

# CURRENT ISSUES IN METAPHYSICS

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## Works of Art from the Philosophically Innocent Point of View

### INTRODUCTION

The *Mona Lisa*, the *Mondscheinsonate*, the *Chanson d'automne* are works of art, the salt shaker on your table, the car in your garage, or the pijamas on your bed are not. The basic question of the metaphysics of works of art is this: what makes a thing a work of art? That is: what sort of property do works of art have in virtue of which they are works of art? Or more simply: what sort of property *being a work of art* is?

In this paper we argue that things are works of art in virtue of *what they are like*, their intrinsic features, that is, in virtue of the fact that they have the perceptual (auditory, visual, etc.) properties they have. In other words: *being a work of art* supervenes on *perceptual-intrinsic features*. Currently, this metaphysical view is extremely unpopular within the philosophy of art. It is unpopular because there allegedly exists a knock-down objection to it, the well-known argument from indiscernible counterparts. Our thesis implies, among other things, that every perceptual duplicate of a work of art is also a work of art. According to the argument from indiscernible counterparts, however, there could be (or even: there are) indiscernible counterparts such that one of them is a work of art while the other is not. Hence things cannot be works of art solely in virtue of what they are like.

Our paper divides into three parts. In the first part we state our views. In the second part we defend it against various versions of the argument from indiscernible counterparts. (In doing so our position will become more plausible, we hope). In the final part we provide some meta-reflections on the matter.

### 1. THE NATURE OF ARTWORKS

#### 1.1. *What is our view exactly?*

Let's begin with the notion of perceptual property. The perceptual properties of the *Mona Lisa* are those which are visually presented to us when we look at the painting. The perceptual properties of the *Mondscheinsonate* are those which

are auditively presented to us when we listen to the music. It is crucial that what we call the ‘perceptual properties’ of the *Mona Lisa* or the *Mondscheinsonate* are *not* the properties of our experiences of them (they are not qualia, or some such mental, phenomenal stuff), but the perceptually accessible intrinsic properties of the works of art themselves what we can see or hear. By definition: the perceptual properties of work of art *O* are those intrinsic properties of *O* which *are manifested to the perceiver during the perception of O*.

Someone might say that notions like ‘perception of a work of art’ and ‘perceptual properties of a work of art’ are plausible in the case of fine arts and musical arts (we do perceive such works of art during which their perceptual properties are indeed manifested to us), but they are not plausible in the case of literature.

This isn’t so. To begin with, the perceptual properties of some literary artworks are not the perceptual properties of its (printed) textual image. We obviously do not say that the *Chanson d’automne* is a work of art in virtue of the fact that the image of its printed text has the perceptual properties that it has. Instead we say that when you read the *Chanson d’automne*, the work of art is *presented* to you. Not visually, of course, and not auditively, but – to put it this way – *imaginatively*. That is, when you read the *Chanson d’automne* you *perceive* it imaginatively (with your ‘mind’s eye’, so to speak), and the perceptual properties of the *Chanson d’automne* are those which are imaginatively presented to you.

The matter becomes clearer if we bring out a parallel between literary artworks and musical artworks. Suppose that you are a thoroughbred musician and before you lies a copy of the musical score sheet of the *Mondscheinsonate*. When you read the musical score sheet, to you, the qualified musician, the *Mondscheinsonate* becomes imaginatively presented. You do hear the music, imaginatively. Its perceptual properties are manifested to you, imaginatively. We claim that something *similar* is the case when someone reads the *Chanson d’automne*. You do see what the poem says, imaginatively. Its perceptual properties are manifested to you, imaginatively. So the perceptual properties of the *Chanson d’automne* are like the imaginatively given perceptual properties of the *Mondscheinsonate* when a qualified musician is reading its score.

Furthermore, just as you can perceive the *Mondscheinsonate* not only imaginatively, by reading its musical score sheet, but auditively by hearing it, you can perceive the *Chanson d’automne* not only imaginatively, by reading its printed text, but auditively—by hearing its recitation. Just as one can play the *Mondscheinsonate* on a piano (it could be you), one can recite the *Chanson d’automne* (it could be you). Now, it is plausible to think that we gain access to the very *same Mondscheinsonate* when we read its musical score sheet and when we hear it, and we gain access to the very *same Chanson d’automne* when we read its printed text and when we hear it. It is also plausible to think that when you hear the *Mond-*

*scheinsonate*, and when you hear the *Chanson d'automne*, what you hear is their perceptual properties. Hence we can rightly speak of the perceptual properties of the *Chanson d'automne*, or of any other literary work of art for that matter.

It's by sheer historical coincidence that fewer people can perceive musical works of art by reading musical score sheets than can perceive literary works or art by reading printed texts. We can easily imagine a world at which the only mode of encounter with the *Mondscheinsonate* is by reading its score. It would be odd to say that in that world, the *Mondscheinsonate* has no perceptual properties.

So what we are saying is this: *O* is a work of art in virtue of what it is like, that is, in virtue of the fact that *O* has the perceptually accessible intrinsic features that it has, features that are manifested to us when we perceive *O* (visually, audibly, or imaginatively). The properties manifested to us during perception are the perceptual properties which *alone* can make something a work of art.

Notice that this is not a definition of the *concept* of work of art. The same way in which a physicalist theory of mind is not a definition of the concept of mind. We might ask: among the many perceptual properties a work of art has, which ones are those in virtue of which it is a work of art, and which ones can be used to define the notion of a work of art. Answering such questions lie outside the metaphysician's competence. It's the art historian's, the aesthete's and the art critic's job to provide such answers. Just as it's not the physicalist's task, but the neurophysiologist's to spell out which neurophysiological state is responsible for which mental state. We only say that perceptual properties alone determine works of art, but we are silent about which perceptual properties we're talking about, the same way in which the physicalist only says that physical properties alone determine mental states, but she remains silent about which physical properties she is talking about.

A further aspect of similarity. Just as neurophysiologists can be wrong about which neurophysiological state is responsible for which mental state, art historians, aesthetes and art critics can be wrong about which perceptual properties make something a work of art. So it can all too easily happen (as it did) that during some period of time, a work of art is mistakenly taken for something else before realizing that it is a work of art after all. Mind you, it was a work of art all along, it's just that it wasn't recognized as such.

### 1.2. *What is our main motivation?*

Our main motivation is that only this view is in line with our most commonsensical, philosophically innocent beliefs about works of art. From the philosophically innocent point of view, works of art are what they are because of what they are like. The *Mondscheinsonate*, for instance, is a work of art because of what it sounds like.

To us this much is clear. Take David Lewis' simple maxim of honesty: "never put forward a philosophical theory that you yourself cannot believe in your least philosophical and most commonsensical moments" (Lewis 1986, 135). If we heed the maxim, we *cannot* put forward a theory according to which the perception of the *Mondscheinsonate* gives us little clue as to whether it is a work of art or not, that what matters is *not* its perceptual likeness, but something else. We would surely dismiss any such view in our least philosophical and most commonsensical moments.

Why? Well, we usually buy tickets for music concerts to perceive the properties of musical works like the *Mondscheinsonate*, in order to be able to hear certain sounds following one another in a certain rhythm, in a certain tempo, and with a certain dynamics. If you were trying to feed us with the idea that the *Mondscheinsonate* is a work of art not because of its perceptual features that you can hear in the concert hall, but because of something else (not perceptual, hence not manifested there and then), we would not buy into it: *everything* that counts is in the concert halls.

Also, if the *Mondscheinsonate* were a work of art because of some non-perceptual feature (like causal history, for instance) which is not manifest when listening to the music, then someone who knows the causal history of the *Mondscheinsonate*, but has never heard the musical work itself is in a better position to judge for himself whether it is a work of art, than someone who knows little about the origin but is thoroughly acquainted with the music. This is counterintuitive. Anyway, whichever non-perceptualist account we end up with, none of them attributes importance to the perception of works of art, at least for judging their artwork status. And this we find extremely implausible—in our most commonsensical moments.

### 1.3. *What views are we against?*

So far we have stated our view which was: something is a work of art in virtue of what it's like; and our primary motivation for it was: it accords with our most commonsensical beliefs about works of art. There are many alternative views, however, which are all non-perceptualist.

According to the institutional theory of art, something is a work of art in virtue of the fact that some professional jury, or social institution has conferred the status of artwork upon it (for example, Dickie 1974, Fish 1980). This view is non-perceptualist: on this account, something is a work of art because of the way it is related to the decision of certain people, to some collective intentionality, and such things are obviously not manifest to us when we perceive the artwork itself. According to the mimetic theory of art, something is work of art in virtue of the fact that it mimics a portion of reality (for example, Plato in *The Republic*).

This view is non-perceptualist: a work of art is that which stands in a similarity relation to a portion of reality, which is, again, not manifest to us when we perceive the artwork itself. According to a third theory, something is a work of art in virtue of the fact that we relate to them in a special (aesthetic) way. To use Kant's *bon mot*, with disinterested contemplation (Kant 1790/1997). This view is non-perceptualist: a work of art is that which stands in some relation to a contemplative mode, which is not manifest to us when we perceive the artwork itself. Finally, according to a fourth theory, something is a work of art in virtue of the fact that it has resulted from some deliberate creative artistic intention (for example, Danto 1981). This view is non-perceptualist: a work of art is that which stands in some causal or ancestral relation to a certain artistic intention, not manifest to us when we perceive the artwork itself.

It is quite clear that our view is the opposite of all these *relationist* accounts which claim that works of art are what they are because of the way they are related to other things, where the relation in question (any one of the four) *cannot* be manifested to us in the perception of the artworks themselves. We hold that works of art are what they are because of what they themselves are like, because of their *intrinsic nature* so to speak, and which *can* be manifested to us in the perception of the artworks.

We have already remarked in the introduction that a view like ours is extremely unpopular these days in the philosophy of art, and not only because of the indiscernible counterparts objection.

This unpopularity is also due in part to considerations like the following. It is not uncommon that certain works of art *refer* to other works of art and as such are interrelated. For instance, in the *Don Giovanni*, Mozart makes explicit reference to a well-known part of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Or to use a literary example, in the *Cantos*, Ezra Pound quotes a part from the *Iliad*. Since such references are constituent parts of the works of art in question, their presence indicates that factors like the interrelation between works of art also matters in their artwork status, yet this interrelatedness is beyond the perceptually accessible intrinsic features of any given artwork. This might give a further incentive to the idea that any perceptual–intrinsic account of artworks is doomed to failure.

We think that this consideration concerns the *interpretation* of works of art. We do not deny that the interpretation of a work of art requires much more than taking into account what it is like. In the course of interpreting the *Don Giovanni*, we must take into consideration, among other things, its reference to *The Marriage of Figaro*, and in interpreting the *Cantos*, its quotation from the *Iliad*. No quarrel there. What we do deny, however, is that the ontology of artworks depends in any way on their interpretation, on what we take them to be about.

## 2. ARGUMENTS FROM INDISCERNIBLE COUNTERPARTS

### 2.1. *The perfect forgery*

The argument from perfect forgery runs as follows. It could have been the case that a perfect forgery of the *Mona Lisa* was created. In this counterfactual scenario, the original and the fake are *indiscernible counterparts*, they have the exact same perceptual properties. But alas, while the *Mona Lisa* is a work of art, the perfect replica is *not*. For the *Mona Lisa* is *the original* made by Leonardo, the perfect replica is just a *forgery*. Therefore, it is not true that every (possible) duplicate of a work of art is also a work of art. Consequently, it is not true that a work of art is what it is in virtue of its perceptually accessible intrinsic features.

The argument from perfect forgery is certainly not conclusive. It is no more plausible to maintain that while the original painting is a work of art the perfect forgery is not, than to say that the perfect forgery is *also* a work of art, what's more, the *same* work of art as the original. It is no more plausible, for us at any rate, because we hold that the *Mona Lisa* is a *universal*. Not Platonic, not some abstract stuff lying outside the spatiotemporal realm, but an Aristotelian *immanent* universal which can be perceived. Such an entity, which admits of multiple instances, would be a multi-located entity wholly present at numerous non-overlapping places at the same time. And it would not be a simple immanent universal like whiteness or roundness, but a *structural* universal, an entity that is constituted by all the perceptual properties of all the parts of the particular instantiating it.

Taking the *Mona Lisa* and other works of fine arts as universals offers us the chance to give a simple and *uniform* answer to the ontological question: what kind of things are works of art. In the case of musical works and literary works, universals seem the natural choice. The *same Mondscheinsonate* is played by Evgeny Kissin in Budapest at the Palace of Arts, and played by Yundi Li in London at the Royal Albert Hall. The *same Chanson d'automne* is read by kids in the schools from Paris to Marseille. This sameness can simply be accounted for in terms of the *Mondscheinsonate* and the *Chanson d'automne* as two universals each wholly present at several places (potentially) at the same time. We do not shun a similar explanation of the sameness of the *Mona Lisa* and its perfect forgery. When you stand before the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre, and when someone else stands before its perfect forgery some place else, the two of you are standing before the *very same work of art*, because the two paintings are one and the same universal wholly present in the Louvre and some place else at once.

There are, of course, many alternative ontologies of art (see Thomasson 2004), but none of them is *prima facie* better than our universalism. To mention but a few. If works of art were mental entities, as Collingwood had suggested (Collingwood 1938), then the *Mona Lisa* would be a shadowy private picture,

everyone having her own in her head, each private picture closely matching the distribution of color patches on the public canvass without being identical to the public picture. This is no less counterintuitive than what we say. Nor are we better off with the suggestion made by Currie (1989) that works of art are event types or action types, because in our commonsensical moments we would surely resist the thought that the *Mona Lisa* is the sort of thing like getting on a bus or taking a sip from a cup of coffee. And finally, we find no less odd the widely shared view that works of art are abstract entities, which implies, among other things, that the *Mona Lisa* is like the number  $\varpi$  or the square root of 2.

Anyway, the argument from perfect forgery is based on the contentious assumption that a thing cannot be a work of art if it is not original but fake. This is also reflected in the near zero market value of fakes (once the forgery is discovered) and the big money market of originals. But it is just a contingent fact that our culture is so obsessed with originality and assumes that what is not original is not art. Things could have obviously gone differently. What is more to the point, however, is that originality is not an ontological category, but a historical one. It has nothing to do with the metaphysics of artworks. Originality is the business of art historians, gallery owners and art dealers, not metaphysicians.

## 2.2. *The gorilla's painting*

The argument from the gorilla's painting runs as follows. It is possible, no matter how improbable, that a gorilla in the zoo has inadvertently made an exact replica of the *Mona Lisa*. In this counterfactual scenario, the *Mona Lisa* and the gorilla's painting are *indiscernible counterparts*, they have the exact same perceptual properties. But while the *Mona Lisa* is a work of art, the gorilla's painting is *not*. For the *Mona Lisa* has resulted from a *deliberate creative artistic intention* whereas the gorilla's painting surely did not. Therefore, it is not true that every (possible) duplicate of an artwork is also an artwork. Consequently, it is not true that a work of art is what it is in virtue of its perceptually accessible intrinsic features.

The argument is based on the assumption that only such things can be works of art that have resulted from some deliberate creative artistic intention. That is, that the extrinsic property of being created by deliberate creative artistic intention is a *necessary condition* for being a work of art. We think that this assumption is false or at least questionable.

Let's use intuition pumps. What would you say if it turned out that Leonardo made the *Mona Lisa* while he was dreaming? Or in some other uncontrollable state, under hypnosis or under the influence of some drugs? It is uncertain whether we can still speak about a deliberate creative artistic intention in these cases. Yet would you hesitate to say that the *Mona Lisa* is a work of art? What if it turned out that Leonardo made the *Mona Lisa* in pitch dark or in a temporally

blind state? In that case, the *Mona Lisa* would have been created randomly, much the same way as if the brushes fell on the canvass randomly during an earthquake, miraculously creating a painting just like the *Mona Lisa*.

Take now a case where there is definitely no deliberate creative artistic intention. Suppose that it turns out that one of your favorite readings (say, Mayakovsky's poem, the *Ленин – жил, Ленин – жив, Ленин – будет жить*) was not written by Mayakovsky, but was typed accidentally by a young chimp who sneaked into his room. Would you now say that the *Ленин – жил, Ленин – жив, Ленин – будет жить* is not a work of art, and has no place in the anthologies of Soviet literature?

Forget the monkeys. Imagine a Russell-world, indiscernible from our own, in which everything has come into existence five minutes ago (Russell 1921: 159-160), whereby none of the works of art thought to be older than five minutes have resulted from deliberate creative artistic intention. Would you dispute that in the Russell-world the paintings and sculptures in the art museums, the musical works performed in the concert halls are works of art?

Our intuition tells us that we are dealing with genuine works of art in these counterfactual scenarios despite the fact that the deliberate creative artistic intention is clearly missing. But even if your intuitions about these cases were different, you cannot deny the following. The rain dance of the Hopi Indians, the paintings of Altamira, the diary of István Széchenyi, or the letters of St. Paul are these days seen as works of art. They are the results of deliberate creative intentions, to be sure. But they are certainly *not* the results of deliberate creative *artistic* intentions. So either art historians are wrong, or else a deliberate creative artistic intention is not a necessary condition for artwork status.

### 2.3 Duchamp's ready-made

Duchamp's ready-made, the *Fountain* is an *indiscernible counterpart* of an ordinary porcelain urinal in some public toilet, they have the exact same perceptual properties. Agnes Martin's painting the *The Desert* is an *indiscernible counterpart* of a sand-colored plain canvass, they have the exact same perceptual properties (a few years back, *The Desert* cost around 4-6 million dollars, no kidding). John Cage's musical work, the *4'33"* is an *indiscernible counterpart* of a pianist's elongated preparation prior to playing her instrument—they have the exact same perceptual properties. The art world deems the *Fountain*, the *The Desert* and the *4'33"* works of art, but their indiscernible counterparts are clearly *not* works of art. Therefore, it is untrue that no (possible) duplicate of a non-artwork is an artwork. Consequently, it is untrue that a work of art is what it is in virtue of its perceptually accessible intrinsic features.



The argument from Duchamp's readymade (and similar artworks) is the inverse of the previous ones. Those arguments took some *par excellence* work of art and have assumed that it could have had an indiscernible counterpart which is not an artwork. By contrast, the present argument takes some *par excellence* non-artworks (an ordinary urinal, a plain canvass, silence for about 4 minutes and 33 seconds) and points out that they have indiscernible counterparts which in fact are works of art. Furthermore, this argument relies on hard facts, not on farfetched possibilities.

Now in response to the previous arguments, we have claimed that *both* the *Mona Lisa* and its possible indiscernible counterpart are works of art. In the present case, we say that *neither* the *Fountain* installed in Alfred Stieglitz's studio, nor its indiscernible counterpart, the ordinary urinal in a public toilet is a work of art (the same goes for the *The Desert* and the '4'33''—none of them is a work of art). We claim that the *Fountain* and the likes are not genuine works of art. We don't deny the obvious, of course, that the art world *treats them as* works of art, but we think that all these people are wrong.

Our main reason is the following. If you hold that some works of art are indiscernible counterparts of things that are not works of art, then you must also hold that the object's *likeness* plays no role at all in whether something is a work of art or not. That is, the *object* itself plays no role at all. We do not even have to perceive it to recognize that it is a work of art! Now while this may be true of Duchamp's readymade, it is certainly not true of the *Mona Lisa*.

Imagine the following 'work of art' called the *Knight*. Take an orchestra consisting of an oboe player, a trombone player, a clarinet player, a violinist, a bassoon player, a celesta player and an organist. In front of each musician there is a board (similar to a chess board) of eight by eight squares, and each square contains the name of a tone: one-lined *C*, contra *F*, great *G*, four-lined *Gis*, small *Ces* etc.. The orchestra has a conductor who stands blindfolded before the musicians and points randomly to one or another musician. The musician then has to play the note in the square which is in 'L-shape' distance from the square whose note was last played. Suppose, the concert goes well (the audience endures it in silence) and the music is played for 60 minutes.

Let us ask of you. Did you have to be at that concert? Did you have to hear what the music sounded like? Or is it merely enough that we told you the punch line of this 'work of art'? We think that the essential feature of such 'works of art' is that knowing their punch line *substitutes* for their perception. Just as we do not need to hear the *Knight*, we do not need to see Duchamp's readymade. It is quite enough to know their punch line.

But this obviously isn't true of genuine works of art. No narrative can substitute the perception of the *Mona Lisa*, the *Mondscheinsonate*, or the *Chanson d'automne*. And the simple reason is that they are works of art in their own right, that is, they are works of art in virtue of what they are like.

We could go even further, and say that 'works of art' like Duchamp's ready-made, not only do not have to be perceived, but do not even have to *exist*! Fictional paintings in fictional art galleries, fictional musical plays performed in fictional concert halls, or fictional literary works read in fictional literary saloons. They could be subjected to interpretation, they could be talked about, they could be analyzed, in general they could function *as if* they were real.

Imagine the following non-existent 'work of art'. In an exhibition room there is a table (which resembles to a kitchen table) and on it there is a meat grinder which grinds little yellow rubber duckies one after the other. Its title is the *Fukuyama's Mistake*.

An art critic, for instance, could write the following upon hearing of it: „According to Fukuyama history has ended, because everywhere in the world liberal democracy has prevailed. Of course this claim is contestable, but the *Fukuyama's Mistake* clearly shows that history is not over yet, because animals are massacred scot-free by the human race. The *Fukuyama's Mistake* draws attention to the fact that history will end only when animal rights are fully acknowledged and respected world-wide.”

### 3. SOME META-REFLECTIONS

It is usually said that what makes it so difficult to give a philosophical account of artworks is the fact that certain artists (indeed the greatest ones) create works of art with the express intent to blow up the actual conceptual framework within which we think of artworks. We are not denying that. Impressionism blew up the confines of realism, dodecaphony blew up the confines of classical harmony theory, and so on. Nonetheless what they have created were such that no amount of punch line-knowing could substitute their perception. With Duchamp's readymade, however, it is not only the case that it blows up the way we traditionally think about artworks, but it is passed *as* a work of art which is *sui generis not*.

In our paper we have expounded and defended a theory of artworks which takes *at face value* our philosophically innocent, commonsensical beliefs about artworks. Namely, that works of art are what they are because of what they are like. In this respect what we do is very similar to what the disjunctive theorist does who defends our naive convictions about perception (see Martin 2004). Instead of saying that there must be some *common factor* between Duchamp's readymade and the *Mona Lisa* in virtue of which they *both* are works of art, which has nothing to do with perceptual-intrinsic features, we said that they belong to *different* ontological types (as according to the disjunctive theory hallucinations are a different type of mental event than the appropriate veridic perceptions which are indiscernible from them). We think that the acceptance of any view

opposite to our's means the renunciation of our commonsensical beliefs about artworks, and so all such views are *error*-theories.

To wit: we have tried to do justice to the layman's intuition, who when confronted by a readymade in a museum, groaned so – this ain't no work of art.

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