

## HOW CAN THERE BE WORKS OF ART?

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Interested in art, we tend to be interested in works of art. We seem to encounter works of art all the time, and—setting aside certain relatively abstruse problems in ontology—we seem to have little difficulty in recognizing them for what they are. That there are works of art seems obvious and unproblematic.

Quite so, I think. But reflection on what has to be the case if there are to be works of art shows that some quite demanding conditions have to be met. Some will find those conditions too demanding: if I am right, that means that they should not admit that there are any works of art, and they will have to give some other account of what might be involved when we think we are dealing with a work of art. For myself, I think the conditions are not too demanding: their interest comes in what they show us about the nature of artistic ‘media’, and about what is involved in being a great artist.

### II. ART IS INDEFINITELY RE-INTERPRETABLE

Art is essentially meaningful: it has a certain kind of significance. We cannot consider art *as* art without being concerned with its meaning or significance. The significance of art has a certain character, which we might try expressing in part in the following claim:

(AIR) Art is indefinitely re-interpretable.

The reason for wanting to accept (AIR) is that unless it is true we cannot understand how it might be that interpretation can never be finished. And I think it is absurd to suppose that we might finally have *done* with the interpretation of some piece of art. Imagine a critic who said, ‘There: nobody need ever write about Shakespeare again’. Or one who said, ‘That’s cracked it: you need never listen to another performance of the Well-Tempered Clavier’. One reason for thinking that such claims would be absurd is that they seem to suggest that, once these final and definitive interpretations have been produced, there is no reason to pay any attention to the art itself. Complete and final interpretation seems to make art itself redundant. If that is right, one reason for accepting (AIR) is that it is part of what is required if we are to do justice to the (roughly Kantian) thought that it is essential to the nature of art that it asks us to linger with it, to dwell on it.<sup>1</sup>

That is an initial explanation of the rationale for accepting (AIR). It might nevertheless be objected to: I will consider some objections a little later. But in the meantime more needs to be done to explain exactly what (AIR) means. Its meaning depends on what *interpretation* is. I will stipulate, to begin with, that there is the following link between *interpretation* and *meaning*:

(IM) Interpretation is the revealing of meaning.

But I assume no further restriction on what counts as interpretation. Meaning might be revealed by an attempt to *say* explicitly what something means; but it might be revealed in a number of other ways. In the case of painting, for example, we might cover a portion of a canvas up, before uncovering it again, in order to show more clearly what is done by the covered-up portion. In the case of a poem, we might read it in one way rather than another, or in one way and *then* in another. The same applies to a piece of (written) music: we might play it one way rather than another, or again, in one way and *then* in another. In the case of a play, we might choose a certain kind of set, and actors with certain physiognomies to play particular roles. These can all be ways of revealing meaning without *saying* anything at all. They all count as interpretations for the purposes of (AIR). It is difficult to say what an interpretation must involve—beyond revealing the meaning of what is interpreted—but in many

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<sup>1</sup> In Kant, of course, the lingering is simply with the beautiful (and principally the beautiful in nature): Kant (1790: §12).

cases what characterizes an interpretation will be simply that it makes some things salient, and some things unsalient, in the piece of art with which it is concerned.

The reason for insisting that interpretation is the *revealing* of meaning is that it rules out a gross subjectivism about the meaning of art, which might be expressed like this:

(SM) Art has no meaning other than what an interpreter finds in it.

Without the conception of interpretation as the *revealing* of meaning, some subjectivism such as that expressed in (SM) might be taken to be natural ground for accepting (AIR).

But (SM) is obviously untenable: nobody can engage in interpretation while seriously thinking that (SM) is true. (SM) makes interpretation nothing but idle self-indulgence, and it makes art nothing more than a pretext for constructing something of our own. This seems to lead to a devaluing of art: it makes art itself unnecessary. If art itself has no meaning other than what an interpreter finds in it, it is hard to see how it can have any role other than as a provoker of effects which could, in principle, have been reached in another way. If we can find such another way to get those effects, there is no need to attend to the art. And, as I have suggested, part of the point of insisting on (AIR) is to prevent art itself being unnecessary; so (SM) cannot be the real ground for accepting (AIR).

Once we have ruled out a simple-minded subjectivism, we can be more precise about what is important about (AIR) itself. In the first place, (AIR) now shows itself clearly to be a claim about the kind of *meaning* which art has—rather than a claim which is merely about our attitudes to it. Moreover, the meaning which a work of art has it must have *antecedently* to any actual interpretation. We can, if we like (though this would be a matter for further consideration), give a secondary-quality account of the meaning of art. That is to say, we might claim that we cannot understand what it is for art to have meaning except in terms of its being *such as to be* interpreted with such a meaning by a well-placed interpreter. But this secondary-quality account of the meaning of art falls well short of the radical subjectivism of (SM): something can be *such as to be* interpreted as having a certain meaning without actually being so interpreted, and it can be such as to be interpreted in a certain way by a *well-placed*

interpreter, even if a poorly-placed interpreter misunderstands it or fails to understand it at all.

(AIR) makes something like the following claim about the distinctive kind of meaning which art has: what is special about the meaning of art is that one cannot be finished with revealing it. We might try to put that slightly more precisely as follows:

(AIR\*) If *a* is a piece of art, then however many times *a* has been interpreted, it is always possible for there to be a *new* interpretation of *a*.

The significance of this formulation depends, in turn, upon what it is for an interpretation to be *new*. A ‘new’ interpretation will not just be one that has not actually been proposed or encountered before. For an interpretation might not have been proposed, and yet be all too predictable. And if an interpretation is predictable, we don’t need to attend to the art itself to recover it: once we’ve cracked the code, as it were, we can find it independently of attending to the art. To avoid that, we need what is revealed by a new interpretation to be something which could not have been predicted before. And this presents us with a *prima facie* difficulty: if what is revealed by a new interpretation were not already *determined* by what was antecedently present in the piece of art, it is hard to see how it could really have been *there*—in advance of having actually been found by an interpretation.

The solution, I think, is to borrow a lesson from chaos theory, and distinguish radically between *predictability* and *determination*. ‘Chaotic’ processes are deterministic: in fact, they may even involve the instantiation of relatively simple laws. But their outcomes are sometimes not predictable, because it is (sometimes) *physically* impossible to model processes which are chaotic, in the sense of chaos theory, more quickly than they actually occur. We do not need to suppose that the unfolding of the meaning of a piece of art is itself a process which is chaotic in this precise sense (although such processes might be involved), but this does not prevent us from drawing from chaos theory the general model that unpredictability does not mean lack of determination. And, in fact, *determined but unpredictable* is precisely the way in which what is revealed by a new interpretation of a piece of art presents itself to us. For example, if we hear a new interpretation of a piece of music—one that does not just get the music wrong, or go off on an enterprise of its own—we think

simultaneously *both* ‘I’d never have thought of it like that’ *and* ‘But you can see that it’s there in the notes’.

So much for the clarification of (AIR), as a thesis about what is distinctive about the meaning of art. Not everyone will accept it, however. I will consider two kinds of objection.

First, some will think that it is simply *not* essential to art, however great it may be, that it be re-interpretable. The core phenomenon, on this view, is that art is always *re-visitabile*, is always something to be *lingered* over, but the reason for its being always re-visitabile, or always to be lingered over, is not that there is always more to be revealed of its meaning. What other reason might there be? The natural suggestion is just: the experience of the art is intrinsically pleasant, and pleasures are such that it is rational to want to repeat them and extend them.<sup>2</sup>

I do not deny that the experience of art is often pleasant, but I think that this is unsatisfactory as an account of what is distinctive about art.<sup>3</sup> In the first place, I can coherently think that there is something to be lingered over in art which I do not much like. As it happens, I do not myself much like Wagner (simply because of the character of the music). But I have no difficulty telling that there is something in Wagner’s music which is worth lingering over—even worth *my* lingering over, although the lingering will not be an unmitigatedly pleasant experience. Secondly, when I take pleasure in the experience of art, the pleasure is not a kind of pleasure which anything but art can provide. And it seems to me that the pleasure I take is always, in part at least, a pleasure in the indefinite extendability of the discovery of its meaning. When I experience again a familiar work of great art, at least part of my pleasure is in fact a pleasure of discovery, of finding something new. It seems to me a kind of philistinism to suppose that all one might want of the experience of art is a certain kind of kick, or a certain kind of therapy. And of course, to suppose that the point of experiencing art is to get a certain kind of kick, or a certain kind of therapy,

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<sup>2</sup> A suggestion along these lines was made by Jerrold Levinson.

<sup>3</sup> It is also, I think, quite unsatisfactory as an account of the motivation for attending to art, for two related reasons. First, it is entirely general: pleasure can be used as a reason for choosing anything, so this does not explain why we should attend to art in particular. And secondly, with the possible exception of extremely primitive pleasures (sex is the obvious example), our pleasure is itself a feeling of the value of something, so that it is what is valuable about what we enjoy which is our fundamental motive, not the mere fact that we enjoy it. This seems clearly the case with art: it is hard to imagine anyone who cares about art who does not think (or hope) that the pleasure they take in attending to art is a reflection of something which is independently important about art, whose value is the rational ground of our pleasure.

looks as if it risks making the art itself is strictly inessential to what is got out of it: the same effect could in principle be produced by something other than art. It is in part to avoid that result that we want to endorse (AIR); and that gives us reason for preferring (AIR) to this hedonistic theory. Finally, and most simply, it seems obvious in fact that there is always more to be discovered about the meaning of great art: great performers, of music or drama, reveal something new in their performances, however many performers have preceded them; great critics show us something we had not seen in the art which they consider, however much we are acquainted with a long tradition of criticism.<sup>4</sup>

A second objection to (AIR) is that it is only *great*—or at least pretty good—art which is indefinitely re-interpretable. Someone might write a fugue which is so trivial that there is really nothing to say about it.<sup>5</sup> Or a poem—an extremely banal haiku, for example—might be so limited in its resources that its bottom is very quickly reached.

This issue strikes me as being surprisingly difficult to settle. On the one hand, it is not obvious that something is bound to be art if it has the superficial form of art: so being a fugue or a haiku may not be enough to make something art, for example. Nor is it clear that merely *thinking* one is producing art, or *intending* to produce art, is enough to guarantee success. And, on the other hand, surprisingly minimal things are indefinitely re-interpretable: it is not altogether absurd, for example, to see Beethoven's famous set of variations as a collection of ways of revealing the meaning of an apparently trivial waltz by Diabelli. There is also the intriguing category of *boring* art: in the case of boring art, one can see that there are indefinite possibilities of re-interpretation, and one can recognize that each such interpretation will be in some sense new, but for all that, it can quickly be clear that each new interpretation will have a certain unsurprisingness about it, and one can be, in consequence, already weary at the thought of it.<sup>6</sup>

But even conceding the point of this objection will not, in fact, damage my larger purposes in this paper. (AIR) and (AIR\*) can easily be modified to restrict them just

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<sup>4</sup> This is why I think it is never enough to have heard just one performance of a piece of written music, or to be content with just one recording of it: in effect, what happens then is that the performance or recording replaces the piece of music itself, and the fact that it is a *performance* (whose business is to reveal what is there in the work) is then forgotten. (Perhaps unsurprisingly, Jerrold Levinson disagrees about this.)

<sup>5</sup> This example was suggested in conversation by Andrew Kania.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Davies alerted me to the importance of art which one no longer wants to be bothered with.

to great, or at least pretty good, art.<sup>7</sup> Such a modification might give us this, for example, instead of (AIR):

(GAIR) Great art is indefinitely re-interpretable.

It will be enough for my purposes if there is at least some art which is indefinitely re-interpretable,<sup>8</sup> and that, I think, is beyond dispute. My question will then be this, in the first place: how can there be great works of art? Of course, if there could not be any *great* works of art, it would have to be doubtful that there can be any works of art at all: there would seem to be a problem with the very idea of a work of art. Either way, the same large conclusions about artistic ‘media’ will follow.

### III. WORKS OF ART ARE MADE TO BE INDEFINITELY RE-INTERPRETABLE

So far I have spoken evasively of ‘art’ and ‘pieces of art’, in order to avoid any very strong commitment on the question of the nature of the objects which are our immediate concern when we are concerned with art. But usually we think it is just obvious what these objects are: they are works of art. What does this involve?

We can understand the concept of a *work of art* as defining a *species* of a *family* within a *genus*. The genus is defined by the general concept *work*. A work is something which is produced by work—that is to say, it is worked. So *works*, in general, are defined by this condition:

(W) Something is a *work* only if it is made intentionally.

Within this genus, a more specific kind of thing (a family) is defined by the concept *meaningful work*. A meaningful work is something which meets this condition:

(MW) Something is a *meaningful work* only if it is made to be *interpretable*.

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<sup>7</sup> And perhaps (AIR) and (AIR\*) do not even need to be modified. It is natural to think that art must be defined normatively: to think of something as art is to think of it as something for which a certain kind of feature would be a *defect*. In that case, (AIR) and (AIR\*) could stand as they are, just as it remains true to say that tigers are quadrupeds, despite the (possible, at least) existence of three-legged tigers, because the concept of a tiger is the concept of something for which anything but four-leggedness would be a defect.

<sup>8</sup> This point was made to me by Robert Hopkins.

The point of a meaningful work is that it has a meaning: it is made in order to have a quality (its meaning) which is there to be understood. And works of art are a special case of meaningful works, because the meaning they are meant to have is of a special kind. So if we keep the original versions of (AIR) and (AIR\*), it seems that works of art are things which meet this condition:

(WA) Something is a *work of art* only if it is made to be *indefinitely re-interpretable*.

If we varied (AIR) in the manner of (GAIR), then we would expect a corresponding variation in (WA). Since it is implausible that every great work is *made* to be a great work, we would need something like this instead of (WA):

(WA\*) Something is a *work of art* only if it is made to be of a kind the great examples of which are *indefinitely re-interpretable*.

(It is worth noting briefly that I have used ‘interpretable’ and ‘re-interpretable’, rather than ‘interpreted’ and ‘re-interpreted’: there is nothing in these conditions which blocks the possibility of secret, or ‘private’, meaningful works or works of art.)

A few examples will show how these conditions apply. The architectural works of Vauban, the great French military engineer, are fortifications which can be found all round France. These are evidently made intentionally, but they are not made to have a meaning: it does not matter—at least for Vauban’s purposes—how anybody interprets them; what matters is how effective they are at protecting places of strategic importance. The same cannot be said, however, of Descartes’s philosophical works: these are things which are made to have a meaning, for which it matters how they are interpreted. But Descartes’s aim was not to produce something indefinitely re-interpretable, or even something of the same kind as indefinitely re-interpretable works: it was, rather, to produce something which would be interpreted in a certain particular way—as a defence of science, for example. In contrast to both of these, a work of art is precisely designed to be indefinitely re-interpretable, or at least to be of the same kind as something which is indefinitely re-interpretable: it is designed to belong to a kind which can have the sort of meaning which was our concern in the last section. Or so I claim.



The intentions with which these things are made determine their function (given a certain competence in the making); since function provides a basis for evaluation, these intentions fix a standard for evaluation of the various kinds of work. So if a work is not a meaningful work, it is defective if it does not do what its author meant it to do—protect a strategic port, say, in the case of Vauban—but not if it fails to have a certain meaning. And if a work is a meaningful work, but not a work of art, it is defective if it fails to mean what the author wanted it to mean, but not if it is not interestingly re-interpretable. It seems that (W), (MW), and (WA) (or (WA\*)) display a plausible increase in the specificity of purpose which works of the various kinds have, but the claim of (W) and (MW) to characterize significant kinds is not central to my purposes now. What matters is just the truth of (WA) or (WA\*), and the fact that works of art must also meet the conditions imposed by (W) and (MW).

Those points might be challenged in three obvious ways. The first challenge is on quite general grounds, and is directed at (W), as well as the claim that works of art have to meet the condition imposed by (W). This is the challenge of the Platonist in the ontology of art: someone who holds that works of art—or perhaps just works of some art (music, say)—are not made at all, but exist eternally.<sup>9</sup>

Platonism in the ontology of art strikes me as being undermotivated; and in any case, I think we do it no great injustice if we regard it as not being concerned with works of art at all. Let's take these two points in turn. The motivation for Platonism in the ontology of art is provided by some such argument as this (see Dodd 2006: 10):

- (P1) In the case of some arts, there can be multiple copies of what we think of as the same work, without there being anything which is more authentic than any of the multiple copies;
- (P2) That possibility is best explained by the copies being instances of a kind which is what we think of as the work, or tokens of a type which is what we think of as the work;
- (P3) Kinds and types are eternally existing entities; *so*
- (P4) It is best to think of what we think of as works in the relevant arts as being eternally existent entities.

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Wolterstorff (1980, Kivy (1983), and Dodd (2006). For one line of criticism of this kind of view, see Morris (2007).

Others (e.g., Levinson (1980)) will worry about (P3). My own concern is with (P2): I don't think enough alternative explanations have been considered for this claim to be justified.

But even if (P1)-(P4) were felt to offer a compelling argument in favour of taking *what we think of as works* in the relevant arts to be eternal entities, it provides no reason yet for thinking that there is anything which is *really* a work which is an eternal entity. For the argument might equally be taken to show that there are not really any *works* in the relevant arts which meet the condition elaborated in (P1). It seems to me that Platonism is quite naturally understood as a proposal about what matters aesthetically in the relevant art forms: on this view, it is not *works* we are concerned with (whatever we might normally think), but certain abstract structures. Alternatively, we might regard Platonism as a proposal to *relocate* the concept of work in relation to the relevant art forms: so we might regard the *performance* of a piece of music—something which does not itself have instances, and which we might think was created—as the work, while what it is taken to be a performance *of*—the thing which we normally think of as the work, in the case of composed music—is not really a work, but an eternally existing abstract structure.

So the challenge from the Platonist can be set aside. The second challenge to (WA)—or (WA\*)—is that it is too precisely tailored to works of art produced in a very particular period, within one particular tradition—the high-culture tradition of western Europe. So someone might claim that it is easy to find examples of works of art which fail the condition imposed by (WA) or (WA\*), even in western Europe. On the one hand, it might be claimed that church carvings by mediaeval craftsmen (for example) count as works of art, even though the craftsmen themselves did not think of them as indefinitely re-interpretable in the relevant way, or even as belonging to a kind the best specimens of which are indefinitely re-interpretable. And, on the other hand, it might seem that anti-traditional works like Duchamp's 'ready-mades' precisely reject the ideal of lingering contemplation enshrined in (WA) and (WA\*).

These two aspects of the second challenge to (WA) or (WA\*) need to be treated differently. Let's begin with the case of the mediaeval craftsman. We can use four considerations to defuse this worry. First, we can be more permissive about when to attribute intentions such as those involved in (WA) or (WA\*) than the worry imagines. It will turn out (in the next section) that intending to produce something which is indefinitely re-interpretable involves treating the artistic medium in a certain

way. We can regard someone who treats the medium like that as having a suitable intention, even if she doesn't have the full conception of indefinite re-interpretability which I developed in the last section. And it can be made plausible that at least some mediaeval craftsmen treated their medium in such a way.

Secondly, it does not follow from the fact that only works of art are *made* to be indefinitely re-interpretable, that other kinds of thing are *not* indefinitely re-interpretable. In particular, it will be plausible that in developing a conception of artistic media which is capable of making sense of works of art being indefinitely re-interpretable, we will have made sense of the possibility of all meaningful works in the same or similar media being indefinitely re-interpretable. So it will be all right to treat any meaningful work—something which satisfies the condition imposed by (MW)—rather as one does a work of art, even if it would not necessarily be counted a *defect* in it if it turns out to be rather uninteresting as a work of art.

Thirdly, it is possible, of course, to take an aesthetic interest in things other than works of any kind: it is possible to take an aesthetic interest in nature, for example. It may be that some of our interest in objects created by distant cultures is more closely comparable to an aesthetic interest in nature than it is to a concern with works of art.

And, finally, it may be simply indeterminate whether something was produced with the requisite intention, and therefore whether it counts as a work of art, or a meaningful work at all. If we take proper account of these four considerations, it is hard to see how works produced in a not- (or not-yet-) self-consciously-aesthetic culture can provide any decisive problem for (WA) or (WA\*)

What, then, of things like Duchamp's 'ready-mades'? There is a serious indeterminacy about what we are considering here. In the particular case of Duchamp's 'Fountain', are we considering Duchamp's action, in placing a urinal in a gallery, signing it (with an obviously bogus name), and calling it 'Fountain'? Or are we considering the gesture he made in performing that action? (The difference which it is natural to find between the action and the gesture is that the gesture looks as if it was made in order to be interpretable in a certain way—which makes it look as if the *gesture* is a kind of meaningful work, according to (MW), even if the *action* is not.) Or are we considering the urinal itself, in its environment in the gallery, with its

signature, and its name ‘Fountain’? The action itself is not a work at all;<sup>10</sup> nor is it obviously of much aesthetic concern. As for the gesture, if we treat it as a meaningful work, we can see it as making a statement about art and culture. It might be healthy to be reminded of this statement when we go to a gallery—which would justify the continued display of the urinal—but this would not make it a work of art, any more than any kind of art-movement manifesto is itself a work of art.

Might the urinal itself, in the environment of the gallery, and with its label and signature, be a work of art? If it were, of course it would not, strictly, be ‘ready made’: it would be constructed out of the antecedently existing matter of the urinal, the gallery (and its attendant traditions), the signature, and the title.<sup>11</sup> The real problem with this constructed object is close to the problem raised by the case of the mediaeval craftsman: was this constructed object made with the right intentions—with the right attitude to the medium? This seems to me, as a matter of historical fact, rather doubtful. It seems to me more likely that Duchamp was cocking a snook at the pretensions of the art world, rather than inviting us to dwell on the significance of a mundane, indeed embarrassing, object in the environment of a gallery, and with the imprimatur of a signature and a title. Others might do what I suspect Duchamp was not doing, and they would then be creating works of art, and the works they would be creating would meet the condition imposed by (WA) (and so *a fortiori* (WA\*)) without difficulty. It seems likely to me that Duchamp himself created nothing more than a meaningful work, something which was meant to say something, but which was not a work of art.

The third challenge is that many artists seem not to have been as open to re-interpretation as (WA) suggests. Some composers, for example (Beethoven is an obvious case), have been strictly directive about how their music is to be played. There are two responses to this. The first is to point out that artists are not always

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<sup>10</sup> This means, of course, that some further condition, beyond (W), needs to be met for something to count as a work.

<sup>11</sup> Dodd (2007), p. 138 claims that it is counter-intuitive to deny that ‘ready-mades’ are strictly ready-made: ‘Putting a piece of driftwood in a gallery does not cause *something else* to pop into existence in addition to the “mere piece of driftwood”’. There are two things in play in this remark. One is the ‘popping’ metaphor; but in fact, setting a urinal in an environment, signing it, and giving it a title is more than the waving of a magic wand, so the constructed work does not just ‘pop’ into existence. The other is a very restrictive approach to ontology, which would prefer not to recognize anything other than ‘medium-sized dry goods’, individuated in physical terms—but, under pressure, will acknowledge such things as kinds, universals, and types (provided these, in their turn, have at their base physical principles of individuation). There certainly seems to be some reluctance to acknowledge anything but physical identity-conditions of anything which is non-abstract.

consistent: they can both be committed to an enterprise whose whole point, as they very well know, is that what is produced is indefinitely re-interpretable, while also being personally reluctant to let too many alternatives—or certain particular alternatives—be considered. But, secondly, the most that rigid performance directions can do is restrict interpreters in the way they carry out their interpretations, but not in the number of interpretations they can offer. If no variation is allowed in performance, performance ceases to be a mode of interpretation, and indefinite re-interpretability has to be manifested in other ways (in critical discussion, for example).

So (WA) and (WA\*) can survive the obvious challenges to them. But if either of them is true, then, in conjunction with (AIR) (or (GAIR)), a sharp question is raised about the very possibility of works of art.

#### IV. MEANING, MATTER, AND GENIUS

If (AIR) (or (GAIR)) and (WA) (or (WA\*)) are true, with an interpretation understood to be a revealing of meaning, then it seems works of art must have a meaning which is not a matter of what anyone means by them or takes them to mean. Consider a range of ways of describing someone meaning something by an object *O*, or taking *O* to mean something:

- (i) *a* means by *O* that *p*;
- (ii) *a* takes *O* to mean that *p*;
- (iii) People mean by *O* that *p*;
- (iv) Facts of the same general type as (iii) make *O* mean that *p*.

(These last two formulations are a nod to Grice and Griceans, with (iv) making room for the meaning of a whole to be a function of the meaning of its parts.<sup>12</sup>)

All of (i)-(iv) suppose that what someone means by *O*, or takes *O* to mean, can be *stated*. But when I first introduced the notion of interpretation, I allowed a very liberal understanding of it, which means that the notion of meaning should be understood similarly broadly. So consider also:

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<sup>12</sup> For Grice's general account of meaning, see Grice (1957); formulation (iv) can be used to provide the basis for a response to an objection by Platts (1979), p. 229.

- (v) *a* means *O* to be played like *this*;
- (vi) *a* takes *this* to be the way to say *O*;
- (vii) *a* means *O* to be looked at like *this*.

(You can imagine Gricean variants of these too.)

All of these are ways of describing *interpretations* (in the case of (ii) and (vi)), or ways of describing the *fixing of an interpretation* (in the case of (i), (iii), (iv), (v), and (vii)). And the same will evidently apply to any conception of what someone *means* by an object, or of what someone *takes* an object to *mean*.

The mere fact that art (or great art) is indefinitely re-interpretable (that (AIR) or (GAIR) are true) is not enough to ensure that the meaning of a work of art is not determined by anything of the form of (i)-(vii). For (i)-(vii) describe *attitudes* which someone might have towards a work—attitudes which, in some sense, involve an interpretation. And it is not implausible to suggest that attitudes themselves are things which are subject to indefinite re-interpretation. It is natural to think that the discipline of history is, in large measure, an account of the attitudes which explain, or are manifested in, large historical events. And it is just about as implausible to think that we might have finished the task of history as it is to think that we might have finally completed the interpretation of Shakespeare. If attitudes are themselves indefinitely re-interpretable, we can accept that objects are indefinitely re-interpretable even if their meaning is fixed by something of the form of (i)-(vii): each re-interpretation of the attitude manifested in something of the form of (i)-(vii) will itself provide a re-interpretation of the object *O*.

But this response is no longer credible if we take the object *O* to be a work of art, and we add (WA) or (WA\*) to (AIR)—if we insist, that is to say, that works of art are *made* to be indefinitely re-interpretable, or are *made* to belong to a kind whose best examples are indefinitely re-interpretable. For even if, as an artist, I have in mind some particular meaning which I intend my work of art to have, or which I take my work to have, or which I think people, in general, will take my work to have, I must also, as an artist, take the meaning of my work—or, at least, of great works—to outrun all such interpretations. The particular interpretation which I am inclined to make of my own work may itself be subject to indefinite re-interpretation, if attitudes in general are indefinitely re-interpretable, but if (WA) is true, the meaning of the

*work* must always outrun every one even of these re-interpretation (and if (WA\*) is true, the meaning of a *great work* must always outrun every one of these re-interpretations).<sup>13</sup>

The very idea of something having a meaning which is not a matter of what anyone means by it, or takes it to mean, can seem bewildering. And if that is the kind of meaning which works of art, or great works of art, have, it is natural to be seriously worried about the very possibility of such works of art: how could there be such things? Hence the question of my title.

After such a build-up, a quick deflation is bound to be a let-down. But the question has a straightforward answer, and the worry has a simple cure. The worry is raised by the following assumption:

- (M) Something's having meaning is always a matter of something which is in itself meaningless being taken to have a meaning, or being used to mean something.

And the cure is just to deny that assumption. We need to suppose that we *begin* with something which is already meaningful, rather than with something which is in itself meaningless.

How are we to make sense of that? It is natural to suggest that the crucial work is done by the notion of a 'medium'—as we ordinarily call it. A work of art can have a meaning which is not just a matter of what someone means by it or takes it to mean, because it is made in a medium which is always already meaningful—always meaningful before anyone makes a work of art in it. Of course, if we take this line 'medium' will no longer be quite the word. The problem is that the notion of a *medium* is the notion an *intermediary*: the idea is that the medium is something which is intermediate between a communicator and an interpreter, which the communicator uses to convey what she means. But if (AIR) and (WA) (or (GAIR) and (WA\*)) are true, an artist cannot think that her business is—or is only—to convey what she means; and in that case, the notion of a medium begins to look inappropriate. It is better, I think, to return to the Aristotelian idea of *matter*, and think of works of art as

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<sup>13</sup> Might we not be interested just in the indefinitely re-interpretable intentions of the artist? Of course: but that is not to be interested in the work of art. And it is important to remember that, in general, that the intentions of the artist are only interesting because they are the intentions of the person who produced those works.

being made of *matter* which is already meaningful in itself, rather than being simply used to mean something.<sup>14</sup>

The business of the artist will then be to do what can be done with matter which already means what it does. And the mark of the artist will be that she is prepared to let the matter do its own work, which will permit whatever she makes from it to be indefinitely re-interpreted. But there is nothing surprising in this. It seems to me that this is just a redescription of what is involved in an artist's being attentive, circumspect, and respectful in her treatment of the matter of her art. Such attentiveness, circumspection, and respect are naturally attributed to artists well outside the tradition of self-conscious aestheticism which (WA) might seem to presuppose. (They would naturally be attributed to the mediaeval craftsmen who made church carvings, for example.) This strikes me as a plausible conception of artistic endeavour in general: much more plausible than the self-importance of trying to communicate something. So with all its other virtues, (WA) seems to encourage us to think of artists in ways in which they can reasonably think of themselves.

But there is a problem which is linked closely with letting the matter do its own work. If works of art are indefinitely re-interpretable in ways which even their artists cannot predict, how can there be such a thing as *skill* in art? How can we make sense of there being such a thing as a great artist, if no artist can predict what different interpretations may reveal about her own work? The problem is not new, of course: it faced Kant, and could have been predicted to emerge at some point the moment (AIR) was broached. Kant's answer was that the greatness of an artist is inexplicable: it is strictly a matter of genius (Kant 1790: §46).

If we accept (AIR) and (WA)—or (GAIR) and (WA\*)—we have to give something like the same answer, but we can work to make it a little less bewildering. First, although the artist's skill is inexplicable in the sense of its effects' being unpredictable, it does not need to be supernatural, unless we suppose that only the supernatural is unpredictable. And secondly, consideration of the implications of (WA) suggests that the great artist's ability is to be understood in quite an everyday way—as being due to a deep attunement with the matter of her art, something which allows the quality and depth of her work to be predictable, even if every facet of its

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<sup>14</sup> It is helpful to remember here that the Aristotelian notion of matter is *relative*: matter is always the matter *of* something. Similarly here the *matter* the artist is concerned with is always relative to the work of art being produced, or to some art form: it is always the matter *of* a work of art, or *of* an art form. (So it is not just the physical material which the making of the work redistributes.)



meaning is not. More needs to be done to explain in detail what is involved in this attunement with a ‘medium’—with the *matter* of an art; and such an account will have to show this kind of attunement not to be just *magic*. For all that, our account needs to be constructed with care. The ability of a great artist may not be supernatural, but it is not mundane. We need to preserve some sense of it as something miraculous, a proper object of wonder.<sup>15</sup>

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