

The Abstractness of Artworks and its Implications for Aesthetics

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"Alice laughed: "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

What would it be like to belong to a profession whose members routinely believe many more than six impossible things before breakfast? Well, just look in the looking glass: the chances are that if you're reading this, you are already associated with the profession in question. Such are the implications of the argument to follow. We aestheticians, and our theories, are currently embroiled in allegiances to any number of impossible beliefs about the concreteness of artworks, which leave us in a theoretically untenable situation.

Here is an initial statement of the relevant argument, to be called the *modal abstractness* argument for artworks, or simply the *modal argument* for short. Artworks have at least

some necessary content properties, as do abstract entities such as propositions. But no concrete item, whether an object, event, process etc., could have any necessary content property. So no artwork--or artwork instance, for those who think that some artworks might be types--could be identical with a concrete item. Hence artworks must be abstract. Discussion now follows.¹

It has been little noticed that, to all appearances, artworks share a basic modal feature with abstract entities such as propositions or theories.² Just as the theory of relativity is necessarily about relativistic physical phenomena, and the proposition "Socrates is wise" is necessarily about Socrates, so also is the film *Citizen Kane* necessarily about the fictional character Kane, Beethoven's fifth symphony is necessarily about the characteristic musical contents of performances of that work, and Picasso's painting *Guernica* is necessarily about the town of Guernica. The relevant artworks could not be identified as such independently of their necessary intentional contents, any more than theories or propositions could be identified independently of their own characteristic necessary contents.

At the same time, in the case of theories and propositions it is universally held that concrete linguistic expressions of them are only contingently related to the relevant propositional and theoretical contents, because of the conventional nature of natural languages. Hence, apart from a few extreme nominalistic doctrines, there is little or no theoretical temptation to identify theories or propositions with concrete linguistic items, because of the clear contingency of their relations. As Kripke has taught us, genuine

identity relations must hold of necessity,³ so that abstract theories and propositions cannot be identified with concrete linguistic entities that are only contingently related to them. Hence the status of propositions and theories as abstract entities that are necessarily related to their contents is secure, with no threat of theoretical conflict via a putative identification of such abstracta with the concrete linguistic tokens that express them.

However, in the case of artworks, by contrast, it seems to be almost universally assumed that some artworks are indeed concrete entities, such as physical paintings or statues, and it is also widely assumed that the remainder of artworks are types that have concrete artistic tokens as their instances, such as particular book copies, or concrete musical performances. So in the case of artworks, it seems that we have a potential conflict. Though artworks seem initially to qualify as abstract entities having necessary contents, similarly to theories and propositions, it is also widely held that either they or their instances are all concrete objects or events. Thus in the case of artworks we have at least a theoretically anomalous, if not paradoxical situation: how should the apparent conflict between the abstract and concrete features of artworks be resolved?

The modal abstractness argument, as stated above, has the implication that the conflict cannot be resolved. Concrete items simply are not metaphysically the kind of thing that *could* have necessary content properties. To put the matter plainly, *it is metaphysically impossible for concrete items to have necessary content properties*, or, equivalently, *concrete items having any content properties must possess them only contingently--a*

principle to be henceforth identified, in either form, as the *content contingency principle* for concrete items. Hence, since artworks do have necessary content properties, it is metaphysically impossible for them (or their instances) to be identical with concrete items. It follows that artworks must, of metaphysical necessity, be abstract, content-like entities. The following sections will prove this contention, disarm contrary intuitions, and briefly draw out some implications for aesthetics. As might be expected, most of the discussion will be focused specifically on the *content contingency principle* as such, since I take it that no one would seriously dispute that artworks have necessary content properties. (It makes no sense to suppose, e.g., that Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* might have been about some other character than Hamlet).

I. THE TWO STAGE PROPOSITIONAL MODEL AS APPLIED TO ARTWORKS

Before proceeding further with discussion of the content contingency principle itself--namely, the principle that it is impossible for any concrete item to have a necessary content, or, equivalently, that any content must be possessed only contingently by a concrete item--a brief overview of the modal situation with respect to propositions and concrete linguistic sentence tokens that express them is in order. Sentence tokens provide a trivial supporting instance for the content contingency principle, in that it is obvious, in virtue of the conventionality of natural languages, that any contents that sentence tokens have are purely contingent rather than necessary. As for how to coordinate or reconcile

the contingency of concrete sentence contents with the necessity of propositional contents, the standard view is that this is possible in virtue of the fact that linguistic uses involve not one, but *two* stages of expression, representation or content formation. In the first stage, a concrete linguistic sentence token such as "Socrates is wise" *contingently expresses* a particular proposition, in this case the proposition that Socrates is wise. Then in the second stage, that contingently expressed proposition has an abstract structure such that it necessarily represents Socrates as an element of its content, in virtue of the truth-conditions for the abstract proposition. So in this two-step manner, the contingency of content for a concrete expressive vehicle neatly dovetails with the abstract necessity of the content of the contingently expressed proposition itself.

This familiar two-step modal structure for the two contents--namely, a contingently expressed proposition on the one hand, and the necessarily represented content of that same proposition on the other hand--provides a useful initial model for a legitimate, consistent way in which artworks having necessary contents could relate to concrete objects, events and states. In the case of propositions, the fact that a sentence token T is only contingently related to the relevant proposition P would show that the content contingency principle applies to token T. A similar point would apply to the concrete vehicle V for an artwork A having a necessary content in a propositional model.⁴

In such a model, an artwork A would be regarded as an item having a necessary content, with artwork A being contingently expressed by its vehicle V--just as a proposition P, having a necessary content, is contingently expressed by a sentence token T.

Hence, if the content contingency principle can be established for artwork vehicles, then a two-step modal structure that is closely similar to that holding for propositions, as described above, would hold for artworks also, so that artwork ontology, epistemology and semantics could benefit from the relatively well-developed and well-understood corresponding propositional concepts and theories. I shall argue, as announced, that content contingency does indeed hold for the relevant concrete items.

II. CONFUSIONS ABOUT CONTINGENCY OF REPRESENTATION AND THE CONTENT CONTINGENCY PRINCIPLE

It will soon become apparent how easy it is to prove the content contingency principle, and how intractably difficult it would be to deny it. Yet I suspect that there is a highly significant initial bias against the principle that is based on nothing more than confusion or conflation. Arguably these center round the following issue. Whereas linguistic tokens are purely conventional signs, so that it is easy to accept that they have a purely contingent relation to the propositions that they express, nevertheless concrete pictures, and other iconic vehicles of representation such as sound recordings, seem to have much closer relations to artworks and their contents. Typically concrete pictorial artifacts do look like or resemble the items they depict, so that there is a strong reluctance to declare the relation a purely contingent one. Hence it is easy to assume that, in some vague way, there must be elements of necessity in the relations of such artifacts to the corresponding pictures.

Nevertheless, this conception of the issue arguably is a confused and irrelevant one.

Admittedly, the reluctance just mentioned stems from a correct belief that iconic kinds of representation put strong constraints on the possible connections of pictures etc. and the world, whereas purely conventional linguistic sign systems impose no such constraints. However, such comparative constraint issues are *completely irrelevant* to the content contingency principle (CCP), which claims only that *no concrete item could have a necessary content*. In order to show the difference, consider a concrete picture T whose painted side looks like the corner of a building. As an iconic shape token T, there are indeed constraints on what T can (correctly) represent--namely, only items that look roughly like the corner of a building. However, such constraints provide no evidence whatsoever that the concrete token T having that shape could be such that *necessarily--i.e., in any possible artistic use of it--it would have the same content* (or some invariant content component).

In order to illustrate the difference, I shall now demonstrate just how hard it would be to come up with a counterexample to the CCP in the case of contents involving concrete objects. Recall that the necessary content of an artwork may be of any kind at all, from a musical structure to a fictional character to a particular worldly object. In order for the corner-of-building token T discussed above to be a counterexample to the CCP, it would have to be such that it necessarily could only represent, or have as its content, one particular such item. Consider, then, the corner of one particular building B1 in the world that looks like token T. It is hard to deny that T could be used by an artist A, or be

legitimately interpreted by an audience, as representing that corner of building B1, in which case its content would be that particular corner of building B1.

However, there is nothing to prevent that same concrete token T, under appropriate circumstances, from also being legitimately interpreted as representing a numerically distinct but qualitatively similar building corner B2. In such a case, T would then have a numerically distinct content, namely the corner of building B2 rather than the corner of building B1. So, at least with respect to the building-cornerhood component of token T's content, its content fails to be necessarily the same in *all* of the possible artistic uses of token T.

Clearly, the primary ground of this failure for opponents of the CCP is that iconic representation is a purely qualitative matter, since something that looks like the corner of a building could be used to represent the corner of any qualitatively similar particular building. But artwork contents can be--though they need not be--*particular* worldly objects, such as the Spanish city of Guernica. Hence there is no way to restrict the putative *numerically* defined contents of a concrete token T--namely, all possible numerically distinct but qualitatively similar objects--from qualifying as possible distinct contents of token T. Qualitative resemblance by a token T to a content item cannot guarantee numerical uniqueness of content item for token T in all of its possible uses, and hence it cannot guarantee that token T has a necessary content.⁵ So at least as far as artwork contents involving concrete objects are concerned, the CCP is clearly or obviously true, simply in virtue of the distinction between qualitative similarity and

numerical identity. Though some contents of an artwork are necessarily fixed, the contents of a concrete object are inevitably referentially promiscuous, in the sense that it could be contingently used by an artist, or legitimately interpreted under some contingent conditions by an audience, as representing anything that it sufficiently resembles.

Or, to mention some other contingencies, token T might be legitimately interpretable as expressing the general boringness, or excitingness, or paradoxicality, or..., of building corners, or of objects looking like building corners, in general. Or someone might have shot artist A before she had decided what her artwork was to represent, so that token T had no artistically relevant content at all. And so on. To summarize, concrete artifacts associated with artworks only get any artistically relevant content by artists assigning it to them, or by finished works being legitimately interpretable thus.⁶ But it is a purely contingent matter what content is thus associated with any particular concrete item X. Hence X cannot have a necessary content--i.e., a content that is necessarily independent of any of the contingencies in artist or audience decision-making with respect to X. Hence the content contingency principle (CCP) holds for all such concrete items X.

One further kind of example illustrating the CCP is as follows. Leonardo's visual artwork *Mona Lisa* is only contingently related to the physical canvas and its painted surface hanging in the Louvre, because it is a purely contingent matter that Leonardo happened to choose that particular canvas, and those particular paint samples, as the materials with which to express his artwork. Clearly an assistant could easily have interchanged paints

and canvases behind his back without any resultant change in art history. Hence the CCP can also be indirectly proved without any direct appeal to content considerations.

III. COULD NECESSARY CONNECTIONS SAVE NON-ABSTRACT VIEWS OF ARTWORKS?

Even if an artwork having a necessary content could not be *identical* with a concrete item, it might be hoped by opponents of the present view that some species of *necessary connection* between an artwork and a concrete item could yet preserve a view of artworks as not being purely abstract. The initial hope might be that there is some sense in which concrete items are *closely enough* associated with an artwork and its necessary contents so as to confer at least some degree of concreteness upon the artwork itself. However, I shall briefly show that necessary relations of reference, determination, constitution, parthood and origin respectively do not entail any kind of concreteness for artworks, in that the relevant necessary relations either do not have any relevant ontological implications, or their postulation is question-begging or confused.⁷

First, cases of necessary reference or aboutness will be discussed. To begin, the basic claim that artworks necessarily have specific intentional contents--such as that the play Hamlet is necessarily about the fictional character Hamlet, or that Picasso's painting *Guernica* is necessarily about the actual town of Guernica--itself generates a class of non-ontological necessary connections of a referential kind. However, the fact that a certain

visual artwork by Picasso is necessarily about a particular actual town is a purely semantic fact, having no implications as to the ontological status of the relevant artwork. The concreteness of a town has no implications as to the concreteness of an artwork that necessarily refers to that town, just as propositions necessarily referring to that same town do not thereby become partly concrete themselves.

This perhaps obvious semantic point about both artworks and propositions becomes relevant to our discussion in those special cases--roughly but inaccurately describable as "self-referential" cases--in which it might be claimed that an artwork necessarily refers to *a particular concrete vehicle*, namely the very vehicle that was used to express the relevant artwork. As a case in point, on one plausible conception of action painting, it typically involves a salient necessary artistic reference to the very canvas on which the artist has executed his work. The work has as its subject matter, or referential content, a kind of demonstration as to what the artist's prior actions were that produced the finished result on that particular canvas.

Also, one potentially plausible view as to the source of the intuition that paintings in general are necessarily tied to particular physical objects--so that no other object, no matter how qualitatively indistinguishable, could count as the same painting--is that it is artistically supported by a more subtle, background kind of necessary semantic reference, whether denotative or merely connotative, to the relevant particular physical painting. But even if this semantic account of the particularity of paintings is correct, it would have no *ontological* implications as to the concreteness of paintings. This is clear from the

corresponding propositional case. The loosely self-referential sentence token "the ink in this sentence token weighs 0.243 grams" might express a true proposition that is necessarily about the properties of the very same printed sentence token that expresses the proposition. But obviously that semantic point has no implications as to the ontological concreteness of propositions. Equally, one should not be deluded into thinking or assuming that loosely self-referential artworks--even if all paintings are thus--must be partially concrete as a consequence. In sum, reference relations, whether necessary or not, are purely semantic rather than ontological relations.

A second kind of non-ontological necessary connection, namely that of determination, will now be discussed. Broadly contextualist views about artworks, such as those of Levinson and Danto, may be distinguished from non-contextual or localist claims via the differing *supervenience* bases associated with artwork identity in each case.⁸

Contextualists claim that facts simply about the relevant concrete vehicle by itself--i.e., purely localist facts--are not sufficient to fix or determine artwork identity. Instead, artwork identity only supervenes on, or is fixed by, the relevant concrete vehicle in its full art-historical context. Now one way in which to view such contextually defined supervenience relations is as a species of necessary connection, so that on this view, artwork identity, including the necessary content of an artwork, is necessarily fixed by the concrete vehicle in its full art-historical context. Such a view would provide a kind of necessary connection between an artwork and a context that includes the relevant concrete vehicle.

However, it is by now well recognized that necessary supervenience relations are not, and nor do they entail, ontological relations. For example, one could not prove that mental entities or properties can be reduced to physical entities or properties simply by proving that mental facts necessarily supervene on physical facts.⁹ Hence, even if we accept the common view that all aesthetic facts are necessarily fixed by the non-aesthetic facts on which they supervene, nothing follows about the ontological status of aesthetic facts--including facts as to whether artworks are purely abstract or partly concrete.¹⁰ The case of propositions is again instructive. It is highly plausible that all semantic facts, including facts about propositions and their contents, are fixed by the totality of non-semantic facts, including facts about the concrete linguistic vehicles that express the propositions. But no one thinks for a moment that this defeats the claim that propositions are purely abstract entities. Equally, no one should think that aesthetic supervenience claims, whether of a localist or a contextualist kind, entail full or partial concreteness of artworks either.

A third issue, that of necessary constitution, will now briefly be considered. This issue turns out to be a question-begging case. A standard metaphysical concern is that of whether an artwork, such as a statue, could be necessarily constituted by, even if not identical with, a concrete item such as the clay of which it is made.¹¹ However, it should not be too surprising that such standard constitution issues--since they are specifically *material* constitution issues--are useless for proving partial concreteness of artworks, because such accounts already presuppose that the relevant artworks are fully or

unconditionally concrete, as physical objects made of clay. All that is at issue is whether the relevant kind of material constitution is a kind of identity or not.

As for the fourth and fifth issues concerning necessary parthood and necessary origin, the discussion will also be brief, this time because I have recently discussed both issues in some detail.¹² On the necessary parthood issue, Arthur Danto has a well known view, according to which a visual artwork has as its constituents a concrete object with a marked (drawn, painted, photographed, ..) or shaped (sculptural) surface, plus a contextualist interpretation of it that is supposed to confer necessary properties on the artwork in the relevant context.¹³ So his is an explicitly ontological view of necessary parthood that, if successful, would provide a clear sense in which visual artworks at least would be partially concrete.

However, the view is incoherent for several reasons, including the following. The resulting complex structure of a concrete object plus an interpretation is, as a categorially mixed kind of entity, not the kind of entity of which typical artwork descriptions could be truly, or even meaningfully, predicated. Consider again the property of necessarily being about the town of Guernica, as possessed by Picasso's painting *Guernica*. Danto must concede that the physical painting, as a "mere real thing" in his terms, has no such necessary property. Also, Picasso's interpretation was not necessarily about the town either, for he might have interpreted the physical canvas in some other way instead. Hence Danto could not justify attributions of true necessary content predications to artworks as defined in his way. And more generally, it is not clear that it even makes

sense to predicate ordinary properties of a structure containing ontologically disparate elements, as opposed to predicating its elements taken separately.

Fifth and finally, on the Kripkean topic of necessity of origin cases, these would involve claims that contingently existing artworks might nevertheless acquire necessary connections with concrete items subsequent to their coming into existence.¹⁴ The potential analogy would be with cases such as parentage cases, in which parents decide to have a child, but where the contingently resulting child would nevertheless necessarily be the child of those very parents. The basic problem for present purposes with these admittedly interesting cases is that they are all cases of *causal dependence* between child and parents etc. But causal dependence is a relation that can only hold between at least partially concrete items. So necessity of origin cases presuppose, rather than having any tendency to prove, concreteness in the case of artworks.

Hence, to summarize, I have briefly shown that necessary relations of reference, determination, constitution, parthood and origin respectively do not entail any kind of concreteness for artworks, in that the relevant necessary relations either do not have any relevant ontological implications, or their postulation is question-begging or confused.

IV. TYPE THEORIES IN THE ARTS: A PAROCHIAL DISPUTE

Given the failure so far of attempts to defeat the content contingency principle (CCP) for concrete items, opponents might hope that type theories in the arts might fare better in associating concreteness with artworks. However, type theories identify some artworks, not with concrete items, but instead with *abstract types* that have concrete objects or events as their tokens. Type theories are one popular way in which to explain how a particular novel, musical composition etc. could have multiple copies or performances, yet still be such that all of its instances or tokens are purely concrete items.¹⁵

It is usually assumed that types are abstract entities that have all of their properties necessarily. So to that extent a type theory may have some affinities with the propositional model for artworks, in which artworks are viewed as entities having necessary content properties. Also, there is at least one category of type theory--namely, that of condition-based theories--that allows tokens T of a type A to contingently be tokens of type A.¹⁶ On this condition-based approach, items O must necessarily possess the defining characteristics C of type A in order to be tokens T of A, but it is not ruled out that an item O might itself possess those characteristics C only contingently.¹⁷

Hence, at least in purely formal terms, and independently of content considerations, condition-based type theories do satisfy both a generic form of the content contingency principle (CCP) and a generic necessary artwork properties requirement. To that extent, such condition-based type theories might be considered as a first approximation to an

acceptable theory of artworks, since they do not officially identify artworks with concrete items, and they do accept that artworks as such have some necessary properties.

Also, most criticisms of type theories in the arts are specifically attacks on the *abstractness* of artistic types, such as Levinson's view that a novel category of non-abstract "initiated" types is required to address legitimate contextualist concerns.¹⁸ Thus the present propositional view is, in a broader picture, not so much an attack on type theories, as an attempt to better defend the basic view--that artworks are abstract--against Levinsonian and other objections to specifically type-theoretic conceptions of abstractness.

So in this ecumenical spirit, for present purposes I offer only the following criticism of type theories, namely that they have insufficient abstract structure to adequately cope with Levinsonian and other criticisms.¹⁹ As will become clear in the later sections, a broadly propositional theory of artworks can potentially explain both stylistic and expressive aspects of artworks, as well as purely content-based aspects. As Danto emphasizes in *Transfiguration*, artworks express, among other things, the personal expressive style of artists in their response to their subjects. Only a broadly propositional or statement-making view of artworks can address such vital stylistic factors in significant artworks. Artworks must have an articulated structure in order to capture both style and content, and arguably it is this lack of articulation in type theories, rather than their claims of abstractness as such, that is their central weakness.

V. LAST-DITCH OBJECTIONS: APPARENTLY CONCRETE ARTISTIC OR SOCIAL INTENTIONS

The following section considers some more specialized objections to the content contingency principle (CCP), which might be considered as last-ditch efforts to show that at least some artworks must be concrete items.

One such case is that of a painter who claims, in the name of artistic freedom, a right to *declare* or *stipulate* that a particular painting P of his is identical with the concrete canvas A on which he painted it. His claim might be as follows: whether or not paintings in general are identical with physical objects, it is within his rights as a creative artist to *identify* painting P of his with the particular painted physical object that is canvas A. After all, he might argue, if even non-artists could declare that a particular dog they own is their favorite aesthetic object or work of art, and hence ensure the physicality of a particular doggy artwork in that way, surely a creative artist has even more right to similar privileges in the case of an artwork of his own creation.

In reply, arguably such cases are question begging. To be sure, anyone, whether an artist or not, can intend or declare anything that they like. Thomas Hobbes intended to square the circle, but since that task is mathematically impossible, he was in fact unable to carry out his intention. Similarly, if the CCP is correct--so that it is impossible for a concrete object to have any necessary content properties--then neither artist nor non-artist could

succeed in the impossible task of investing concrete objects with necessary content properties.

A similar reply can be given to a social institution version of essentially the same argument. For example, Amie Thomasson has recently argued that the possible ontological categories for items belonging to a socially constituted artifactual kind category, such as that of artworks, are fundamentally defined or delimited by the prevalent conventional means for identifying items belonging to the category.²⁰ In the case of artworks such as paintings, standard social identification criteria identify paintings with physical objects. Hence, in her view, paintings as such necessarily must be physical objects. Any suggestion--on whatever grounds--that paintings should not be regarded as being physical objects is dismissed as revisionary rather than descriptive metaphysics.

However, social institutions, via their prevailing rules or stipulations, are no more able to carry out genuinely impossible intentional tasks than are individuals. If artworks, as defined by their necessary content properties, *could not* be identical with concrete objects, then widespread beliefs or conceptual presuppositions to the contrary, no matter how strongly they are socially reinforced, could not convert paintings into physical objects, nor make it true by stipulation that they are so. The most that could follow is that, if paintings are necessarily physical objects, and if no physical object could be an artwork of any kind, then there are no physical paintings that are also artworks, in spite of widespread beliefs to the contrary--a conclusion with which I am happy to agree.

Nevertheless, the following rapprochement between the positions of Thomasson and the current approach is worthy of investigation. This is that the current, socially defined conceptual structure with respect to paintings is a genuinely conflicted one. It both requires that paintings are physical objects, and requires that artistic paintings, like other artworks, have necessary intentional contents. If the content contingency principle is true, then there is no possible world--including the present world--in which both requirements could simultaneously be realized. But such an impossibility of joint realization of the two requirements would not show by itself that either requirement fails to be currently a requirement. Thomasson could still insist that a purely descriptive metaphysics of our current social concepts would maintain both requirements in full force, while also holding that a restoration of consistency of requirements would involve the novel enforcement of some other, revisionary metaphysical approach to artworks. So, at least to this minimal extent, Thomasson's position potentially remains a defensible one that is consistent with the current approach. I have no objection to my approach being declared revisionary in a minimal sense, if it is so only in attempting to restore a minimal logical consistency that is lacking in our current social conceptions of art.

VI. MOTIVATIONS FOR CONCRETENESS VIEWS

Given the failure of both identity-based and necessity-based views of artwork concreteness, plus of various last-ditch attempts to show it as discussed above, this is an

appropriate point at which to consider general issues of intellectual motivation. Recall from the introduction and section 1 that there is a striking, and almost total, cultural mismatch or disconnect between views about artistic meaning and linguistic meaning respectively. In the case of language, almost everyone--except for a few committed nominalists or physicalists with theoretical axes to grind--assumes that the primary, truth-related kinds of meaningful content are exclusively associated with purely abstract entities--propositions. The idea that propositions might nevertheless have some necessary connections with their linguistic vehicles, in virtue of which propositions would, as a result, themselves be *partly concrete* rather than purely *abstract* items is so bizarre and unmotivated that, to my knowledge, it is a view that has never been held or advocated by anyone.

Yet in the case of artworks, virtually everyone holds that they are either identical with concrete items, or that they have necessary connections to them, in virtue of which they are themselves partially concrete. Why is there this fundamental split in beliefs and attitudes toward propositions and artworks? Both use appropriate concrete vehicles to communicate their respective kinds of meaningful content. What could motivate aestheticians to seek or demand partial physicality for artworks, when they, along with everyone else, would not see any point in attempting to discover or enforce similar requirements on linguistically expressed propositions?

My suspicion is that what is at work here is a classic case of a conflation--but in this case, of culture-wide proportions--between ontological and semantic issues. In Goodman's

terms, the obvious differences between linguistic sentences and paintings are formal or structural differences in how they represent their contents. Paintings are *semantically dense*, so that any differences whatsoever in surface physical configurations are relevant to what is represented, and how it is represented.²¹ By contrast, all that matters with linguistic tokens is what word types they exemplify, so that the formal semantic structure of how and what they represent is much simpler. But those semantic differences, though they are real and significant, show nothing whatsoever about the ontology of artworks or propositions, or about their modal relations to their concrete vehicles.

So on this diagnosis, the perennial demand for concreteness among aestheticians is most charitably explained as a demand for an adequate kind of theoretical structure that can capture the complete range of pictorial (etc.) artistic content in its full specificity and particularity. In Goodman's terms, it is a legitimate demand for an adequate theoretical recognition of the semantic density of pictorial, and other kinds of artistic representation, that is lacking in standard propositional representation. But, to repeat, that real semantic difference is not an ontological or modal difference between artworks and propositions. In the rest of this article I shall show how an extended propositional view of artworks can fully satisfy a demand that semantic density be addressed, without its being confused with ontological concreteness.

VII. INTERMEDIATE SUMMARY

At this stage, a rough overall summary of where we have arrived at is appropriate. The content contingency principle (CCP)--that concrete items have their content properties only contingently--has turned out to be unavoidably true. In the case of concrete objects such as paintings or clay statues, arguably the principle is easy to defend, in that an unpainted or painted canvas, or an unmolded or molded lump of clay, clearly retain their physical identity through contingent changes in their content properties. As for the prominent case of a particular state of a painted canvas, as discussed in section II, it too has its content properties only contingently, depending e.g. on the contingent intentions of the artist who caused it to have that particular physical configuration. In part this is because traditional resemblance-based constraints on content are powerless to determine one particular content, rather than another similar but numerically distinct one.²² Also, it turns out that type theories in the arts are of no help to the concreteness cause either, because standard type theories identify artworks with abstract types, rather than with the concrete particulars that are their instances. In addition, section V undermined intuitions about last-ditch cases in which the CCP might seem not to hold.

Hence we are now in a position to conclude that the modal abstractness argument is correct--that artworks cannot be identical with concrete items, whether objects, events, mental processes, etc. In part this is because of the claim in the introduction that there are contents that artworks necessarily possess, such as the fact that Picasso's painting

Guernica is necessarily about the town of Guernica, and the film *Citizen Kane* is necessary about the fictional character Kane. Since artworks have some necessary content properties but concrete items cannot--i.e., since the modal content properties of artworks and concrete items differ--they cannot be identical. Also, artworks cannot be partially concrete in virtue of their necessary connections with concrete items either, as was shown in section III.

This article has introduced a propositional model for comparison purposes, as one relatively well-understood model of how concrete items such as linguistic tokens could be contingently related to the abstract items--whether artworks or propositions--having necessary contents, that they express. Indeed, in effect my argument would be that a minimal form of the propositional model, involving no more than concrete vehicles having contingent content properties, along with the abstract entities expressed by them that have necessary content properties, is unavoidably the only possible model for artworks.

VIII. IMPLICATIONS FOR AESTHETIC THEORY

At this point, many readers might have at least provisionally accepted everything said so far, and yet still be left thinking--so what? For most aestheticians not specifically working on ontological issues, issues about the non-identity of artworks with concrete items may hardly seem to be center stage in their theoretical concerns. However, issues

concerning the nature and status of expressive or representational contents of artworks are surely of concern to everyone in aesthetics, and my claim has been that a broadly propositional model of artistic expression and representation is currently the only viable model available of how artworks having necessary contents could be contingently represented or expressed by concrete vehicles that are not themselves artworks.

Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that the resulting theoretical situation amounts to a kind of ongoing crisis in aesthetics.²³ At least since the time of Frege, one hundred years ago, the sciences of language and the philosophy of language have been converging on a broadly propositional understanding of linguistic content, in which concrete linguistic vehicles play a purely contingent or inessential role. Mainstream cognitive science has similarly converged on a broadly propositional view of the representational contents of cognitive states. If this is in fact the way in which broadly content-based forms of cognition work in minds such as ours, then any aesthetic theories that assume otherwise are doomed to failure in any case. However, in fact there has been no similar convergence on a broadly propositional model of content in aesthetics and aesthetic theory during the same broad time period.

This article has shown that it is metaphysically impossible for artworks or their tokens to be concrete objects or events, and yet virtually all aestheticians routinely assume the truth of that impossibility in their theorizing. As a case in point, all of the familiar theories of visual representation or depiction in the literature by writers such as Gombrich, Wollheim, Goodman, Danto, Wolterstorff, Walton, Budd, Peacocke, Schier, Lopes,

Hopkins and Hyman assume that at least some artistic depictions or visual artworks either are concrete particulars, or are necessarily connected with concrete particulars-- such as particular pieces of painted canvas--in a manner that ensures at least partial concreteness for visual artworks themselves. Consequently, it has been further assumed that the task of a theory of depiction is to explain how such a particular piece of canvas etc. can depict its subject matter. But since the impossibility arguments show that depictions cannot be concrete particulars, such theories are immediately rendered devoid of any application, since the concrete particulars they discuss cannot themselves be artistic depictions.

This is not to deny that such theories of depiction could be extensively modified to restore their theoretical coherence. But the required modifications would be at such a fundamental level that the resulting theories would arguably morph into another kind of theory altogether, namely what I have elsewhere called *double content* theories of artwork expression.²⁴ Somehow concrete pieces of canvas etc. must contingently express, or have as their content, genuine artworks, which then in turn have their own subject matter as their respective content. (These two levels of content would closely correspond with the two stage propositional model as discussed from section I onwards). So any even minimally adequate theory of depiction arguably must involve a two-level hierarchical theory of artistic content. Also, both levels must somehow be explained in terms of levels of content in perception of concrete artifacts or events, just as propositional expression by linguistic written or spoken sentences must also be so explained. Since traditional theories of depiction, and traditional type theories, simply do

not address such fundamental issues, in their current forms they fail to be even minimally adequate as coherent theories of artistic depiction.

IX. A PERFORMING ARTS APPLICATION OF THE TWO STAGE PROPOSITIONAL MODEL

It is one thing to argue that art must be broadly propositional because any other view is metaphysically impossible. It is another to come up with potentially successful explanatory theories in aesthetics that actually have such a structure. But in this and the next section, here at least are two specific initial suggestions as to how this might be achieved, whose approaches I have defended in work as previously cited.

The most basic idea employed in each case is that the two stages in the propositional model--namely, of contingent expression of an artwork, followed by the necessary representation by the artwork of its own content--each has its own integral role to play in the overall artistic content of the artwork, and hence in our experience of it.

Nevertheless, the sense in which a concrete vehicle contingently expresses an artwork must be distinguished from the sense in which the whole artwork, as thus expressed, itself has a necessary expressive content revealing the artist's attitude to her necessary subject matter.

To begin, one of the great mysteries about the performing arts, such as music or dance, as well as a primary source of their perennial power to move us, is that for each individual artwork, we seem unavoidably to have to deal both with the artwork itself, and with individual ways or styles of performing it. Traditional simplistic type theories of the arts are completely unable to deal with the richness of this structure, which enables us to easily distinguish, for instance, Toscanini's characteristically incisive, almost superheated way of performing Beethoven's fifth symphony from Klemperer's broader and more measured style of performance of the same work. Type theories that identify performances as being identical with sonic tokens of a musical work are completely unable to distinguish different *kinds* of performance of the same work. Clearly what is minimally needed is a tripartite distinction between: 1) a particular concrete sonic *event*-- a performance at a particular time and place of the work; 2) a particular performance *style* for the work, potentially expressed by various distinct concrete sonic events, but not by others; and 3) the musical content of the work itself.

The fact that several concrete performance events may, or may not, express the same performance style for the work shows that the style or kind of performance must be distinguished from the various distinct concrete events that express the work as thus stylistically interpreted. This by itself is sufficient to show that a style or kind of performance of a work must be ontologically distinct from the relevant concrete events. Also, the fact that any one work is capable of being performed in more than one distinct style shows that the work must itself, in turn, be distinguished from possible performance styles for it. Hence our tripartite structure has been initially specified.

On the present account, concrete sonic events contingently express a musical artwork consisting of a necessary performance style as applied to a necessary musical content. (As a further example of why the relation must be a contingent one, a qualitatively identical concrete sonic sequence might have been produced purely accidentally, in which case it would not count as expressing a performance of the relevant musical artwork).

Hence, on this account, any hearing of an appropriate concrete sonic event associated with a musical work M is a hearing, not of the sonic event as such itself, but instead of its doubly structured content. On this account, just as expert readers of tokens of a language language can directly grasp the propositions expressed by sentences--including their necessary respective contents such as objects and properties--without undue attention to token linguistic symbols, so also can expert listeners to concrete sonic events directly grasp a style of performance of a musical work, as applied to its content, without any undue attention to purely sonic features of the relevant sonic event that expresses the relevant work.²⁵ Also, I argue that artworks as they are *experienced*--rather than as conceptually analyzed--involve an inseparable fusion of experienced style and experienced content.²⁶

However, if this attribution of propositional structure to items in the performing arts is broadly correct, a very interesting result follows, namely that strictly speaking it is a performance style, or *a way of performing the content of an artwork*, that is the basic

artwork in performing arts cases. A so-called musical work M itself, as schematically specified by a musical score, is not a complete artwork by itself, but instead it merely specifies the necessary common structure of musical content or subject matter that all of the individual styles of performance S of M must have as their necessary content.

Nevertheless, this result could be predicted from the plausible view that musical scores are primarily sets of instructions as to how performers should perform the work.²⁷ Nor does this view--that performance styles of works are aesthetically primary in the performing arts--slight the creative primacy of composers or compositions in any way, because composers are completely free to specify performance instructions in their scores in whatever manner, and to whatever degree, they please.

X. TWO STAGE DOUBLE CONTENT IN THE VISUAL ARTS

As with the previous section, the suggestions here are no more than an initial sampler as to how the two stage propositional model might be applied, in this case in the visual arts. I suggest that the metaphysically unavoidable need to go beyond traditional failed theories of depiction, and hence to seek for novel theorizing about depiction and related topics, also provides a significant opportunity to integrate elements of style and expression, as well as more traditional subject matter elements, into our theoretical account of the content of visual art. Recall that on the suggested approach to the two stage propositional structure, the initial contingent expression phase expresses a double content artistic structure involving both expressive and subject-related kinds of content.

An implication of this approach is that the most intuitive paradigm cases supporting the two stages of content are highly expressive kinds of artworks, in which stylistic elements play as prominent a role as do traditional subject matter elements. For example, in many of his paintings van Gogh used a very free painterly style, which results in heavy brushstrokes being prominently visible in many of his works, both in his portraits and landscapes. If the content of these works were interpreted literally or purely realistically--as involving just a single, pure level of subject matter content as represented by the physical painting itself--one would have to conclude that these are pictures of hideously disfigured faces, or horribly scarred landscapes.

However, of course anyone with even a minimal acquaintance with expressionist styles in pictures rapidly learns to interpret these works as having a *double* content. Each physical painting is seen as expressing a *characteristic van Gogh style expressionist artwork*, in which the heavy brushstrokes express van Gogh's *vigorous way of seeing* the perfectly ordinary, unscarred people and landscapes that provided the subjects for his artworks. We interpret the physical brushstrokes as expressing artworks having a double content, in which the stylistic elements are necessarily fused with the everyday faces and scenes that they depict. Each visual artwork is seen to be such that its unique expressed stylistic configuration necessarily expresses the particular person or wheatfield that is its subject matter, since the picture inseparably fuses its characteristic way of representing that item with what it represents.²⁸

In this manner, the architecture of an expressed painting is indeed shown to be a kind of frozen music. The durability of Goethe's metaphor in its various forms shows that double content phenomena, in which there is an expressive fusion of style and content, are ubiquitous in the arts. Whether it is a style of music performance, a style of architecture having equally abstract content, or a style of representing everyday people and landscapes as in painting, the double content structure is just as cognitively unavoidable in the arts as it is in language processing and representational cognitive processing in general. Nevertheless, what is most ironic in the general theoretical situation concerning cognitive expressive and representational processing is that the arts, which potentially provide the best and most salient examples of humanly significant double content phenomena, is the one area of theoretical investigation which has been *most resistant*--arguably for at least a hundred years--to broadly propositional, two stage or double content approaches to cognition.

Many broadly modernistic sculptural styles illustrate similar double content principles. For example, many of the Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti's works might look, at first glance, as if they are representations of extremely emaciated or spindly people. However, of course they are no such thing, because if they were, they would have no expressive or emotional content at all. Instead they would just be accurate scientific depictions of possible spindly people, having no artistic interest whatsoever. But what Giacometti has instead achieved in many of his works is a series of powerful and interrelated visual metaphors, in which the highly expressive, almost vanished physicality in the sculptural forms of the represented people shows their intense vulnerability and

fragility in the face of modern conditions of living. The people are seen as almost vanishing, but it is ordinary, full-fleshed people like any of us who are thus expressively depicted as having drained and marginalized lives.

Indeed, this double content point reveals explanatory gaps in even the most perceptive recent resemblance-based theories of depiction, which seek to explain the representational or depictive powers of visual artworks in terms of similarity of physical shape in the concrete artwork to the outline or occlusion shape of the represented subject.²⁹ Such a one-dimensional approach is not only inaccurate--since it is normal rather than spindly-shaped people that are represented--but it also fails to capture what makes Giacometti an important sculptural artist, rather than just a boring copyist of possible spindly people.

Hence, not only are standard aesthetic theories of depiction based on metaphysically impossible assumptions, but they also fail to explain a fundamental element in the expressive powers of important visual artworks, which is a primary factor in making them of significant aesthetic interest in the first place. Specifically aesthetic theories of depiction must earn their keep by directly addressing such central aesthetic concerns, since otherwise they would be mere appendages to more generic, science-based cognitive theories of representation and perceptual processing. Double content theories of art arguably are at least an unavoidable first step in this important work of defending the autonomy of aesthetics.³⁰

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NOTES

¹ To be completely clear, the modal abstractness argument is a two-factor modal argument for the abstractness of artworks. It is not an argument concerning some strange concept of "modal abstractness."

² For further details see my articles "In Support of Content Theories of Art," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 85 (2007): 19-39, and "The Propositional Challenge to Aesthetics," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 115-144, and for general background see my book *The Double Content of Art* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005).

³ Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

⁴ There need be no initial supposition that artworks are themselves propositions having a truth-value--nor that artworks are abstract, since that remains to be shown.

⁵ Indeed, insofar as the distinction of qualitative similarity from numerical identity of particulars is a fundamental, metaphysically necessary distinction, this reinforces the claim that the CCP is itself a metaphysically necessary principle.

⁶ To be sure, Julian Dodd in *Works of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) claims that musical works are sonic types that exist independently of artistic decisions. But nevertheless he agrees that such works are purely abstract (on which see section IV).

⁷ My thanks to a referee for suggesting that it would add to the generality of the discussion if necessary connections other than identity relations were also addressed. See also my comprehensive recent discussion of these and related issues in the articles cited in fn. 2.

⁸ Jerrold Levinson, *Music, Art and Metaphysics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1990), Chs. 4 and 10; and Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981).

⁹ Karen Bennett, "Global Supervenience and Dependence," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68 (2004): 501-529.

¹⁰ John E. MacKinnon, "Aesthetic Supervenience: For and Against," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41 (2001): 59-75.

¹¹ E.g., Mark Johnston, "Constitution is not Identity," *Mind* 101 (1992): 89-105.

¹² See fn. 2.

¹³ Danto, *Transfiguration*.

¹⁴ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Lecture III.

¹⁵ Support for type theories is provided by (among others) Noël Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Gregory Currie, *An Ontology of Art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), Joseph Margolis, *Art and Philosophy* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1980), and Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects : With Six Supplementary Essays* 2d ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

¹⁶ E.g., Dodd in *Works of Music*; Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*; Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

¹⁷ By contrast, extensional definitions of typehood A in terms of membership in a set of tokens of A, such as that of W.V.O. Quine in *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), permit no such contingency for members, since set membership in the extension set for type A is a necessary characteristic of the members.

¹⁸ Levinson, *Music, Art and Metaphysics*, Chs. 4 and 10. See also my attempt to formulate an improved, non-type version along the current propositional lines in "Reforming Indicated Type Theories," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 (2005): 11-31.

¹⁹ I offer a comprehensive range of criticisms of type theories in *The Double Content of Art*.

²⁰ “The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 221-229.

²¹ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).

²² See Dominic Lopes, *Understanding Pictures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) for relevant criticisms of resemblance theories.

²³ See fn. 2.

²⁴ *The Double Content of Art*. For a summary focused on issues of depiction see my "A Double Content Theory of Artistic Representation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 249-260.

²⁵ A view that receives strong support from Roger Scruton's basic distinction of sound from tone in his book *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁶ *The Double Content of Art* devotes the whole of chapter 6 to explaining this important inseparability phenomenon, which also explains Wollheim's later phenomenological twofoldness thesis as presented in his book *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

²⁷ A view defended by Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁸ See fn. 26.

²⁹ Such as those of Robert Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), and John Hyman, *The Objective Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

³⁰ My thanks to the Editor, Susan Feagin, and an anonymous referee for very helpful comments.