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Artworks and Representational Properties

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Abstract:

A sustained challenge to the view that artworks are physical objects relates to the alleged inability of physical objects to possess representational properties, which some artworks clearly do possess. I argue that the challenge is subject to confusions about representational properties and aesthetic experience. I show that a challenge to artwork-object identity put forward by Danto is vulnerable to a similar criticism. I conclude by noting that the identity of artworks and physical objects is consistent with the insight that attending exclusively to the object's individual physical properties may prevent us from grasping the nature of the work.

We often think that an artwork is identical to some physical object; so, for example, Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* just is a particular painted canvas. This view accords with our pre-philosophical ways of speaking about artworks: they can be looked at, located, pointed to, created and destroyed. As Jerrold Levinson says, an artwork "is composed of matter, is at one place at one time, and is subject to a familiar range of causal interactions with other physical objects."¹

But the view that artworks are physical objects has been challenged on the grounds that it fails to account for features of our aesthetic experience, or to capture what is most important to us when we view and think about art. To identify an artwork with a physical object, some say, is to misdirect our attention, and thereby either to distract us from or to render invisible to us the qualities that are of prime aesthetic importance. In this paper, I consider one such challenge, according to which physical objects cannot possess representational properties. Various thinkers have addressed this issue from time to time, but to my mind it has never been satisfactorily resolved. If the challenge were successful, it would imply

that (at least) representational artworks cannot be physical objects. I here examine three formulations of the challenge and show that each is subject to a confusion about the nature of representational properties or of aesthetic experience. The challenge thus supplies no reason for thinking that artworks cannot be physical objects.

Notes on the identity of artworks and physical objects

A few preliminary notes are in order. First, the notion of identity on offer is the straightforward one we typically have in mind when we apply Leibniz's law: if Gentileschi's artwork has properties that the corresponding painted canvas lacks (or that the painted canvas could not possibly possess), then the artwork is ipso facto not identical to the painted canvas.

Second, identity is obviously only one of several intimate relationships that might obtain between artworks and physical objects: an artwork might, for example, be realized by, constituted by or embodied in a physical object without being identical to that object.² Even if physical objects could not possess representational properties, these other relations might remain viable. I take it, however, that we should subscribe to such notions as physical embodiment or realization of artworks only given compelling reasons to reject the identity of artwork and object. For one thing, we should avoid invoking more entities and relations than we really need to get our aesthetic and metaphysical jobs done; and, to continue with the example of Gentileschi, if we deny that the artwork is identical to the painted canvas, we will need to invoke an additional entity as well as to offer an account of the relation that holds between the painted canvas and this other

entity. For another, we should try to respect the pre-philosophical intuitions that tell us that when Gentileschi was engaging in physical activity to manipulate physical materials in real time and space, she was directly making the artwork that we literally see in the museum when our visual apparatus detects the light it reflects. These considerations weigh strongly in favour of the view that Gentileschi's work is identical to a particular physical object, namely the painted canvas she produced. Insofar as the challenge related to representational properties is proposed as a good reason to hold that artworks cannot be identical to physical objects, it deserves to be taken seriously and, as I will show, debunked. This is true even if, in good philosophical spirit, we ultimately end up rejecting artwork-object identity on other grounds.

Third, it seems clear that works in some art forms, particularly music and literature, simply are not candidates for identity with physical objects. There's no limit to the number of copies that could be made of a novel, but that won't change the fact that the novel is only one artwork. And the physical object and its properties seem inessential to the work: it might be possible to eliminate the book altogether and present the novel in spoken or digital form without compromising the work's integrity. An unscored musical work, when it's not being performed, may exist only in the memory of some musician. But we wouldn't want to say that the work is identical to the brain region in which that information is stored. (At least, I don't know of anyone who would want to say that.) Similar problems arise for other performing arts.

Even within the visual arts, "multiples" like etchings, photographic prints and cast sculptures cause problems for the identity relation. Walker Evans may have

made several prints from one of his negatives, and those prints may be geographically dispersed by thousands of miles. We can't say that the work is identical to any particular print, because it would survive the destruction of any one of them. We can't say it's identical to the class of prints Evans made or authorized, because this would mean that part of the work is destroyed if one of the prints is destroyed, and that's not the case. We can't say it's identical to the negative, because if we had only the negative and not the prints we wouldn't have the work yet, but only a sort of template for the work's creation. And if the negative were destroyed after a print had been made, the work would not be lost along with it. Hence, though some physical object is required for the work to exist, there isn't any *particular* physical thing or group of things that can be seen as identical to the work itself, though there may be several things that give us full experience of it.³

These cases clearly rule out any view claiming that every artwork is identical to some physical object. They do not, however, rule out the possibility that some artworks—particularly unique works of visual art, such as painted canvases and carved sculptures—are identical to physical objects. The substantial differences among the various art forms suggest that we should remain open to the possibility that different kinds of relation might obtain between artworks and physical objects, depending on the type of artwork in question: there are good reasons to think that a painting by Gentileschi will turn out to be a different sort of thing than, say, a novel by Faulkner or even a photographic print by Evans.⁴ In any case, the present analysis applies only to those artworks that are candidates for identity with physical objects in the first place.

This paper thus has a relatively modest aim: to ward off one kind of challenge to the notion that some artworks are identical to physical objects. It will not ward off every such challenge. But the responses that are offered here will, I think, serve as a model for the kinds of things we should say when other such challenges are raised. At the end of the paper, I will discuss how we might respond in a similar spirit to another such challenge, raised by Arthur Danto.

Three formulations of the challenge

The view that representational properties rule out the identity of artworks with physical objects has been expressed in three ways. First, it has been suggested that the representational properties of the artwork logically conflict with the object's "real" properties, so that attributing those representational properties to the artwork would involve subscribing to a contradiction. This has sometimes been put in a slightly different form, as follows: the aesthetically relevant properties of the artwork are not exemplified by the object, and therefore are not properties of the physical object; since the artwork and object have different properties, they clearly cannot be identical. Second, it has been claimed that apprehending the work's representational properties centrally involves denying the object's physical properties. On this view, the proper object of aesthetic attention is not the physical object. Since the artwork is the proper object of aesthetic attention, the physical object cannot be identical to the work. Finally, it has been claimed that since the viewer's participation is required to constitute the work's representational properties, those properties cannot be seen as belonging to the physical object

alone. This implies, once again, that the artwork has properties the physical object lacks, thereby ruling out the identity of the two.

Let us consider these formulations of the challenge, and the replies appropriate to them, in turn.

1. Representational properties conflict with "real" properties

It has sometimes been claimed that the representational properties of an artwork are baldly inconsistent with the properties of the relevant physical object. For instance, "[w]e say of the *St George* that it moves with life... Yet the block of marble is inanimate. Therefore the *St George* cannot be that block of marble."⁵ For a contrast between literal motion and motionlessness, we might turn to Niccolò dell'Arca's *Lamentation*, which offers a remarkable depiction of movement despite the static nature of its material. Similarly, we might take note of the spatial depth of Raphael's *School of Athens*, though the fresco is relatively flat. If we attribute the work's representational properties to the object, then, we are committed to the attribution of *conflicting* properties: the object is both deep and flat; it is both in motion and motionless. Attribution of conflicting properties is unacceptable. Thus the physical object cannot possess representational properties.

Paul Ziff aims to extricate us from such contradictions by indexing each assertion ("it is deep" v. "it is flat"; "it moves" v. "it is motionless") to context.⁶ The curator tells the crate-builder that the painting is flat but tells an audience of art amateurs that the painting has great depth. These descriptions appear to conflict, Ziff says, because their statements are similar in form: 'X is flat' seems to be the same sort of proposition as 'X has great depth.' While not denying that they

could conflict under some circumstances, Ziff holds that often, the descriptions “the painting is flat” and “the painting has great depth” are both true.

To resolve the apparent conflict, Ziff appeals to the different uses of the two descriptions, and suggests that each description must be relativized to the appropriate family of description. For example, “the painting is flat” belongs to the crate-builder’s family of descriptions, while “the painting has great depth” belongs to the art critic’s family of descriptions. Once this relativization has been accomplished, Ziff says, the conflict evaporates. He regards the appearance of conflict as a philosophical fabrication, since in real life descriptions from different families “rarely associate”⁷ and the confusion therefore doesn’t arise. Ziff concludes that “there is no need, and indeed it is a serious mistake, to suppose that there is some unique object corresponding to each different description.... *There are two descriptions, not two objects.*”⁸

But there is a problem with Ziff’s proposal for resolving the conflict: namely, that in the context of aesthetic appreciation, both of the “conflicting” qualities (depth and flatness, movement and motionlessness) might be of interest to us. One of the interesting questions to ask about a work is *how* a particular representational effect, such as motion, is achieved through the mode of representation employed. The relationship between what is represented and the means of representation may be of as much aesthetic interest to us as the represented subject itself.⁹ Simply to notice the movement represented in a work may be insufficient. As we look, say, at the figures of the *Lamentation*, we may well be inclined to ask, just how is it that motion has been shown through the presentation of a motionless mass of terra cotta? To pose—not to mention

answer—such a question, both of the “conflicting” properties must be appealed to by a single individual, with a single objective (aesthetic appreciation of the work), within a single context. Both “the painting is flat” and “the painting has great depth,” then, might belong to the art critic’s or appreciator’s family of description. Thus we cannot simply say, as Ziff does, that the statements “*X is a*” and “*X is not-a*” are made relative to different contexts and that their meeting is a mere philosophical fiction. And the context of appreciation, where the two statements meet, cannot be dismissed as marginal or atypical; it is, rather, central to aesthetic consideration of the work. To say that the two descriptions corresponding to these conflicting properties belong to different families of description and “rarely associate” is to evade the central problem that Ziff purports to address. A different solution is needed.

A similar formulation of the challenge, which ultimately raises the same set of issues, can be derived from the “transparency view,” on which the proper focus of appreciation is what can be “seen in” the work. John Hanke presents the challenge as follows:

[T]he painted canvas ... does not ordinarily exemplify more than a few of the many properties of what it represents, and one might well conclude that it is merely a vehicle “pointing beyond itself,” in the presence of which we become conscious of the aesthetic object.¹⁰

In consequence, “the material painting is but a means to experiencing the total aesthetic object rather than being identical with it.”¹¹ This is called the transparency view because it is sometimes expressed by saying that we “look through” the physical object (painting, sculpture, etc.) to see the real aesthetic object.

According to the transparency view, the aesthetic object we see when we look through the physical object has properties the physical object does not. Consider, for example, Monet's 1869 *La Grenouillère*. When we look through the painted canvas to see the aesthetic object, we ascertain a wet surface. Thus the aesthetic object (or part of it, at least) has the property 'wetness.' But the painted canvas has (i.e., exemplifies), instead, the property 'dryness.' Thus the aesthetic object has a property that is nowhere exemplified in the physical object. Clearly, the property 'wetness' is aesthetically relevant to the work; a full appreciation of the work will require that we ascertain this property and note its significance to the work's impact. Since some aesthetically relevant properties, like 'wetness,' are not exemplified by the physical object, then perhaps we must say that some of the aesthetically relevant properties of the artwork are not also properties of the object. If the object lacks some of the properties possessed by, and aesthetically essential to, the artwork, then clearly the two cannot be identical.

The central problem with this objection, in both the form treated by Ziff and the form derived from the transparency view, lies in its assumption that attribution of a representational property is the same as attribution of the property represented. There is simply no reason to accept this assumption. To deal with the alleged contradiction between the depth and flatness of a work, we need only gloss "The painting has great depth" as "great depth is represented in the painting," or "the painting has the property of representing great depth." And this poses no problem, since these statements clearly do not contradict the statement "the painting is flat" or "the painting has the property of being flat." Similarly, we may say that the aesthetically relevant property of *La Grenouillère* is 'representing

wetness,' not 'wetness' per se. And again, there is no barrier to saying that the object has the property of 'representing wetness' although it lacks the property of 'being wet.'

The objector might resist the suggestion that the aesthetically relevant property of the work is 'representing wetness' and not 'wetness' itself. But there are good and venerable arguments for seeing the former and not the latter as the appropriate focus of aesthetic concern. Of tragedy, and mimesis more generally, Aristotle suggested that the viewer's aesthetic pleasure depends upon the knowledge that the object viewed is a semblance; to appreciate an imitation aesthetically in the manner appropriate to an artwork, the viewer must know that it is an imitation. It is *qua* imitation, *qua* representation, that we appreciate it. I may, while still deceived, appreciate the scene depicted in a *trompe l'oeil* work on the grounds of its aesthetic features; but the kind of aesthetic appreciation appropriate to the work *qua* artwork becomes available only once I have recognized my error. Among the sources of my aesthetic pleasure in the work will be my recognition of the resemblance between the depiction and the depicted, the representation and the represented; and comparison between the two can be conducted only given my knowledge that what I am encountering is, indeed, a representation. If the knowledge that something is a representation is central to our aesthetic response to it, then it seems reasonable to conclude that the aesthetically relevant properties, those for which we appreciate the work, are such properties as 'representing wetness' and 'representing depth' rather than 'wetness' or 'depth' themselves. If we reject the "transparency view" of artworks on which

the objection is based—the view that instead of looking at artworks, we look through them to what they represent—the objection dissolves along with it.

2. To apprehend representational properties requires denying physical properties

Another formulation of the challenge suggests that to apprehend what is represented in a work, the viewer must resolutely ignore or actively deny the physical properties of the object encountered. Roman Ingarden says, in this vein, that the viewer faced with a drawing of a knight can't simultaneously apprehend the "little figure" on paper and intuitively apprehend the "*presented* knight, who is ... neither 'small' nor a 'little figure.'"¹² Since the knight is the appropriate focus of our aesthetic attention, the properties of the object, which must be suppressed for the knight to appear, cannot also be properties of the artwork. The concern here, in contrast to the first objection, is not that the properties of the aesthetic object logically conflict with those of the physical object. Ingarden may accept that 'representing wetness' rather than 'wetness' is the aesthetically relevant property of *La Grenouillère*, so that there is no incompatibility between the dryness of the canvas and the represented wetness of the water. But even once we have resolved this logical incompatibility, Ingarden is concerned that the two types of properties compete for our attention: attention to the dryness of the canvas will interfere with our apprehension of the wetness of the water. Since appreciating the scene Monet has presented is our primary aesthetic task, we must suppress our attention to the physical object, which would undermine that task. This shows that the physical object and its properties are not the proper object of our aesthetic attention, and thus the physical object is not the artwork.

In response to such an objection, Richard Wollheim asks, *does* the recognition of representational properties really require the rejection or denial of physical ones? Wollheim suggests that “seeing-as,” or seeing one thing as representing another, is something we engage in all the time. Even something as simple as a mark on a canvas may be seen as advancing out of or receding behind the canvas, and hence may be taken to represent the property of advancing or receding.¹³ No denial of the physicality of canvas and paint seems required for us to recognize this relationship.

But as a response to Ingarden this is unsatisfactory, because it employs an overly strict conception of what it is to “deny” the physicality or other properties of the painted canvas. When I am seeing a mark as advancing out of the canvas, I do not have to insist to myself, “No, it’s not a mark on canvas!” But still, it seems that my attention to the fact that it is a mark on a flat surface does conflict, at any given moment, with my ability to see it as projecting forward, just as my present attention to the duck aspect of the ambiguous duck-rabbit image conflicts with my ability to see the rabbit aspect. To use Wollheim’s language of seeing-as, I cannot simultaneously see the image as a duck and see it as a rabbit; perhaps it is also true that I cannot simultaneously see the mark as lying directly on a flat surface and see it as advancing toward me. True, seeing an image as X need not involve *denying* that it is, or can also be seen as, Y (or even as not-X). I can see the rabbit aspect while remaining perfectly aware of the availability of the duck aspect. But the fact remains that these two aspects do compete for my attention.

To respond to Ingarden’s concern, we need to take a broader view of the situation, to step away from the issue of moment-to-moment attention. The

Aristotelian idea presented in the discussion of the previous objection may be the first step in an adequate response. Our attention to the scene Monet has presented, insofar as it is aesthetic attention, is attention to it qua representation. Thus as we attend to the wetness of the water, we must bear in mind that what we are seeing is not real wetness or real water. This response does not go quite far enough, however, for in itself it does not show why attention to represented-wetness doesn't require denial of the actual dryness of the canvas.

To complete the response, we must say more about what it is to attend to something qua representation. First, we must note that it is precisely by virtue of the object's physical characteristics, such as its color and form, that it represents. And, indeed, it is precisely by our attention to those physical characteristics that the property represented is made manifest to us. The wetness of the water may be conveyed to us despite the dryness of the canvas, but it is conveyed to us because of, and through, other physical features of the object. Moreover, to attend to a property qua *represented* property is to attend to the relationship between the property and the means through which it is represented: that is, to recognize just how the representation of this property has been achieved through the presentation of other, perhaps completely different, properties. This task is, perhaps, removed from the activity of immersing oneself in what is represented; it requires relinquishing some of one's attention to such qualities as the wetness of the water in order to hold other elements in mind at the same time, and consider them in relation to one another. To my mind, this consideration of various elements of a work in relation to one another is a central aesthetic task, and it can be achieved only by simultaneous reflection on the property represented and the physical

properties of the object through which it is represented. To ignore some of those physical properties (e.g., the dryness of the canvas) may be necessary as we initially apprehend the property represented. But ultimately, our recognition of both kinds of properties must coincide. To deny the physical properties of the object would be to render oneself aesthetically incompetent. Once we have rejected the idea that aesthetic attention to the work requires denying the physical features of the object, this formulation of the challenge is rendered ineffectual.

3. Representational properties cannot be constituted without the viewer, and thus do not belong to the object alone

A further formulation of the challenge, as presented by Hanke, appeals to the role of the viewer in constituting the represented properties:

[I]f the meaning is not present in the physical object independently of its being seen there and if this meaning belongs to the aesthetic object, then the aesthetic object must depend in part on acts of perceivers in order for it to exist. Consequently it could not be identified with a mind-independent physical object.¹⁴

This recalls Ingarden's suggestion that the "picture," or artwork, requires not only the physical properties of the object but also the participation of a suitably informed viewer as an "ontic foundation ... for its full constitution."¹⁵ The object, Ingarden suggests,

is simply the Objective, real condition of the concrete seeing and of the existence of the "picture" in the aesthetic sense; but the seeing and the existence of the "picture" require that various subjective conditions also be fulfilled, if the "picture" is to be given to us.¹⁶

The "picture" is the focus of appreciation, on Ingarden's view, and its properties are the aesthetically relevant ones. To say that these properties are "in" the object,

when both the object and the viewer must participate for the properties to be constituted, is inappropriate. Ingarden suggests that this will be the case for non-representational properties as well: the appropriate aesthetic focus, indeed the only possible aesthetic focus, is always the artwork *as seen*, not the object in its independent existence.

One kind of response to this objection will resemble what has been said above. It is certainly true that for the property 'wetness,' say, to be experientially constituted, or "given" in Ingarden's sense, a viewer's participation is required. But even if the constitution of this property in viewing is an important component of the aesthetic experience, we do not have to say that 'wetness' itself, as opposed to 'representing wetness,' is an aesthetically relevant feature of the artwork. We do not say of Monet's work that it is *identical to* a frog pond, or that it is composed partly of water, or that it is wet, but that it *depicts* a pond with these qualities. While the experiential constitution of the property 'wetness' may require the viewer's participation, that doesn't mean that the property 'representing wetness' isn't already a property of the object prior to the viewer's encounter—indeed, the presence of this property might be just what makes the experiential constitution of 'wetness' possible. Though the *attribution* of properties like 'representing wetness,' and the experiential constitution of the properties represented, may depend in part on the viewer's participation, this does not show that the representational property does not exist in the object independent of the viewer's activity.

This response to the objection admits that the viewer's participation may be required to experientially constitute the property *represented* (e.g., the wetness), but denies that this is incompatible with seeing the representational property (the

property of representing wetness) as a property of the object. On this view, it is partly by virtue of the fact that the object has a certain representational property that the viewer can experientially constitute the property represented. An issue that arises, given this response, is that the viewer's participation in constituting the represented properties will yield variable results: some viewers may detect a representational property while others fail to notice it. If some viewers are able to pick out the 'wetness' of the work and others are not, how can we justify saying that 'wetness' really is represented *in* the object?

Ingarden accounts for the differences among viewer responses by making the work a subjective entity in the mind of each viewer. The picture, he says, is constituted anew, and perhaps differently, each time a viewer encounters the painting. The attitude the viewer brings to the encounter, and the conditions of the encounter itself, will help to determine how the artwork is constituted in her experience. For example, if

we view the painting from too great a distance, or else from too close, too much from the side, and so on, then the aspect reconstructed in the picture does not attain to constitution.... We must, among other things, fulfill the requirements of perspectival seeing imposed by the picture, and consequently we must take up ... that place which is determined ... as the orientation center, in order to see correctly the space presented in the picture and the things situated in this space.... In contrast, the painting can be viewed from any place within the range of its visibility.¹⁷

To see the *picture*, then, we must adhere to certain norms of viewing, while the *object* (i.e., the painting) can be seen under much more variable conditions. The picture (or artwork), then, can be obtained only from the object-viewed-under-certain-circumstances-by-a-properly-prepared-viewer. And this, Ingarden suggests, means the picture is not identical with the object itself.

On my view, Ingarden draws the wrong metaphysical conclusion from an apt epistemological observation. He himself offers considerations suggesting that denying the identity of artwork and object is not required to account for the fact that the picture is accessible only under favourable circumstances. In the midst of the passage just quoted, he says, “[P]icking up upside down the photograph of a person well known to us is enough to prevent us from recognizing this person,”¹⁸ just as viewing a painting under certain conditions will prevent us from seeing the picture. True enough. But should we conclude from this that the photograph is not really, in and of itself, a photograph *of* the particular person? Ingarden himself describes it as a photograph *of* the person; moreover, he seems to see this as among its essential properties. This is what makes it notable that picking the photograph up upside down might *prevent us from recognizing* the person, with the clear suggestion that the person is there to be recognized. It is not only a photograph of that person *when-viewed-under-certain-circumstances*; it simply *is* a photograph of that person, which is what makes the circumstances allowing for that person’s recognition the *right* circumstances for viewing it.¹⁹

Here’s the upshot: to attribute a representational property to an artwork is to make a claim not about how it looks to any particular viewer, but about what is there to be seen. Though some viewers, due to lack of knowledge or sub-optimal circumstances, may fail to apprehend a representational property, that property is nonetheless *there to be seen* even for them: it is a component of the intersubjective entity to which all viewers have access. There is thus no reason to accept that representational properties are constituted by the viewer in any meaningful sense.

We are left with no reason to believe that representational properties cannot legitimately be attributed to physical objects. If we are mindful of the distinction between representational properties and the properties represented, we need see no conflict between the features of an artwork and those of the associated physical object. And the fact that certain norms of viewing must be adhered to if we are to apprehend representational content gives us no reason to think that content belongs to some entity other than the physical object: after all, favourable viewing conditions may be required if I am to apprehend of a chair that it is a chair, but this hardly shows that it, qua chair, is something other than a physical object. Thus the present challenge, at least, supplies no reason for abandoning the thesis that representational artworks are identical to physical objects.

Danto's challenge

The discussion thus far has aimed to resolve a longstanding debate over whether representational properties can be possessed by physical objects, thereby clearing away one sort of objection to the notion that some artworks are identical to physical objects. Another sort of objection, arguably more influential in contemporary circles, has been introduced by Arthur Danto. A discussion of Danto's objection will show how the sort of reply offered above can serve as a model for replies to other challenges to the identity of artworks and physical objects.

Suppose, Danto asks, that you have before you two canvases, both square, both of the same size, and both painted uniformly red. The physical similarity

between them is such that you wouldn't be able to tell one from the other. But in spite of this, the two are very different artworks. The first, titled *The Israelites Crossing the Red Sea*, shows the scene after the Israelites have crossed and the sea has closed, drowning their Egyptian pursuers. The second, titled *Red Square*, is a geometric minimalist work. Since the two canvases are, for practical purposes, physically indistinguishable, it cannot be their physical features that account for the deep differences between the corresponding artworks. Were we to focus exclusively on their physical features, we would be unable to recognize them as the distinct artworks that they are. This leads Danto to conclude that each painted canvas is the *material counterpart* of an artwork, but is not identical to that artwork.²⁰ "[A]n artwork," he says, "cannot be flattened onto its base and identified just with it, for then it would be what the mere thing itself is...."²¹

Marcel Duchamp's readymades furnish another example. The snow shovel that Duchamp christened *In Advance of the Broken Arm* did not undergo any physical change in the transition from plain old shovel to art object. Since the object did not change, and many other objects just like it never became artworks, it can't have been anything about the object that was sufficient to transfigure it into a work. This means, on Danto's view, that the object, the shovel, can be at most a component of the work; the shovel and the artwork are not the same thing. Danto suggests a subtraction procedure: since the shovel and the artwork are not the same, and something has presumably been added to make the shovel a work, then we should be able to subtract the shovel from the artwork, find the remainder, and say that this remainder is the decisive factor transfiguring the shovel into a work.²² The remainder that Danto identifies in this subtraction procedure is interpretation:

artworks are *constituted* by interpretation, and different interpretations constitute different works.

Danto rejects the identity of artwork and physical object, then, on the basis of two sorts of consideration. First, since two physically indiscriminable²³ paintings may have very different aesthetic properties, the physical properties of the object cannot fully account for the work's aesthetic properties. Second, since, of two physically indiscriminable objects, it may be the case that one corresponds to an artwork and the other does not, the physical properties of the object cannot account for the artwork's status as an artwork. Danto concludes, in each case, that there must be some entity other than the physical object at play.

Danto's examples have been fecund within aesthetics, prompting many insights about the nature of aesthetic experience.²⁴ Insofar as they have suggested that aesthetic experience can be accounted for only by denying that artworks are physical objects, though,²⁵ they have led the discussion astray. Let us consider, first, the case of two physically indistinguishable painted canvases that correspond to artworks with very different aesthetic properties. Must we conclude, with Danto, that the artwork is not identical to the physical object, since its aesthetic properties are not determined exclusively by its individual physical properties? Consider the following analogy. You and I own two physically indiscriminable chairs. Nothing about the chairs indicates which belongs to you and which to me; if they were swapped while we slept, we would be none the wiser. Thus it seems that their physical properties are insufficient to determine which is yours and which is mine. Yet, it is a fact that one of the chairs has the property of being yours, and the other the property of being mine. These properties of the chairs, however, are not

determined exclusively by physical properties of the four-legged physical objects that occupy our respective living rooms. Thus each chair must be something other than a physical object.

This argument clearly fails to go through. Yet, it is no worse than the argument Danto gives us, through the example of the red square paintings, for the conclusion that artworks are not identical to physical objects. Danto's example shows that the artwork's aesthetic properties are not determined exclusively by the individual physical properties of the object. But this leaves completely open the possibility that they are determined by the physical object's *relational* properties (or by some combination of physical and relational properties). The fact that a particular chair is mine may depend exclusively on its history. This gives us no reason whatever to reject the notion that the chair is just the familiar physical object we have always taken it to be, since physical objects can and do have histories. Similarly, the aesthetic properties of an artwork may depend in part on its relational features, such as having been interpreted in a certain way by an artist (which is of central interest for Danto). But, since physical objects are capable of bearing all manner of relational properties, including the property of being thought about or seen in a particular way, this does nothing to show that the artwork is not identical to a physical object.

Let us turn now to Danto's other example, of a physical object that becomes an artwork despite undergoing no physical change, and despite leaving behind many other, indistinguishable objects that are not artworks. Since the object's individual physical properties did not change in the transition, and since other objects with the same individual physical properties didn't become artworks at all,

the object's physical properties cannot have been responsible for the newly acquired artwork status. Must we therefore conclude that insofar as the entity is an artwork, it is not a physical object? Suppose that I find myself erecting a tent in a forest in which a number of physically indistinguishable rocks happen to be scattered. The ground is hard, and to drive in the stakes I require a hammer. I reach for the nearest rock and put it to successful use. It has a nicely ergonomic shape, and I like it so well that I take it home and keep it in my toolbox for household tasks. This particular rock has been transformed into an artefact, despite the fact that it underwent no physical change, and despite the fact that many physically indistinguishable rocks did not become artefacts. Therefore, insofar as it is an artefact, my hammer must be something other than a physical object.

This argument, like the first, is obviously fallacious. It is true that the rock's becoming an artefact depended on aspects of the situation, and not just on its particular physical properties: it just happened to be the rock within easiest reach of my tent site, and any other would have done just as well. But the role played by my activity and other aspects of the situation in transforming the rock into an artefact goes no distance toward showing that my new hammer is not a physical object.

The surface plausibility of Danto's arguments depends on the assumption that every sort of property a physical object may have must either be identical to or supervene on some set of its individual physical properties. But this assumption is simply untenable. It is a familiar fact, brought out by the mundane examples of chair and rock, that physical objects can have all sorts of relational properties that

do not depend solely on their individual physical properties in this way.²⁶ A chair acquires different relational properties by virtue of events in the universe that may not impinge on it in any way. The same is true in the case of artworks and their corresponding physical objects (painted canvases, shovels, etc.): the fact that an artwork has properties that cannot be detected by studying its physical properties does not show that the work is not identical to a physical object.

What about Danto's worry that by "flattening [the artwork] onto its base" we will limit it to being only "what the mere thing itself is"? If we were to say that the artwork is a physical object, would this make it impossible for us to see artworks as anything beyond brute lumps of material? Not at all. Even if artworks were identical to physical objects, this would not force us to approach them exclusively by attending to their physical features. A chief moral of the discussion of the representational properties challenge, with which we have been preoccupied for most of the present paper, is that we need not be so pessimistic about what "mere things" can be. Physical objects can be rich in historical and other sorts of relational properties that are not detectable on the basis of, or determined by, their individual physical properties. If these relational properties—such as the property, emphasized by Danto, of having been interpreted in a particular way—are of central interest to us, then mere inspection of physical properties will be, at best, inadequate as a mode of approach.

The correct conclusion to draw, on the basis of Danto's examples and other considerations adduced here, is not a *metaphysical* but an *epistemological* one: namely, that to see something as an artwork is, at least in many cases, to look beyond the physical and to ascertain the relational properties that are essential to

its meaning. Once we have recognized this, the central problem is to elaborate how artworks are to be approached, studied and grasped as artworks: and this opens onto a deep and interesting field of questions about aesthetic appreciation. We would be wise to clear away spurious metaphysical conclusions about the identity of artwork and physical object, so as better to focus on the nature of the activity that will enable us to grasp the essential features of the work. The identity of artwork and object, if indeed they are identical, is no barrier to the insight that aesthetic experience, correctly characterized, involves much more than looking.²⁷

Notes

¹ Jerrold Levinson, "The Work of Visual Art," in *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 129-37, esp. pp. 135-36.

² Joseph Margolis holds that artworks are embodied in physical objects ("Works of Art as Physically Embodied and Culturally Emergent Entities," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 14 [1974]: 187-96). Gregory Currie, though he holds that works of art are action types and not identical to physical objects, allows that visual artworks are "essentially embodied" (*An Ontology of Art* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989] esp. pp. 125-27). Lynne Rudder Baker argues that artworks are constituted by, though not identical to, physical objects. See "Why Constitution is Not Identity," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 94 (1997): 599-621; and *Persons and Bodies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 29-34.

³ Cf. Levinson's related discussion in "The Work of Visual Art." As he puts it, "one has the work of art that is the etching *in* and *through* each individual authorized and properly executed impression" (p. 131).

⁴ Philosophers have introduced a variety of distinctions to account for the heterogeneity among artworks. Nicholas Wolterstorff distinguishes between performance-works (those artworks, such as musical and dance compositions, which we experience through performances) and object-works (which we experience through our encounters with physical objects) ("Toward an Ontology of Artworks," *Noûs*, 9 [1975]: 115-42). Nelson Goodman distinguished between "allographic" works, for which perfect adherence to a given notation is sufficient to make something an instance of the work, and "autographic" works, the replication

of whose features would result not in a genuine instance of the work but in a forgery. As Goodman points out, paintings, etchings and sculptures tend to be autographic, while works of music and literature tend to be allographic (*Languages of Art* [Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1968], pp. 113-22). Levinson defends the distinction between the multiple arts, in which "more than one ... individual physical object does or can count as a genuine exemplar of the work in question," and the singular arts, in which only one object can be an exemplar of the work ("The Work of Visual Art," p. 131).

⁵ Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 2 Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 11. This is Wollheim's formulation, but not his objection; he introduces the notion of "seeing-as," discussed below, to resolve the apparent conflict between representational and other properties.

⁶ Paul Ziff, "Art and the 'Object of Art,'" *Mind*, 60 (new series) (1951): 466-80.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 478.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 479. Emphasis in original. Ziff offers no extensive account of the conditions in which we are justified in seeing a description as belonging to one family of description rather than another. He relies largely on the intuitive appeal of certain examples, including that of the distinction between the crate builder's and the art critic's ways of seeing the work. One might criticize Ziff for leaving open the possibility of manipulating the meaning of a description through ad hoc assignment of it to a family of description. As this is not my primary concern with his view, I will leave this issue aside.

⁹ Arthur Danto makes a related point in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 147-48.

¹⁰ John Hanke, "Can Representational Works of Art Be Physical Objects?" *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 10 (1976): 209-219, p. 209.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Roman Ingarden, *Ontology of the Work of Art: The Musical Work, The Picture, The Architectural Work, The Film*, translated by Raymond Meyer with John T. Goldthwait (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1989), p. 203, emphasis in original.

¹³ *Art and Its Objects*, pp. 15-16. In a subsequent discussion of seeing-in, a phenomenon similar to seeing-as, Wollheim points out that "I can see something in surfaces that neither are nor are believed by me to be representations" (*Painting as an Art* [London: Thames and Hudson, 1987], p. 47).

¹⁴ "Can Representational Works," p. 212.

¹⁵ *Ontology of the Work of Art*, p. 160.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 137.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 206.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Note that my point assumes nothing about which conditions make the photograph a photograph of that person. Berys Gaut says that "the content of a photograph (what it is a photograph of) is determined not by any language-like features of photographs, but by the non-conventional, non-intentional causal relations in which the camera stood to its object" ("Interpreting the Arts: The Patchwork Theory," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 [1993]: 597-609, p. 597). While I doubt that "the content of a photograph" is always equivalent to "what it is a photograph of," I accept that the latter (at least) may be determined by some causal relation between the camera and a corner of the world. In any

case, I think most would agree that there is at least usually a fact of the matter about what a photograph is of, regardless of what makes that fact true, and that apprehending what it is of will at least often be a requirement for adequate apprehension of the photograph itself.

²⁰ See *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 120. Danto's full account includes several other red square examples.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²² Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 26.

²³ Following Danto, I speak loosely of physical indiscriminability here. Nothing in the discussion hinges on the assumption that there exist pairs of medium-sized physical objects that are *perfectly* indiscriminable with respect to their individual physical properties. And clearly, indiscriminability with respect to relational properties is not at issue here: indeed, Danto's examples presuppose that the objects are readily distinguishable by their relational properties. See John Andrew Fisher's related discussion in "Is There a Problem of Indiscernible Counterparts?," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 92 (1995): 467-84, especially pp. 468-69.

²⁴ See, for example, a variety of papers in *Danto and His Critics*, edited by Mark Rollins (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), particularly Richard Wollheim's "Danto's Gallery of Indiscernibles," pp. 28-38.

²⁵ John Dilworth, to give just one recent example, credits Danto with establishing this point ("A Representational Theory of Artworks and Artefacts," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 41 [2001]: 353-70).

²⁶ It might turn out that all properties supervene on the physical, in which case these relational properties would be physical properties. If the supervenience thesis fails—and it turns out that minds, say, are non-physical—then there will be non-physical relational properties: so a chair might have the non-physical relational property of being thought about by me at time *t*. But this would do nothing to undermine the chair's status as a physical object.

²⁷ I am grateful to Martin Montminy and Alexander Nehamas, as well as an anonymous reviewer for this journal, for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.