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## SURFACE AND DEEP INTERPRETATION

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According to Arthur Danto, interpretations are essential to the identity of an object as a work of art. In *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* he says: “My theory of interpretation is . . . constitutive, for an object is an artwork at all only in relation to an interpretation.”<sup>1</sup> Interpretations are *transfigurative*; they are “functions which transform material objects into works of art.”<sup>2</sup> There is no work of art without an interpretation.

But not just any interpretation will do; transfigurative interpretations must be “correct”; that is, they must coincide as closely as possible with the artist’s own description or mental representation of the work. Artworks are “misconstituted when interpretation is wrong.”<sup>3</sup> Correctness and identity are so closely related, in fact, that “knowing the artist’s interpretation is in effect identifying what he or she has made.”<sup>4</sup> Such identification is timebound, “scrupulously historical,” and refers only to possibilities with which the artist could (or actually does) agree.<sup>5</sup> The artist is the privileged authority, the ultimate arbiter. Determining textual identity of works of art in this way, according to Danto, is so “routine” that we have become “masters” of it.<sup>6</sup> Later in this book, Danto calls this type of interpretation “surface interpretation.”

There is another type of interpretation that Danto explores, one which he believes we have not mastered (though not for lack of trying). Deep interpretation is a reading of a work of art that goes beyond (below) the surface level: it yields understanding below (deeper than) that which can be realized at the surface level. Whereas interpretation at the surface level is confirmable by the artist (what she might have meant, must have meant, or would allow to have meant upon reflection), interpretation at the deep level is not so confirmable. Deep interpretations afford multiple readings of the one same phenomenon, the work of art, that are alternatives to that obtained at the surface level. Such readings emerge from within a stipulated conceptual framework; for instance, Marxism, feminism, structuralism, psychoanalytic theory. Though artists can propose deep interpretations of their own work,

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they are in no special relationship to such readings: their intentions are irrelevant to the plausibility of the reading proposed. Here they are not the final arbiters.

At one point, Danto contrasts stains on an actual wall that have inspired Leonardo to paint landscape and figures (for example, the *Battle of Anghiari*, *The Last Supper*) and an imaginary wall with stains that was once a Leonardo painting but has since reverted back to mere stains. The identities of these frescos are in doubt, of course, until we achieve the “right sort of knowledge” about them: knowledge about what the artist has done and why. Ascertaining this knowledge constitutes establishing surface interpretations, thereby legitimating only the latter as art. Hence, the importance of art history. Any and all deep interpretations, for instance, a reading of *The Last Supper* along Freudian lines, depend on the established identities of the works at surface level. Since “there is no end to deep interpretation,”<sup>7</sup> myriads of deep readings seem to depend unquestioningly upon the one correct surface interpretation.

As might be presumed, there are interesting relationships between these two levels. First, surface interpretation is a prerequisite for deep interpretation: “surface interpretation, when successfully achieved, gives us the interpretanda for deep interpretation, the interpretata for which are to be sought in the depths.”<sup>8</sup> This relationship derives from Danto’s earlier claim that interpretation is constitutive of a work of art. Second, deep interpretation follows upon surface interpretation: “Deep interpretation supposes surface interpretation to have done its work, so that we know [at the surface level] what has been done and why.”<sup>9</sup> This further relationship stands between the contents of surface and deep interpretation.

That, in briefest outline, is Danto’s view of surface and deep interpretation in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, a view that complements his previous discussions on aesthetics.<sup>10</sup> Danto is at his best when he is being suggestive and creative; rarely are his perspectives anything less than insightful. But, starting with the biases of analytic philosophy, God is to be found in the details. Where Danto hints at clarifying analogies, reflection on them yields improved understanding of his perspective. Where a single thesis seems to be suggested, several emerge, some more plausible than others. And where the relationship between surface and deep interpretation is said to be straightforward, it is actually complex and controversial.

In the next two sections, we detail the analogy between understanding human actions and interpreting works of art. This analogy both develops a motivation for Danto’s view and clarifies it. In the course of that discussion, we distinguish between alternative definitions of “surface interpretation” and “deep interpretation,” as well as the asserted dependency between these types of interpretation. In the final two sections, we object to the most plausible version of content dependency among surface and deep interpretations. In doing so, we also clarify the way in which an interpretation is constitutive of an artwork.

## 1 Analogy with Human Action

Danto draws our attention to the analogy between understanding human actions and interpreting works of art. Ultimately the analogy is grounded on the fact that creating a

work of art is an action, often a highly complex, temporally extended action, but an action nonetheless. Interpreting a work of art, in fact, is a special case of understanding an agent's action.

For our purposes, the focal aspects of this analogy are these: (1) a description of an art object is like an observer's – a spectator's – understanding of the mere behavior associated with an action; (2) the surface interpretation of a work of art is like an agent's understanding of his own action; and (3) a deep interpretation of a work of art is like an observer's understanding of the consequences of the agent's action.

We embrace the Causal Theory of Action, according to which a bit of behavior is an action in virtue of its causal antecedents. These antecedents are representational mental events, preeminently intentions, but also background beliefs and desires.<sup>11</sup> This is a functional account of action, in that action is specified in virtue of its causal roles. Consider some simple or basic action, say Stravinski's lowering his arm. The story is this: Stravinski's lowering his arm is an action in virtue of his mental representational state, consisting primarily of his intention to lower his arm, causing the bodily behavior of his arm's going down.

From an observer's point of view, all that is seen is the motion of Stravinski's arm. An observer does not, literally, see an action, since he can see neither the agent's intention nor the causal relation between the intention and the arm's motion. He infers that Stravinski's arm going down was caused by his intention to lower his arm from contextual clues and by projections from his own actions.

A description of a work of art is like an observer's understanding of the behavior associated with an agent's action. All that is relevant to a description of a work of art are its physical characteristics. If the work is a painting, then the description consists in citing, for example, the size of the canvas, the kinds to which the objects depicted belong (for example, apples, bowls, fish) if the painting is realistic, or the colors and shapes if it is nonrepresentational. A description of the painting does not make reference to the artist's intentions or any other of the artist's representational mental events in creating the work. Similarly, in a literary work, say a novel, a description would cite the main characters, the setting, and the storyline. The description does not say what the author intends to convey to the reader, nor what the reader thinks the work conveys. For in those cases, we are going beyond the purely observational characteristics of the text; we are referencing the author's or the reader's representational states.

If all that we are told about Stravinski's arm is that it descends at a certain rate in a certain direction, we have no way to determine whether Stravinski acted. Without information about his mental state and its connection to his arm's motion, we are not entitled to claim that an action took place. Similarly, if we only have descriptive knowledge of the physical characteristics of a man-made object, we are not entitled to claim that it is a work of art. Rather, we must also know the intentions of the maker in creating an artwork. Without these prior intentions playing a crucial causal role, the object is not an artwork. If we label a statement of the artist's prior representational mental state "the artist's intended interpretation," then the artist's intended interpretation is constitutive of the artwork in the same way that Stravinski's intention to lower his arm is constitutive of his bodily behavior being an action.

Suppose now that Stravinski signals to the cellos by lowering his arm. An observer, a music critic, questions whether at that point in *The Firebird*, Stravinski was signaling to the cellos or to the basses. After all, one can signal and that signal not be taken. Stravinski could have been signaling to the basses, but the cellos responded. How is the critic to answer this question? It is obvious. Ask Stravinski. No one is – or can be – in a better position than Stravinski himself to say correctly whether he signaled to the cellos or to the basses. Stravinski occupies a privileged position as to understanding what he did.

The surface interpretation of a work of art is a statement about what the artist created based on his or her intentions and other representational states, such as background beliefs and desires. The surface interpretation of a work of art is, fundamentally, the artist's intended interpretation.

Often, the critic must rely on plausible reconstructions of the artist's intentions in order to approximate the surface interpretation of the work. Such reconstructions generally make use of historical knowledge about the artist, about the social context in which she worked, about the traditions and conventions in place at the time, and so on. Without access to the artist's report of her intentions, and evidence to believe that this report is reliable, the critic's reconstruction of the surface interpretation can never be taken as definitive. Nonetheless, there is exactly one surface interpretation, though it might never be known, and that is the correct rendering of the artist's intentions.

Danto seems to suggest at times that the surface interpretation is more than the artist's intended interpretation. Works of art often exhibit ambiguities. Surface interpretation disambiguates the work in a way that differs minimally from the artist's intended interpretation. Understood in this way, there may be more than one surface interpretation since there may be more than one way to disambiguate a work while being consistent with the artist's intentions and making only minimal additions to them. Indeed, under this view, there can be in principle indefinitely many such surface interpretations. For there can be indefinitely many ways to supplement the artist's interpretation without contradicting her stated intentions about the work.

Against this view, it might be responded that there is exactly one surface interpretation and it is precisely the artist's intended interpretation. *We* might not know how to disambiguate the work, but the artist does, even if she fails to report it or even consciously think about it.

This response presupposes that the artist intends exactly one reading or interpretation of every aspect of a work of art, and that appears false. Consider Watteau's painting *L'embarquement à Cythère*. Are the lovers entering or leaving the Isle of Love? The work is ambiguous. It might, importantly, be intentionally ambiguous. Watteau, we can imagine, never intended, one way or another, whether the lovers were falling in or out of love. He simply had no intentions at all in this regard. Thus, the artist's intended interpretation of the painting would not make reference to this aspect of it.

It is not clear which notion of surface interpretation Danto intends. But in any case, there is a problem with taking surface interpretation as minimal disambiguation. Ambiguities and unclarity abound in works of art. If we are required to resolve each one, a surface interpretation will add considerably many claims to the artist's interpretation. Unless we are willing to countenance indefinitely many surface interpretations, the question arises

as to the criteria for fixing sets of disambiguating statements. If a set of disambiguating judgments is to be coherent, there will be a theoretical perspective from which it is made. But appealing to a theoretical perspective is to provide a deep, not a surface, interpretation. That is, once we move beyond the artist's intended interpretation, there is a slippery slide toward deep interpretation. The preferred approach, and one consistent with the analogy to action theory, is to restrict surface interpretations to the artist's intended interpretations. Admittedly, there will then be aspects of the work that cannot be interpreted on the surface level. But that result seems acceptable. In part, it is because surface interpretations are not complete that deep interpretations are brought to bear.

Consider two painters who create abstract works that are observationally, that is, descriptively, extraordinarily similar; say, each depicts a large bright red–orange sphere with a yellow background. The first painter indicates that his intention was to illustrate the blending of oranges, reds, and yellow; it was an exercise in color and composition. The second painter indicates that his intention was to depict the coming of worldwide destruction due to man's misuse of the ecosystem. The second painter's intentions go well beyond what can easily be “read” directly from the painting.

Which of these artists has given the correct surface interpretation of his work? *Both*. The surface interpretation of a work of art *is* the interpretation the artist gives to the work in virtue of his intentions in creating it. The degree to which the work is put into context or given a symbolic reading, or alternatively the degree to which it approaches a description of the work as a limit, is irrelevant to the correctness of the surface interpretation. The surface interpretation is no more than, and no less than, the understanding of the work given the artist's intentions, background beliefs, and other representational mental states that played a role in his creating it.

An artist can fail to have the work express his intentions, or he can misreport his intentions when reflecting on the completed work. The situation is the same for the case of actions generally. Stravinski might fail to signal to the cellos if they do not take his signal, or he might misreport his intentions when discussing his action with a critic after the concert. But if his memory is veridical and he reports truthfully, then what action he performed – whether he signaled to the cellos or to the basses – is definitively settled by him. The same holds for our two artists. The art critic may have reason to believe that, for instance, the second artist was offering a *post hoc* interpretation of the piece or that, for whatever purpose, he was inaccurately citing his intentions. But if the artist's memory is veridical and if he is reporting truthfully, then his interpretation is the surface interpretation, whatever the critic thinks of that interpretation of the work. We will return to this point about surface interpretation later.

Turning to the third focal aspect of the analogy between understanding action and interpreting art, suppose that sitting in the audience during the performance of *Firebird* is the steering committee for the rebellion. They are awaiting a signal to start the revolution and they take Stravinski's sudden downward motion of his arm as that signal. The revolution to free humankind from economic oppression begins. Stravinski, let us further suppose, knows nothing of the rebellion nor that he is the person to give the signal. The steering committee brought to the situation a set of background beliefs, a theoretical or conceptual framework, which is wholly distinct from Stravinski's. For Stravinski, the

start of the rebellion is an unknown and unintended consequence of his action of signaling to the cellos.

A work of art may be interpreted in a way in which the artist never intended, nor even imagined. A Greek tragedy or a Shakespearian play might be given a Freudian interpretation despite neither Euripides nor Shakespeare having knowledge of Freudian theory. Eighteenth-century neoclassical painting might be interpreted from a feminist perspective despite the lack of knowledge of feminism by David and his contemporaries. Just as an agent need not – indeed, cannot – have knowledge about all the consequences of his actions and the contexts in which they can be understood, so too an artist can lack knowledge about the contexts and frameworks in which his work can be interpreted.

Sometimes an agent can foresee the consequences of her action even though that result is not intended. In saving the life of a drowning child, a person might realize that she will embarrass the lifeguard. She foresees that embarrassing the lifeguard is a consequence of her action; but in acting as she did, she did not intend to embarrass him, she only intended to save the child. The agent's recognizing that embarrassing the lifeguard is a consequence of her action puts her in the same position as an observer of what happened. An observer is equally able as the actor herself to determine whether the action leads to the lifeguard being embarrassed. The agent enjoys no privileged position with respect to understanding the unintended consequences of her actions.

Similarly, an artist might offer an interpretation of his work in a context distinct from that which he intended when creating the work. After creating the painting, our first artist, the one who intended to undertake an exercise in color and composition, might then interpret the work as a symbol for an impending holocaust. Here he is offering a deep interpretation of that piece; and the plausibility of his interpretation is only as strong as it would be if it were offered by any observer. Since this interpretation does not reflect the initial intentions with which he created the work, he fails to enjoy a privileged position. Note, incidentally, the second artist, the one who created the work with the intention of representing the coming holocaust, *is* in a privileged position with respect to that interpretation. For the second artist, it is a surface interpretation; for the first artist, it is a deep interpretation.

The metaphor “surface interpretation” can be misleading. It suggests a superficial or minimalist interpretation. But a surface interpretation, taken as the artist's intended interpretation, can be both acute and robust. In creating the work, the artist might have a comprehensive set of intentions, based on a highly articulated set of background beliefs, which he successfully brings to fruition. True, many artists do not create in this way; but there is little doubt that sometimes works exemplify an artist's robust intentions.

## 2 The Dependency Theses

Danto claims, as we noted at the outset, that deep interpretation depends on surface interpretation. There are several ways to understand this dependency. One is based on the analogy with action theory, and elucidates Danto's characteristic position on the nature of art. Two others relate the contents of surface and deep interpretation.

The first claim of dependency – let us call it the Constitutive Dependency thesis – relies on Danto’s view that interpretation is a function that transforms objects into works of art. In order to understand the consequences of what a person does within some broad-based context, the person’s bodily movements must rise to the status of action in virtue of their causal history. Similarly, a physical object or event must be transfigured into a work of art through the causal history of the artist’s intentions in order to be something that can then be interpreted within a conceptual or theoretical context. We might symbolize this claim by

$$I(o) = W,$$

where  $o$  ranges over material objects or events and  $W$  over works of art. There would be no works of art unless there were interpretations ( $I$ ) of objects and events.

We propose that there are two senses of “surface interpretation.” The first equates a surface interpretation with the artist’s intended interpretation:

(SI<sub>1</sub>) The surface interpretation of a work of art is the artist’s intended interpretation.

The Constitutive Dependency thesis assumes that an artist’s intended surface interpretation is “correct” since “artworks are misconstituted when the surface interpretation is wrong.”<sup>12</sup>

The second version adds that a surface interpretation is a minimal disambiguation of the work:

(SI<sub>2</sub>) A surface interpretation of a work of art is an interpretation that minimally disambiguates the work consistent with the artist’s intentions and historical and contextual background information.

Note that there can be indefinitely many interpretative statements of the work consistent with the historical and contextual information.

We believe that (SI<sub>1</sub>) best captures the spirit of Danto’s own view, as well as being the more plausible alternative. As mentioned, the version (SI<sub>2</sub>) leads down a slippery slope toward collapsing surface interpretation into deep interpretation.

Turning to deep interpretation,

(DI) A deep interpretation of a work of art is an interpretation of that work, other than a report of the artist’s intentions, that is grounded in some theoretical or conceptual framework.

Note that in deep interpretation, the object of interpretation is a work of art, and not a mere material object. The conceptual or theoretical framework within which a deep interpretation is made, according to (DI), need not be the artist’s framework.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to Constitutive Dependency, there is another type of dependency relationship between deep and surface interpretation which we will call Content Dependency. In order to assert that a deep interpretation is correct, the content of the deep interpretation must bear a specific type of relationship to the content of the surface interpretation. At least

*two* such instances of this relationship are distinguishable. We believe that Danto advocates the weaker of these:

- (Weak D) A deep interpretation of a work of art is correct *only if* the deep interpretation of the work is consistent with the surface interpretation of the work.

Recall that the surface interpretation is most plausibly taken to be the artist's intended interpretation (SI<sub>1</sub>). Thus, a deep interpretation of a work of art is correct only if this deep interpretation is consistent with the artist's intended interpretation.

This condition for correctness of a deep interpretation is permissive, but it does not say that every deep interpretation is correct. For example, Shakespeare did not ground his work within the Freudian theoretical framework for the simple reason that he had no access to this theory. Yet, it is plausible to think that none of Shakespeare's beliefs in writing *Macbeth* were incompatible with Freudian theory.<sup>14</sup>

This weak relationship between the contents of deep and surface interpretation precludes a deep interpretation from being correct if it contradicts the artist's intended interpretation. In our earlier example, we supposed that an artist intended his orange and yellow painting to symbolize the destruction of the ecosystem by humankind. If a critic interpreted that work as symbolizing instead the glorification of the ecosystem, the critic would be incorrect. According to (Weak D), the artist, in some cases, is the final judge of incorrect deep interpretations of his work, though in no case is he the final judge of correct deep interpretations.

A stronger version of the Content Dependency thesis essentially restricts correct deep interpretation to traditional art history:

- (Strong D) A deep interpretation of a work of art is correct *only if* the deep interpretation of the work is consistent with the surface interpretation and the deep interpretation is based on the artist's theoretical or conceptual framework.

A deep interpretation, under this construal, seeks to understand the artwork by uncovering connections between it and other works in the same tradition, by tracing the artist's intellectual development that led to his creating this particular piece, and so on. Here only deep interpretations conducted within the context of traditional art history can be correct. A Freudian interpretation of *Macbeth*, for instance, would be automatically ruled incorrect.

This condition of correctness flies in the face of much contemporary literary and artistic deep interpretation. In *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Danto appears to want to defend this condition of correctness, but he cannot find a good argument to do so.<sup>15</sup> It is an unpermissive thesis, though it does not reduce correct deep interpretations to one.

Conceivably, one could hold that there is exactly one correct deep interpretation and this is the artist's intended interpretation, that is, that deep interpretation reduces to surface interpretation. But this surely is false. There is no good reason to think that the statements of the artist's intentions and beliefs about the work of art exhaust all that is true of it.



Philosophical interest lies mostly in the Weak Dependency thesis, and secondarily in the strong version.<sup>16</sup> Each of them sets the limits on correct deep interpretations. Each of them assigns a pivotal role to the artist's intended interpretation. The weak version is permissive, though it does count some deep interpretations as incorrect. The strong version is unpermissive, likely too much so.

### 3 Are Deep Interpretations Weakly Dependent on Surface Interpretations?

We have proposed that it is likely that Danto advocates the weaker version of the Content Dependency claim, (Weak D), which states that a deep interpretation that is inconsistent with the surface interpretation is incorrect. In the interest of seeking correct interpretations of artworks, it would seem to follow from advocating (Weak D) that Danto would be a strong proponent of critics attending to artists' intentions, for to do otherwise is to risk both viewers' understanding of the work and the status of the object as art. But is this, in fact, what Danto advocates?

Although Danto does not address this question directly in his philosophical writings, we have the opportunity to study his art critical writings for an answer. In his reviews (written for *The Nation*), Danto provides a glimpse into the *practice* of interpreting that he only suggests as a philosopher. Though most of his reviews serve to reinforce the Weak Content Dependency thesis, some do not.<sup>17</sup> In these latter examples, Danto offers deep interpretations, the content of which is clearly inconsistent with the content of the artists' intended surface interpretations.

Consider first the case of Anselm Kiefer, a native of Germany, who creates paintings (some measuring 12 by 18 feet) that consist of photos, pigment, lead, sand, and straw. Over the past 20 years, his subject matter has ranged from vast and desolate landscapes of destruction, to architectural interiors reminiscent of Nazi design, to mythological references to Nordic, Egyptian, German, and Old Testament narratives, and, most recently, to symbolic representations of science as redemptive knowledge. His works are heavily laden with allusions to history, philosophy, alchemy, and poetry, so much so that on a deep level (according to Danto) they are indecipherable without a catalogue that is "obligingly provided" to visitors by the museum staff. The catalogue, in fact, becomes the focus of our discussion; it is the locus of Kiefer's stated surface interpretations, interpretations that Danto, as critic, rejects.

Kiefer, in describing early works such as *The Flooding of Heidelberg* (1969), *Nero Paints* (1974), and *Painting = Burning* (1974), has incited considerable controversy: "I do not identify with Nero or Hitler . . . but I have to reenact what they did just a little bit in order to understand the madness. That is why I make these attempts to become a fascist."<sup>18</sup> Mark Rosenthal, the author of the catalogue, places this remark in a larger framework of other claims by Kiefer in order to discern a cohesive rationale to Kiefer's intended meanings. Rosenthal's deep interpretations of Kiefer's work – which see Kiefer as exploring complex themes of life and death, good and evil, artist as salvation of the German people versus artist as destructive power – are based on extensive interviews with the artist.<sup>19</sup> When Kiefer

refers to Adolf Hitler in *Nuremburg* (1982) or the Aryan woman of Paul Celan's poetry<sup>20</sup> (*Your Golden Hair, Margarete*, 1981) or *Germany's Spiritual Heroes* (1973), Rosenthal believes that Kiefer is "derisively parroting the fondly held views of Germany,"<sup>21</sup> namely, that Germany exemplifies a pure and superior race: "Kiefer's outlook is founded on a notion that is akin to original sin: a 'blemish' exists on the soul of humanity, especially the German nation, and this is very nearly impossible to remove."<sup>22</sup> Any artist – and the artist Kiefer in particular – "is dangerous yet important to society."<sup>23</sup> Kiefer sees himself in the role of the dangerous artist who portrays the horrors perpetrated by a Germany that has "maimed itself and its civilization by destroying its Jewish members" in his attempt to "make Germany whole again."<sup>24</sup> Kiefer exposes rather than ignores the past, haunting his countrymen with scenes of desolation, despair, and evil in an attempt to force them to atone for the past. "A state of spiritual anxiety prevails; perhaps a form of chaos is immanent."<sup>25</sup> Rosenthal reports: "Kiefer is uncomfortable when his art is positive or perceived to be so, for he believes that this attribute is not sensible or realistic given history and the present world situation."<sup>26</sup>

Danto's reading of the work, however, stands in sharp contrast to Kiefer's claims. Danto believes that Kiefer is deluding enthusiastic fans (especially wealthy Jewish patrons) with a "crackpot message" of German nationalism totally devoid of remorse and shame.<sup>27</sup> Rosenthal's catalogue is a "morass of portentous exegesis" designed to explain the "farce of heavy symbolism" abundant in Kiefer's works. Kiefer's use of symbols is "jeune and dishonest," an "absurd masquerade . . . a heavy-handed compost of shallow ideas and foggy beliefs." Kiefer is deliberately deceiving us by means of ambiguous imagery, skillfully crafted to be taken in either of two ways:

The work is willfully obscure enough that it can be interpreted that way [as Deutschland's contrition over the Holocaust], and sufficiently filled with flames, ruins, charred stumps and slurred wastes that one can see agony and the ashes of slaughtered innocents inscribed in its dreary surfaces. But it is far more plausible that it is a sustained visual lament for a shattered *Vaterland*, a recall to the myths of triumph and heroic will and a summons to fulfillment of some Nordic promise as if the comfortable German present must be shaken out of its commercial complacencies and prodded into some serious game of dungeons and dragons through which it will regain its destiny.

When Danto offers his own "more plausible" reading of Kiefer's work, he is, in effect, offering a deep interpretation whose content clearly contradicts the content of the artist's intended surface interpretation. Danto rejects Kiefer as arbiter of the meaning of the works and instead sets himself up as final judge.

Consider another example: the work of New York artist Julian Schnabel. Schnabel's canvases are, like Kiefer's, large and three dimensional. He has depicted human figures on black velvet as in *Nicknames of Maitre d's* (1984), fairytale characters on linoleum in *Humpty Dumpty* (1984), and introduced his "signature" use of broken plates affixed to painted canvas in *The Walk Home* (1985).<sup>28</sup> His work was the hotly debated and bestselling commodity of the 1980s artworld. In contrast to Kiefer, Schnabel has written extensively about his work, explaining his paintings in an attempt to prevent critics from usurping his role as interpreter. Schnabel claims that his work is a way to share his thoughts and

experiences with others in order to relay “a clearer realization of the world we live in.”<sup>29</sup> “Only through the work can there be a recognition, a harmony of intention and revelation, artist and viewer communing.” By means of this sharing, art is generative: “All components of the work are parts of a desire to transform the spirit.” “We are then using the physical to get at the invisible communal which is about the sameness of the viewer and the artist, not about their difference.” It is not created for the “cliques of power” (“Art that caters to critics is empty”) nor is their input welcome.

There is altogether too much mediating going on; too many words and ideas and theories come between the viewer and the object of contemplation. On the spot digestion and “interpretation” of a work of art by a critic/reporter, quick and witty reportage, serves to obfuscate meaning.

Take the use of broken plates as an example: “My interest was in the reflective property of white plates to disturb the picture plane . . . The plates seemed to have a sound of every violent human tragedy, an anthropomorphic sense of things being smeared and thrown.” According to Danto, however, the plates give the paintings “a vitality all the whipped pigment and portentous imagery aspire to but miss.”<sup>30</sup> Danto accepts none of Schnabel’s claims. He casts him as the paradigm mercenary: a cuckold of critics. Schnabel paints big paintings because the market disdains small ones (“If you do not make it big, you do not make it at all.”) Schnabel slathers on the paint because it “enables the artist to deposit evidence of creative frenzy.” He depicts the human figure (for example, a yellow female Christ on a cross in *Vita*, 1984) because it is serious in tone (Christ) and timely (female). The figure is badly drawn “just to make it clear that feeling trumps dexterity.” His works are “so anxious to please that it is as though they are wagging their tails.” He has “so ingeniously internalized” the “crass structures of the art world” that his “loud and awful paintings” serve as “fuel for the engines of the art market today.”

This is a cursory dismissal of Schnabel’s explicitly stated surface intentions. At least in the case of Kiefer, Danto admitted that the images were ambiguous and could be read in opposing ways. But in the case of Schnabel, Danto rejects the artist’s intentions outright.

In sum, (Weak D), the requirement of consistency between a deep interpretation and the surface interpretation, is defeated by counterexamples from Danto’s own writings in art criticism. Danto offers deep interpretations of both Kiefer’s and Schnabel’s works that are contrary to reports of their intended interpretations. Presuming that Danto’s deep interpretations are correct, it is possible, then, for a deep interpretation to contradict an artist’s intended interpretation.

Danto might respond that neither Kiefer nor Schnabel accurately report their intended interpretations. Once we know what their actual intentions are, the alleged inconsistencies would dissolve. However, we have good evidence in these cases about the artist’s intentions; indeed, in terms of documented reports of artists’ intentions, if these cases fail, it is unclear whether we can establish any genuine surface interpretations.

Moreover, even if Danto is correct in claiming that Kiefer and Schnabel have misreported their intentions, we can assume for the sake of argument that they were accurate in their reports. We would presume that, even in these counterfactual circumstances, Danto

would continue to argue for the correctness of his deep interpretations. As critic, Danto takes the approach that he has insight into these works, independently of what the artists intended to create.

Note that the analogy with human action does not require consistency between the content of surface and deep interpretations. The consequences of an action can be understood by an observer in ways incompatible with the agent's intended consequences, provided that the observer's theoretical framework differs appropriately from the agent's. A Marxist, for example, might well understand a neoconservative legislator's decision to cut taxes for the wealthy entirely differently from the consequences intended by the legislator. Thus, dependency between the contents of surface and deep interpretation is not supported by the analogy with human action.

#### 4 Consequences for the Constitutive Dependency Thesis

Let us agree that these counterexamples to (Weak D) obtain, that there are cases in which the critic's, not the artist's, interpretation is correct. This result has consequences for Danto's primary philosophical claim about the nature of art, his Constitutive Dependency thesis.

Recall Danto's claim that interpretation is constitutive: "an object is an artwork *at all* only in relation to an interpretation." Danto stipulated, further, that the correct surface interpretation is the one with which the artist does (or could) agree. That is, the correct surface interpretation – the interpretation constitutive of the artwork – must coincide with the artist's own description or mental representation of the work. The Constitutive Dependency thesis, moreover, is grounded on the analogy with human action. The consequences of an action can be understood only if an action has in fact been performed, and an action has been performed only if the agent's intentions caused his bodily movements. Similarly, there can be a deep interpretation of a work of art only if there is in fact a work of art, and there is a work of art only if there is an interpretation of what has been created in terms of the artist's intentions.

However, counterexamples to (Weak D) also jeopardize the Constitutive Dependency thesis, for artworks are "misconstituted when interpretation is wrong."<sup>31</sup> If the artist's intended surface interpretation can be rejected by the critic, then these man-made objects can fail to be transfigured into art. The status of the artwork as an object that embodies the artist's creative intentions loses its focal position. It is as if the causal role of an agent's intentions were not essential to his actions. Basically, this result collapses the distinction between action and mere behavior, as it collapses the distinction between works of art and ordinary objects and events.

Fortunately, this problem is not as serious as might be supposed. The confusion, we suggest, is to take surface and deep interpretations to be competing. This confusion is compounded by talk of each kind of interpretation being correct or incorrect. If (Weak D) is defeated, and the critic's interpretation can contradict the artist's intended interpretation, and moreover the critic's interpretation is taken to be correct, then it is natural to conclude that the artist's intended interpretation is incorrect. But drawing this "natural" conclusion must be rejected.

Rather, we suggest that “correct” and “incorrect” not be predicated of surface interpretations (or, if they are, these terms be defined in a way different from the way they are used in the case of deep interpretations). Surface interpretations are sets of statements that accurately reflect, or fail to accurately reflect, the artist’s intentions in creating the work. Surface interpretations refer primarily to the artist’s intentions, and only secondarily to the work. By contrast, deep interpretations are readings of the work within a theoretical or conceptual framework; they make reference to the artist’s intentions, at best, secondarily if they refer to them at all.

The normative terms “accurate” and “inaccurate” should replace “correct” and “incorrect” in the case of surface interpretation. An accurate surface interpretation is a set of true statements that describes the artist’s intentions in creating the work. An inaccurate surface interpretation does the opposite. We suppose, further, that some descriptions capture better than others the artist’s intentions; that is, statements of surface interpretations lie on a continuum, with some being more inaccurate than others. An accurate surface interpretation is one that describes best the artist’s intentions in creating the work.

The Constitutive Dependency thesis now says that an object or event is transfigured into an artwork if there is an accurate surface interpretation of that object or event. Note that it is not claimed that the surface interpretation must be *known* by anyone other than the artist. Rather, the claim is only that there is such an interpretation for there to be an artwork.

An accurate surface interpretation can contradict a correct deep interpretation. The correctness of a deep interpretation depends on a variety of factors, some of which are obvious – such as internal consistency, grounding in a conceptual framework – and others of which are far from obvious. But, in any case, correct deep interpretations do not necessarily depend on statements of the artist’s intentions. Understood in this way, statements of Kiefer’s and Schnabel’s intentions can be accurate, and Danto’s deep interpretations of their works can be correct, while simultaneously contradicting each other.

Reformulating the Constitutive Dependency thesis in terms of an accurate rendering of the artist’s intentions is consistent with the analogy with human action. Danto’s main point that creating a work of art is like performing an action remains because in both cases the agent does something that satisfies his intentions. Moreover, in both cases, he has special access to these representational states. This approach to the Constitutive Dependency thesis is within the spirit of Danto’s view; even if it departs somewhat from the letter of it.

In conclusion, the Dependency thesis (Weak D), which requires consistency between the contents of surface and deep interpretations, is false, as counterexamples derived from Danto’s own art-critical writings show. A consequence of the failure of (Weak D) is a high level of permissiveness for correct deep interpretations. We may be more skilled at the deep level than Danto gives us credit. At one point, Danto laments that he has not found an argument to constrain deep interpretations. The reason that he has not found one, we maintain, is that there is no good argument. Without (Weak D), it is difficult to rule out myriad, perhaps even bizarre, deep interpretations. But so be it.

The failure of (Weak D) might seem to threaten the Constitutive Dependency thesis, the central claim of Danto’s theory of art. But not so. The apparent inconsistency between some surface interpretations and other correct deep interpretations disappears when we

realize that surface interpretations are to be evaluated on the basis of their accurately describing the artist's intentions, and not the work itself, whereas deep interpretations are evaluated on just the opposite basis. The Constitutive Dependency thesis, when taken to mean that there is a work of art if there is an accurate surface interpretation of the object, remains tenable.

## Notes

- 1 Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York, 1986), p. 44.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 53.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 10 See *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA, 1981) and *The State of the Art* (New York, 1987).
- 11 See Myles Brand, *Intending and Acting* (Cambridge, MA, 1984), especially chs 1 and 2. Danto's views on human action, including his classic account of basic actions, are most developed in his *Analytical Philosophy of Action* (Cambridge, 1973).
- 12 Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, p. 45.
- 13 In order to explicate "deep interpretation" adequately, it would be necessary to clarify the nature of a theoretical or conceptual framework, a task of significant proportions, and well beyond the scope of this essay. Here we assume that there is a reasonable intuitive sense of the matter, and we limit ourselves to citing examples of such frameworks.
- 14 In order for his beliefs to be inconsistent with Freudian theory they would have to contradict directly one or more statements of the theory; since Shakespeare, presumably, never had any beliefs within Freudian theory, there is no possibility for a contradiction to arise.
- 15 See *Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, p. 47.
- 16 Criteria for correctness of deep interpretation that are stricter than (Weak D) but not as strict as (Strong D) can be formulated by adding additional conditions for correctness to (Weak D). The thesis, (Weak D), however, is the philosophical core.
- 17 For examples of commentary that serve to reinforce the Content Dependency thesis, see Danto's reviews of the work of Ad Reinhardt, Cindy Sherman, Andy Warhol, and others in issues of *The Nation* as well as a published collection of his essays called *The State of the Art* (New York, 1987).
- 18 Mark Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer* (Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York, 1987), p. 17.
- 19 Kiefer is noticeably reticent to talk about his work; the catalogue contains few direct quotes. Rosenthal reports that Kiefer is much more comfortable in allowing him to paraphrase.
- 20 The poems of Paul Celan which were written in a concentration camp in 1945 and published in 1952. Celan was the only member of his family to survive but he committed suicide in 1970.
- 21 Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, p. 96.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

- 25 Ibid., p. 104.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 All quotes are taken from Danto's review of *Anselm Kiefer* in the January 2, 1989 issue of *The Nation*, pp. 26–8.
- 28 These works are 9' × 21', 10' 6" × 15', and 9' 4" × 19' 4" respectively.
- 29 *Julian Schnabel: Paintings, 1975–1986* (London, 1986), pp. 93–7. All quotes are taken from these pages.
- 30 See ch. 8 on Schnabel in Danto's *The State of the Art*, pp. 43–7.
- 31 Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, p. 45.