, for lying involves having beliefs, which artworks cannot possess themselves. Furthermore, Anti-intentionalists cannot avail themselves of this troublesome

result by admitting reference to the curator's intentions, rather than the artist's, in determining whether an artwork lies. For to do so might risk collapsing into a type of intentionalism.

Chapter 3, which argues that artworks have propositional content, suggests a proposition theory of art with a Soamesian twist, whereby artworks communicate to their viewers types of 'cognitive actions.' This chapter as it stands is neutral on the Intentionalist Debate, though I sketched how it would fit within at least Actual Intentionalist and Hypothetical Intentionalist pictures of meaning. However, given that the Soamesian proposition theory of art offered invokes the notion of a cognitive act performed by an agent (or agents), suggests that it might be incompatible with Anti-intentionalist theories of artwork meaning, both Originalist and Anti-Originalist. More needs to be done though to investigate this possible incompatibility.

Chapter 4, which argues that artworks can express deep meanings via their use of ARTISTIC METAPHOR, is incompatible with all of the Originalist positions: Actual Intentionalism, Hypothetical Intentionalism, and Conventionalism. This is because my account of ARTISTIC METAPHOR is an Anti-Originalist position: it allows curation to provide new target domains, and so leaves open the possibility that the curator draw on facts from contemporary, *non*-original contexts that depart from the context in which the work was created. Allowing this possibility thereby permits non-original contexts and new events to potentially affect the meaning of the artwork in question, and in this case, affect what metaphors might be expressed by the work. Moreover, ARTISTIC METAPHOR is also incompatible with the New Critic's Anti-Originalist position, because my account also allows the work's history, i.e. facts about the historical setting in which it was created, to provide target domains, thereby allowing the work's original context to affect the overall meaning of the artwork.

And Chapter 5, which argues against Originalism and for a particular Constructivist position, thereby rules out all of the Originalist positions: Actual Intentionalism, Hypothetical Intentionalism, and Conventionalism. But it also rules out the existing Anti-Originalist Anti-intentionalist approach – that of the New Critic – because my particular Constructivist approach still gives a work's original context theoretical importance in determining artwork meaning.

The second consequence my thesis has for the Intentionalist Debate is that it creates space for novel Anti-Originalist positions. Specifically, the above results of each chapter begin to carve out new possible positions in the Intentionalist Debate: Anti-Originalist two-

dimensional positions that capture the importance of a work's original context, but also allow a work to accumulate in meaning by being influenced by *non*-original curated contexts. I'll now outline how Chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5 reveal these novel positions.

Chapter 1 can be seen as raising a problem for both Actual Intentionalism and Hypothetical Intentionalism, in that both positions look too restrictive on *whom* the 'distant speaker' in art is. According to a Hypothetical Intentionalist treatment of illocutionary performance in art, the person about whose intentions we are to hypothesise is the artist, and the artist only. And according to Actual Intentionalists, the person whose intentions are determiners of meaning are the artist's and the artist's only. But it looks like artworks can perform illocutionary acts derivatively on the intentions or beliefs of people other than the artist, perhaps the curator, which could be a single person or a collective entity. In relation to speech act performance, then, we should therefore acknowledge an expanded type of at least Actual Intentionalism or Hypothetical Intentionalism, but one that does not concern just the artist. We can bring in the curator too. On this kind of picture, the artwork might perform illocutionary acts derivatively on the artist's or curator's actual intentions, or derivatively on an ideal audience's hypotheses about the artist's or curator's intentions.

Similarly in Chapter 2, whether an artwork lies was argued to partly depend on the artist's or curator's beliefs about what the artwork says. We should again therefore recognise an expanded type of Actual Intentionalism or Hypothetical Intentionalism, that does not include just the artist's beliefs and intentions when theorising about whether a work lies. We can bring in the curator too. On this kind of picture, the artwork might lie derivatively on the artist's or curator's actual beliefs, or derivatively on an ideal audience's hypotheses about the artist's or curator's beliefs.

In Chapter 4, the source and target domain fusion process within my ARTISTIC METAPHOR account was suggested to fit within a *partial* Hypothetical Intentionalist framework. This involves the audience detecting a metaphorical fusion by either hypothesising what the artist might have intended, via the work's history, or hypothesising what the curator might have intended, given the show's curatorial narrative and concepts. I suggested a partial *Hypothetical* Intentionalist approach because an Actual Intentionalist approach is incompatible with my metaphor account: target domains not envisaged by the artist may be provided, so my account treats the artist's *actual* intentions as redundant. It is not necessary that the artist intend their work to be metaphorical for the work to be metaphorical, nor does what a metaphor convey depend on what the artist actually intended. So, a partial Hypothetical Intentionalist approach was suggested instead, whereby target

domains can be provided as a result of our hypotheses about what the artist or curator may have intended for the artwork.

And lastly in Chapter 5, the Constructivist position argued for is Anti-Originalist but it still gives an artwork's original context theoretical importance in determining work meaning. This therefore requires an Anti-Originalist two-dimensional theory of artwork meaning that captures the importance of a work's original context, but also allows a work to accumulate in meaning by being influenced by *non*-original contexts.

Tradition would have you believe that the only Anti-Originalist position is that of the New Critic. But like most things in the artworld, tradition must give way to progressive modernity. My thesis exposes some novel Anti-Originalist positions that haven't yet been noticed. In sum, we should acknowledge Anti-Originalist variants of Actual Intentionalism and Hypothetical Intentionalism that draw on non-original contexts, including the role of the curator. These two new expanded intentionalist positions would ideally capture the importance of the original context to artwork meaning, but also capture the flexibility of artwork meaning in new, non-original contexts. I will briefly sketch out what these positions might look like.

Under an *expanded Actual Intentionalism*, the artist's successfully realised actual intentions or the curator's successfully realised actual intentions in later contexts, determine artwork meaning. This position would accommodate the performance of illocutionary acts (including the act of lying) by artworks because it's still a broadly intentionalist position. It would also fit neatly with my accumulation version of Constructivism because it assigns roles to both the original context via the artist's actual intentions, and to non-original contexts via the curator's actual intentions. However, as explained above, it likely would not fit neatly with my ARTISTIC METAPHOR account of metaphor in art.

Under an *expanded Hypothetical Intentionalism*, artwork meaning is determined by a suitable audience's hypotheses about what the artist meant by the work or hypotheses about what the curator meant in using the work in later contexts. This position also would accommodate the performance of illocutionary acts (including lying) by artworks because it's still a broadly intentionalist position. It would also fit neatly with the accumulation version of Constructivism, because it assigns roles to both the original context via hypotheses about the artist's intentions, and to non-original contexts via hypotheses about the curator's intentions.

Moreover, in contrast to an augmented Actual Intentionalism, an augmented Hypothetical Intentionalism looks compatible with my ARTISTIC METAPHOR account of

metaphor in art, for it does not treat as necessary what the artist or curator *actually* had in mind when determining any metaphors in the artwork. Rather, metaphors in art can be generated by target domains being offered by the work's history or curation in new contexts. The former involves an ideal audience hypothesising about the artist and the context in which she created the work, and the latter involves the audience hypothesising about what the curator had in mind for the work. The *actual* intentions of neither the artist nor curator determine meaning, only suitably ascribed intentions do.

The central two arguments of this thesis have been that artworks are *active* and *flexible* in meaning, and the thesis is by no means a comprehensive argument for an expanded Actual Intentionalism or expanded Hypothetical Intentionalism. Nor does it comprise a solid knockdown objection to all of the existing positions in the Intentionalist Debate. However, the results from the thesis do cast doubt on some of the existing positions in the Intentionalist Debate, and suggest schemas for the augmented intentionalist positions. I have offered a rough picture of what these two positions would look like. If the arguments of this thesis are correct, then the philosophy of art needs to remedy its neglect of the curator in theorising about artwork meaning. This is only a starting point, but I think one that forms a promising direction for future research into the meaning of art.

2.2. *Upshots for art and morality*

This thesis has been about how artworks say and do things. But the ability of expression and action comes with duties of responsibility. It is now documented that some speech acts can harm individuals and social groups.¹ Indeed, the UN considers hate speech to be a type of verbal assault – the words used can constitute direct attacks on people – as well as inciting hatred and violence towards certain groups.² Given, as I've argued, that artworks are speech acts, questions are raised about the types of social harm that some artworks might therefore constitute or cause. There's a possibility that some artworks can harm individuals and social groups in the way that hate speech does. We should therefore consider the possibility that artworks might harm not only by saying immoral things, but also by constituting problematic

¹ For example, see Langton (1993; 2016) and Waldron (2012).

² For an example of this, see 'Tackle tabloid 'hate speech', UN commissioner urges UK' *BBC News* (2015).

actions such as subordination.³ And given, as I've argued, that artworks can lie, the question of how art can harm through deception is also raised.

Furthermore, by rejecting the long-standing dogma of treating the artist as the focal point in theorising about artwork meaning, this thesis raises questions about the moral responsibility of curators, as well as that of artists. If what I have said about the role of the curator in determining artwork meaning is true, then this will have profound significance for issues relating to the ethics of both art-making and exhibition-making. For instance, the 'Aryan' artworks in the 'Great German Exhibition' (1937) told lies or at least falsehoods about Aryan race superiority, which likely perpetuated racial inequality. But were the artists responsible for this dangerous art, and its societal harm? Or did the responsibility entirely lie with Ziegler (and broadly the Nazi Party for which he was working), the curator(s)? If the curator indeed plays a role in the ways I've outlined in this thesis, then we need to be careful how we evaluate artists who have been co-opted by malignant ideologies.

Answers to these questions will help us better understand whether and in what ways we should censor artworks, an issue becoming increasingly relevant with the resurgence of populist and totalitarian politics and the problems of giving hate speech a platform. This thesis lays the foundation for these areas, and carves new directions, the moral dimensions of which are yet to be explored.

Theorising about artwork meaning has been predominantly an Originalist affair. My hope is that this thesis helps move future research into the meaning of art in an Anti-Originalist direction, a direction that highlights the role of the curator and exposes the real power that art possesses, in its dynamic content and force.

³ This would therefore provide support for proponents of the view that visual pornography constitutes the illocutionary act of subordination. For example, see Bianchi (2008), Langton (1993), and Saul (2006).

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