

## Artworks, Objects and Structures

Sherri Irvin

Published in *The Continuum Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Anna Christina Ribeiro (Continuum, 2012), 55-73. Please cite the published version.

It is tempting to think that most artworks are simply a subset of the physical objects in the world: there is my bike in the shed out back, the magnolia tree in the yard, and then the small painting by Ruth Ann Borum on my dining room wall. Ruth Ann made the painting by applying paint and ink to canvas stretched over wood. I bought the painting in her studio, carried it home, and hung it on two screws so it would not go out of level.

These facts seem compatible with Ruth Ann's artwork being a physical object. However, there are reasons to resist the idea that the artwork is identical to the painted canvas. In this essay I will present the difficulties faced by the claim that artworks are simple physical objects (or, in the case of non-visual art forms, simple structures of another sort), and will examine alternative proposals regarding their ontological nature. Though my focus on what follows will be on works of visual art, much of the discussion applies to works in other forms as well.

### I. Methodology

Ontological theorizing about natural objects might aspire to carve nature at its joints, picking out and characterizing groups of objects that share many features and stand in common causal relations to other objects. Though our desire to theorize about natural objects is undoubtedly influenced by the way in which they serve human interests, it seems that the objects themselves exist independently of us, and grasping their natures is, in large part, a matter of ascertaining features whose import is not exhausted by their salience to us.<sup>1</sup>

Artworks, however, are not like natural objects. An artwork comes to exist as a result of human activity and is understood within the context of social practices that govern appreciation and interpretation. Indeed, it appears that many of an artwork's features cannot be grasped unless such context is taken into account.<sup>2</sup> It is, accordingly, not clear that we can even make sense of the idea of grasping artworks as they are independently of human activities and concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> This conception of the ontology of natural objects is controversial; some hold that even natural objects must be understood as socially constructed insofar as we attempt to theorize about them. My aim here is not to argue for the adequacy of this conception but simply to point out that, while intuitively attractive for natural objects, it lacks plausibility with regard to artworks.

<sup>2</sup> A seminal argument for this thesis is found in Kendall Walton, 1970.

Moreover, even if we restrict our consideration to works in the visual arts, as I do here, inspection of the items in any major museum will reveal a diverse array of objects that are made of very different materials and have very different appearances and histories. Some have more in common with non-art objects than with other art objects: a Martian performing classifications based on physical resemblance would likely group Dan Flavin's sculptures involving fluorescent light fixtures with items sold in many a hardware store rather than with Donatello's Abraham and Isaac.

The class of artworks, then, cannot be picked out by identifying a set of common intrinsic features possessed by all art objects.<sup>3</sup> What they have in common seems, instead, to be a matter of their role in a set of human practices. Determining what sort of thing an artwork is, accordingly, is a matter of examining those practices to see what kind of entity is capable of playing the role in question.

Different theorists have expressed this thought in different ways. David Davies describes the "pragmatic constraint" on ontological theorizing, according to which

[a]rtworks must be entities that can bear the sorts of properties rightly ascribed to what are termed 'works' in our reflective critical and appreciative practice; that are individuated in the way such 'works' are or would be individuated[;] and that have the modal properties that are reasonably ascribed to 'works', in that practice.<sup>4</sup>

Amie Thomasson argues, similarly, that

the only appropriate method for determining [the] ontological status [of artworks] is to attempt to unearth and make explicit the assumptions about ontological status built into the relevant practices and beliefs of those dealing with works of art, to systematize these, and to put them into philosophical terms....<sup>5</sup>

An account of the ontological status of artworks that is seriously at odds with the art community's intuitions about the nature of art, then, should be rejected.

Because of the way in which artworks are constituted within human practices, appeals to our intuitions and to common claims about artworks are unavoidable. As many have observed, though, these intuitions and common claims are not all consistent with one another. To do ontology, we must decide which intuitions and claims are to be treated as central and which as marginal; and, predictably, different theorists disagree about these matters. As we will see, the argument for any ontological theory about art must include assumptions, whether implicit or argued for, about the primacy of a subset of claims commonly made about artworks.

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<sup>3</sup> See Morris Weitz, 1956, for an influential discussion.

<sup>4</sup> D. Davies, 2004, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Thomasson 2004, pp. 87-88.

## II. Artworks and physical objects: the appeal of the identity relation

A natural starting point in thinking about the nature of many familiar examples of artworks, such as the paintings of Artemisia Gentileschi and the sculptures of Michelangelo, is to see them as identical to certain physical objects: a canvas with paint on it, a piece of carved stone, and so forth.<sup>6</sup> Many of the things that we say about them seem to concern their physicality: we may speak of the sculpture's size and the smoothness of its surface, of the thickness of the application of paint on the surface of a painting, of the fact that one or the other has suffered damage.

Encounters with these artworks happen largely through vision, which is a mode of detecting the physical properties of an object; and when a work is to be included in an exhibition, the object may be shipped around the world so that different audiences may have such encounters. The creation of such artworks centrally involves the manipulation of a physical material, and when the integrity of that physical material is sufficiently compromised, or its visible features irretrievably obscured, the artwork is thereby destroyed.

In addition, it seems that we have direct ontological intuitions about the nature of artworks: when asked what kind of thing a particular visual artwork is, most people will likely say (or give an answer that implies) that it is a physical object. What is Michelangelo's *Pietà*? A piece of stone that Michelangelo carved. Such an answer may well be given by both ordinary people and experts, such as curators and conservators. If the content of our concept is fixed by our ontological intuitions, as Thomasson suggests, then both our implicit and explicit notions about the ontology of art seem to point toward the idea that visual artworks are physical objects.

This idea is appealing for other reasons as well. In ontology as elsewhere, it is attractive to start with the simplest theory we can, invoking familiar kinds of objects whose relations are not overly complicated. The physical object is a familiar kind of entity, subject to causal relations of familiar kinds with other physical objects. If artworks turned out to be physical objects, this would allow us to account for them within straightforward ontological categories that are already required to account for other phenomena in the world. Though ontological theorizing about art might turn out to be a pursuit rather lacking in excitement, the parsimony of the resulting theory would be a strong consideration in its favor.

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<sup>6</sup> Curt John Ducasse (1929, 1944) offers such a view. Margaret Macdonald (1952-1953, p. 206) identifies visual artworks with physical artifacts. Richard Wollheim considered the view that visual artworks are identical to physical objects of sufficient interest that he added a supplementary essay on the topic to the second edition of *Art and Its Objects* (1980), without pronouncing on the truth of the view. Jerrold Levinson (1996) defends a sophisticated physical object view that is immune to some of the criticisms discussed below.

### III. Problems with the identity relation

In this section I discuss a number of challenges to the identity of artworks and physical objects. In section IV, I will review a number of the alternative ontological positions that have been offered in response to such challenges.

#### III.1 Problems involving properties

One kind of challenge to the identity of artworks with physical objects has appealed to Leibniz's law, which states that if two entities have different properties, they cannot be identical. This type of challenge involves a claim that artworks possess properties that physical objects do not or cannot possess.

An early formulation of such a challenge, discussed by Richard Wollheim, 1968, holds that physical objects cannot possess representational or expressive properties (e.g., the property that a yellow patch on the painted surface represents the sun, or the property of expressing the power of a king), whereas artworks do possess such properties. A related worry pertains to the artwork's aesthetic properties, at least some of which seem to be underdetermined by the object's intrinsic physical properties. Kendall Walton, 1970, argues that one and the same object, seen in relation to two different categories, will yield artworks with different aesthetic properties. It might thus be concluded that the artwork's aesthetic properties cannot belong to the object alone.<sup>7</sup>

A further important class of properties we assign to the artwork is that of properties related to the artist's achievement: the artwork may be innovative, masterly, and so forth.<sup>8</sup> However, the mere physical object does not have these properties.<sup>9</sup> Had it been deployed in a different context, it might well have manifested very different achievement-related properties: it might have been more or less innovative, for example, depending on what other works had already been created. Since the artist's achievement is a central aspect of what we appropriately consider when we appreciate an artwork, according to this challenge, the artwork cannot be identical with the physical object.

#### III.2 Problems involving modality

Many of the problems involving properties described in section III.1 can be solved by a rather straightforward maneuver. A piece of painted metal, taken on its own, may not possess any representational properties; but when it is placed in a particular context where certain conventions are operative, it may come to represent the curving road ahead. Perhaps, then, physical objects do in fact possess

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<sup>7</sup> Levinson (1980) offers several helpful examples of the context-dependence of the aesthetic properties of musical works.

<sup>8</sup> This point is discussed extensively by Gregory Currie (1989).

<sup>9</sup> This does not show, however, that the properties could not be attributed to some more richly construed physical object. See the discussion of the constitution relation in section IV.2 below.

all the properties we appropriately attribute to artworks, by virtue of the fact that they have been deployed in specific contexts. The expressive, representational, and other properties discussed above would then be thought of as relational properties of the object.

Can such a response allow us to see the artwork as identical to the physical object? Unfortunately not. For the artwork possesses the properties in question necessarily, whereas the physical object is deployed in a particular context only contingently and, thus, possesses any properties attributable to its context only contingently. One and the same sign could be hung in one context to indicate that the road curves ahead, but then moved into another context (perhaps where different conventions are operative) and used to indicate that the road surface is slick. An artwork, on the other hand, has its meaning properties necessarily, not contingently: to speak of Michelangelo's Pietà as representing something other than Mary holding the lifeless body of Jesus would be to say something incoherent.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the very property of being an artwork is possessed necessarily by the artwork but contingently, if at all, by the physical object, which could have existed in a world without art.<sup>11</sup>

A related challenge pertains to the identity conditions of artworks. Given the way we ordinarily identify artworks, it does not seem incoherent to suggest that Leonardo could have created the Mona Lisa – that very artwork, not simply some other work of the same name – by painting on a different piece of canvas and using different tubes of paint.<sup>12</sup> If this is indeed a logically possible circumstance, Mona Lisa cannot be identical to the particular painted canvas hanging in the Louvre.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John Dilworth, 2005, argues at length for the non-identity of artworks and the associated physical objects, on the grounds that artworks have necessary content properties while physical objects cannot. Dilworth does not claim that the artwork has all of its content properties necessarily; thus the argument does not fall afoul of Guy Rohrbaugh's (2003) observation that artworks exhibit at least some modal flexibility (such that an artwork could have had slightly different content, yet maintained its identity as that very work).

<sup>11</sup> See Lynne Rudder Baker, 2000, p. 30. Also, for reasons discussed by Ruth Barcan Marcus, 1961, it is not viable to say that the artwork is identical to the physical object in this world but not in other worlds; identity relations are necessary relations, and must hold in all worlds if they hold at all.

<sup>12</sup> Dilworth, 2005, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> Those persuaded by arguments for the necessity of origin may resist the claim that the Mona Lisa could have been made with a different canvas and different paints. See, for instance, Nathan Salmon, 1979.

A final challenge pertains to the persistence conditions of artworks and physical objects.<sup>14</sup> Marcel Duchamp created his work In Advance of the Broken Arm by acquiring a manufactured snow shovel, titling it and presenting it for display. The physical object existed before the artwork did. The persistence conditions of the two entities are distinct; thus, they cannot be identical.

### **III.3 Cases in which there is no one-to-one relation between the artwork and a physical object**

Most of the above discussion pertains to cases in which the artwork bears a special relation to some particular physical object; it's just that there are reasons to think this relation must be something other than identity. An additional problem arises in cases where the relation of artwork to physical object is not one to one.

The most obvious sort of case is in art forms such as printmaking, photography and cast sculpture, where one act of artmaking may result in the generation of multiple objects, each of which is (under standard accounts) an instance of the artwork. The problem of multiples has been discussed extensively elsewhere, and I will not recapitulate the discussion here.<sup>15</sup> However, even within the singular visual arts, there are cases where no one-to-one relation holds between the artwork and a particular physical object. In such cases, the identity of artwork to physical object is clearly ruled out.

Several of the installation works of Felix Gonzalez-Torres involve the display of piles of candy that viewers are permitted to consume. When a particular work is on display, curators top up the pile with new candy from time to time. When the work is not on display, there may be no candy kept in storage; an entirely new batch of candy may be purchased for the next exhibition. However, it doesn't seem that the work itself goes out of and then back into existence (any more than a musical work exists only when it is being performed). Thus, the work cannot be identical to any particular physical object or assemblage. Something similar is true of many works of contemporary installation art: some or all of the physical objects displayed may be constituted anew for each exhibition and discarded after the exhibition is over.<sup>16</sup>

John Dilworth, 2005, discusses the possibility that two artists, working at different times and without communication on the manipulation of some common physical material, might compose two distinct artworks. Each of them has the option to either accept or reject changes in the object made by the other. If, at some point in

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<sup>14</sup> Technically speaking, issues of persistence are distinct from issues of modality; I treat them together here because they are closely related and because frequently the same theoretical maneuver will resolve problems of both types.

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent overview, see Stephen Davies, 2003. I will note, below, instances where theorists are motivated in part by an attempt to give a unified account of singular and multiple artworks.

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of such cases, including an explanation of why I see them as singular rather than multiply instanced works, see Sherri Irvin, 2008.

the process, both artists come to regard their respective artworks as finished, they will, Dilworth claims, have made two distinct artworks which stand in a symmetrical relation to a single physical object (pp. 133-136). Clearly, that relation cannot be identity, since identity is transitive: on pain of contradiction, two non-identical things (the artworks) cannot both stand in a relation of identity to some third thing.

Dominic McIver Lopes, 2007, discusses an intriguing sort of case in Japanese architecture. The Shinto shrine Ise Jingu, which is some 1500 years old, contains a structure known as the goshoden, housing Amaterasu Omikami, the sun goddess. However, the goshoden is not made up of any 1500-year-old materials; it is rebuilt approximately every twenty years. The present goshoden is not torn down to accommodate a new construction on the same spot; instead, the structure that will become the goshoden is constructed on the kodenshi, the vacant lot next to the current goshoden. Once the construction of the new structure is complete, the sun goddess is transferred to it in a ritual; at this point the new structure becomes the goshoden, and the earlier structure is dismantled to leave behind only the vacant lot, or kodenshi. In this manner, the goshoden and kodenshi switch places every twenty years. One way of regarding this situation is to think that the goshoden is a single architectural work that has persisted (albeit with a complex history) over a thousand years, and that bears symmetrical relations to many distinct physical objects while being identical to none.

Finally, some instances of conceptual art, which grew out of and is normally treated as belonging to the visual art tradition, involve no candidate physical object at all. For Robert Barry's 1969 Closed Gallery Piece, the artist declared the gallery closed for the duration of the exhibition. The typed card by way of which this declaration was made seems inessential to the work, and clearly is not identical to it.

Works such as these demand an ontological account that does not make them out to be identical to physical objects. Of course, they might be thought of as special cases; however, an ontological account that can accommodate both central cases of singular visual artworks and these unusual cases in the same way will, at least to that extent, have parsimony in its favor.

#### **IV. Alternatives to identity**

If the visual artwork is not identical to a physical object, what might it be? In this section, I describe and assess a variety of alternative theories that have been offered.

##### **IV.1 The artwork as an idea**

Benedetto Croce, 1921, and R. G. Collingwood, 1938, suggested that the artwork is in fact an idea in the mind of the artist. On this account, the viewer's task is to use the physical object to reconstruct the artist's idea. Only when such reconstruction has been accomplished can the viewer be said to apprehend the artwork.

Such a view violates the pragmatic constraint invoked by Thomasson, 2004, and D. Davies, 2004: our practices of interpretation and criticism do not seem typically to have us regard the physical object as a prop for reconstruction of the artist's idea. Moreover, our ontological intuitions seem clearly at odds with the notion that artworks, in general, are ideas: asked about the nature of Donatello's Abraham and Isaac, we will not say that it was an idea Donatello had that led him to carve a hunk of stone in a certain way. Finally, as has often been pointed out (e.g., Stephen Davies, 2003), it seems flatly incorrect to suggest that someone can create a work of painting or sculpture simply by having an idea, no matter how complex and refined. Even if we charitably regard the idea in question as one that pertains to the use of a medium and can be fully developed only through manipulation of that medium, it seems incorrect to say that the idea itself, rather than some outward product of the manipulation, is the artwork.

Clearly, a theory with such significant drawbacks would need strong independent reasons to motivate it. For the purposes of this essay, we may simply note that it goes much further, in rejecting a relationship between the artwork and the physical object, than is warranted by the considerations adduced above.

#### **IV.2 The artwork as constituted by the physical object**

If artworks are not identical to physical objects, they still seem to stand in some significant relation to such objects. Some have proposed that this relation is that the artwork is constituted by a physical object. A constitution relation may be invoked to deal with concerns about identity and persistence conditions. It seems that a lump of clay can maintain its identity through any number of manipulations: one and the same lump of clay may be shaped into a portrait bust or a streamlined abstract form, or it may simply be rolled into a ball and put away to await its owner's next inspiration. A particular sculpture made from the clay, however, does not survive such major changes in configuration: if I roll the clay into a ball I will have destroyed your portrait bust. The clay, then, constitutes the sculpture without being identical to it.

What exactly is the relation of constitution? Lynne Rudder Baker, 2000, discusses Michelangelo's David and Piece, the block of marble that constitutes it. David, for as long as it exists, shares both the physical properties and the spatial location of Piece. Moreover, 'many of David's aesthetic properties depend on Piece's physical properties: David's pent-up energy depends on, among other things, the way that the marble is shaped to distribute the weight' (p. 31). However, David and Piece are not identical: David has causally efficacious properties (such as the power to evoke certain kinds of reactions in people) that Piece alone could not have had, if it had never been placed in the circumstances that brought David into existence. These

properties, if they belong to Piece at all, belong to it only contingently, whereas they belong to David necessarily.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to emphasize that the view that David is constituted by Piece does not rule out the possibility that David itself is a physical object. This sort of account is often given for non-art artifacts: a candle may be a physical object co-located with the lump of wax that constitutes it, though we resist saying that the candle and the lump are identical because they differ in their identity and persistence conditions. David, while not identical to Piece, might nonetheless be a physical object of a different order that shares the spatiotemporal location of Piece. Strictly speaking, then, the constitution account need not be seen as denying that the artwork is identical to some physical object; it denies only that the artwork is identical to a mere physical object like a hunk of stone.<sup>18</sup>

To claim that artworks are constituted by physical objects is not yet to explain many of their most significant features. The relation between the artwork and its constituting matter may be quite complex (for instance, an artwork may lose part of its constituting matter, as when an arm falls off a sculpture, or gain matter, as when a painting is restored) and may vary from case to case. The constitution view in itself also does not explain the artwork's possession of essential features like a title and a correct orientation. A fully fleshed out account of artworks would need to supplement the constitution view with an account of the persistence conditions for artworks and of the way in which an artwork gains its significant features by virtue of the sociocultural positioning of the constituting matter. This is not, of course, to deny that the constitution relation may play a role in the correct account of at least some artworks.

The constitution view also faces challenges from cases discussed in section II.3 above. The works of Felix Gonzalez-Torres do not seem to go into and out of existence, even though there may be times when the pile of candy has been completely depleted (or, in between exhibitions, when no candy is kept in storage). The work, then, cannot be essentially constituted by a physical object. The same is true, a fortiori, of works of conceptual art like Barry's Closed Gallery Piece. Perhaps the goshoden at Ise Jingu is always constituted by some physical object; however, the fact that the work leaps from one chunk of constituting matter to another may leave us unsatisfied with the explanatory power of the constitution relation. If the relation can be instantiated so differently, and may fail to hold at all in some cases, we may suspect that there is something further about the nature of the artwork that must be invoked to explain whether and in what circumstances a constitution relation holds.

#### **IV.3 The artwork as embodied in the physical object**

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<sup>17</sup> For more on the distinction between the identity relation and the constitution relation, see Baker, 1997, and Mark Johnston, 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Baker, 2000, endorses the idea of co-location of physical objects of different orders, as do Levinson, 1996, and Stecker, 2003.

Perhaps, rather than being constituted by a physical object, the artwork is embodied in it. An embodiment relation is less intimate than a constitution relation: it allows that the artwork may have many properties that are not possessed by the embodying object at all, even contingently.

Joseph Margolis, 1974, describes artworks as 'physically embodied and culturally emergent entities'. The embodiment relation invoked by Margolis has two features: the identity of the artwork is 'necessary linked to the identity of the physical object', and 'the work of art must possess properties other than those ascribed to the physical object' (p. 189). (The second feature explains why the relation between the artwork and the physical object is one of embodiment rather than identity.) However, the work may also inherit some of the properties of the physical object.

An advantage Margolis claims for the embodiment relation is that 'whatever convenience of reference and identity may be claimed for a physical object may be claimed for the work of art embodied in it' (pp. 188-189). To locate Artemisia Gentileschi's work Judith Slaying Holofernes, one locates a particular piece of canvas with paint on it.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, merely to invoke a relationship of embodiment is not to explain what extra properties the artwork has or where they come from. Margolis's notion of cultural emergence is meant to do this part of the explanatory work. The art-related practices of a particular cultural context are what make it the case that we can identify an artwork as being embodied in a particular physical object and appropriately attribute certain emergent properties to it that do not belong to the physical object. And, indeed, in Margolis's view it appears that all it is to be an artwork is to be an entity that is rightly seen as embodied in a particular physical object according to some art-relevant cultural tradition. The emergent properties of the artwork, in turn, are just whatever properties are rightly attributable to it within that cultural tradition.<sup>20</sup>

It certainly seems right to suggest that some of the artwork's properties depend in a robust way on the cultural tradition within which it is identified. But Margolis's view leaves the nature of this dependence obscure. Just what facts within the cultural tradition determine when an artwork can rightly be said to be embodied in a physical particular, and what properties, either physical or emergent, can rightly be ascribed to it? A fully elaborated ontology of visual artworks should provide answers to these questions. In addition, if we take seriously Margolis's claim that the artwork's identity is necessarily linked to that of the physical object, we may wonder whether this view can allow for the fact that the identity conditions for

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<sup>19</sup> If Dilworth, 2005, is correct in claiming that one physical object might bear symmetrical relations to two distinct artworks by different artists, the individuation of artworks will not be able to proceed simply by the individuation of the associated physical objects in the way Margolis suggests.

<sup>20</sup> Margolis also holds that the work can change over time as the cultural context changes.

artworks typically do not require that a work be associated with a particular physical object.

#### IV.4 The artwork as the content of the physical object

Dilworth (2005, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, among others) claims that the relation between the artwork and the physical object is one of representation: the painted canvas, rather than being identical with the artwork, in fact represents the artwork, which may in turn represent some subject matter (if the artwork is representational). The artwork, then, is a kind of content possessed by the physical object.

Dilworth, 2008a, draws an analogy with language. The following is a 'concrete linguistic sentence token' (p. 342):

The Dude is a cat.

The concrete sentence token represents the proposition that the Dude is a cat. It represents this content only contingently: in other circumstances where different linguistic conventions were operative, it might have represented a different proposition, such as that The Rock is a wrestler.

The proposition that the Dude is a cat, Dilworth suggests, has content of its own: it represents a particular animal, the Dude, and represents him as a cat. The proposition represents this content necessarily, not contingently: a proposition with different content would not have been that proposition.

The proposition is not identical to the concrete sentence token, which might have represented some other content or been meaningless. Also, that same proposition can be represented by any number of distinct concrete sentence tokens. The proposition also is not identical to the content it represents: the proposition is an abstract entity with truth conditions, whereas the Dude is a concrete entity with whiskers.

Dilworth proposes that we see the artwork as analogous to the proposition, and the associated physical object as analogous to the concrete sentence token. The connection between the object and the artwork is a purely contingent one, while the connection between the artwork and its representational content is necessary.

The artwork, thus, is a form of content contingently represented by the physical object. As Dilworth acknowledges, representation functions differently in the artwork case than in the proposition case. The connection between a sentence token and the proposition it represents is purely conventional (those same marks could have been used to represent a completely different proposition), whereas the connection between a physical object and an artwork involves a form of representation that functions iconically, or through exact resemblance: "an irregularly shaped and textured physical brushstroke on the surface of the paint

would express an exactly similar shaped and textured brushstroke content element in the relevant artwork structure” (2007, p. 25).

The theory of artworks as representational content of physical objects has notable advantages. It gives the same account of the artwork regardless of art form, and it allows us to give similar accounts of different kinds of objects each of which may bear a special relation to the work, whether the work is singular or multiple. Thus, a photographic print, a negative, and a digital file may all represent the same work of photography; the original score, a copy of the score, a performance, and a recording may all represent the same work of music.<sup>21</sup>

A consequence of the representational content view, acknowledged by Dilworth, is that any physical object that is not perceptibly different from the object presented by the artist, and that is offered for consideration in relation to the same context in which the artist’s object was presented, represents exactly the same content that the original physical object did. Thus, there is no unique relation between the artwork and any particular physical object; it is merely a contingent matter that we have not yet perfected the ability to make perceptually indistinguishable replicas of paintings and sculptures that would represent exactly the same content.<sup>22</sup>

A limitation of the view emerges in relation to certain works of contemporary art. Kelly Mark’s 1996-1997 work Object Carried for One Year, as its title suggests, features a physical object that Mark carried in her pocket every day for a full year. I tend to doubt that we should see the physical object as chiefly a vehicle for the expression of content. But suppose, for the sake of the argument, that we grant this point. Whatever content this object expresses, it does so not only by virtue of its appearance but also by virtue of its historical and relational properties. Mark could not have made the same artwork by presenting a perceptually indistinguishable replica that she had not in fact carried for a year. But when content comes to be a function of historical properties as well as appearance, it is difficult to see how we are to determine precisely what that content consists of. There is no iconic or exact resemblance function we can use to transform historical properties of the object into content properties of the artwork. Nor can the content simply inherit those historical properties: the content itself was not carried for one year. Is there, then, any way to determine the content represented by the object? If not, then Dilworth’s view seems to render the artwork undesirably elusive.

The candy works of Felix Gonzalez-Torres present a related problem. The shape, size and configuration of the pile of candy change whenever an audience member or

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<sup>21</sup> Dilworth 2005, p. 76; 2007, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Currie, 1989 (esp. ch. 4), holds a similar view, and Jeanne Wacker, 1960 (p. 224), makes a comment in the same spirit. Dilworth (2005, pp. 78-79; 2007, p. 28) acknowledges that artistic genres such as painting recognize the special status of *original* representations; his view does not conflict with the idea that there may be a unique original representation in such cases.

curator removes candy from or adds candy to the pile. If the content of the pile is determined by an iconic or exact resemblance relation, then that content is constantly shifting. However, it does not seem correct to identify Gonzalez-Torres's work as constantly changing.<sup>23</sup> Is there some other way to translate from the physical features of the object into some expressed content that can be identified with the artwork? Dilworth does not offer any obvious resources here.

The modal arguments deployed by Dilworth against the identity of the artwork and the physical object are convincing: Mark might, it seems, have created the same work by carrying a qualitatively identical but numerically distinct object in her pocket for a year. The view of the work as pure content, however, makes the relation between the work and the object too distant; and in some instances it makes the artwork unnecessarily elusive. To avoid these problems, one might propose that the work has the object as a part, along with other parts (such as the title). Dilworth, 2007, argues that, since a different object could have played the same role that the actual object in fact plays, the actual object cannot be a part of the artwork (pp. 32-33). This argument relies on the unstated assumption that parthood relations, like identity relations, are necessary if they hold at all. This assumption, however, is clearly false: my bicycle might have had a different wheel (and, indeed, might come to have a different wheel, should the present one be irreparably damaged), but this does not show that its current wheel is not part of the bicycle. Modal arguments of the sort Dilworth successfully deploys do not rule out a parthood relation between physical objects and artworks in the way they rule out the identity relation.

#### **IV.5 The artwork as a structure**

If the artwork is identical neither to a concrete physical object nor to some abstract representational content, perhaps it is some sort of complex structure picked out by the artist. The structure might have a physical object as its part, as suggested by Arthur Danto, 1981 (pp. 115-135). Danto holds that an artwork has two fundamental components: a physical object and an interpretation put forward by the artist.<sup>24</sup> Qualitatively identical objects, Danto suggests, may become components of very different artworks given the artist's interpretation; and something that started out as a mere real object, like a snow shovel or urinal, may come to be a component of an artwork through the artist's interpretative activity.

In Danto's view, then, the artwork may be thought of as a two-part structure including a physical object plus an interpretation. To assuage some of the modal worries expressed above, we may add that the particular physical object is a part of the artwork only contingently; some other qualitatively similar object might have served in that role.

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<sup>23</sup> I am grateful to Martin Montminy for this point.

<sup>24</sup> Danto often speaks as though the physical object itself becomes the artwork. Given the arguments advanced above, I charitably interpret his view as claiming that the object becomes part of the artwork.

The idea that the artist's interpretation is part of the artwork is not without its difficulties. One might object to the idea that an interpretation is in fact part of the work on the grounds that interpretations are about artworks, not about mere objects. It is difficult to see how an interpretation could both be a component of an artwork and be about that very artwork.<sup>25</sup> In addition, it appears that on Danto's view the interpretation is determined by the artist's intentions, and one might wish to resist the idea that the artwork's nature is so closely tied up with the artist's mental states. An alternative account might give the artist a special role in constituting the artwork, but without suggesting that the artist's interpretation is itself part of the work.

Such an account may be reconstructed from the views of Jerrold Levinson. Levinson, 1980, holds that a musical work is an 'indicated structure', or a structure of sounds indicated by a particular artist at a particular time and in a particular musico-historical context. The musical work cannot be identified with a pure sound structure, Levinson suggests, since the same structure deployed in different contexts would have different qualities. In order to individuate musical works adequately, then, we must incorporate within them an account of the context in which they were deployed.

Though Levinson himself does not defend such a view, we might suggest, in a similar spirit, that the visual artwork is some sort of structure (construed broadly, as a set of elements positioned in relation to one another) indicated by an artist in a particular historico-artistic context.<sup>26</sup> While the structure cannot, it seems, simply be a physical object (given the modal arguments discussed above), it might have a physical object as a part, in the way Danto suggests. Or the nature of the structure might differ from one work to another.<sup>27</sup>

The notion of the artwork as a contextualized, indicated structure allows for it to possess, necessarily, properties (such as content) that are possessed by the physical object only contingently, if at all. However, it might be complained that the metaphysical nature of the indicated structure remains somewhat obscure. Is an indicated structure a structure plus an action of indication? If so, then we might be led to prefer an account of artworks as actions, as discussed in the following section. Another worry is that the notion of indication is vague: Levinson gives no clear account of what indication consists in and does not adequately distinguish between what an individual indicates in her role as composer and what she indicates in her

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<sup>25</sup> Stecker, 1997, makes a related point.

<sup>26</sup> Levinson's (1996) actual view about singular works of visual art is that they are physical objects of a complex and sophisticated sort. As he acknowledges (1985, 1996), the title of a visual artwork may need to be counted as a nonphysical component.

<sup>27</sup> For further discussion of this possibility, see section IV.7 below.

role as conductor of one of her own works.<sup>28</sup> Once clarified, though, the notion of an indicated structure might figure in the correct account of many artworks.

#### IV.6 The artwork as an action

The interest in recognizing the role played by context in fixing the artwork's features has led some to eschew altogether the idea that the artwork is a physical object or any other kind of structure. Gregory Currie, 1989, and David Davies, 2004, defend the view that the artwork is to be identified not with the artist's product, but with a particular sort of event: the artist's activity in producing it.<sup>29</sup> Whereas one might regard the Levinsonian maneuver of identifying an artwork with a contextualized, indicated structure as somewhat ad hoc, it does not seem ad hoc to see the artist's activity as directly responsive to artistic, historical and socio-political context, such that there is in fact no separating the activity from its context. The aspects of the context that really did shape the artist's activity will thus be regarded quite naturally as essential to the artwork, on this view.

Moreover, as Davies argues, the view that the artwork is identical to the artist's activity can allow for nuance in just which aspects of context are relevant to a given work. Levinson's view suggests that the entire musico-historical context, which includes 'the whole of cultural, social and political history', is relevant to the artwork, such that even slight differences in context invariably generate (perhaps subtly) different works, even where the structures presented are exactly identical.<sup>30</sup> Davies argues that this is a mistake: some works have their identities bound to particular aspects of context, but others do not; whether a change in context is relevant to the work's identity will vary from case to case. The view that the artist's activity is the true artwork, Davies suggests, accounts for this fact in a way that the view of artworks as contextualized structures cannot.<sup>31</sup>

The view of artworks as identical to the artist's creative activity has the advantage of assigning the artwork to a metaphysically respectable category: namely, that of events. There is nothing obscure or mysterious about events, and it seems clear that any adequate account of what there is in the world will need to appeal to them. Moreover, it is very easy to account for the representational and expressive

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<sup>28</sup> For discussion, see S. Davies, 2004, pp. 71-72.

<sup>29</sup> Currie holds that the artwork is to be identified with an action-type, whereas Davies identifies it with a particular action-token. For Davies' discussion of the reasons for moving away from the action-type view, see D. Davies, 2004, pp. 131-140.

<sup>30</sup> Levinson, 1980, p. 10. It should be emphasized that Levinson restricts his account to 'fully notated "classical" composition[s] of Western culture' (p. 6), leaving open the possibility that a different account may be required for other sorts of musical works.

<sup>31</sup> D. Davies, 2004, pp. 105-120. Carl Matheson and Ben Caplan, 2008, call into question Davies's claim that Levinson's contextualized structure view cannot account for nuances in the role played by context in shaping the artwork's identity.

properties of artworks on this view, since it is uncontroversial to say that people can express and represent things through their actions.

The chief disadvantage of this view is that it seems to violate central and deeply held intuitions about the nature of artworks. Just as viewers are unlikely to characterize Donatello's Abraham and Isaac as an idea in the mind of the artist, they are unlikely to accede in the identification of this sculptural work with a now- unobservable event that happened in the fifteenth century. If there is any truth to Thomasson's (2004) view that our ontological intuitions fix the referent of our term 'artwork', a view like Currie's and Davies's appears to change the subject rather than elucidate what the artwork is.

It should also be noted that on the view that artworks are events, the question about the ontological nature of the artist's product, referred to by Davies as the 'focus of appreciation', does not go away. Is the focus of appreciation of Donatello's Abraham and Isaac a physical object, an entity embodied in or constituted by or represented by some physical object, or what? Are all foci of appreciation the same sort of thing, or are some different from others?<sup>32</sup> For those who believe that the focus of appreciation, rather than the activity of creating it, is the true artwork, the account of artworks as events is ontologically uninformative.

#### **IV.7 Artworks as ontologically diverse**

If we attend chiefly to traditional works in the singular visual arts, such as paintings and carved sculptures, we are likely to be impressed by the intimate relation of each such work to a particular physical object. Thus, we are moved to ask, what is the nature of this relation? A consideration of contemporary art, including works of performance art, installation and conceptual art, forces one to ask different questions: what explains the fact that some works have an intimate relation to a particular physical object whereas others do not? And given this, should we think that there can be a unified account of the artwork's nature?

These questions also arise in relation to genres of visual art that generate multiple artworks on some occasions but singular artworks on others. These include printmaking, which sometimes generates works with multiple instances and sometimes generates single-instance works; cast sculpture, where the mold may be destroyed after the first cast; and even film, where on occasion avant-garde filmmakers have produced an aesthetic effect by scratching directly onto the filmic medium, with the result that a new printing of the film will not be the same work.

What accounts for the fact that some works in a medium are singular and others multiple, and the fact that works of traditional painting and sculpture have an

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<sup>32</sup> Currie holds that the focus of appreciation is an abstract type rather than a concrete object. However, Rohrbaugh, 2003, argues that it is impossible to account for the modal flexibility of artworks – the possibility, for instance, that a work of painting might have had one more brushstroke than it in fact had – on such a view.

intimate relation with a particular physical object while a work of installation art may involve different objects on different occasions? Sherri Irvin (2005, 2008) argues that artists determine the specific relations between their works and the relevant physical objects through the process of sanctioning, which includes both presenting objects for consideration and stipulating parameters that govern how they are to be displayed and conserved. It is open to the artist to stipulate that a particular object is essential to the display, or to allow that different objects may be used on different occasions. The artist may also determine whether a particular feature of the physical object is to be treated as relevant to the work or not: the paint flaking from one painted canvas may count as damage that requires restoration, whereas the paint flaking from another painting may be an aesthetically relevant feature that should be allowed to unfold naturally.<sup>33</sup>

The relation the artwork bears to a particular physical object or assemblage, then, varies in accordance with the artist's sanction. The artist may specify that a particular physical object must be present for the work to be exhibited, in which case the work might be partly constituted by that object (or might be a structure that has that object as a part). Or, instead, the artist may specify that the artwork is such that each display must involve some object or other of a given type, in which case the artwork is only contingently connected with some particular object or series of objects. Ultimately, on this view, the artwork is whatever entity satisfies the parameters expressed by the artist in the act of sanctioning (Irvin, 2008).

The view of artworks as ontologically diverse can explain why some works in a particular art form (such as printmaking) are singular while others are multiple. It accounts for the intimate relation of the artwork's characteristics to a generative act by the artist, as emphasized by Currie and D. Davies. It respects the ontological intuitions expressed in the critical practice of the art community, according to which works are thought to have varying kinds and degrees of connection to physical objects.

The view will not be satisfying to those who wish to see a common ontological account given of all visual artworks. Someone seeking a unified account might think that the artwork should be identified with the parameters themselves, rather than with some entity that satisfies them. This might be helpful in cases where the parameters are internally contradictory or otherwise unsatisfiable: to identify the

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<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that there are limits, determined by the art-historical context, on what can be sanctioned at a given moment. The context also supplies certain defaults, such that particular features of the work are implicitly sanctioned as long as the artist does nothing to contravene this: for instance, the artist implicitly sanctions that the painted surface of the canvas is relevant to the artwork, and the oil-stained reverse of the canvas irrelevant, unless the artist explicitly sanctions otherwise. To sanction is not merely to intend or to state one's intention; the artist's sanction must be communicated in such a way that there is a reasonable expectation of uptake. See Irvin, 2005, for further discussion.

artwork with an entity satisfying the parameters seems, in such cases, to render it nonexistent. In my view, though, to identify every artwork with a set of parameters is to ignore the distinction between works that genuinely do seem to consist of parameters (such as Nam Jun Paik's Danger Music No. 5, which prescribes that the performer crawl up the vagina of a living whale) with those, like Michelangelo's David, that do not. By collapsing the distinction, the view of artworks as parameters would fall seriously afoul of critical practice and community intuitions; and this, to my mind, is too high a price to pay to bring all artworks under a common ontological umbrella.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> I am grateful to Stephen Davies, Martin Montminy, Anna Christina Ribeiro, and Robert Stecker for very helpful comments on earlier versions.

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