

## INDISCERNIBLE PROPERTIES, DISCERNIBLE ARTWORKS

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In this paper I will try to trace a discussion about status of art in some recent theories, which pay special attention to the fact that artworks are the kind of things to which representational, expressive, and aesthetic properties are ascribed. First, I will briefly mention some already established criticisms—developed by Richard Wollheim<sup>1</sup>—against the idea that artworks *cannot* be identified with physical objects. These criticisms have the further aim of providing an account of art experience that includes our perceiving representational and expressive properties as well as aesthetic ones in artworks. In Wollheim's view, a misconstruction of the nature of these properties and of our perception of them in artworks has been the main reason for the view he intensely criticizes. Thus, he offers a different understanding of these properties, which also involves a new account of perception that does not require an idealisation of our experience of art.

Once this debate is in place, I will discuss whether this new proposal can accommodate what I see as an important phenomenon within artistic production and reception. This phenomenon, which has been interestingly treated by Kendall Walton in his already well-known article 'Categories of Art',<sup>2</sup> involves a difference in appreciation of a particular feature of an artwork depending on the art-category within which this feature is placed. In my view Wollheim has difficulties in dealing with this phenomenon because he takes it to involve a kind of dualism or, at least, certain ontological assumptions that are far from acceptable within the scope of his theory. I

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<sup>1</sup> Wollheim (1980). Tilghman has also formulated a parallel criticism against those who, appealing to representational and expressive properties, engage with a more idealistic view of artworks.

<sup>2</sup> Walton (1970).

will try to explore in detail what Wollheim means by dualism here, and why Wollheim rejects certain views that are strongly based on the structure of this phenomenon.

Finally, I will examine in detail whether the initial aim of Wittgensteinian approaches (that is, to account for the status and the experience of art while avoiding any kind of idealist commitment) really need to resist the phenomenon I have called upon here in order to fulfil their anti-idealist aim.

So, let me first briefly recall Wollheim's criticism against the Presentational theory of art,<sup>3</sup> a view that rejects the 'physical object hypothesis'.<sup>4</sup> It can be said that in Wollheim's *Art and its Objects* an important goal is to combat some of the traditional arguments for denying the physical nature of artworks. One of the most appealed to arguments against the physical object hypothesis relates to the claim that representational properties and expressive properties are ascribed to artworks.<sup>5</sup> If this is so, and it seems that rejecting this claim would complicate things even more, then, artworks cannot be merely physical objects, for physical objects are not the kind of things to which we would ascribe these properties.<sup>6</sup>

Wollheim faces these arguments in sections 11-14 and 15-19 with regards to representational and expressive properties respectively. He also discusses this problem in combating the Presentational theory of art in sections 25-30. In his view, the tactic of those who appeal to the attribution of representational properties to artworks in order to support their rejection of an

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<sup>3</sup> Wollheim reports that, at least, two different theories may flow from the rejection of the 'physical object hypothesis'. Both share the assumption that, 'if the work of art is held to be a particular but not physical, the next step is to posit a further object, over and above the relevant physical object, and this object is then regarded as the work of art' (1980, 35). This entity can be an ideal object or a set of immediately perceived properties; in the first case, it arises in the Idealist theory, exemplified by the Croce-Collingwood view; in the second, the Presentational theory of art emerges. I will concentrate on this second answer to the art nature debate and on Wollheim's criticism to it.

<sup>4</sup> One of the main goals in *Art and its Objects* is to give plausibility to the 'physical object hypothesis', that is, to the idea that artworks can be identified with physical objects without compromising any of the common attributions we make on them.

<sup>5</sup> The other well-known argument for denying the physical object hypothesis rests on the distinction between autographic and allographic arts. Allographic arts seem to offer a counterexample to the physical object hypothesis. Wollheim's solution to this problem, which we cannot develop further here, appeals to the pair type/token in order to keep the basic intuition he aims at preserving.

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes the argument involving aesthetic properties runs in the opposite direction. Since artworks are physical objects and expressive properties are typically intentional properties, expressive properties cannot belong to artworks as other intrinsic properties belong to them. However, I just wish to mention that this seems to be a kind of Janus problem, where either the artwork or the expressive property seem to be placed at different levels in order to account for our common intuitions about expression.

identification of the artwork with a physical object is 'to take some representational property that we ascribe to a work of art and then to point out that there is some property that the relevant physical object possesses and that is incompatible with it'.<sup>7</sup> In general, the argument simply states that when we attribute to a painting, for example, spatial depth or a melancholic character, these kinds of properties seem to contradict the physical facts that a painting is flat (and not spatially deep) and that it is not a proper subject of mental states (and can therefore not look melancholic).

The main line of argument developed by Wollheim is related to a certain view of perception within which the perception of art is broadly considered. In his view, a closer inspection of our attribution of these properties to artworks will show their compatibility with the 'physical object hypothesis'. The reason why, in the argument presented above, representational and expressive properties do not seem compatible with the physical nature of artworks is closely linked to the way these properties are accounted for within aesthetic experience. The Presentational Theory, which rejects the 'physical object hypothesis', is strongly based on the distinction between 'properties that we immediately perceive and those which are mediately perceived or inferred'.<sup>8</sup> This means that the claim that artworks cannot be identified with physical entities is related, in part, to the status it gives to representational and expressive properties in perception. Wollheim does not provide a straight answer to the question whether representational and expressive properties are directly or indirectly perceived.<sup>9</sup> He takes the representation of movement in pictorial art and tries to draw some conclusions from analysing it. Wollheim's thought about this is that it is counterintuitive to reject that we perceive movement in certain pictorial representations. His two-step argument runs as follows:

Firstly, those who reject that movement is directly perceived usually claim that 'what we are looking at, i.e., a canvas on which the two horsemen are represented, is not itself in movement'.<sup>10</sup> However, for Wollheim, the principle on which this argument is based is plainly unacceptable: 'namely that of determining the properties that we immediately see by reference to the properties

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<sup>7</sup> Wollheim (1980), 12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>9</sup> 'The general question, whether these (representational properties) are directly perceived, is beyond the scope of this essay', *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

possessed by the object that we see'.<sup>11</sup> I doubt this principle can be rejected in common perceptual experience; Wollheim offers as an example of the failing of this principle a well-known case of optical illusion: the perceived bent stick in a glass of water. As I see it, this case, rather than confirming Wollheim's plain rejection of the principle, shows, because of its exceptional status, just the contrary. In opposition to what Wollheim wants to say, my claim is that, in general, the principle holds.<sup>12</sup> However, when faced with pictorial representations we must take into account the fact that a special perceptual ability is at play, the ability of *seeing-in*, which, according to Wollheim's own definition, 'allows us to have perceptual experiences of things that are not present to the senses'.<sup>13</sup> Understood within the context of pictorial accounts, the principle cannot apply to the case of representational perception and, thus, fails to establish its conclusion: that is, that representational properties are not directly perceived.

Secondly, Wollheim claims that, given that we cannot find a criterion for demarcating what kind of properties are directly perceived and what others are not, we can only trust what 'we would naturally say in response to an outer picture', that is, what we would say about the visual content of our experience. Wollheim, then, reframes the question in terms of expressive properties and, again, he proceeds by choosing an example to exemplify the discussion. This time, the subject is 'tactile values'. Wollheim's reasoning in this part parallels the one viewed previously. He aims at erasing the mere distinction between directly perceived properties and mediately perceived or inferred ones. For him, the very setting of this dilemma in the context of an analysis of representational and expressive properties leads to aporetic conclusions. Usually, it leads to the attempt to account for these properties in terms of inferential relationships. Thus, the fact that, although they are not directly visible, these properties play a role in aesthetic experience and content is accounted for. But, this attempt simply puts forward another problematic situation. That of specifying the relationship between directly perceived properties and indirectly perceived ones.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 49.

<sup>12</sup> The argument for it cannot be discussed here; I will just try to show that its rejection is more counterintuitive than its acceptance.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

For Wollheim, the attempt of explaining every single representational or expressive ascription in terms of a set of physical features does not pay sufficient attention to the way we usually face pictorial works. To see his account of how representational and expressive properties are experienced we must look at another part of his interesting work: his notion of *seeing-in*.

His explanation of pictorial representation pivots on 'seeing-in' and its particular structure. It is extensively treated in 'Seeing-as, Seeing-in, and Pictorial Representation'.<sup>14</sup> In this article, Wollheim offers a number of arguments to support an explanation of pictorial experience in terms of this notion. However, at this point of the argument, the virtue of seeing-in that interests us most is that it allows representational properties to be accounted for as part of our pictorial experience without thereby conflicting with the view that our aesthetic experience is an experience of *pictorial physical objects*.<sup>15</sup>

I think that an important part of Wollheim's strategy rests on his account of representational perception and expressive perception. Thus, his main argument against the view he means to fight is that it is based on a misconception of how we perceive these special properties that seem ascribable to artworks.

I have already mentioned that his explanation of the specific way of perceiving involved in art experience just provides this point. Seeing-in, allowing us to see things and state of events that are not present to the senses in surfaces or other configurations that are so present, provides precisely the perceptual structure within which both statements can be made compatible. Seeing-in provides the frame for what Wollheim calls the 'twofoldness condition'. Twofoldness refers to the fact that we can simultaneously pay attention to the configurational aspect of a painting (the marked surface) and to the recognitional aspect (the depicted subject in it). This twofold attention explains, for example, the way a viewer may relate certain effects in the visual content provided by

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<sup>14</sup> In Wollheim (1980), 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.

<sup>15</sup> There is an important but non-explicit connection in Wollheim's thought between how representational properties are given to us in pictorial experience and his supporting the physical object hypothesis. I cannot try to make this connection more explicit here, but I strongly believe that these two parts of his pictorial account are deeply connected. A brief way of showing this connection would be to point out Wollheim's interest in providing an explanation of representational and expressive properties, which avoid entering the ontological arena. Rather it searches for a coherent picture fitting our common assumptions and practices within pictorial experience.

a painting with the way this content has been yielded in pictorial terms, that is, it allows the viewer to value the artistry of a pictorial work.<sup>16</sup> Wollheim puts much weight on this condition and tries to emphasize its fittingness with the peculiar phenomenology of pictorial experience.<sup>17</sup> Twofoldness allows for the simultaneous attention to the configurational and the recognitional aspects and, in this sense, makes room for perceiving representational and expressive properties without giving up the physical object hypothesis.

Now, several criticisms have been set against Wollheim's characterization of the twofoldness condition. Some of them share a common complaint. They notice that Wollheim's characterization leaves unspecified the relationship between the recognitional and the configurational aspects and ask for a clarification of this point. There is no place here to deal with each of these criticisms and Wollheim's responses in turn. I must simply say that Wollheim's general answer to them is that there is no necessity of a third element relating the configurational aspect and the recognitional one. We see in the pictorial configuration the depicted subject without there being a rule, hypothesis or third component which relates both aspects to each other. We have already seen this kind of answer when reviewing Wollheim's reflection on representational and expressive properties and his rejection of a need for an explicit account of these properties in terms of the physical properties of paintings.<sup>18</sup> In general, and in a rather

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<sup>16</sup> '[I]n Titian, in Vermeer, in Manet we are led to marvel endlessly at the way in which line or brushstroke or expanse of colour is exploited to render effects or establish analogies that can only be identified representationally, and the argument is that this virtue could not have received recognition if, in looking at pictures, we had to alternate visual attention between the material features and the object of representation', *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>17</sup> '[T]he twofold thesis at least gives us an account...of what is distinctive phenomenologically, and not just causally, about seeing something or someone in a representation. It tells us what is experientially different about, for example, seeing Henry VIII in Holbein's portrait, as opposed to seeing him face to face', *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>18</sup> In discussing the problem of expressive properties, Wollheim says: 'There is not necessarily a prior description in non-emotive terms, on which we superimpose the emotive description. Or, to put the same point in non-linguistic terms, it is not always the case that things that we see as expressive, we can or could see in any other way. In such cases what we need is not a justification, but an explanation, of our language' (*Ibid.*, 33-34).

Note the Wittgensteinian flavour of the last sentence of this quotation. Wollheim echoes in this paragraph Wittgenstein's attitude about certain philosophical problems. The thought that more than a solution to a problem already established, what we should do would be to show that the problem itself is a product of our grammar or a reflection of our linguistic attitudes. Wittgenstein proposed, then, clarifying philosophical dilemmas through a specification of our language and its uses. Thus, rather than accepting the term in which certain traditional problems were set, he meant to dissolve them through the analysis of our language and of the

Wittgensteinian vein, Wollheim tries to account for the role of these properties in pictorial art and art experience without reducing them to a basic level of properties and without placing them over and above pictorial experience. They are part of the pictorial experience and this being so does not require any further specification in terms of the configurational aspects.

I have reached the point where my main aim in this paper can be approached. For it to be done, I must turn to Walton's article 'Categories of Art'. In this paper, Walton deals with the fact that certain features may yield different effects according to their relationship with the rest of pictorial elements<sup>19</sup> and with the role we usually assign to them. Walton defines the concept of art category<sup>20</sup> in order to account for this fact. An art category is defined through standard,<sup>21</sup> variable<sup>22</sup> and contra-standard<sup>23</sup> features. He illustrates this tri-partite structure by asking us to imagine two physically indiscernible paintings—two indiscernible *Guernicas*—which, as they belong and are interpreted according to two different categories of art, exhibit a rather different set of expressive properties.

I have no place here to recall the whole experiment but I want to briefly mention one of its more important consequences. While the two *Guernicas* are perceptually indiscernible, that is, while they share all their visual non-aesthetic properties, Walton's thought experiment shows that the same set of properties may yield two, or more, different sets of aesthetic, expressive, and representational properties. This difference involves, for example, our being able to point out certain features of the work on which the properties we are dealing with supervene.

I believe that Walton has no difficulty in admitting that these two *Guernicas* are at a certain level indiscernible, share a set of non-aesthetic properties, while, on the other hand, he is able to accommodate that they are different artworks providing different aesthetic experiences due to their

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grammar structures that give place to these problems.

<sup>19</sup> Although I still use pictorial examples, Walton's article set up a frame applicable to all arts.

<sup>20</sup> 'A category is perceptually distinguishable if membership in it is determined solely by features of the works that can be perceived in them when they are experienced in the normal manner', Walton (1970), 339.

<sup>21</sup> 'A feature of a work is *standard* with respect to a (perceptually distinguishable) category just in case it is among those in virtue of which works in that category belong to that category,' *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> 'A feature is *variable* with respect to a category just in case it has nothing to do with works belonging to that category; the possession or lack of the feature is irrelevant to whether a work qualifies for the category', *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> '[A] *contra-standard* feature with respect to a category is the absence of a standard feature with respect to that category—that is, a feature whose presence tends to *disqualify* works as members of the category', *Ibid.*

belonging to different categories, and to our regarding them according to such categories. However, I doubt that Wollheim would agree with the first part of Walton's analysis. He would rather join another Wittgensteinian claim, which rejects any explanation of our perceiving, say, an expressive property in an artwork in terms of our seeing a directly perceptible feature under an interpretation, which assigns it an expressive content. For example, when I see the word 'pain' in English and the word 'pain' in French I am not seeing first a chain of letters, which is indiscernible for both words, and then I interpret it according to the language in which the word is supposed to be written. I see merely 'pain' as the English word for a sensation or, alternatively, as the French word for a kind of daily food. Wollheim's analysis of the phenomenon erases the level at which we can place indiscernibility. Within a Wittgensteinian analysis, it makes no sense to distinguish between a level at which these words are indiscernible and another at which they are different. Things are given to us through experience and we experience them in one manner or another. There is no point in distinguishing a basic perceived configuration underlying different meanings.<sup>24</sup>

My objection against such an analysis is that it seems unable to account for a common feature of art production. A feature that is particularly attractive for those who enjoy comparing art effects. Walton has frequently appealed to examples that belong to musical art. A musical structure, for example, may produce different effects according to the category within which the work is produced. This is an amazing and interesting fact and opens up a hopeful path for those who, like John Stuart Mill, complain about the finiteness of music.<sup>25</sup> Walton, however, does not deny at all that aesthetic properties, representational and expressive, are directly perceptible in artworks. On the contrary, he explicitly commits himself to this view when he claims that 'What is important about works of art is what can be seen or heard in them'.<sup>26</sup> He precisely does *not* subscribe to the view that because supervening on other properties, aesthetic properties cannot be

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<sup>24</sup> Another well-known example that has been widely used for illustrating the phenomenon I am referring to is the duck-rabbit figure by Joseph Jastrow. Wittgenstein addresses the problem presented by it in his *Philosophical Investigations*, and those pages have set up the terms of a discussion about seeing-as and aspect perception. How to understand Wittgenstein's thought is, in this matter, as difficult as in many others. I find myself unable to decide whether an analysis in Wollheim's terms fits Wittgenstein's thought about the phenomenon illustrated by this figure or whether Walton's thought about this matter is closer to Wittgenstein's view.

<sup>25</sup> Danto (1981), 105.

<sup>26</sup> Walton (1970), 394.



directly seen.

In another article, Walton reflects upon the way certain knowledge may inform our perceptual experience, not only in art but also in life. After accepting 'the well-known fact that how things look or sound or seem is conditioned by what we know or believe', he points out the relevance of our experiences and of our beliefs that we derive from them for perception. These beliefs are those that we get in our everyday dealings with the world and that generate most of our common expectations. Such a belief need not be a specific or sophisticated one. Out of habit, we consider certain features as typical for certain objects. This does not mean that the same feature cannot be produced in a completely different manner. And when we learn that this can be the case, we also learn to see a specific feature as being yielded in more than one way. This explains why we usually expect a great noise when two heavy objects seem to crash into each other. We would be really surprised if instead of a big crash we would just hear a low ringing tone.

How things look or sound or seem is conditioned by what we know or believe, and hence by the experiences that formed our beliefs. One general principle about such conditioning is this: what sort of action a particular object appears to have resulted depends in large measure on our beliefs about what sorts of objects generally results from what sorts of actions, at least when these beliefs are sufficiently 'internalised'.<sup>27</sup>

These considerations shed some light on the way art categories become sufficiently structured to serve as rules for correct interpretation. Their effectiveness comes in part from habit and continuous experience. It is not only a matter of convention but also a question of how we are accustomed to dealing with the world; that is, what kind of effects we usually expect from certain actions or events. Note that this is extremely helpful in our comprehension of certain pictorial features. For example, when we interpret de Kooning's brush strokes as expressive we do so because we implicitly associate what we see with a certain action, a certain way of putting paint on canvas. We would be, as in our previous example, really astonished if we were told that he rather did every single brush stroke carefully and with incredible precision. This could happen but it would run against the way we usually see things happening.<sup>28</sup> 'We are used to inferring how things

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<sup>27</sup> Walton (1987), 90-91.

<sup>28</sup> Walton's example of a painting by Roy Lichtenstein, *Little Big Painting*, 1965, is an interesting one because

are from how they seem'<sup>29</sup> but if we are shown that they are different we can change our minds.

Walton's account, it seems to me, is able to explain how we correctly ascribe representational, expressive and aesthetic properties to artworks without denying its physical status. My last reflection goes back to Wollheim. I sympathize with his anti-idealist program and with his aim of explaining art experience without rejecting the physical status of artworks. But I doubt that, for his program to be successful, it has to dismiss the phenomenon explored by Kendall Walton, or at least, the phenomenon as it is understood within Walton's analysis. Wollheim, and other Wittgensteinian theorists as well, sees in this way of framing the phenomenon of aesthetic experience a kind of dualism that suggests that there are two different levels of perception. As if there were a first perceptual level, where pure data provide all the visual content; and a second level, on which we impose an interpretation on that data, thereby constituting a new, aesthetic visual object.<sup>30</sup> I think that accepting it in these very terms does not compromise the physical object hypothesis. But it offers a useful insight into aesthetic problems, solutions and pleasures. Walton's analysis need not engage with any dualistic ontology in order to set his point. Maybe because after all this is not a matter of ontology but of perception.<sup>31</sup>

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it represents precisely the contradiction between the appearance of the mark and the way it has been done. In representing a typical abstract expressionist brush stroke by a neat and careful medium it pays attention to the way abstract expressionism must be understood.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>30</sup> B.R. Tilghman, for example, has developed this criticism and has insisted in the conceptual dependence between artistic dualism and the analysis of this phenomenon in terms of indiscernible objects yielding different aesthetic experiences. For him, such a conception is linked to a view of art ontology, which places artworks over and above physical objects. See his *But is it art?*, Chapter 5.

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