

Interpretive Truth and Interpretive Validity: Remarks on Danto's Idea of "Constitutive Interpretation"

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Abstract

Given an interpretive ontology of the artwork, exemplified by Danto's "constitutive interpretation" thesis, the present paper considers a fundamental "obscurity" at the heart of the artistic (contemporary) phenomenon – the ontological confusion between the material and the semantic "body" of an artwork. For Danto, the material object of an artwork is nothing but the embodiment of an intended meaning, metaphorically expressed by the artist and waiting to be reconstructed by its audience. Therefore, an epistemic concept of truth, understood as interpretive validity, seems to be required for maintaining the identity of the artwork.

In this paper, I am trying to show that Danto's epistemic conditions of interpretive validity are too strong to be maintained in the (ordinary) experience of an artwork. Instead, using the difference between understanding and interpretation, I try to show, following Shusterman and Gadamer, that the experience of the artwork could be democratically reconstructed in the frame of a pluralistic view of the concept of interpretive validity. The necessity of a "hermeneutic" concept of "truth" is thus maintained, given that the artwork and its experience by a concrete public would not be dissociated.

Keywords: ontology of art, interpretation, truth, validity, pluralism, hermeneutics, Danto.

I. Perception, Interpretation and Ontology: The Constitutive Obscurity of Visual Art

1. Danto and the Task of the Interpreter: The Question of a "Constitutive Obscurity"

Visual art seems to talk by herself (or so goes the common prejudice), the meaning of artistic images is often misunderstood given the divergent uses of visual codes, or the historical distance separating the public and the artwork. Such problems are well-known in philosophical hermeneutics and

they do not differ much from the similar ones encountered in the field of textual interpretation. But a particular situation in visual arts has gained specific attention in recent analytic philosophy and its implications spread far beyond it.

The possibility that an artwork may share the same perceptual features with a different one, not to mention the even more disturbing possibility of sharing the same properties with a mere real thing which is not an artwork has been raised in analytic philosophy of art by Arthur Danto. Its consequences changed the relation between perception and interpretation, surface and depth in defining an artwork, for it is a particular interpretation of the perceptual features of an object which turns it into a piece of art.

Such a situation points out a particular meaning of the term “obscurity”. In classical hermeneutics, this term used to apply especially to those unclear passages in a text requiring clarification, or to a special feature of a text which is difficult to translate or to understand in the literal sense. Chladenius pointed out three types of ambiguities which are not the task of the interpreter: those which are caused by textual errors (whose correction is the task of the critic), those caused by the insufficient knowledge of the language used (which are the task of the philologist) and those caused by the ambiguous meaning of certain words, which are also not to be decided by the interpreter (Grondin 1994, 51-3). Therefore, the proper task of textual hermeneutics would be that of supplying the “background knowledge” required to understand a specific text. The fact that the author and the reader share different conceptions upon the world is the reason why the latter cannot understand certain parts of a certain text. Any retrieval of the author’s intention would fail unless such a common knowledge is present or brought to mind by means of interpretation.

In relation to Chladenius’s opinion on the proper task of the interpreter, Danto’s ontology of the artwork seems to have raised similar claims. But for Danto such knowledge would be required not only for understanding an artwork, but also for identifying it and even noticing its presence in the world and for appreciating it as such (Danto 1977, 29). Thus, the possibility that two perceptually identical images may be two different

artworks seems to suggest that an ontological “obscurity” lies at the core of any visual artwork. Any artwork would be, in this sense, an instance of ontological obscurity if interpretation is required to identify what artwork it is. Further, this obscurity is not to be removed, but rather acknowledged by the interpreter. Therefore, I suggest to use the term “obscurity” in order to cover not only uncertain meanings of an artwork, but rather the perceptual properties of *any* given artwork; a certain *informed* interpretation is required in order to constitute it from an ontological point of view, to fix and preserve its identity.

2. Constitutive interpretation

In this respect, Duchamp’s *readymades*, which may distinguish themselves as artworks from the real things by the concept of their creation (de Duve 2003, 29-31), can be considered the paradigmatic philosophical case in defining art and non-art (Humble 1984). However, for Danto, the case is historically reflected by Andy Warhol’s famous *Brillo Boxes* exhibited at the Stable Gallery in New York in 1964. Perceptually indiscernible from the soap pad boxes they represent, being a visually perfect imitation of the latter, these artistic objects raised, for Danto, the fundamental question in the philosophy of art: what makes *Brillo Boxes* be art, whereas all the other Brillo boxes are (and remain) just ordinary Brillo boxes? (Danto 2004, 73).

In this case, a particular use of interpretation is required to signal the presence of an artwork in a world of physical objects or “mere things”. This type of interpretation is ontologically constitutive (Danto 1994, 125): “An object *o* is then an artwork only under an interpretation *I*, where *I* is a sort of function that transfigures *o* into a work: $I(o) = W$.”

According to Danto’s thesis, the function of interpretation is to allow things to function as a representation. By means of such an interpretive process, things pass into a world whose ontology is similar to that of language (Danto 1994, 116-20).

One might consider this use of the term “interpretation” as a very limited or marginal one, seemingly being restricted only to post-avant-garde artworks. But Danto himself enlarges

it in order to cover traditional forms of representation, such as painting. In order to explain its structure, he chooses the example of Peter Bruegel the Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. In this painting, the subject of the artwork is represented by some human feet splashing in or out of water. A metaphorical identification between them and Icarus is required in order to constitute Bruegel's artwork, and this identification is provided in the frame of such a constitutive interpretation. Considered as a representational or depictive statement, this identification states something like "this is Icarus". However, this identification is ontologically similar with the act of a magic or religious identification, since it "transfigures" its object without changing its material properties (Danto 1994, 126). For instance, it is similar with identifying bread and wine with the body and the blood of Christ in the Christian ritual. This ontological function is what explains the logical properties of an artistic statement: it is not incompatible with the falsity of its literal correspondent because an artistic statement is a metaphor and, therefore, it actually functions in intensional contexts (Danto 1994, 186-9). "I believe this is Icarus" is not at all contradictory with "This is not Icarus" (which is literally true). This is why Danto insists upon the fact that the function of "is" in the act of artistic identification is not the same with logic predicament or the existential statement (Danto 1994, 126). It thus *constitutes* the artwork from the material thing it embodies it.

Once the material thing represents something and also expresses something about its subject (by means of metaphor), it becomes an artwork, complying with the two fundamental conditions Danto sets for defining an artwork (Carroll 1997).

3. Artistic Prerogatives of Constitutive Interpretation

There are major implications concerning the aesthetic appreciation of an artwork as Danto underlines in the thesis of the constitutive character of interpretation. The most important one I am interested in here is the alteration of the artistic form by means of interpretation and the constructivist character of this concept of "form". The artistic form is constructed by means

of interpretation (Danto 1994, 100-4) and it is in itself a cultural construction, subject to different paradigms of looking who are theoretically informed and historically determined

According to Danto, the semantic interpretation, which is guided for instance, by the title of an artwork (functioning as a clear sign that we appreciate a language-like thing) selects the perceptual data which are relevant for constructing the artwork given its material counterpart (Danto 1994, 119). Interpretation can alter the subject matter once a different identification is applied to the same thing or to the same visual configuration of lines, shapes and colors. For instance, *The Fall of Icarus* and *Ploughman by the Sea* transform the legs splashing out the sea into a different character. At the same time, what is missing in the second case is the comment Bruegel does on its subject matter – the hopeless attempt of overcoming human condition – by choosing such a manner of depiction for his character. In this case, we may fail to notice the expressive feature of the artwork which distinguishes it from any accidental or unintentional representation. The almost unnoticed presence of Icarus in the painting is historically explained by the mannerist tradition of depiction where “the last will be the first” (Danto 1994, 172).

Therefore, the concept of artistic form, which could be understood as the embodiment of the semantic intention, both representational and expressive, is dependent on its *correct* re-configuration by the interpreters of the material part of an artwork: “The form of the work may be that gerrymandered portion of the object the interpretation picks out. Without the interpretation, that portion invisibly lapses back into the object” (Danto 1994, 125).

Danto offers a clearer example reflecting the prerogative of a correct semantic interpretation over the concept of artistic form. Given a sculpture of a cat with a chain attached to something, we cannot decide prior to its interpretation if the chain is part of the sculpture or not. The representational content would decide if it is a sculpture of a chained cat or of a cat chained by something else (Danto 1994, 102). But specifying its representational content is already *constituting* the artwork from its material counterpart, an operation which leaves out or takes

into account a part of the given material thing. Similar problems can be encountered when dealing with minimal sculptures installed in a specific place: for instance, Robert Morris's *Corner Piece*, where the corner of the gallery is virtually part of the work itself.

II. Truth and Validity: An Epistemological Concept of Interpretation

1. Interpretive Monism and the Identity of the Artwork

It might seem that, according to Danto, artistic interpretation is the one that decides if we are dealing with an artwork or with a mere real thing, while deciding what the form of an artwork is in relation to its material counterpart. But it also clarifies another ontologically problematic situation, namely if we are dealing with two perceptually indiscernible artworks or two instances of the same artwork (for instance, two photographic prints of the same photograph). In this case, a strong concept of interpretive validity is required in order to guarantee the identity of an artwork.

Danto claimed for such a concept of interpretive validity when stating that interpretation can be true or false in the sense of historical explanation (Danto 1996, 65). On such a ground, Danto would be placed in the position of an interpretive monism, arguing that a single correct interpretation of an artwork is acceptable (Davies 1996). Therefore, interpretive pluralism is threatening not only the meaning, but also the very identity of the artworks.

The question of the validity and limits of interpretation has been also discussed in continental textual hermeneutics by Umberto Eco, stressing the requirement of multiple, but limited valid interpretations of an artwork. For Eco, who lays a textual constraint on the interpretive freedom of the reader and his intentions, the text himself is considered to be an abstract "device" or "construct", meant to produce his ideal reader (Eco 1996). In turn, this reader is manifested in the structure of the text by means of different signals or statements (Eco 1996, 25). Just like the concept of author, this abstract entity is in fact a

fully aware empiric interpreter able to correctly respond to various signals emitted by the text and by its empiric author. In analytic philosophy of art, Eco's concept of author would be similar with the one coined by hypothetical intentionalism (Levinson 1996; Levinson 2002; Nathan 1992). *Mutatis mutandis*, the ideal reader or interpreter is a hypothetical person able to make the right choices when selecting the representational content of an artwork, and it is also contained in its form both as a possibility and a necessity.

Therefore, Eco proposes two different concepts of interpretation. One is what we may call interpretation as such or the semantic reading of an artwork. In this process, the interpreter is following the textual or visual signals as close as possible and with highest fidelity, thus achieving a correct interpretation of the artwork and a correct retrieval of the hypothetical author's intentions. The other one supposes a playful, creative use of textual or visual signals in order to construct his own interpretive scenarios, which Eco defines as "use" (Eco 1996, 35). In this case, we may be dealing with creative over-interpretation, whose validity criterion can be that of interpretive coherence, but not with interpretation as such (Eco 1992, 52; 66-88). The latter would be verified in relation to the artworks' own systems of codes and narrative structures and not in relation with the interpreter's private systems, structures and impulses (Eco 1996, 25).

Several other classic attempts of avoiding this problem are also worth reminding. For instance, Monroe Beardsley tried to distinguish between different functions of interpretation, namely, semantic interpretation in the narrow sense or "reading", clarification and explanation (Beardsley 1987, 371). The first activity is close to what Beardsley calls the description of an artwork from the point of view of its content, identifying its themes and motives. This type of interpretive activity is the one Danto takes into account when talking about constitutive interpretation. The other types of interpretation are part of a larger critical activity. We may call them "exegetic interpretation", since the first refers to the clarification of unclear meanings and the second one to explanation of situations, behaviors etc., searching for the reasons behind a specific feature of an

artwork. According to Beardsley, the first type of interpretation (which is our object of discussion here) concerns the author's intentions only so far as they are exhibited in the text. In this case, they are irrelevant as criteria for interpretive validity (Beardsley 1982, 188-207). At the same time, E.D. Hirsch Jr. tried to avoid such a problem distinguishing between meaning and significance of an artwork. He stated that while the meaning of an artwork is an interpretive construct, which may allow multiple interpretations as being equally valid (especially in different historical circumstances), the significance of a work is immutable and unique (Hirsch 1971, 117).

Interpretive monism has its own problems when the author's intentions are to be taken into consideration for sustaining this position. However, accepting for the time being the intentionalist frame Eco himself doesn't seem to refute, we may note that the position of interpretive monism can also be applied to various ontological levels when dealing with an artwork. In its radical form, the creative use of an artwork's materiality in order to construct it according to the interpreter's will is considered to alter its identity and therefore, it should be strictly forbidden. In its lighter version, there is only one semantic interpretation which is the actual and the correct one and, of course, some other plausible ones. But the latter are failing to alter the artwork's identity if the actual intentions of the author would be taken as being ontologically constitutive.

However, if the identity of the artwork is fixed by textual constraints, as, for instance, in Goodman's case, the ontological threat raised by creative interpretation is avoided (Goodman, 1976). Therefore, a creative interpretation of a semantic structure can alter at most the artistic or aesthetic value of an artwork, but doesn't have the power to change its identity. Whatever we might say about Bruegel's painting in the light of our own creative conjectures and private "interpretive frames" (Culler 1982, which may for instance refer to the class structures it depicts and the conception of power it displays, we would not reach to change it into a different artwork that would be, in the end, our own creation. It remains Bruegel's painting and its identity are fixed by its visual structure (or "notation",

in Goodman's terms) which also limits the range of our possible interpretations.

A similar situation may occur when fixing an artwork's identity by taking into account its history of production (genetic intentions) and the history of interpretations surrounding it. What if we embrace a contextual and historical constitution for the artworks, as Noël Carroll does? If an artwork is placed into such a "historical narrative" (Carroll 1993), which in the end, retrospectively acts upon its meaning, it might seem that the history of an artwork's interpretations would finally end up changing its identity. Interpretive monism seems to be required in order to fix it, and this one would use as final authority the author's intentions and its genetic history of production. But even for Carroll, this ontological alteration is highly unlikely to happen. An artwork can be constituted by means of such a narrative, explaining its position in the history of art. But the sequence of interpretations around it can alter only its aesthetic value (Carroll 1992). And, if we are to mention Gadamer it seems even that we may freely use it, by adding up whatever private or public conjectures we might like in order to highlight it once again, when history threatens to turn it into oblivion (Gadamer 2006, 290-305). In this sense, creative interpretation would only assure historical continuity and help the reader understand its original intention(s) and meaning(s).

2. Interpretive Monism and Actual Intentionalism

Danto responded to the question of the validity of constitutive interpretation and its ontological entanglements by distinguishing between surface and deep interpretation of an artwork (Danto 1993 b). In his sense, deep interpretation relates to what Eco will call the "use" of an artwork in the light of an already given interpretive principle or frame. But only surface interpretation is ontologically constitutive: it is, therefore, the interpretation ruled by the intentions of its author and guaranteed by the history of production of the artwork, the latter being the actual and correct frame an interpreter should use in his exercise (Danto 1993 b).

It seems, for Danto, that there are two major criteria assuring the validity of a correct or incorrect interpretation: surface (or constitutive) interpretation is to be ruled out in respect to the *actual* intention of the author of the artwork (or the artist). And deep interpretations are to be validated in relation to the meaning of the artwork thus specified (Peg and Myles Brand 1993).

We may understand this position if we go back to the idea that the author is a sort of privileged interpreter of the material object it presents to the public as an artwork: the author creates a metaphor, and metaphors are not subject to validity criteria. They are not true or false in respect to the world. Thus, we may consider that the author projects for the first time such a constitutive interpretation onto the material thing which embodies the artwork (Dilworth 2004). But the public's constitutive interpretation is meant to retrieve this metaphor and thus the author's actual intentions. In this sense, constitutive interpretation is itself part of a process of retrieval of the author's intentions, just like critical interpretation (Wollheim 1997, 234-5). And doing this, it is therefore subject to truth or falsity.

Sometimes we might never establish what these intentions are, although we rely for that on the linguistic and visual conventions allowing us to guess them (Carroll 1992, 97-131), so that we should better speak about intentions in a hypothetical way - the most plausible conjectures an interpreter would get about the author's possible intentions (Levinson 2002). However, the author's actual intentions at least play a *regulative* part in this process. This is what Danto states when saying that the structure of interpretation must be at least partially governed by the artist's intentions (Danto 1994, 129).

We might notice, at this point, that such an attempt of retrieval (of the original metaphor and its meaning) might fail to allow the interpreter to use the *possible meanings* an author inserts into an artwork when constitutive interpretation is taken to be validated in relation to the author's actual intentions. In this respect, just as Wollheim claimed concerning the task of interpretation in the practice of art criticism, it forbids the "creative use" of an interpretation which allows us to

“revise” an artwork’s meaning in order to adapt it to our historical age (Wollheim 1997, 236).

III. A Critique of Danto’s Validity Conditions: Overrating the Interpreter

Although constitutive interpretation is itself different from the process of verifying an interpretation or analyzing an artwork in the critical sense and it seems to deal only with the reconstruction of the visual metaphor embedded in an artwork, Danto seems to overestimate the interpreter. In this sense, the interpreter is always an “ideal reader”, historically informed, trained as an art historian and capable of difficult conjectures, which differs a lot from the actual interpreter that an artwork usually encounters as the average public of an art exhibition. The life of an artwork is not only guided by the institutionalized practice of art criticism and historical interpretation: it is also constructed (or misrepresented) by its understanding achieved by its non-professional public, who may sometimes ignore the guided interpretation offered by historians, critics and curators as mediators and regulators of the correct interpretation of an artwork. This is the main point I would like to make here in order to account for a certain *reasonable pluralism* of interpretations neo-pragmatists would claim for.

1. Comprehension, Interpretation and Linguistic Translation

The first argument I would like to use is a version of Richard Shusterman’s claim for a radical distinction between comprehension and interpretation. It seems to me that, in claiming that the constitution of an artwork is based on interpretation and ruled by the author’s intentions, Danto misconceives this classical distinction. For Danto, understanding supposes a cognitive and informed process of interpretation able to retrieve at least the constitutive metaphor embedded in an artwork.

But Shusterman notices that at least some artworks do not require interpretation as an epistemic process meant to

reveal in linguistic terms the meaning of the artwork. They can stir aesthetic emotions and responses and produce a degree of understanding situated “beneath” any interpretation in its epistemic sense (Shusterman 2000, 120-130). Dance and music are such types of artworks that do not require linguistic translation and mediation; however, they elicit bodily responses and affective associations. Therefore, we cannot claim that somebody does not understand a piece of music if it is not able to say precisely what metaphor it conveys. A dancer doesn’t need to *explain* his dance in order to prove that his understanding of the dance is correct. And sometimes you can understand it only by dancing too. These responses, just as, for instance, singing and crying, can be taken as *symptoms* of understanding. By these examples, Shusterman proves that understanding and interpretation understood as linguistic translation and mediation of visual codes might be separate exercises. Thus, a viewer might understand a visual artwork before and regardless of the correct translation. He may thus retrieve the author’s intentions without being able to reconstruct them in a coherent manner. Interpretation is a special case of understanding and not the other way round: according to Wittgenstein, it supposes the internalized behavior constitutive for the linguistic practice and acquisition of meaning. Understanding is not the effect of interpretation, but, perhaps, its prerequisite, so that by interpreting we make explicit our understanding (Gadamer 2006, 268-73). In this sense, understanding is, first and foremost, an existential situation in the world.

Therefore, we might conclude concerning Danto’s theory that, if it is “constitutive” in the ontological sense, regardless of any historically informed interpretation, then an interpretation can be *ontologically* true for a particular interpreter even though it is epistemologically *incorrect* or *invalid*.

Shusterman’s critique may be paralleled with Susan Sontag’s own critique of the “semantic turn” in art criticism, by means of which form is neglected or it is considered to be an effect of the content. The ontological consequences of such a position would turn the artwork into its meaning (Sontag 2000, 13-25). The material counterpart, the “body” or “form” would merely serve as a “vehicle” for that meaning in the light of an

idealist ontology of art (Dilworth 2007). However, this would not be the case for Danto, who stands for a dualist position of mind/body concerning artworks (Fodor 1993). If this position is to be maintained, Danto should also acknowledge the importance of the form over the artwork's ontology, while accepting its consequences: the fact that interpretation is equally determined by pre-reflexive understanding, including mere aesthetic responses.

Sontag also notices in this respect the political consequences of such an "interpretationalist turn" conceived in purely cognitive terms: it serves to "tame" and eventually "disenfranchise" the artworks, since it reduces them to the status of cognitive abstractions. This leaves aside the performative potential of any artwork, the effects it has upon the public, its capacity of transforming the public, of *moving* them (that Danto is well aware of when defining the metaphor as such). It ultimately reduces art to a series of concepts and examples in the play of philosophical arguments and epistemological disputes.

This would be the precise "disenfranchisement" of art by philosophy Danto is trying to avoid and fight back (Danto 1993 b). He replied to Sontag's mass critique by noticing that his sense of interpretation is a creative one and not that of mere "decoding" of visual patterns and intentions. But avoiding any participation of emotions and aesthetic response in the process of understanding does not leave much room for such a creative endeavor, given also his intentionalist constraints. This is illustrated by Shusterman's application of Searle's famous "Chinese room" argument against the computational model of understanding and language competency. Thus, Shusterman imagines two interpreters of the same artwork, one human and one non-human, both able to produce interpretations as cognitive moves elicited by different associations of stimulus and responses. We may imagine the cyborg as having internalized the linguistic competency of correctly interpreting a given artwork. Are we also sure that he actually *understands* it if he is able to do that, in the light of multiple information about the artwork's visual structure (Shusterman 1997, 37-8)? Or should we consider that understanding supposes more than a certain background of art historical information, a specific relation to the "background

knowledge” that is, ultimately, structuring our reality as human beings?

2. The Over-Competent Interpreter

The second problem arises when relating the constitutive interpretation with critical activity, although Danto tries to separate them clearly. As Tom Leddy noticed, surface interpretation will always be “informed” by some background knowledge (Leddy 1999, 460-1). Thus, it runs the risk not only of slipping into a version of “deep interpretation”, but also of restricting its creative use to a version of historical explanation and historically informed art criticism. The question Danto avoided, that of restricting interpretation to a mere cognitive activity, reappears when stating that constitutive interpretation is dependent upon the artwork, defined as “an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art” (Danto 1977, 29). In his later writings, Danto reduces the artworld to an even more specialized and narrow field: that of art historical interpretation, making it closer to Noel Carroll’s own definition of art by means of historical narratives (Carroll 1993). For instance, Danto notices that his concept is similar to Michael Baxandall’s concept of “inferential art criticism”, which means the capacity (or even ability) of offering a historical explanation of artworks (Danto 1996, 63-5). And this seems to require an existing historical narrative led by enfranchising art theories.

The task of the artworld in Danto’s theory of ontological interpretation and its validity criteria are decisive, even though he rarely went back to it in his late writings. In any case, it plays a decisive part in legitimizing the ontological reconstruction or activation of the artwork from its material counterpart. To be able to recognize an artwork means to be able to retrieve an artistic metaphor; but this supposes a previous acquaintance of the interpreter with the history of art and knowledge of the appropriate artistic theories “enfranchising” the artworks. One couldn’t differentiate, let’s say, between an artwork and the reversed urinal Duchamp played with as an artistic gesture if one doesn’t have appropriate theories of art and art historical precedents. That is why Carroll states that the artwork is

acknowledged as such when inserted into a narrative filling the “gap” (Caroll 1993); in our case, the gap opened by Duchamp is “filled” when it becomes the precedent for a different artistic series. But it is also impossible to understand *correctly* an artistic metaphor if one doesn’t have the appropriate knowledge about, at least, the title of the work *signaling* to us the author’s intentions etc. And in any case, we couldn’t differentiate between two indiscernible images if Hokusai and one accidental dirt-drawing if Hokusai itself is unknown to the viewer.

Such dependency of constitutive interpretation upon historical explanation is virtually noticed by Danto when saying that art criticism means identifying the embodied meanings of an artwork and explaining their mode of embodiment (Danto 1996, 63).

In addition, it is not even as clear as Danto would like to that “constitutive interpretation” bears no relation with the institutional theory of art. As Dickie noticed, the practice of such an interpretation functions ontologically but supposes the existence of an institutionalized practice of art historical and critical interpretation which constitutes the artworld in its institutional definition (Dickie 1993, 75-91). Danto replied that constitutive interpretation is prior to the critical one, so that the latter is impossible without the first (Danto 1993 a, 203-5). However, thus he only reinstates better in the well-known circularity Dickie himself feels very comfortable within. The latter could also reply that, if art historical interpretation is only making explicit our understanding of the artwork *without this context*, understanding itself would become an institutional practice when requiring an *informed* interpretation. And Danto doesn’t seem too eager to give up the informative constraints of constitutive interpretation and to accept, therefore, the collapse of constitutive interpretation into “spontaneous” understanding regarded in Shusterman’s enlarged sense of aesthetic experience.

Last, but not least, there are political implications that are to be noticed when embracing such merely ontological approach: first, the interpreter would become a version of the informed art critic and historian, raising the similar problems of legitimacy and expertise Dickie’s definition of art has been repeatedly accused of (Davies 1991, 152-56). On what grounds

is the authority of the artist and of his correct interpreters going to be maintained? Secondly, such an interpreter would turn the history of art into a closed system that runs the danger of *academism*: if no creative innovation is possible, being ontologically *incorrect*, then we have the opposite problem of interpretive pluralism. How should we accept that the history of art is a field of changing values, canons and ideas, which is always on the move?

IV. The Pragmatist Stance: Why Does Pluralism Matter?

1. Interpretive Pluralism and Aesthetic Appreciation

If the ontology of art could be saved of the chaotic multiplication of entities seemingly caused by the plurality of equally acceptable interpretations (and we have various ways for doing that), and if we might also accept that this usually happens when *understanding* an artwork, I think we might get closer to some neo-pragmatist claims I would argue for in the space left here. What I am interested in is their capacity of *revising* Danto's fundamental intuition that an artwork may *ontologically* require an interpretation in order to exist. And its existence surpasses the mere appearance of its material counterpart. But the direction I would like to take is the opposite of Dilworth's proposal of reforming Danto's "vehicle fetishism". Rather, it goes towards the acceptance of the radical and troubling fact that sometimes creative misinterpretations are supposed by understanding, which is the fundamental process of constructing an artwork as an "embodied meaning" (Danto 1996, 193-4). It is the return to the body itself that allows for that possibility, by eliciting different aesthetic experiences and responses which, in the frame of Danto's ontology, may be inappropriate for the very artwork in question.

I would first like to remind the possibility of using a pluralist logic to accommodate artistic interpretation. As Joseph Margolis noticed, the idea that a single interpretation is acceptable is perpetuating a version of the "myth of the given" in its idealist version. The meaning would be given (by its author) and the interpretation would only "discover" it in the

work, without noticing that it is as well the result of the interpretive process itself and its cultural frames. If meaning is the artwork, then meaning is a cultural construct just as the artwork is (Margolis 1987 a; Margolis 1995, 29-34). Thus, there are more truth-values that different interpretations may acquire at different times, such as “plausible” or “reasonable” (Margolis 1987 a, 390-1). And this might vary in time without having a definite binary resolution.

Early enough, the wide use of “interpretation” in the aesthetic sense has been argued by Stuart Hampshire (Hampshire 1959), reminding us that different values such as “enlightening”, “interesting” (fertile), or “original” may be applied as equating truth-values for an interpretation. Alan Goldman (Goldman 1990, Peter Lamarque (Lamarque 2002) or Stephen Davies (Davies 1995) also consider that restricting interpretation to an epistemic function eludes its original use which is related to the activity of artistic appreciation. It may function to enhance aesthetic value and effect of an artwork and thus, becomes a *good* or *bad* interpretation of it when it allows for or frustrates it. Stephen Davies and Lamarque also show that.

As far as the ontological question of identity is concerned, I have already mentioned the physical possibility of accepting interpretive pluralism based on the existence of a notational system according to Goodman. Margolis and Peter Lamarque offer as well different solutions for a non-physicalist ontology of art that doesn't also require interpretive monism. Margolis shows that the proper object of an interpretation is represented by the semantic properties of an artwork; different interpretations apply themselves to different properties of the same cultural construct which is the artwork, so that they can be both acceptable as valid or “true” at different historical times (Margolis 1987b, 390-1; Margolis 1995). Lamarque has a similar move (Lamarque 2001): if interpretations apply to their own constructed objects of interpretations, and if their proper object is not the artwork as such, but its meaning, we may accept different meanings and interpretations as equally plausible about the same artwork (and many artworks, in fact,

display such structural ambiguities – it suffices to mention only Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*).

In fact, Margolis offers us a seductive possibility: that of accepting as identity criterion the genetic constituency of an artwork without failing to accept that it becomes a cultural construct in time. In fact, we may say that Duchamp’s *Fountain* is both “ironical” and “abject”, “witty” and “stupid” without referring to a different artwork, but to the same artwork at different moments in time, let’s say today and more than ninety years ago. Interpretation that picks up such semantic properties (which are aesthetic ones as well) is not constructing a different artwork from the point of view of its reference. In this sense, artworks are also cultural “types” that may have different “tokens”.

2. Coherence, utility and pragmatic effects

The radical ontological move transgressing the mind/body distinction regarding the total constructivism of an artwork may be found in Richard Rorty, who also ties the knot between publicly conservative and private, creative uses of interpretation in the cultural field. Rorty distinguishes between “texts” and “lumps”, stating that putting lumps and cultural objects into different categories and then claiming for different criteria of truth according to scientific objectivity and empirical correspondence of truth is a false distinction. Both truths may be subjected to a third perspective: that of a utilitarian criterion of truth depending on what we do with this “object”.

Rorty first shows that there is no meaning *in itself*: There is a meaning as far as there is an interpretive cooperation between the interpreter and the object as part of a process of linguistic behavior in a certain community. Description and interpretation of these objects depend on a specific interpretive frame and vocabulary and are, therefore, subject to language constraints. There is no intrinsic meaning of a cultural object and we have no point of view outside our language practices and vocabularies to find it out (Rorty 1993). We use for this purpose a set of “vocabularies” which are part of our language games, deciding upon what is relevant and important in rela-

tion to our own interests and needs (Rorty 1998, 99). In order to interpret or understand something, we are already placed into some interpretive process and vocabulary we are dependent upon. By “vocabulary”, Rorty understands a way of describing ourselves and the world in accordance with such a set of commonly shared values. Interpretive truth is thus merely interpretive consensus within a particular community upon what description of that object would better suit our needs (Rorty 2000, 179). The task of the interpreter is not the correct description in respect to the author’s or even the work’s intentions, but that of offering coherence to collective beliefs concerning a specific cultural or natural object (Rorty 2000, 207-9). Therefore, it is the suitability to our purposes and not to the “world” which makes an interpretation *valid* (Rorty 2000, 286-291).

Secondly, Rorty’s conception of interpretation and truth offers us an insight upon art history as a sort of “infinite conversation” made-up by multiple inter-related interpretations. It can be regarded as a network of interpretations serving to tie our own beliefs with other beliefs and vocabularies (Rorty 2000, 201-3). The task of the interpreter into that field is not to situate the artwork as good as it gets into the artwork’s original context, meaning and intention, but to continue these attempts, to make them relevant for a specific public in different periods of time. This is how we could preserve and maintain the very institution of art history and its interpretive practice. This practice can be regulated by public interests relevant for different “interpretive communities” (Fish 1980) at different times, and they always depend on the “vocabulary” used to describe them. We could also use Jonathan Culler’s notion of “interpretive frame” (Culler 1982, 74) as a set of interpretive strategies commonly used in order to identify and contextualize meaning of an artwork, or Stanley Fish’s concept of the text as a “self-consuming artifact” in the process of interpretation (Fish 1980, 66) to explain the way artworks are tied to each other inside this institutionalized practice.

Of course, the concept of “interpretive communities” is weak enough to accommodate a robust ontology of art. Its weaknesses have been pointed out, among others, by Shusterman

(Shusterman 2000, 106-12). First, communities regarded as an ideal public consensus may well differ at the empiric level and would block subjective participation by public conventional constraints. Secondly, as a *focus imaginabilis*, their authority may be either internal and therefore, arbitrary, either legitimated taking into account the work's own immanent criteria, therefore, they become unnecessary. But what I consider to be important here is the *open* and *democratic* process of the constitution of an artwork by means of interpretation. Rorty's distinction between creative, public and private *uses* of an artwork allows for such a democratic constitution without prejudicing the private *use* of an artwork in order to create a private vocabulary, a private and even idiosyncratic way of describing and understanding the world. In this democratic process of dialogical constitution of publicly accepted interpretations as better suiting public interests and being "more creative", "interpretive communities" can be regarded as regulative principles for empiric communities of interpreters sharing common beliefs and desires.

However, "interpretive communities" can also be considered similar to Gadamer's set of "legitimate prejudices", which allows subjects to dwell into an intersubjective world and makes understanding possible (Gadamer 2006, 267-98). There are several points of view which may be poorly informed but are as legitimate as the correct, specialized or academic interpretation. They could be called "false beliefs" in respect to the intention of the author, interpretive uses and misinterpretations or overinterpretations according to Eco, or creative misconstructions of an artwork in Danto's terms; but they are legitimate and necessary in the wide process of reception of an artwork. It is in the historical nature and cultural life of an artwork to accept such "false interpretations". In fact, these "false" or "incorrect" interpretations serve to tie the interpreter's beliefs to other cultural beliefs. They are also important for the public life of an artwork as an aesthetic artifact: they may allow the production of the aesthetic effects of an artwork. They serve, in fact, to the interpreter's private *existential* interests: those of self-construction or edification, and this supposes emotional responses and enlightening his own life-experience, as both

Dewey (Beardsley 1982, 77-93; Shusterman 2000, 56-58) and Gadamer (Gadamer 2006, 77-87; 294-99) put it.

In a nutshell, it is the reason why Danto's fundamental ontological insight is still important for the question of "constitutive interpretation": an artwork differs from other representations and vehicles of meaning by its particular metaphoric structure. It is while making the metaphoric identification that the interpreter projects some of his own world, into the art-world, regardless if this process sometimes fails to produce the correct metaphors the author intended to convey.

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