

## Installation Art and Performance: A Shared Ontology

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It has often been thought that there is a fundamental difference between visual artworks and works in the performing arts. Typical works for performance are susceptible of having indefinitely many performances, often thought of as tokens of the work. Visual artworks, on the other hand, are not susceptible of having indefinitely many tokens. For paintings and carved sculptures, the particular physical object created by the artist is the only token of the work; and even for works in multiple forms like etching or cast sculpture, legitimate tokens of the work are typically only those authorized by the artist and created by a specific process.

Contemporary works of installation art call this dichotomy into question. They may have a different appearance for each exhibition, with different configurations or even entirely different materials. The vortex elements of Ann Hamilton's (1988/1996) (*the capacity of absorption*), in the collection of the Miami Art Museum, are configured differently each time the work is exhibited. Two displays of one of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's candy spills may not have any components in common: the candy may be thrown out and replaced between exhibitions.

In creating an installation artwork, the artist does not simply create or specify some physical object. Installation artworks centrally involve the expression of parameters for the constitution of a display; and depending on the work, the displays may (or even must) vary dramatically from one exhibition to the next.

Moreover, people other than the artist often construct the display: curators, conservators and assistants may imbue it with aesthetically relevant features the artist did not choose.

The analogy between installation works and artworks for performance, such as musical compositions, is thus easy to see: the artist specifies parameters for acceptable realizations, there is considerable variation among these realizations, and aesthetically relevant aspects of the realizations are often introduced by others. Should we, then, see installation artworks as analogous to artworks for performance, applying the same modes of understanding in both cases?

This paper has three objectives. First, I argue that apprehending an installation work is, in fact, similar to apprehending an artwork for performance: in each case, audiences must recognize a relationship between the performance or display one encounters and the parameters expressed in the underlying work. Second, I consider whether and under what circumstances realizations are also artworks in their own right.<sup>1</sup> I argue that, in both installation art and performance, a particular realization is sometimes an artwork in its own right (even as it realizes another work).<sup>2</sup> I offer criteria for determining when this is the case. Application of

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<sup>1</sup> My treatment of this topic is inspired by James Hamilton's (2007) argument that every theatrical performance is an artwork in its own right, and no theatrical performance is a realization of any other work. I discuss Hamilton's argument in Irvin 2009.

<sup>2</sup> There are also performances, e.g., Keith Jarrett's 1975 *Köln Concert* (as discussed by Davies 2011, pp. 135-136), that are not realizations of any underlying work. On my view such cases, which I do not discuss here, always come out as artworks in their own right.

these criteria will yield the verdict that performances are sometimes artworks in their own right, while displays of installation artworks rarely are. However, this is a contingent matter that arises from the conventions of the respective art forms.

Third, I address ontological concerns about entities that are both abstract and temporal, as many artworks are on my analysis.

To clarify my terminology: with respect to installation art, what we see on a given occasion is the *display*, and many displays may be generated for a single work. A display is to an installation work, then, as a particular performance is to a work for performance. The installation artwork or work for performance itself is the *underlying work*. Both displays and performances are *realizations* of the underlying work.

### ***Production (1980)***

Let us begin with a case study. Liz Magor's installation artwork *Production* (1980) is made up of some 2800 bricks that Magor produced four at a time out of wet newspaper, using a manual press which is also part of the work. This labor-intensive process required weeks of full-time work. The bricks are not attached to each other or numbered. The work had been exhibited in several different configurations prior to acquisition by the National Gallery of Canada, so the curator and Magor swapped diagrams and descriptions by fax to work out details of the new display. One of Magor's faxes begins,

Yes, there are a thousand different ways to do it. But there's a notion or rule of thumb that eliminates some of them and modifies the others. I like it best

when the bricks are trying to act architecturally – they’re trying to make a wall or a column or something. The ultimate would be that they totally cover a wall, with no space at the top, bottom or sides.... But a partial wall is okay too.

The bricks were finally installed in a long wall about two meters high, with the press positioned right of center, a few feet in front of the wall. On earlier occasions the arrangement had been quite different: the bricks were once used to construct two parallel walls, each eleven feet long and approximately the same height as the artist, with just enough space between them to accommodate the press and one brick-producing worker, who might have been constructing her own prison cell.

The nature of this work not only allows but demands reconfiguration. The work comments on the relation between the labor of production and the creative task of construction; the laborer simply produces the units, which may then be manipulated in a multitude of ways. Always to display the bricks in the same way would be to obscure this fact and thereby to undermine an important feature of the work. However, not all possible configurations are appropriate: the bricks can’t be dumped in a heap.<sup>3</sup>

### **Apprehending the Underlying Work**

This case reveals a number of things about installation artworks. First, apprehending an installation work is more than apprehending a particular display, just as grasping a musical work is more than hearing one performance. Grasping the

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss this work further in Irvin 2006.

underlying work involves understanding the parameters specified by the artist and the possibilities they create. I have written elsewhere about the artist's *sanction*: the full array of creative activity the artist undertakes, much of which goes beyond manipulation of physical material (in the case of visual artworks).<sup>4</sup> When artists provide instructions for the constitution of displays, they sanction particular features of their works: the range of permissible configurations and materials, for instance. This is as much a part of the creation of the work as is the making of the physical object; and for some contemporary artworks it has supplanted the latter partly or completely: when a museum acquires a text-based conceptual work by Lawrence Weiner, only a certificate of authenticity, and no physical display material, changes hands.

Attending to the parameters sanctioned by the artist is crucial. To focus only on a particular realization, without recognizing that realizations with different features are permissible, would be to misunderstand the underlying work. In the case of *Production*, it would obscure a central interpretative theme of the work: namely, the idea of units of production that can be incorporated into a final construction in very different ways. Similarly, focusing only on a particular performance, without awareness of the permissibility of other, very different performances, would often mislead us about the underlying work: we might assume that the musical work mandates a melodic passage which is in fact the product of permissible improvisation.

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<sup>4</sup> See Irvin 2005 and 2008.

Even when realizations are heavily constrained, so that little variability is permissible, this is an important thing to grasp about the work. Imagine a work, call it *Obsession*, where only one configuration of the bricks is permissible, with every brick numbered to ensure it will always end up in the same position. The range of interpretations apt to such a work is quite different from the range of interpretations that is apt to Magor's work *Production*.

Grasping the underlying work, then, may require sophisticated understanding of how the features of a given realization relate to the features of the underlying work. This understanding will tend to be facilitated by exposure to varied realizations, though mere awareness that the artist has sanctioned the permissibility of such realizations will help the audience to apprehend the underlying work more fully.

### **The Status of Realizations**

With regard to apprehension of the underlying work, then, our accounts of installation artworks and of artworks for performance should be similar. But what of the realizations themselves? Are they artworks in their own right?

I deny that a realization should automatically be seen as an artwork in its own right; to allow otherwise would lead to a proliferation of artworks that is undesirable and unnecessary. I take my approach to be a reasonable reconstruction of how people tend to understand things in ordinary thinking about art. A performance may fit the artist's prescriptions well enough to count as a performance of a given musical work, yet do nothing to tempt us to say that a new

artwork has been created. A performance of “Hang on Sloopy” by a mediocre high school marching band may, if we’re lucky, competently exhibit some of the potential of the underlying work, but it does nothing more than that.<sup>5</sup> However, when a performer’s interpretation of a musical composition is striking, we begin to speak of the interpretation as a distinct artwork. This is especially clear in cases of jazz compositions that allow for improvisation, but it can also happen in more standard musical compositions, as with Glenn Gould’s interpretations of the *Goldberg Variations*.

In visual art, there are practices of individuation that clearly tend away from the proliferation of artworks. These, too, give some support to a policy of conservatism about when we say that a new artwork has been generated. Pace Mag Uidhir (2009 and forthcoming), we do not credit an artist with making a new artwork every time she prints from the same photographic negative, unless there is special manipulation going on in the printing process.<sup>6</sup> A fortiori, we do not suggest that a new artwork is created when someone else makes a print from the negative to

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<sup>5</sup> I do not hold that, in general, aesthetic merit is required for the constitution of a new artwork. However, I hold that for a realization to be a work in its own right, it must be aesthetically distinctive. Further discussion is found below.

<sup>6</sup> As I understand Mag Uidhir, his nominalist view of photographic and print ontology stems from the *assumption* “that a particular print is in fact an artwork” rather than an instance of an artwork (Mag Uidhir 2009, § 2). While I believe it is sometimes true that a particular print is an artwork in its own right, I do not regard the assumption as generally acceptable with regard to prints and, especially, photographs.

the artist's usual specifications. And, of course, when a painting or sculpture is reexhibited in a way that requires little or no reconfiguration, there is no temptation to say that an additional work is generated. So, given that some installation artworks are plausibly regarded as complex works of sculpture, some criteria must be satisfied to tempt us to think that a new work has been generated.

Below, I propose criteria to distinguish between realizations that are artworks and those that are not. Application of these criteria to installation artworks, on the one hand, and works of performance, on the other, has divergent results: whereas performances are sometimes artworks in their own right, the displays of installation artworks rarely are. I explain this contingent state of affairs in terms of the conventions operative in the different art forms.

Here are the criteria that determine whether the realization is an artwork in its own right:

- 1) The features of the realization are significantly underdetermined by parameters sanctioned in the underlying work: that is, the parameters allow for readily apparent variation among realizations.
- 2) The realization makes an aesthetic contribution that is not merely perfunctory: it possesses aesthetic properties that, either in degree or in kind, go significantly beyond what is required by the parameters.
- 3) Those constructing the realization appropriately (in accordance with the artist's sanction) make aesthetic decisions that are not simply mandated by aesthetic values expressed by the artist of the underlying work.

When at least one of these criteria is unsatisfied, the realization is not an artwork.<sup>7</sup> Failures to satisfy the criteria tend to occur in different ways, and for different reasons, in installation art than in the performing arts. I will defend the criteria in the course of discussing cases in which they are not satisfied. Here are two examples of failure that are typical of installation artworks:

A) The aesthetically relevant features are so heavily constrained by the underlying work that all admissible displays will be very similar.<sup>8</sup>

In such a case, criterion 1 is not satisfied, and it is thus impossible for 2 or 3 to be satisfied. The possibility that the realization is an artwork cannot get off the ground at all. If those installing the work are forced to make aesthetic decisions (perhaps due to peculiarities of the gallery space), they will aim to be guided by principles expressed by the artist and features of past realizations. The resulting display is not an artwork in its own right, any more than the hanging of a painting on a particular occasion is or generates a new artwork. It owes all of its aesthetically relevant features to the underlying work.

B) A display may fail to be an artwork even though significant variability is permitted by the underlying work.

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<sup>7</sup> Satisfaction of the criteria is a matter of degree, with the consequence that some realizations may be borderline cases of distinct artworks. I see no reason to be troubled by this.

<sup>8</sup> An example is Maria Fernanda Cardoso's 1992 work *Cementerio – jardín vertical* (*Cemetery – Vertical Garden*), in the collection of the Miami Art Museum, which is installed in accordance with rigid parameters and templates that preclude significant variability.

In this case, typified by Liz Magor's *Production*, the display's features are significantly underdetermined by the work's parameters (1). The realization may well surprise us, even if we have seen other realizations in the past; and thus its aesthetic contribution need not be perfunctory (2). Because variability is permitted, those constructing the realization may be required to make aesthetic decisions. Crucially, however, every effort will be made to refer back to parameters explicitly expressed by the artist or implicit from prior realizations. As my discussion of *Production* revealed, it is conventionally the curator's task to avoid introducing salient aesthetic features; curatorial decisions should, instead, reflect the artist's aesthetic values (3). Discussions of contemporary art curation and conservation emphasize this point: the artist should always be consulted, if possible, in matters of display and conservation. Long questionnaires and elaborate best practices have been developed to document artists' preferences.

The failure to satisfy criterion 3 suggests that the display is not an artwork in its own right, even though the displays differ markedly. Those who constitute the display are acting as agents of the artist, in accordance with principles that heavily constrain their choices and prohibit autonomous aesthetic decisions.

Performances typically do not fail to be artworks for either of the reasons just indicated. The underlying work tends to vastly underdetermine the features of the performance (criterion 1), with the result that performances may make significant aesthetic contributions (criterion 2). Regarding most works for performance, it is clearly appropriate for performers to make autonomous aesthetic decisions (criterion 3); indeed, it would typically be wrong for them to refrain from

doing so. The conventions of installation art thus differ significantly from those of the performing arts.

How, then, might a performance fail to be an artwork?

C) The performance lacks aesthetic significance (2), although the underlying work substantially underdetermines the features of acceptable realizations (1).

This might occur even if 3 is satisfied, and those creating the realization appropriately see themselves as making autonomous aesthetic decisions. They might simply fail to generate a performance that is anything other than derivative; and in such a case, their product has no claim to be a distinct artwork.<sup>9</sup>

A word about criterion 2 is in order. Most contemporary definitions of art do not require that an artwork be aesthetically significant; it need only have been created through the right sort of process, or received uptake into the institutions of art, or something of that nature. Why, then, should aesthetic significance be required for a realization to be an artwork? First, the criterion of aesthetic significance is not a criterion of aesthetic value. The realization might be aesthetically significant, introducing aesthetic features that go well beyond what the underlying work requires, even while it fails aesthetically. The issue is not success, but something more like aesthetic distinctness: does the realization possess features that are not merely parasitic on the underlying work? The reason for demanding aesthetic

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<sup>9</sup> When a realization is derivative in the very strong sense I mean here, its structure is derived almost exclusively from the underlying work itself or from another realization. This is not just a matter of stylistic similarity.

distinctness is one of parsimony: when everything aesthetically significant about the realization can be referred back to the underlying work, or to a previous realization, nothing is gained by invoking another artwork.

Second, aesthetic significance is not a matter of appearances alone. Usually, a photograph of an artwork is not itself an artwork; it is either a snapshot or a reproduction. However, under some conditions, something that looks like a reproduction of another work is an artwork in its own right: Sherrie Levine's photographic appropriations of other artists' works are a well-known example. The context and manner of presentation, as well as the discursive framework, supply content that mere reproductions lack, and this distinguishes Levine's works aesthetically.

It might be possible, then, to produce a "straight" performance, yet do so in a way or in a context or with supplemental communication that makes for aesthetic distinctness. This does not, however, show that all, many or most straight performances are artworks. Not all photographic reproductions became artworks when Sherrie Levine's photographs of other artists' works became artworks. The circumstances in which this happened were rare and special, and something similar is true regarding the aesthetic significance of straight performances.

Here is another way a performance might fail to be an artwork:

D) Although the work significantly underdetermines the features of the realizations (1), the performers fail to make autonomous aesthetic decisions (3).

In most such cases, 2 will also be unsatisfied: those who make no attempt at artistry rarely produce anything aesthetically significant. But suppose that, by luck or chance, the resulting performance is aesthetically distinct (so that 1 and 2 are satisfied, but 3 is not). We should deny that it is an artwork, as we would deny that an aesthetically valuable object produced by natural phenomena is. It is thus possible that only one of two indiscernible performances is an artwork, since it is a product of autonomous aesthetic decisions whereas the other isn't.

Another way in which criterion 3 could go unsatisfied, with regard to either installation artworks or musical compositions, is this: the person creating the realization could make autonomous aesthetic decisions that are *inappropriate*, since the underlying work does not allow for such decisions in the construction of the realization.<sup>10</sup> If a curator expresses her own aesthetic values by constructing a display that deviates markedly from the artist's parameters, we probably do not have a realization of that artist's work at all. We might have another work constituted of the physical stuff normally used to realize the original artist's work; but that is another matter.<sup>11</sup> Things are similar in musical performance: if the performer clearly operates outside the scope of what is permitted by the

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<sup>10</sup> Note that mistakes (such as wrong notes in a performance) do not fall into this category, since they are not the product of autonomous aesthetic decision.

<sup>11</sup> This is still another reason to reject the view of installation artworks as 4-dimensional concreta in spacetime: not everything that happens to the stuff the artist made (if such there is) belongs to the artwork proper.

composition, we may have a distinct work, but not one that is both a realization of the original composition and a new work in its own right.

I have presented three criteria for a realization to be a work in its own right. There is a well-established practice of treating some distinctive performances or performative interpretations as works in their own right, and I believe the criteria do a good job of capturing the central elements that tend to figure in such decisions. This is not to deny that there may be outliers that the criteria do not account for. Deriving such criteria is a matter of identifying the curve the runs among the scattered data points of practice.

But are the criteria relevant to installation art? Does critical practice ever issue the verdict that a display is an artwork in its own right? A first point is that as art forms evolve, it makes sense to look for established principles that can be used as norms in new kinds of case. These criteria, descriptive of practice in relation to the performing arts, can sensibly be used to warrant and assess evolving critical practice in relation to installation art.

Second, there are cases in which critical practice does seem to recognize an underlying installation artwork and a set of displays that are treated as artworks in their own right. Consider Rachel Harrison's *Indigenous Parts*, whose five displays have differed dramatically. Certain sculptural and video elements are included in every display of the work; other site-specific elements are amassed by the installation team at each venue. Iwona Blazwick, who curated the work at Whitechapel, describes the situation thus:

Rachel Harrison's sculptural constellation *Indigenous Parts* was first installed in a temporary gallery space in downtown New York in 1995. Since then it has migrated to numerous locations..., absorbing and shedding indigenous fragments at each venue.... In this way one work becomes many, as *Indigenous Parts* is iterated according to the specifics of each context.

(Blazwick 2010, 101-3)

Blazwick's description of *Indigenous Parts* itself as something that has "migrated," and her observation that "one work becomes many," lends credence to the idea that each display realizes an underlying work while counting as a work in its own right. The nomenclature and dating system that has emerged for the work supports this view: the displays have come to be known as, for example, *Indigenous Parts V*, 1995-2010, and *Indigenous Parts IV*, 1995-2009.

I do not suggest that critical practice in this area is firmly fixed, that there is no alternative way to understand *Indigenous Parts*,<sup>12</sup> or that there are no instances that conflict with the picture I have laid out. I do think, however, that the criteria I have offered are well established in relation to the performing arts and can sensibly be – and in some instances already have been – extended to installation art.

### **Artworks, Instances and Ontology**

I have suggested that installation artworks and their realizations are distinct, and that installation artworks, like artworks for performance, centrally involve

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<sup>12</sup> The obvious alternative is to think there are five distinct but interrelated works that, though they share common elements, do not realize any common underlying work.

parameters for the creation of realizations. I have not pronounced on the nature of these artworks, or on their relationship, identity or otherwise, to the parameters. But I see no viable way around the idea that these works are universal or abstract entities of some sort: their realizations are instances, or at least occurrences, of them.

The most compelling objection to the claim that artworks are abstract is that artworks are temporal and, often, temporally flexible, subject to creation as well as (in many cases) change over time and destruction, whereas abstract entities are typically conceived as atemporal and unable to enter into causal relations.<sup>13</sup> In the ontology of music, some theorists have attempted to avoid this difficulty by adopting perdurantism or endurantism about musical works. Perdurantism, as defended by Ben Caplan and Carl Matheson (2006 and 2008), is the view that the musical work is the fusion of its performances. Endurantism, as defended by Chris Tillman (2011), is the view that the work occupies all the spacetime regions occupied by its atoms (which may include performances as well as scores, recordings and perhaps even memories), but without being identical either to any particular atom or to the fusion thereof. Instead, the work is “wholly located” wherever one of its atoms is, just as I am wholly located wherever my current timeslice is.

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<sup>13</sup> I am less concerned about modal flexibility, as discussed in (e.g.) Rohrbaugh 2003; I’m willing to say, if necessary, that if the symphony had had one different note, it would have been a (subtly) different symphony, rather than the same symphony with (subtly) different features.

How should we adjudicate among competing proposals about the nature of the artwork? As David Davies (2004, ch. 1) and Amie Thomasson (2004) have argued, our aim in identifying the artwork should be to identify the entity that is relevant to our critical practice: that is, the entity that, to the greatest degree possible, warrants or makes true the appropriate claims we make about artworks in our practices of appreciation. The fusion of a work's performances is not the right sort of thing to satisfy this role. When we critically appreciate a particular musical work, our aim is to assess the entity that the composer has offered to us and that manifests the composer's achievement.<sup>14</sup> But the fusion of performances may be deeply misleading in this regard. If the work is performed only once, then on Caplan and Matheson's view, all there is to say about the work is what there is to say about that performance. But this is incorrect: a single performance, especially a mediocre one, may reveal little of the underlying work's potentiality and brilliance. And given that, pace Nelson Goodman, there can be incorrect performances, a single performance may have features that actively distort our understanding of the work.

Tillman's endurantism fares a bit better, in part because Tillman admits the possibility that scores, as well as performances, might be atoms of the work.<sup>15</sup> Attention to the score at least provides us access to aspects of the work that performances might not reveal. But the work is not fully revealed through any of its performances, so to say that it is wholly located where a given performance is

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<sup>14</sup> For argument, see Currie 1989, pp. 36-40, and Davies 2004, pp. 52ff.

<sup>15</sup> An atom, in Tillman's view, is an appropriate object of critical attention and, while not identical to the work, can be seen as a stand-in for it.

located is uninformative from a critical perspective. To appreciate the work, it would be a mistake to focus exclusively on a particular performance, or even on the collection of all actual performances. Performances contain elements that do not belong to the work; and there may be aspects of the work that are never revealed through performance. Moreover, some explanation of why a particular performance counts as a performance *of the work* is needed: and this explanation must appeal to the performance's satisfaction of the relevant parameters or norms.

Consider, as a simpler case, the philosophy paper you are now reading. In a sense, it is wholly located wherever one of its atoms (printings, digital files) is: if the notation is correct, nothing is missing. Tillman's endurantist proposal thus does better by philosophy papers than it does by musical works. But even here, there are complications. Even if every atom were in the same font, the font would not belong to the paper itself.<sup>16</sup> We don't get confused about this; implicit knowledge of the norms of this form of discourse informs us that font is incidental. But this information cannot be had simply by consulting atoms of the work.

Allan Hazlett (this volume, p. XX) offers another interesting proposal: perhaps a work like Magor's *Production* is a token event including Magor's creation of the bricks and provision of instructions, and the bricks' being installed on various

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<sup>16</sup> I am not claiming that the font can never be integral to a work. Mark Danielewski's 2000 novel *House of Leaves* does have font and text configuration as integral to some of its passages. The point is that the font will be integral in some cases and not in others, and atoms of the work, considered collectively or separately, are not sufficient to determine which holds for a particular work.

occasions. Hazlett's proposal differs from perdurantism and endurantism in that it does not construe the work as having atoms, but instead treats Magor's creation of the bricks and instructions, along with the various displays, as constituting a single event extended over a period of years.

Objections that Tillman (2011) raises against perdurantism seem to apply to Hazlett's proposal as well: it makes the work out to be something that may not be complete until long after the artist dies, and it makes it difficult or impossible for a particular viewer to perceive the whole work. Perhaps these consequences are not as unpalatable for installation artworks like Magor's as they are for musical works, though: we might think that Magor has enlisted the museum as an agent in the completion of her work, and a consequence is that the work evolves over time in a way that does, in fact, limit the accessibility of its whole 4-dimensional structure to any given viewer. Nonetheless, in my view an account like Hazlett's is not consistent with appropriate critical practice regarding the work. The actual displays may or may not do justice to the work itself; they may or may not reveal the full potential of this set of objects and this set of instructions; they may or may not comply fully with the instructions. There is an appropriate object for critical attention here that is distinct from the particular installations: it is the entity that Magor created, which centrally involves a set of instructions for installation. The particular displays count as such partly by virtue of the fact that they sufficiently comply with said

instructions; the work thus has a normative element that is not captured by identifying it as an event.<sup>17</sup>

The ontological category I prefer for artworks is along the lines of the quasi-abstract entity discussed by Barry Smith (2008). What kind of thing, Smith asks, is a game of chess that players play without a board, simply by speaking the descriptions of moves to each other and holding the state of the imaginary board in memory? The chess game is not a thought or collection of thoughts; those are representations of the game rather than the game itself. There doesn't seem to be any collection of stuff that could plausibly be identified with the game; it is, to that extent, abstract. However, it also exists in time: it came into being at a particular moment and will end at a subsequent moment. Moreover, it can have realizations or occurrences: someone listening to the players' verbal exchange could move pieces about on an actual chessboard to realize their game, either during the conversation or later.

Quasi-abstract entities are abstract in two senses: in the sense of not being concrete – not being physical objects or events – and often also in the sense of being susceptible of instantiation. These two senses of abstraction are linked. A particular

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<sup>17</sup> I object on similar grounds to the view of installation artworks as concrete 4-dimensional spacetime worms. In addition, many complex sculptural and installation artworks (e.g., the candy spills of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Jana Sterbak's 1987 *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*) are physically discontinuous: there is little or no physical material that survives from one display to another, though (according to standard critical practice) the existence of these works is not discontinuous.

concrete object or event cannot have (other) instances; there can only be other concrete objects or events, or representations, that resemble it in various ways. The normative, and thus non-concrete, elements of a quasi-abstract entity are precisely what allow it to have instances, namely those objects or events that satisfy the norms.

Is it ontologically promiscuous to suggest that there is a quasi-abstract entity, a game, that came into existence when two people interacted under the right circumstances? Must one who holds such a view think that there are magical processes by which – poof! – strange new things come into existence and float around in a mysterious ontological realm through which they engage in mysterious causal interactions with real (in our realm) objects and events? I don't think so. Amie Thomasson describes what I take to be a promising deflationary maneuver. The existence of an abstract social entity, she says, is just a matter of the fulfillment of the relevant conditions. “[I]f one grasps the concept of a recession and knows that the relevant conditions are sometimes fulfilled, it makes little sense to ask whether there *really* are recessions.” (Thomasson 2003, pp. 288-9)<sup>18</sup> The existence of the

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<sup>18</sup> Searle (1995; 2010) offers a related account of social facts. As Searle would acknowledge, the ability of a specific interaction to give rise to a social fact depends on an extensive background of social conventions and institutions. These, too, exist by virtue of a complex of actions that can ultimately be explained in terms of ontologically unremarkable episodes of physical particles moving around this way and that – or, if they can't, then we will need a more exotic fundamental ontology to make sense of the goings on in our world.

entity is settled by the fulfillment of the conditions that are criterial for that entity; no further question remains to be asked.<sup>19</sup>

Thomasson's account helps to explain how quasi-abstract entities can participate in causal relations, as is required for their temporality. A recession comes into existence when certain conditions are fulfilled and ceases to exist when those conditions are no longer fulfilled. The game of chess came into existence when a set of norms was expressed, and it simultaneously became possible for particular games satisfying these norms to be initiated. The fulfillment of the relevant conditions for the existence of these entities is a function of concrete events whose participation in causal relations is uncontroversial.

To apply this picture to artworks, we can say that an artwork comes into existence when an artist engages in activities of communication and/or fabrication in the right sort of context (given a background of art world conventions). These activities, sometimes along with physical stuff that eventuates from them, fulfill the conditions for the artwork's existence. The artwork can change over time through

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<sup>19</sup> Ross Cameron (2008), in similar deflationary spirit, points out that the truthmakers of claims about abstract entities are perfectly ordinary: they are commonplace events and states of affairs that belong to or depend on the ordinary realm of physical particles that move around this way and that. To say that there is a recession, then, is not to commit oneself – poof! – to the coming into existence of a new nugget in some special ontological realm. Cameron (this volume, p. XX) suggests that this sort of account is compatible with nominalism: “What is important for the nominalist is that a world of concreta suffices to ground all truths.” If that is correct, then so much the better.

further acts of communication and/or fabrication. Finally, given a background of conventions for understanding artworks, the work can cause reactions in its audience, including attempts at appreciation and interpretation.

Opponents of abstract or quasi-abstract entities may claim that the effects I attribute to artworks are due not to these entities themselves, but to something more concrete. To respond fully to this suggestion would take us far afield. For the present, I will simply say that our descriptions of our social world would be dramatically impoverished, and also greatly complicated, by eliminating talk of recessions and chess games in favor of talk of the multiplicity of more concrete events that fulfill the conditions for existence of these entities. Many phenomena of our social world would be much more difficult to understand and explain if we attempted to appeal only to concrete events and objects existing at some ontologically fundamental level. One might propose to explain such phenomena by appealing not to recessions, chess games and artworks, but to beliefs about such entities (with the entities themselves being construed as non-existent). I have trouble seeing the appeal of this sort of story. As Thomasson asks, if the conditions for the existence of a recession are fulfilled (and, we might add, if recessions figure in viable causal explanations and accurate predictions of how things go), why be a fictionalist about the recession? Why attribute error to everyone who believes and acts as though recessions, and other quasi-abstract entities, exist? In any event, I take it that any adequate account of our social world will require something like an ontological category of quasi-abstract entities, and that category will be seen to have

many members; appealing to them is not an ad hoc maneuver to solve a narrow or specific problem related to art.

To say that artworks are quasi-abstract is not yet to say much about their nature; artworks, chess games and recessions are, intuitively, quite different from each other. So, what more can we say about artworks as quasi-abstract entities? Jerrold Levinson (1980) suggests that a musical work is a structure of sound and instrumentation that has been indicated by a composer.<sup>20</sup> While this account may be correct for the instrumental works in the classical tradition to which Levinson (quite reasonably) restricts his attention, it will not quite do for musical works more generally. A composer may or may not indicate a particular sound structure; in John Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, what is indicated is not a sound structure, but a form of activity in which 24 performers, guided by a conductor, control the dials on 12 radios. A jazz composition may include passages in which it is specified that the performers should improvise; and for a performer to "improvise" in the same way each time would be a violation of the norms for performing most such works. It is thus mandatory that the sound structures realized in particular performances of the work vary. Some installation artworks, like Magor's *Production*, are analogous to improvisatory jazz works in this respect.

We have a couple of options in the face of this situation. One is to say that some musical works are indicated sound-and-instrumentation structures, some

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<sup>20</sup> For the application of such an account to other art forms, see Levinson (this volume). It would be consistent with Levinson's position to see an installation artwork as a set of indicated parameters for the construction of displays.

(like *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*) are indicated activity-and-instrumentation structures, some are simply indicated activity structures, and some (purely improvisatory performances) are particular, non-repeatable events. Which is the case depends on what the artist has specified.<sup>21</sup>

Another option is to say something more general about what all of these have in common. In each case, the artist has sanctioned a set of norms for the creation of realizations; and a realization will be one that satisfies those norms, whatever they may be (and, typically, is causally connected to them in an appropriate way).<sup>22</sup> Thus, perhaps the artwork in many cases, or even in every case, just is a set of norms or instructions.

Prima facie, the artwork-as-instructions account seems more palatable for some art forms than others: most musical works may be amenable to analysis in terms of norms or instructions for producing a sound event, while paintings and sculptures, though they have normative aspects (including proper configuration), seem to be chiefly physical entities. Installation artworks lie at various points in between: some are more like complex sculptures, others involve some particular

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<sup>21</sup> I offer an analogous account for visual artworks in Irvin 2008.

<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that not all aspects of the instructions or norms for creating realizations of a work are directly determined by the artist; some grow out of the general musical or artistic culture of the time, and function as defaults even if not expressly invoked by the artist. A painting is to be hung with its representational content right side up, unless the artist (Georg Baselitz, say) specifies otherwise.

physical stuff but without a fixed configuration, and still others lack any physical substrate that persists from one exhibition to another.

It is possible to analyze all of these works as sets of norms: it is just that in the painting case the norms specify that *this very canvas* should be displayed in a particular way, while in installation art cases of the latter sort the norms simply specify that, say, a pile of hard candies in brightly colored wrappers should be dumped in a heap in a corner of the gallery, or that the words *A WALL BUILT TO FACE THE LAND & FACE THE WATER AT THE LEVEL OF THE SEA* should be inscribed some way or other so as to be visible to the viewer.<sup>23</sup> What the artist has done in each case is to supply instructions or norms for creating a display; it's just that in the painting case, the act of articulating the instructions is inseparable from the act of creating a canvas with particular features, since the most important instruction is that *this canvas* be displayed.

I'm sympathetic to complaints about this sort of account. The suggestion that works of painting are really sets of norms is radically at odds with the commonsense idea that paintings are fundamentally physical entities. Because the norms associated with most paintings ("hang it with the painted surface facing away from the wall and the representational content shown right-side-up") are so heavily convention bound that we don't notice them, it's common not to notice that painting has a normative element at all; and it's not clear that the appreciation of painting suffers when most people's grasp of its normative element remains implicit. Even

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<sup>23</sup> These examples are drawn, respectively, from the candy spills of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and a 2008 work by Lawrence Weiner.

when the normative element is noticed, the physical aspect still seems to retain primacy; the temptation, when we consider painting or sculpture in isolation from other cases, is to think the artwork is a physical entity with some normative features tacked on as an auxiliary.

For visual artworks, especially paintings, sculptures and installation artworks that are bound to particular physical material, an option is to say that the work is a hybrid of physical and normative elements, with the physical elements having primacy in some cases and the normative elements in others. Notice, though, that this will be a difficult row to hoe when it comes to works that do not involve any particular physical stuff: the display may be a physical entity, but the underlying work is not bound to any particular physical material, so it's hard to understand in what sense it is even a hybrid physical entity.<sup>24</sup> And, of course, casting musical works out as physical/normative hybrids does not seem feasible.

Ultimately, we face a dilemma: we can have either a neat, unified ontology that treats artworks as sets of norms or instructions, or a heterogeneous ontology that better captures our intuitions about art forms that have a stronger connection to particular material stuff. According to this heterogeneous ontology, some works

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<sup>24</sup> Consider, for instance, Tino Sehgal's 2002 performance artwork *This is propaganda*.

Sehgal supplied only a verbal description of the work, with no supporting documentation, when the Tate Modern acquired the work. The Tate is prohibited from making any records in relation to the work; all information about it must be transmitted verbally. Though critical practice is clear that the work persists between performances, no physical concretum is plausibly identified with it.

(including many musical works as well as the most dematerialized installation artworks) are sets of instructions, while others are physical/normative hybrids. I won't here argue for one of these options over the other;<sup>25</sup> either way, the notion of quasi-abstract entities, or something like it, supplies resources that are needed to account for the work's normative dimension. And, to reiterate what I've said above, the objection that there are no such things doesn't have much traction from my perspective. We need to invoke things like instructions, parameters, norms and laws to make sense of many aspects of our world. So, whatever ontological maneuver is required to allow for the existence of these things, I'll avail myself of it for the sake of artworks as well.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that the creation of both installation artworks and artworks for performance centrally involves the expression of parameters for realizations. Grasping the underlying works in both art forms, then, is a matter of grasping the parameters.

I offered an account of the criteria that determine whether a particular realization is an artwork. These criteria allow that some performances may be independent artworks, while displays of installation artworks typically are not. This is largely due to contingent facts about the respective art forms: installation artworks are often designed to provide a minimum of latitude; and even when latitude is permitted, the installers are expected to defer to the artist's aesthetic

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<sup>25</sup> In Irvin 2008, I come out for the heterogeneous ontology.

values. In the performing arts, the conventions are quite different: the underlying work's parameters typically vastly underdetermine the features of performances, and the performers see themselves, quite appropriately, as making significant aesthetic decisions.

It is possible, of course, for realizations in either art form to cross these boundaries. A work for performance could involve rigid parameters, such that little aesthetic latitude is available to the performers and no independent artwork results. And an installation artwork could enlist the installers in creating a new artwork by demanding autonomous aesthetic decision. For this reason, it is sensible to apply the same criteria to the two art forms, though the verdicts about actual works within the two forms will diverge rather systematically.

To appreciate such works appropriately involves seeing them as quasi-abstract entities, susceptible of having instances but also capable of being created and, in many cases, changing over time and being destroyed. Given the availability of a Thomasson-style deflationary maneuver, I don't see that such entities should trouble us, ontologically speaking. And since quasi-abstract entities abound in many domains of social living, there is nothing ad hoc about invoking them to account for artistic phenomena.<sup>26</sup>

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