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## Sculpture and Space

### (I) Introduction

This paper is about the aesthetics of sculpture. That is, it asks what aesthetic satisfactions sculpture has to offer. There are two directions from which we might approach this topic. We might concentrate on what sculpture has in common with the other arts, thereby explaining what it is about sculpture which makes it an art at all. Or we might direct our attention to what, if anything, is distinctive about sculpture. I will adopt the latter approach. Not that I assume that sculpture is aesthetically distinctive. It is hard to see what, prior to investigation, could justify this view. My motive is rather that, if we don't look for sculpture's distinctive aesthetic interest, we are unlikely to find any that is there. Since I think that philosophical reflection on the arts both feeds on and itself nourishes critical engagement with them, failing to look for anything distinctive about sculpture not only threatens to impoverish philosophy; it might also limit our engagement with the art.

There are other philosophical questions we might raise about sculpture. It will help to distinguish them from the one which will be our main concern. An issue which will concern us a little (§II), is the nature of sculptural representation. At least a good deal of sculpture represents. What is the form of representation involved, and how does it relate to representation by other things, such as pictures and language? Another question will hardly concern us at all: how should sculpture be defined? The answer might seem obvious: it is representation by three-dimensional figures. However, confidence in this quick reply is equally rapidly undermined. Think of abstract sculpture, and representations in three dimensions which are usually given their own categories, such as models and maquettes.

There are interconnections between these questions. One might, for example, attempt to define sculpture in terms of the form of representation it exhibits (having somehow finessed

the issue of abstract sculpture). Or one might use an account of sculptural representation to drive sculptural aesthetics, perhaps deriving from the former aesthetically revealing conclusions about the range of what can be represented sculpturally, or offering sculptural representation itself as able to engage our aesthetic interest in ways in which other forms of representation cannot.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the questions are distinct, and should be treated separately.

## **(II) Sculptural Representation**

It will introduce some useful ideas if we begin with the issue of sculptural representation. What one says about this depends in part on where one thinks the crucial contrasts lie. All acknowledge some important differences between representation by sculpture and representation in language. Even Goodman (1976), who sought to make room for the idea that both are, at root, a matter of convention, devoted considerable ingenuity to stating the difference between them. In contrast, few have attempted to differentiate sculptural representation from representation by pictures. Goodman himself clearly intended what he said about sculpture to apply equally to pictures. Indeed, it is the latter which provide his ostensible subject matter almost throughout.<sup>2</sup> In this, if in nothing else, he was followed by Flint Schier (1986). Schier's central idea is that some representation engages the same processing capacities as what it represents. This defines a general notion of iconic representation, intended to cover, not just pictures and sculptures, but other representations too, such as mime and some aspects of theatre. So those of very different outlooks have concentrated on distinguishing sculpture from language, at the cost of classifying sculpture with pictures. Yet *prima facie* there is a difference between the way in which pictures and sculptures represent.

This thought looks especially appealing in the context of a particular approach to the topic. In discussing pictures, Richard Wollheim (1968, 1987) has argued that the form of

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<sup>1</sup> For a classic exploration of both these lines, see Lessing 1766.

<sup>2</sup> The exception is his discussion in ch.1, §4.

representation they exhibit might be constituted by the distinctive *experience* to which it gives rise. This idea is every bit as plausible as applied to sculpture. The thought is that to grasp the content of a sculpture is to see it in a special way. One's experience of the sculpture is permeated by certain thoughts. These do not merely accompany the experience, they determine its phenomenology. They are thoughts of the object represented—a horse, say. Now, it is true of seeing a horse in the flesh that it is an experience permeated by thoughts of horses. For that is just what it is to be an experience with the content that a horse is before one. But it need not be part of the present approach that sculptures generate the illusion that their objects are present. When we see a horse sculpture, there is no horse before us, we do not take there to be one, and our experience does not have the phenomenology of seeing a horse. Rather, it presents us with a crafted lump of marble, bronze or whatever. But, although we see nothing but marble or bronze to be before us, we experience that material as organized in a distinctive way. It is organized by thoughts of the sculpture's object: a prancing Arab stallion with flowing mane, and so forth.

More needs to be said about this special experience, and in particular about its phenomenology. The way to do this is to specify the experience's structure, to say in what way thoughts of the absent horse permeate one's experience of the marble before one. Such a specification should replace unsatisfactorily vague talk of thought 'permeating' experience with something more precise. There are various accounts we might adopt, and some are discussed below. The point now is that one factor bearing on their plausibility is how far they are able to distinguish our experience of pictures and of sculpture. The general description in the last paragraph applies equally to the pictorial case, as is not surprising given the source of its basic idea. The only more detailed account considered so far, the illusion view, also fails to distinguish the two. For by assimilating our experience of both sorts of representation to our experience of things in the flesh, it denies itself the resources to distinguish between them. But this is surely a failing. It is simply not plausible that we experience pictures and sculptures in the same way, and hence important, if the representation each involves is defined by reference to those experiences, to capture the experiential difference.

Of those sympathetic to the experiential approach to pictorial and sculptural representation, few have explicitly discussed the latter. (This reflects more general neglect of the topic of sculptural representation, and indeed of the other two questions described in §I.) However, it is easy enough to see whether their accounts are able to distinguish the two. Wollheim himself is pessimistic about how far the rough outline above can be filled in with an account of the experience's phenomenology and structure (1987: 46-7). Nonetheless, he does offer something more, and what he says seems unlikely to yield a natural way to differentiate the sculptural from the pictorial (Vance 1995). He talks about the experience of pictures having two 'folds' or aspects. One is constituted by our awareness of the properties of the object, here a painted surface, before us; the other by our awareness of its representing something absent. Much the same clearly applies in the sculptural case. And Wollheim's pessimism about the prospects, in the case of pictures, for saying more serves only to banish further the possibility of distinguishing the two.

Kendall Walton (1990) is more sanguine about the chances of analysing these experiences. In his view, pictorial experience is constituted by our imagining certain things. We imagine, of our looking at the marks on the picture's surface, that it is our looking at the things represented, and we do so in such a way that the imagining, which is rich and vivid, permeates the perception, thus giving it its distinctive phenomenology. There are questions about the coherence and the plausibility of this account (see Hopkins 1998 pp.20-2). But the point now is that, however attractive the view, it does not naturally yield a complementary, though distinct, account of our experience of sculptures. True, Walton does have something to offer on this score; but his comments are very brief. They reduce to the idea that sculptures are more likely than pictures to license imagining that the represented object is actually located in gallery space (63); and that there is a wider range of actions for sculptures than for paintings for which it is natural to imagine performing that action on the represented object in virtue of performing it on the representation—his examples include caressing, and various perceptual actions and movements (227, 296). These differences seem too peripheral to provide a satisfying distinction between our experience of pictures and of sculpture. It is not plausible that, before sculptures, we always imagine in the particular ways Walton describes,

and not plausible that the mere possibility of so imagining constitutes (rather than reflects) an ever-present difference between the two artforms. Yet, if there is a difference between the way we see pictures and the way we see sculpture, it is surely present all the time.

However, at least one account of pictorial experience does naturally capture its difference from the sculptural analogue. If we construe both as experiences of resemblance, we can distinguish them in terms of the respects in which resemblance is experienced. It is not a straightforward matter to state the resemblance relevant to the pictorial case, but not our present concern to do so (see Hopkins 1998). It's enough to note that the overwhelmingly plausible candidate for sculptural resemblance, resemblance in three-dimensional shape, is precisely not a respect in which pictures are experienced as resembling their objects. Now, the view that sculptures are seen as resembling what they represent in terms of 3-D shape is, for all its intuitive appeal, in need of considerable defence. Here is not the place to undertake that.<sup>3</sup> For our purposes, it suffices to have some sense of the possible approaches to sculptural representation, and some grasp of the experiential approach in particular. We will make use below of the idea that sculpture is experienced in the light of thoughts about what is represented, without those thoughts engendering any illusion about what is present. We will also return to the question of imagination's involvement with sculpture. Both themes arise as we address the aesthetics of sculpture.

### **(III) The Aesthetic Question: Some Preliminary Thoughts**

Whatever the right account of sculptural representation, it is unlikely by itself to yield a satisfactory aesthetics of sculptural art. Certainly none of above accounts reveal, unaided, why things exhibiting the form of representation they describe are of interest. To do this, they need supplementing, at the minimum with some claim about the aesthetic interest of representation in general, and ideally with some explanation which engages with the details of the particular form of representation they describe. Moreover, if, as we do, one seeks to

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<sup>3</sup> See Hopkins 1994, 1998. The latter explicitly concerns only picturing. However, several of the moves it develops in defence of the experienced resemblance account of pictorial representation are equally useful to the

distinguish, in aesthetic terms, between sculpture and the other arts, some of the above accounts are clearly impotent. They fail to distinguish sculptural representation from at least one other kind, that by pictures; and thus cannot yield an account of what is aesthetically distinctive about sculpture, as opposed to some wider class of visual arts.

Some would not find this a fault. It is plausible that, from an aesthetic perspective, sculpture is more closely akin to drawing and painting than it is to the the literary arts. So we might, as Lessing notably did (1766), go so far as to treat sculpture and painting as one, developing an aesthetic common to both by contrasting their charms with those of literature. His distinguished example notwithstanding, we will continue to take the aesthetic question in key part to be what sculpture has to offer that painting and drawing do not.

Where might an answer lie? If we divide candidate features into three crude categories, one emerges as key. Some of sculpture's aesthetically engaging features are clearly common, not merely to all visual art, but to a good deal of art *tout court*. Expressiveness, beauty, the ability to explore ideas by embodying the universal in the representation of a concrete particular: these are found, if not in all arts, then at least in many. At the other end of the scale, some of sculpture's features are, while undeniably its own, too elemental to provide a comprehensible basis for our aesthetic interest in it *as sculpture*. Several examples come to mind. Sculpture is the only art, if pottery does not count, at the heart of which lies the formation of distinctive three-dimensional shapes. But while a responsiveness to the appeal or otherwise of shapes is certainly aesthetic, the engagement it offers is at too low a level to provide, by itself, a plausible basis for sculpture's claims to be an art. A parallel point applies to the charms of sculpture's distinctive materials: stone, metal, wood and clay. (Though see in this connection Adrian Stokes's extraordinarily powerful rhapsody on the beauty and significance of limestone and marble (1934, Part 1).) Yet again, although there might be much of aesthetic interest in a distinction between two fundamental ways of making sculpture, carving versus moulding;<sup>4</sup> it is hard not to think that our attention, at least, should focus on the differing

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analogous view of sculpture.

<sup>4</sup> See Carpenter 1960 *passim* on 'glyptic' vs. 'plastic' sculptural art.

consequences of these operations, rather than the operations themselves. At any rate, I will concentrate on the middle ground, on features exploiting, rather than simply constituted by, sculpture's most basic resources; but not so high-flown as to be formed elsewhere from quite different ingredients.

A natural thought is that the aesthetic difference between painting and sculpture stems from the senses they engage. Sculpture, being three-dimensional, demands to be touched as well as looked at; painting can only be appreciated visually. Many have been attracted by this contrast. Herbert Read (1961) made it the centrepiece of his account of sculpture, and the position has its advocates still (Vance 1995). However, there have also been those who deny vigorously any such difference between the two arts. Rhys Carpenter is quite explicit:

...sculpture is a visual and not a tactile art, because it is made for the eyes to contemplate and not for the fingers to feel. Moreover, just as it reaches us through the eyes and not through the finger tips, so it is created visually, no matter how the sculptor may use his hands to produce his work....sculptured form cannot be apprehended tactilely or evaluated by its tactual fidelity. (Carpenter 1960: 34)

And the denial is implicit in the influential work of Adolph Von Hildebrand (1893), who saw sculpture's role as that of providing a series of two-dimensional silhouettes.<sup>5</sup>

As the presence of this debate perhaps suggests, the issues here are messy.<sup>6</sup> We can sidestep them. For, as Hildebrand's view shows, what really matters here is not which senses are engaged, but what their engagement gives one access to. A satisfying sculptural aesthetic needs, in the end, to concentrate on this last. In the absence of a description of what it is one is accessing, appeals to the engagement of a particular sense reduce to the existential claim

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<sup>5</sup> Hildebrand, it should be conceded, thereby assimilates the aesthetics of sculpture to that of painting. However, the assimilation is only partial. For, while a painting offers only one such silhouette, a sculpture can offer many, varying with the point from which it is seen. Interestingly, Hildebrand considered this difference to be to the disadvantage of sculpture. Apparently Cellini, on very similar grounds, drew the opposite conclusion (Brook 1969).

<sup>6</sup> For discussion, see Hopkins 2002 §III.

that there is *something* of aesthetic interest which is thereby made available to us. Thus, although we will briefly return to the theme of the different senses (§V), we will do so only once we have some sense of what it is that we are thereby able to appreciate.

#### **(IV) Different Spaces**

A quite different starting point is the thought that sculpture is distinctively related to the space in which it lies, that it interacts with that space as pictorial art does not. Thus Hegel:

‘...a sculpture...remain[s] essentially connected with its surroundings. Neither a statue nor a group, still less a relief, can be fashioned without considering the place where the work of art is to be put. A sculptor should not first complete his work and only afterwards look around to see whither it is to be taken: on the contrary, his very conception of the work must be connected with specific external surroundings and their spatial form and their locality...halls, staircases, gardens, public squares, gates, single columns, triumphal arches, etc., are likewise animated and, as it were, peopled by works of sculpture, and, quite independently of this wider environment, each statue demands a pedestal of its own to mark its position and terrain...’ (Hegel 1974: 702)

And, extending the point, David F.Martin:

‘...the space around a sculpture, although not a part of its material body, is still an essential part of the perceptible structure of that sculpture. And the perceptual forces in that surrounding space impact on our bodies directly, giving to that space a translucency, a thickness, that is largely missing from the space in front of a painting. With a painting the space between us and the canvas is, ideally, an intangible bridge to the painting, for the most part not explicitly entering into our awareness of the painting.’ (1976: 282)

There is certainly something attractive about these thoughts. Sculpture interacts with its



space: it matters, in appreciating a sculpture, what sort of space it is in. This is true of pictures too, of course. If we hang a painting too high on the wall, it can look 'cramped' by the ceiling. Likewise, if we place a statue in too small a space, it can look suffocated by it. But there is a difference. In the case of the picture, the sense of crampedness would persist even if one had not yet made out what the picture represents, or if a roughly similarly coloured and sized canvas, though one not representing anything, were put there. In the case of sculpture, at least sometimes the effects of fitting with or failing to fit the space is dependent on its representing what it does. If one were to fail to see its content, or if one substituted a non-representational object of a roughly similar shape and size, the effect of cramping would not necessarily persist. This suggests a difference between the two, but how are we to articulate it more precisely?

We might summarize the claims of the last paragraph by saying that in the pictorial case what looks cramped is the representation, the picture; whereas in the sculpture's case it is the thing represented that seems crushed by its surroundings. And this suggests the following account of the difference between the two. The space of the sculpture is the space around the representation itself, what we might, without prejudice as to its nature or location, call 'gallery space'. The space of the painting is distinct from gallery space, the space depicted in a picture is a separate realm from the space of the depiction and the viewer.

However, as it stands this won't do. Both picture and sculpture, the representations, exist in the space in which we perceive them. And neither the objects depicted nor those sculpturally represented exist in that space. A sculpture of a horse introduces no more horses into the space in which it is seen than does a picture of one. Where, then, is the difference between the two? We might try the thought that, while the sculpted horse is not present in gallery space, it at least seems to be. But this is just illusionism, a view we have already rejected (§II). Besides, even if we could construe our experience of sculptures as somehow involving the apparent presence of their objects, we could as easily do the same for *pictorial* experience. Another response would be to note that pictures often represent spaces in a more full-blooded sense than sculptures. For a picture may show a range of objects arranged within

a volume of containing space, while a sculpture presents nothing more than, say, a prancing horse, without surroundings or companions. But not only does this seem a contingent feature of some sculptures and some pictures, since sculptural groups are possible and context-free horses can be depicted; it also fails to connect with the issue in hand. Any sculpture and any picture represents a space, in representing at least one object, and the spatial relations between its parts. Our question is whether that represented space is differently related, in the two cases, to gallery space. And on that question the reply is silent. A final, and forlorn, stab at answering that question would be to claim that, while pictures always represent other spaces, sculptures represent the gallery space itself, and this is the sense in which the space of the sculpture is the space in which it resides. There are difficulties in interpreting this claim, but, more importantly, it seems a picture *can* represent gallery space, as when a photograph of a concert hall hangs in the hall itself; but such a picture is not related to its surroundings in anything like the way in which sculpture is, and which we seek to capture.

To make progress, we need to distinguish two senses in which spaces may be the same, or different. The first is more metaphysical. Two spaces differ in this sense if they do not form parts of a continuum. The space represented in a picture may be different from gallery space in that it is not part of the spatial continuum of which gallery space is part. An example is the space depicted in Bellini's *Sacred Allegory*. There is no spatially continuous route, however circuitous, from the gallery to the space represented in the painting, if only because that space is not actual. Of course, matters are more complicated if, as in one of Bellotto's cityscapes of Verona, what is represented is actual space. But we can prescind from these complications: the Bellini sort of example provides the clearest possible case in which, in one sense, picture space and gallery space are not the same. The problem, of course, is that the space represented by a sculpture (eg the space occupied by the (represented) arm of one of Degas's sculpted dancers) is *also* different from gallery space in this sense.

The other sense of 'same space' is more everyday. In this sense, the space outside a window is different from the space within the room, in that, though equally parts of one spatial continuum, the two constitute *different* parts of it; and, moreover, parts presented to us as

clearly different, with different natural boundaries, organizing contours, focal points, and the like. I suggest this second sense provides the only reasonable way to construe talk of pictorial space being different from that of the gallery, while sculptural space is the same. Setting aside the metaphysical issue, pictorial space is different from gallery space in just the sense in which the space outside the gallery's window is: it is experienced as a discrete spatial unit, with its own organizing features. Not so for the space the sculpture presents.

But what exactly is our positive account of the sculptural case? We can't say that the sculpted object is experienced as lying within the perceived spatial unit that is gallery space, on pain of falling back into the error of illusionism. And it is not enough to say that the sculpture itself is experienced as lying therein—that is equally true of the picture, the representing marks themselves. Martin, in the quotation above, claims that ‘the space around a sculpture, although not a part of its material body, is still an essential part of the perceptible structure of that sculpture’. But what does this mean?

#### **(V) Sculpture and Organization: Langer**

The answer lies in the most sophisticated account of sculpture in the literature, that sketched with tantalizing economy by Susanne Langer in *Feeling and Form*. Her way to frame the general approach within which we have been operating is to say that sculpture creates, compared with painting and, she adds, architecture, a distinctive form of ‘virtual space’ (1953: 86). I take this to mean that our experience of sculpture needs characterizing as having a distinctive spatial content. That content is distinctive in presenting us with a separate space in the everyday sense described above, a discrete perceptual unit, organized in a particular way (88). What is that way? Langer's answer has two parts. First, she notes that quite generally we experience our surroundings as organized around our possible movements and actions:

‘...the kinetic realm of tangible volumes, or things, and free air spaces between them, is organized in each person's actual experience as his *environment*, i.e. a space

whereof he is the centre; his body and the range of its free motion, its breathing space and the reach of its limbs, are his own kinetic volume, the point of orientation from which he plots the world of tangible reality—objects, distances, motions, shape and size and mass.’ (90)

Second, we are able to see the space around a sculpture as organized around *its* kinetic possibilities:

‘A piece of sculpture is a center of three-dimensional space. It is a virtual kinetic volume, which dominates a surrounding space, and this environment derives all proportions and relations from it, as the actual environment does from one's self.’ (91)

As she summarizes in a slogan: ‘Sculpture is literally the image of kinetic volume in sensory space.’ (92)

There are the ingredients here for a solution to our problem, i.e. of completing our account of sculpture's and painting's differing relations to surrounding space. But Langer's ideas need careful handling, and some adapting, if they are to be of use. A central question is whether for Langer the space we experience as organized by the sculpture is gallery space, as it must be for her suggestions to bear on our problem. There are at least hints that she thinks not. One is her insistence on talk of sculpture's creating ‘virtual’ space, another her phrasing when keen to reconcile her account with the persistence of our sense of our own kinetic potential (cf. p.92). But whatever Langer's actual view, the crucial claim, from our point of view, is certainly open to her. She should say that, just as we see the marble which makes up a statue as organized in a particular way, organized by the thought of whatever is represented; so we see the space actually surrounding a sculpture as organized in a particular way, organized by our sense of the potential for movement and action of that represented item. Neither experience involves illusion: they are never of a kind to mislead us about the nature of our surroundings. Rather, the experiences have the very broad structure outlined above (§II): perception itself is transformed by the organizing thoughts, though not so as to yield an

experience that in any way fails to be veridical.<sup>7</sup>

So, what is special about sculpture is that the experiences it supports include experiences of the gallery space as organized in a distinctive way. For paintings, in contrast, the parallel phenomenon stops at the boundary of the marked surface—the marks are perceptually transformed, the surrounding space is not. Below (§VII) we consider the merits of this account as the core of sculptural aesthetics. Before doing that, let us tidy up one or two other issues.

First, Langer too becomes embroiled in questions about sculpture's relations to sight and touch:

‘Here we have the primary illusion, virtual space, created in a mode quite different from that of painting, which is *scene*, the field of direct vision. Sculpture creates an equally visual space, but not a space of direct vision; for volume is really given originally to touch, both haptic touch and contact limiting bodily movement, and the business of sculpture is to translate its data into entirely visual terms, i.e. *to make tactual space visible*.’ (89-90)

This is not quite right. The phenomenon she makes central is indeed at least partly ‘tactual’, since the organizing principle in our perception of the space around the sculpture is the sculpted object's potential for movement and action, and these do essentially involve ‘haptic touch’ and limiting contact with the body. But it is not clear that sculpture ‘makes tactual space visible’ as painting does not. For painting can certainly evoke an environment as organized kinetically. The differences between the two lie elsewhere, and are twofold. First, in painting the environment seen as so organized is not that actually surrounding the picture, but that depicted within it. Second, the centre around which it is organized will lie at the point

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<sup>7</sup> For all that, very broadly speaking, they share a structure, the experience here is distinct from that considered in §II. For any experience essential to sculptural representation will be experience of the sculpted material as organized by thoughts of the represented object itself; but here the experience is of the surrounding space, and the thoughts brought to bear are of the sculpted object's kinetic potentialities.

of view from which the scene is depicted, a point the actual viewer imaginatively occupies. In the sculptural case, in contrast, the viewer does not see gallery space as organized around the sculpted object by imagining herself in that object's shoes: her own actual point of view remains the only relevant one. From that point of view, she experiences the space around the sculpture as shaped by the sculpted object's potential to move and act in various ways. If Langer fails to see that these are the only important differences, it may be because she has not taken some of her own lessons to heart. If she fully embraced the thoughts offered in the first of the above quotations from her book, thoughts so reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty, she would see that *all* visual experience is experience of 'kinetic volume', i.e. is permeated by a sense of possible movement and action. And this includes pictorial experience, the experience in which we grasp the content of pictures.

However, Langer's view does have one consequence for the proper mode of appreciating sculpture. For touching the sculpture itself will hinder us from perceiving its surroundings as appropriately organized:

‘..handling the figure, no matter what it gives us, is always a mere interlude in our perception of the form. We have to step back, and see it unmolested by our hands, that break into the sphere of its spatial influence.’ (92)

Although Langer does not say why this should be, it is easy to think of reasons. For one thing, to touch the sculpture is to be too near to the centre of the space around it to experience that space as appropriately organized. For that experience of organization is essentially visual, however informed by other senses and proprioception, and from up close one cannot take in visually enough of that space at one go. For another, to explore the sculpture by touch is to reinforce one's sense of one's own actual kinetic possibilities, and this may, as a matter of psychology if not of logic, necessarily reduce one's ability to see the space as constructed with another object at its kinetic centre.

## **(VI) Organization and the Imagination**

Langer's account leaves certain questions unanswered. Most obviously, it would be good to know more about the experience she makes central. She tells us something about the thoughts which permeate it, but nothing about its structure, about how those thoughts enter it. I know at least part of what I would *like* to offer her here, but there are complications. My suggestion is that the experience Langer has described is essentially an imaginative one. It is constitutive of that experience that the viewer is *imagining* certain things of the sculpted object.

One framework to which we might appeal in making such a claim is that developed by Kendall Walton (1990). He suggests that a good deal of our engagement with representations, of any kind, is a matter of our imagining certain things as a result of recognizing that the world is in fact a certain way. The actual properties of the representation establish that it is to be imagined that there is suchandsuch an object or state of affairs; and, at least sometimes, our actual relations—be they spatial, perceptual or psychological—to the representation establish that something further is to be imagined about our relation to the represented thing or state. Indeed, we have already seen one application of this scheme, in Walton's account of pictorial experience (§II).

As we then noted, Walton does in passing discuss sculpture, and in particular its differences from painting. Above we said that his appeal to the likelihood of imagining the sculpted object to be present, and the range of actions we might imagine performing on the item do not suffice to capture what is distinctive about sculptural experience, and the representation it defines. Note that they also plainly fall far short of committing him to anything like Langer's view. Nonetheless, his theory does provide a congenial context within which Langerian claims could be made. We would merely need to say that the experience she has pinpointed is one of imagining the represented object to perform certain actions, or perhaps to have a certain potential for action, in gallery space; imaginings licensed by properties of the sculpture itself and of the space in which it stands.

What is attractive about some such appeal to imagining is that it accommodates the sense that

seeing the gallery space as organized around the sculpted object is an experiential matter, but one extending in a somewhat optional way the basic experience of seeing the represented thing in the sculpture. Certainly, one could have the latter experience without the former, and one way to make the step to the more complex experience might be to imagine certain things of the represented object. However, it does not follow that imaginings are constitutive of the experience Langer has described: perhaps they are just a means to that end. And it certainly is not plausible to suggest that seeing the gallery space as organized around the object involves *visualizing*, or (pace Langer) any form of *tactile* or *haptic* imagining, of the represented object's movements. Such deliberate imaginative episodes seem at best to accompany, and at worse to interfere with, the Langer experience. It may seem to ease the problem if we tinker with what is imagined—not actual movement or action, but merely the potential for it. But then it is unclear quite what it *is* to imagine the sculpted object having the potential for those things, if not to imagine (in some way) its doing them. What we are looking for is a way to make room for some thoughts of the object's potentialities, and the problem is that any clear sense in which imagining might do this is also one in which it is not so plausible after all that imagining with that content goes on.

Perhaps this will seem unfair. It is only implausible in the first place that Langer's experience involves visualizing, or other forms of sensory imagining, if it is assumed that such imagining will be both deliberate and at the forefront of consciousness. But can't it be involved in some way that is both more basic and less prominent? The appeal of this line lies partly in generality. There are three experiences before us. One is a form of seeing ordinary things—the experience of the environment as organized around one's own kinetic potential. Another is the experience in which a sculpture's content is grasped. The third is Langer's experience of gallery space as organized around the represented object. I have suggested that imagination plays a role in the third, and above (§II) implicitly rejected any role for it in the second. Walton explicitly gives it a role in the second, and certainly could give it a role in the third. But what of the first? We might see that too as involving imagination. For what could constitute experiencing things as organized around one's own potentialities, if not some lived sense of how one might move and act upon them? And why not then see the imagination,



operating in the background, as providing just that sense? This would enable us to give a single sort of account of all three experiences, and, whatever one thinks about the second, surely the first and third are intimately related.

The problem with this line is that it seriously weakens our hold on what is meant by 'the imagination'. It is no more obvious that the experience of things as organized around one's capacities involves imagining than it was that Langer's experience does. To insist that it does have a role, just one that is both fundamental and in the background, looks unhelpful. For sure, that insistence fits into a long and distinguished tradition. For those who have argued that we do experience things as organized around our kinetic potential have certainly thought that this was a, perhaps the, fundamental form of perceptual experience (Merleau-Ponty 1962; J.J. Gibson 1950, 1986). And there is a long history, running back through figures of the stature of Hume and Kant, of seeing perception itself as fundamentally involving something called the 'imagination'. The difficulty is that, as P.F. Strawson noted some time ago (1970), it is quite unclear that 'imagination' is univocal, between its use in such contexts and its use to describe mental activities which are deliberate and at the forefront of consciousness. The proposed defence of imagination's role seems fated to run into this quagmire of conflicting uses and missing definitions.

Thus I have made relatively little progress in explicating Langer's phenomenon. It remains unclear quite what thoughts about the represented object must be deployed. And it remains unclear in the context of which attitude (our candidate has been imagining) they are instigated. My hope is that nonetheless our grasp on Langer's account is sufficiently tight for us to assess it.

### **§VII Langer Assessed**

What are the strengths and weaknesses of Langer's view?

(i) First, Langer is well placed to explain why the subject matter of so much sculpture has

been severely limited. People and animals form almost the sole subject matter of the greater part of what has been called 'sculpture'. Even the twentieth century, with its radical reconceiving of sculptural art, saw masters such as Henry Moore defending the view that the human form is sculpture's proper subject. For Langer, this should be perfectly comprehensible. If sculpture is 'the image of kinetic volume in sensory space', one would expect it to concentrate on representing whatever can form the centre of such kinetic volumes, and that, since it is the larger creatures which dominate our experience of actual movement and action, means people and certain animals.

However, it may seem that to this strength there corresponds a weakness. Won't the account strain to accommodate certain sculptural works, particularly more abstract ones? For, to put the point crudely, if nothing is represented, or nothing definite enough to have 'kinetic potentialities', how can the sculpture organize surrounding space in the way described?

Partly in recognition of this problem, Langer characterizes what a sculpture needs to support the key experience as 'living' or 'vital' form, the sort of unity, the fittedness of part to part and part to function, which organisms exhibit:

'There is nothing actually organic about a work of sculpture. Even carved wood is dead matter. Only its form is the form of life, and the space it makes visible is vitalized as it would be by organic activity at its center. It is *virtual kinetic volume*, created by—and with—the semblance of living form.' (89)

This solution requires clarifying. The thorniest question is over what 'living form' amounts to. But a related obscurity concerns what it is supposed to be a property of. Is it the sculpture itself which exhibits living form, or some object the sculpture represents?

If Langer takes the former option, the proposal at least promises to apply to all the current problem cases. For Langer can claim that all abstract sculptures exhibit living form without having to suppose that they represent anything, as their abstractness apparently precludes.

The cost of this move is that she is forced to offer a different account of our experience of these sculptures from that, at least in our elaboration of it, she is offering for sculpture of other kinds. For there we have her claiming that the gallery space is experienced as organized around the kinetic potential of *the sculpted object*; while here she must say that it is experienced as organized around the potential of *the sculpture itself*.

The alternative avoids this fracture. Even apparently abstract works represent, and it is the represented object which displays living form. Such sculpture is thus not abstract in the sense of representing nothing. Rather, its abstractness amounts to the fact that what is represented is relatively imprecise: not a horse or man of a certain specifiable type, but merely something shaped in certain only loosely specifiable ways, perhaps with certain broad capacities for movement, and the like. In effect, this line treats abstract sculpture just as Richard Wollheim proposes to treat abstract painting (1987: 62). One might worry that the move will be empty. What is the force of claiming that the sculpture has a content, albeit one limited to shapes and other elemental properties, rather than simply talking about the sculpture itself, in terms of its having those properties? But the worry is misplaced, provided there is reason to distinguish between two sets of properties, those of the sculpture itself, and that at least partially distinct set which composes (for what alternative bearer is there?) what it represents. For instance, with at least some 'abstract' sculptures, appreciating them surely requires a sense of solidity, for all that the sculpture itself is manifestly hollow. Rather, the difficulty the manoeuvre faces is one of incompleteness. For even if many abstract sculptures can be accommodated in this way, why think that all can? Might not some be truly abstract, not merely not representing anything very specific, but not representing anything at all? If there are such cases, then at least some of the original counter-examples to Langer's view stand.

Perhaps either option is feasible. I will not attempt to adjudicate between them. Below I discuss how far Langer can afford to concede recalcitrant cases. If, as I will argue, she has some leeway, then perhaps at least the second defence here does not come at too high a price. For now, let us continue to review the possible cases. Are there other examples of sculpture to which Langer's account fails to apply?

(ii) One possible sort of case is provided by very small sculptures, such as Cellini's salt cellars in the form of animals.<sup>8</sup> What is the space they are experienced as organizing? However, the difficulty here is not that these pieces fail to organize their surroundings, so much as that their doing so leads to faintly absurd consequences. For there is something peculiar in the idea of the other condiments falling with reach of the salt cellar lion's pounce, while the little creature is itself dominated by the vase of flowers close by. If so, the case already fits the essentials of Langer's view, even if the experience she makes central would here be of dubious aesthetic worth. But the example merits further discussion, if only because it introduces two themes of more general theoretical interest.

The first is that the case highlights something implicit all along, i.e. that Langer's experience depends not merely on the sculpture, but also on the surrounding space. It must be such that it can, or can fruitfully, be seen as organized around the sculpted object. The point brings with it various complexities, to do with the role of intention in aesthetic effect, given that at least some sculptures are sufficiently portable to be displayed in a range of environments, many of which would not have been known to the sculptor, and some of which might even have been beyond anything he could have anticipated. But these complexities need not delay us, since they arise for many aesthetic effects, and not just Langer's.

We do better to note that the fact that Langer's phenomenon depends as much on the sculpture's context as on the sculpture itself allows us to build a bridge to some of the cases on the periphery of sculpture, as naturally conceived. For some three-dimensional models, such as tiny replica cars, might also organize the right surrounding space in something like the way Langer describes. It is a further question how special the surroundings must be for this to occur, and whether its occurrence would be aesthetically interesting; but at least their disposition to produce this effect, in the right circumstances, provides a link between these peripheral cases and the core of sculptural art. Perhaps the difference between the two is in part a matter of the range of gallery spaces each is disposed to organize around itself,

traditional sculpture dominating a wide range of spaces, these peripheral cases requiring very specific circumstances for the effect to obtain.

The second theme is that of scale, of how the size of the sculpture relates to that of the sculpted object. In general, of course, the size of a representation, even a broadly mimetic representation, does not directly determine the size of object represented—small portraits do not depict small people. The same is true of sculpture, even on a view on which sculptural representation depends on our experience of it (§II). The salt cellar does not represent a lion the size of the lump of silver; one does not take it to represent such a lion; and one does not even see in the lump a lion of that size. And this, even though one sees the size of the block quite clearly: it is just one of several properties of the sculpture set aside as irrelevant to its content. (The relative size of head to body matters, the absolute size of either does not.)

However, in certain respects this ability selectively to ignore certain features of the piece is weakened if we view sculpture as Langer suggests we should. For it is difficult to see the space around the sculpture as organized around the represented object's kinetic potential, without concentrating on that space in such a way as to be aware of the region of it occupied by the sculpture itself. It does not follow, certainly not as a matter of logic, that one must come to see the space as formed around a *sculpted object* of just the sculpture's proportions. But, at least as a matter of psychology, I think it hard for this not to be the result. This, of course, does not undermine the main point above. There is no pressure here for the sculpture to *represent* a lion of the salt cellar's size. For there is no suggestion that Langer's experience is the one relevant to sculpture's *content*. And even if the upshot is that the content-determining experience is corrupted, so that it does incorporate the lion's small size, in general experiences can determine content without every aspect of the experience determining a correlative aspect of content (Hopkins 1998: ch.6). But it does indicate some of the delicacy of the relation between sculpture and surrounding space, if Langer's experience is to occur in an aesthetically satisfying way.

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<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Rosalind Hursthouse for these examples, and for helpful discussion.

(iii) Other possible counter-examples suggest themselves. Might sculptured groups not exhibit a self-containedness which prevents them from interacting with their surroundings in the right way? Might, as it were, each not draw the kinetic fire of the others, so that our sense of their possible movement and action does not involve their interacting with the gallery space at all?

I am sceptical. There are certainly examples in which the interrelations between the various depicted figures are key—Giambologna's *Samson and the Philistine*, for instance. But such cases do not negate Langer's phenomenon, so much as background it. One still experiences the space around the sculpture in the light of the room needed for Samson to swing his weapon, or the space into which the hapless Philistine might spring, for all that one's attention is concentrated on the intense spiral of the two interlocked men.

Other cases do seem to efface Langer's effect more completely. Here we might think of any one of Ghilberti's panels for the doors of the Florence baptistery. But they do so, not merely through the interrelations of sculpted figures, but through setting them in a clearly defined sculpted space, a classical receding plane. And in doing so, they precisely lie nearer the boundary with art properly thought of as pictorial. For the effect of the sculpted surrounding space is precisely to create a sense of a different space from that of the gallery, in the sense traced above (§IV). Perhaps it seems question-begging to dismiss these examples as only marginally sculptural. But there are other considerations motivating this, such as their combining full-blown sculptural representation with low-relief and even at times engraving. In these respects too, they seem to occupy a region between sculpture and painting, and that is how, in general, tradition has received them. If this marginal status is essential to their frustrating our attempts to experience them in the way Langer has described, they seem as readily to provide a confirmation of her view as a threat to it.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Ghilberti panels in fact involve several other factors antipathetic to Langer's phenomenon. The most important is the small scale of the figures, relative to the vast space of the piazza which they would have to organize. Another is the quality of montage produced by so many distinct sculpted scenes lying side by side. In effect, this puts the organizational power of one panel in competition with that of the others, thereby further neutralising any influence each might have.

(iv) However, there is a more central class of counter-example: sculpted portrait busts. It seems hard to marginalize these—they have a central place in our tradition of sculpted art. Yet it is far from clear that Langer's claims apply to them. For what is the 'kinetic potential' of the represented head, or head and shoulders, such that gallery space is seen as shaped by its possible movements? Of course, it is true that we experience these sculptures as interacting with their surroundings. For we ourselves interact with them in a way somewhat akin to our interaction with other people. Hence it is not mere ease of inspection that encourages us to position such busts at head height. But it is not clear that this interaction is the sort Langer has described. For one thing, it does not clearly involve action, at least not action in some sense in which the environment might be appear receptive or resistant to such—any action here involved would seem to be more psychological in nature. And for another, it needs spelling out how any such interaction differs from that with a *picture* portrait. So Langer faces a challenge. She must either show that busts are after all experienced in the way she has described, or show that bust portraiture is more marginal than it seems, or concede that busts do indeed constitute a central class of examples to which her claims do not apply.

I think there is some hope for her with respect to first two responses here. But let us suppose that these fail, and that she must adopt the third. How serious is this concession? Indeed, how important in general is it that Langer's claims fit all sculpture?

(v) The answer is that it is not very important at all. For Langer need not have ambitions that are thereby frustrated. One such ambition would be that of defining sculpture. My suspicion is that the notion of sculpture is subject to too many pressures—from the etiology of the works in question, the form of representation they exhibit, and indeed the aesthetic satisfactions they offer—for the class to be genuinely unified. That, indeed, creates some room for a revisionist definition, and as such I think Langer's would be as well-placed as any other, for all that it might have to reject bust portraiture as genuinely sculptural. But her claims are of interest independently of any such application of them, and she would do well not to burden herself with extra argumentative commitments. Her ambitions are better seen as

purely aesthetic, and in particular as capturing what is distinctive about sculpture, aesthetically speaking. She can seek to do this without claiming that her answer exhausts what there is to value in sculpture—and hence without having to make the highly implausible claim that bust portraiture is without aesthetic value. And she can even, I think, avoid claiming that her account states what it is for sculpture to be valuable *as sculpture*. For it might be, as indeed seems plausible, definitive of sculpture as an art that it offer, not only its own distinctive satisfactions, but others common to many other arts as well. It should be enough for Langer that the feature she has described is (a) one of substantial aesthetic interest; and (b) unique to sculptural art. So let me end by considering whether her account meets these conditions. I begin with the second, with whether the pictorial arts in particular could ever offer what Langer claims sculpture does.

(vi) One sort of case must be conceded immediately. It seems there at least could be a perfect *trompe l'oeil* painting. There is no reason why such a painting could not depict, and thus be mistaken for, a sculpture. And then it seems very likely that such a painting could induce precisely the experience Langer has described. For even if that experience requires one to engage with the sculpture from a range of positions, one can imagine a cleverly positioned series of perfectly illusory pictures providing just such a range. However, the concession here is trivial. For it does not force Langer to accept that the satisfactions of sculpture could be reproduced by a picture *seen as such*. And surely in general the aesthetics of an art form is a matter of what it offers, when appreciated for what it is.

More substantial concessions are harder to force. It is easy to think of cases in which there is *some* interaction between depicted space and gallery space. Sometimes, as in Masaccio's *Holy Trinity* or Titian's Pesaro chapel, depicted space is a continuation of the actual space in which the painted surface lies. Sometimes the way depicted light falls within the depicted scene is dictated by the actual sources of light in the surrounding room. One can even imagine a case in which the way gallery space appears organized is affected by one's perception of the depicted scene. The columns in a church might be so arranged that one could see them as grouped in either of two ways. A picture depicting the continuation of the



nave might show the continuing space in such a way as to compel one to apply one grouping rather than the other to the continuation, thereby determining which way gallery space itself appears. But although here gallery space is experienced as organized a certain way, and it is so as a result of grasping the picture's content, the organizing principle is not the potential for action of any depicted item. Nor can I think of any example in which this, the crucial condition, is met. Thus, at least until some such example is produced, I am inclined to think that Langer has indeed identified something that many sculptures do offer, and no picture could. I doubt that the impossibility goes deep. No doubt it turns on facts about our psychology, and perhaps our physiology. But it goes quite deep enough for aesthetics. For we make sculptural and pictorial art for ourselves as we are, not for possible creatures with other perceptual and processing capacities. And it is a conclusion of genuine significance if, as we are, we can find in many sculptures something no picture could offer us.

(vii) However, one serious challenge to Langer's view may remain. This is to show how the feature she describes is aesthetically significant. From one perspective, this demand seems unreasonable. There is a form of vertigo familiar in aesthetics, induced by seeing that to any account of the value of something a further question always arises, that of why the terms in which its value has been explicated are themselves not just as questionably of value as the original item. If there is in general no cure for this vertigo, it is unfair to challenge Langer to provide a foundation for sculpture's value so steady as to banish it. But from another perspective the demand is justified. For consider the pictorial phenomena just described, those coming closest to the Langer phenomenon. These seem rather trivial achievements, somewhat as illusionistic triumphs sometimes are. The sculptural phenomenon is one to which they are only distant approximations. But where, in the differences between it and them, does its value reside, such that, though they are trivial, it is not? From this perspective, Langer needs to tell us how the sculptural form of 'virtual space' amounts to a serious achievement, why, that is, we should care about it. And, from this viewpoint, if she cannot do that, her phenomenon, for all that it is distinctive to sculpture, is a mere curiosity of that art.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Thanks are due to audiences at the Open University and the Imagination and the Arts conference for stimulating discussion.

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