

*A Social Ontology of Art*

*Introduction*

. This paper offers a preliminary ontological description of “artwork” as an object, physical or perceptual, on which human intentionality has superimposed a primary aesthetic or appreciative function<sup>1</sup>, through the application of (often implicit) speech acts and constitutive rules. My account draws on John Searle’s social ontology that argues social objects are objects which have been assigned a special kind of observer-relative function. One crucial class of functions is the imposition of intentionality onto objects, such as marks made with ink on paper or human vocalizations, such that they function to symbolize or to transmit meaning. Artworks, on this view, are the product of a special subset of this activity. The collective imposition of function is made possible by *collective intentionality*. The social ontology of art I offer therefore differs from other intention based models of art by placing a much greater emphasis on collective intentionality and social practice. It is able to answer an objection to which an ontology rooted in *individual* intentions might be susceptible: that subject-relative ontologies result in intermittently-existent objects. Since a social ontology of artworks is not based on individual intentionality, it allows for artworks to have a fully subjective ontology without coming into and out of existence with each passing observation. Instead, an object persists through time as an artwork by participating with, and to some extent conforming to, *public* notions about what an artwork is.

*Searle’s Ontology of the Social*

John Searle’s ontology of the social world begins with a distinction between the social world

---

<sup>1</sup> This preliminary description will be complicated as we move through the discussion. I believe this does hold in an “original” sense, in a way that would cast avant-garde transgressions of this norm as “derivative”, however it is precisely the actions of the 20th century artistic avant garde which motivate my later claim that “art” is in its present condition a “contested notion”. This usage of “original” and “derivative” in this context, is (I hope not to sloppily) borrowed from Lydia Goehr.

and the world of “brute” facts, e.g. those features of the world studied by the natural sciences, physical particles in fields of force which are organized into systems by causal relations. Examples of such systems would include animals, plants, stars, planets, rocks, weather events, etc. All such physical objects or events are, according to Searle, intrinsic features of the world. They are *observer independent*, meaning that they exist apart from any subjective experience of them, e.g. any observation or recognition<sup>2</sup>. Social reality is conversely made up of *observer relative* phenomenon. Such phenomenon are *relative* to the intentionality ( or mental “aboutness”, roughly speaking, the power of a mind to represent) of observers<sup>3</sup>. The distinction can be made explicit by asking oneself if the phenomenon in question could be what it is if no conscious agents had ever existed. For example, gold would still be gold in the absence of any conscious agent, by virtue of its atomic structure, however a piece of gold can only be *money* if it is standardly or conventionally recognized as a medium of exchange. So, on this view gold is *observer independent*, while money is *observer relative*.

How is it then that gold becomes money? According to Searle, agents such as humans can make the transition by way of the assignment of function<sup>4</sup>. One crucial, special class of functions is the imposition of intentionality onto objects, such as marks made with ink on paper or human vocalizations, such that they function to symbolize or to transmit meaning. The collective imposition of function is made possible by *collective intentionality*<sup>5</sup>.

Collective intentionality is more than simply group behavior. It refers to the remarkable capacity of social animals to share mental states like beliefs and desires. Collective intentionality, on Searles view, is essential to the establishment of social and institutional facts, which it achieves by utilizing *constitutive*

---

<sup>2</sup> John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

*rules* in the assignment of statuses and functions.

Constitutive rules do not simply govern antecedently existing behavior but rather create the very possibility of a certain activity<sup>6</sup>. For example, the assigned movements of the chess pieces are constitutive rules. They were not invented to make a preexisting activity more organized or functional, they create the activity they govern. Constitutive rules are crucial to Searle's account of social reality. They typically take the form "x counts as y in context c", e.g. moving the pawn diagonally forward one space onto an occupied square (x) counts as a successful capture of the occupying piece (y) in the game of chess (context c). Here I must pause to offer a brief but critical aside: Constitutive rules are the basis for construing the type-token distinction deployed later in this paper *naturalistically*, in that the constitutive rule sets up the condition which a token must meet to belong to a certain type, yet the constitutive rule itself is itself grounded in the biological powers of the brain. Its *ontology* is *subjective*. This is a strong check against platonist accounts of human-made artifacts, including artworks, because the constitutive rule can do all the work of the *type* or *form*, without committing us to unnecessary abstracta.

When there is collective recognition of a *status function* such as marriage, we are in the linguistic habit of treating the products of such collective intentional activity as if they were *real objects* with their own separate ontology. However, social "objects" like marriages ultimately bottom out in actual physical phenomenon, particularly the (performative, linguistic) actions of some specified participants in some specified context who act according to some constitutive rule or set of rules.<sup>7</sup> Abstract social "objects" like marriages, governments, and "works" of music are all ontologically dependent in this way on some or another physical object(s) or event(s), particularly performative

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 34.

speech acts which posit the existence of some A, such that the intended perlocutionary effect (the reaction of the hearer to the utterance) is the hearers acceptance of the existence of A for the purposes of the discourse in which they are engaged. Once this occurs, the existence of A, as a social fact *within* a certain speech-community, is an epistemically objective fact despite the fact that it has a *subjective ontology*. These mechanisms, and their systemic material or conceptual referents, as well as the *functions* we impose on them, this unwieldy ensemble is what we attempt to describe when we make ontological claims about complex social objects.

The unfathomable complexity and variety of human social and institutional creations all arise from the repeated application of the mechanisms outlined above. Once social and institutional facts become effectively accepted by a large enough groups they in effect become epistemically objective features of the world (the money spends, the laws are enforced, etc.).

#### *Art and mere Things*

Let's recall the distinction between the world of brute facts, those features of the natural world studied by physics and chemistry, and the constructed social facts studied by the social sciences. This is the distinction between the observer relative and observer independent. Observer relative phenomenon, e.g. social objects, are defined by their functions,

So children learn to see moving cars, dollar bills, and full bathtubs: and it is only by force of abstraction that they can see these as masses of metal in linear trajectories, cellulose fibers with green and gray stains, or enamel covered iron concavities containing water (Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 4).<sup>8</sup>

We are so fluent in the language of social facts and objects that it is often hard to distinguish them from the “brute facts” on which they rest. While a street fight may be a rather straightforward

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4.

physical event, a championship boxing match is constructed on top of countless social facts which do not admit of physical description. So, as depicted in the famed photograph by Neil Leifer of Muhammad Ali standing defiantly over Sonny Liston, Ali has not simply rendered another man unconscious, he has successfully challenged the champion for his title. Similar to our tendency to see bathtubs rather than “iron concavities”, we tend to see “works of art” rather than paint on canvas i.e. we see a work of art over and above the material out of which it is fashioned. For example, ‘The Death of Marat’ by David depicts the death of French revolutionary hero Jean-Paul Marat after his assassination by Charlotte Corday. As a work of art, this painting has dramatic historical, and political associations by virtue of its subject matter. As a mere object composed of paint and canvas, however, it has no such associations.

The problem with *defining* artworks is a consequence of several unique demands on social ontology. The most difficult of these is that social objects are self-referentially defined by their function. For example, money can be defined as an instrument of exchange, repository of value, etc., only because there is a more or less stable consensus for the function of money relative to a host of other socially constructed notions (buying, selling, trading, etc.). Definitions of art are often criticized for circularity, subtle or obvious. The above strikes me as a plausible explanation for some measure of that difficulty.

The thornier problem here is that if there were ever a consensus on the function of an artwork, in modernity there is no such consensus. Consider the controversy surrounding works like *Fountain* (a so-called “ready made” by Marcel Duchamp, a lowly urinal masquerading as a work of fine art), and the inappropriateness of viewing *Fountain* or Warhol’s famous *Brillo Box* through the traditional lens of aesthetic appreciation, i.e. with an eye toward their formal beauty. So, while the destabilization of the

socially constructed function of art may have made it impossible to define functionally what *must* be so-defined, we have at least made progress on the ontological question: the artwork is an object, physical or perceptual, on which human intentionality has superimposed a special kind of meaning, through the application of speech acts and constitutive rules. The definitional question remains but its root difficulty is, it seems to me, exposed. “Art” today names a sight of socio-ontological conflict, rather than a stable and fixed phenomenon that is describable in either physical or functional terms.

### *Hat Rack David*

In discussing the above theory with philosophers I have encountered one particularly interesting counterexample which puts pressure on the theory to explain how an artwork endures through time. The particular iteration of problem dealt with here (the *Hat Rack David* problem) was raised to me in by Professor Ned Hettinger at the College of Charleston, however it echos some interesting comments by Martin Heidegger from *The Origin of a Work of Art*, as well as Arthur C. Danto from *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* about how or whether artworks persist ontologically through time, and the relationship between what might somewhat untechnically called uptake or recognition and that persistence.

Arthur C. Danto, in emphasizing the *ontological* role of interpretation in art as being a part of that which constitutes an artwork, seems to raise the spectre of intermittently existing artworks, i.e. works which exist solely in the minds of observers that blink on and off with each passing observation,

Without the interpretation, (a) portion (of the work) lapses invisibly into the object, or simply disappears, for it is given existence through interpretation . . . . One may be a realist about objects and an idealist about artworks. (Arthur C. Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 125)

Danto deals with something like this intermittence problem again as he discusses the role of art criticism,

It's function is to equip the reader or viewer with the information needed to respond to the work's power which, after all can be lost as concepts change or be inaccessible because of the outward difficulties of the work . . . . (Danto, *Ibid.*, 174)<sup>9</sup>

Heidegger raises the somber possibility of a *total* breakdown of a work given the passing of its native cultural setting. Heidegger raises the example of a Greek Temple:

The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to (human beings) their outlook on themselves. This view remains open as long as the work is a work, as long as the god has not fled from it. (Art and It's Significance, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 268)

For Heidegger artworks are, by their very nature, acts of world-making or culture building. It seems to follow that artworks are native to a certain cultural soil, to a cultural moment in its particularity, and insofar as *it is what it is* (a work) it necessarily *does what it does* (world-making). Artworks, then, are susceptible to what might be called "world withdrawal". Given the passage of time, and the decay of a certain way of being, the disappearance of a culture through evolution or calamity, it seems to follow on this view that the work of art can, indeed inevitably will, collapse back into the raw material from which it distinguishes itself.

So Danto's view raises the specter of intermittently existing objects and both views raise the possibility of de-evolution from artwork back to mere thing. The difference between these views are a result of a difference in emphasis. Danto's account is more concerned with individual intentionality in the form of interpretation. Heidegger is more concerned with artworks in their role as culture builders.

---

<sup>9</sup> Danto softens the view in the next page or so by praising art history for its "scholarly resurrections" of works which have "gone dead", art history "makes such works approachable again."

Danto's emphasis on individual intentionality arguably leads him to accept both versions of this intermittence problem. Danto's artworks blink on and off with each passing observation. A more social approach would spare us that conclusion without denying the importance of uptake in constituting a work of art, but even this will not ultimately save us from having to accept some version of the notion that artworks are susceptible to a form of breakdown and "death" in the absence of some form of intentional activity, like the breakdown of a cultural point of view as described by Heidegger.

Ascribing this kind of mortality to artworks is controversial. One might respond by saying, "Yes, artworks are cultural artifacts which may be better or worse *understood* by a given observer, relative to some cultural knowledge. However, this is a merely epistemological problem. Ontologically speaking, by whatever means the thing *became* an artwork, by those same means it remains one. " But artworks, unlike say rocks, have certain epistemological conditions *built in*. That is to say, they are what they are ontologically (some symbolic or imaginary function superimposed onto a "thingly" substructure) *partly because they make certain epistemological demands*. Artworks demand reading, scrutiny. They demand interpretation or appreciation in a way that equipment, or moreover mere things, do not.

This view I am espousing, that works are culturally contextualized historical objects ontologically *sustained* by collective intentionality, is seemingly vulnerable to counterexample. The counterexample I'd like to deal with here we may call the "Hat Rack David" example. Imagine a future where no one is aware of the artistic and historical relevance or origins of Michelangelo's *David*, and these inhabitants of the future cease to treat the venerated statue as a work of art at all. Rather, they use it as a hat rack. Now, if there is any truth to this idea that social objects are functionally defined then it seems to follow that *David* is simply no longer an artwork. This just *feels* wrong. I, however, am ready to bite the bullet of this objection with one caveat. *David* ceases to be a work of art only if the social object type



“statue” has gone out of use. If these future dwellers still regard anything as statues, then it does not matter that they cease to treat *David* in particular as one. In this case, those who use *David* as a hat rack are themselves mistaken about what kind of social object *David* is. This problem, and problems like it, can be lumped together in a group one might call “The lost or misidentified token” problems. The following example is from Searle. Imagine a dollar bill falls from the printing press and lands in a nearby trash can, ending up in a dump somewhere, never to be found. It is still money even if it is never used in an intentional interaction between people. Moreover, it is still money if it *is* found and used in some other way, say as a napkin. Indeed, as long as the bills issued by the U.S. treasury (as a type) are accepted and used as currency in human practice, the lost or misidentified token is covered by the rule which bestows existence on the type.<sup>10</sup> What goes for money here, I claim, also goes for artworks. Lost or misidentified tokens, like “Hat Rack David” are covered under the rule established by the socially constructed type, however in the event of a *total* breakdown of that socially constructed type, any and all *observer relative* socially constructed objects disappear back into the *observer independent* base of their raw material. Money reverts back into strips of dyed paper, and artworks devolve into mere objects: paint on canvas, ink on paper, a bit of stone, and so on.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 32.

Bibliography

Danto, Arthur C. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge, MA:

Harvard UP, 1981. Print.

Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art." *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of*

*Aesthetic Theory*. Ed. Stephen David. Ross. Albany: State University of New York, 1984.

259-87. Print.

Searle, John R. *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Free, 1995. Print.

Searle, John R. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. New York: Cambridge UP,

1983. Print.