UNIVERSITY of York

This is a repository copy of *The agency in art*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/183514/

Version: Accepted Version

Book Section:
Currie, Gregory Paul orcid.org/0000-0001-8364-997X (2021) The agency in art. In: Sedivy, Sonia, (ed.) Art, Representation, and Make-Believe. Routledge , pp. 265-283.

Reuse
Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown
If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

White Rose university consortium
Universities of Leeds, Sheffield & York

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/

The agency in art[1]

[Draft: please do not quote from or circulate this version further. Comments welcome.]

> …style is expressive—presents to sense, for example, the order, ease, and rapidity with which ideas move in the writer's mind.
> Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*

I once argued that art works are the actions performed in painting or composition. What hangs on the gallery wall is, on this view, the result of that act and therefore constitutive of the work; but it is not identical to it.[2] People have said that this was metaphysical overreach, and they are right.[3] Wary of demanding wholesale change to the landscape of common opinion, I spend my time these days in the shrubbery, looking for something that will benefit from light pruning. And yes, perhaps there is a little sorting out still to be done when it comes to understanding the relationship between art works and the processes that lead to their creation. You won't hear me arguing that the work *is* the process; I'm content to say that Duccio's *Annunciation* (the work itself) hangs in the National Gallery. How then are the making and the thing made related? In more than causal ways; understanding the one is a condition for appreciating the other. But I don't claim any metaphysically close relation between them; a given work might have been made in ways very different from the way it was made. So *anti-essentialism* about origin is one of my claims. The other is *contextualism*: the view that it is not just the process of making that matters for appreciation but the art-historical context in which that process occurred. This package—anti-essentialist contextualism—is opposed by David Davies who cleaves to the radical view mentioned in my first sentence above. Late in the paper I suggest some ways to respond to his arguments.

That art appreciation must be sensitive to contextual factors is now more or less the orthodox view within anglophone philosophy of art. That is due in part to the work of Kendall Walton, whose "Categories of Art" brought a new precision to this topic fifty years ago.[4] My starting point is an essay of his from a decade later: "Style and the products and processes of art". It focuses on the role of the art making process, and the impression an audience may have of that process, in fixing what it is right to say about the style of a work.[5] I'll offer what I think is a natural generalisation from what Walton says about this. I turn from there to some general features of art appreciative contexts and to the central role played by artistic acts in determining the shape of a work's context.

1. Style

Walton's target is the *cobbler model* of artistic appreciation: what matters in art is the finished product, with the process of making the object no more relevant to the viewer than the process

---

[1] Many thanks to David Davies who managed at short notice to provide excellent commentary on an earlier version. The final version is, I hope, better for that but does not represent any convergence of our views.

[2] *An Ontology of Art*, London: McMillan, 1989. In the account offered there, works are act-types. Davies' theory has similarities to this one but identifies the work with particular actions (see his *Art as Performance*, Blackwell, 2004).

[3] Two trenchant reviews made objections to which I have not subsequently found convincing responses: Malcolm Budd, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 30(1990): 369-372; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 49(1991): 79-81.

[4] Philosophical Review, 1970.

[5] In *The Concept of Style*, ed. by Berel Lang (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), pp. 45-66. Second edition (Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 72-103. Page numbers in the text are to the second edition.

of making the shoes is relevant to the wearer (74). This model, he says, is entirely unhelpful for understanding our responses to art. Take the notion of style: We say of poems, pictures, musical performances that they are flamboyant, witty, sophisticated, sentimental, sensitive, bold, deliberate.[6] Any of these attributions might be made in describing a work's style, but they are applied at best in a whimsical way to natural objects, which cannot literally be said to have styles, for "attributing a style to a work involves, somehow, the idea of the manner in which it was made" (73). I will say why it is that style applies only to artefacts and not to natural objects, and also why the examples of stylistic attributions that Walton considers are untypical and do not suggest a good general account of the relation between works and their makings.[7]

Walton says that "we rarely have the impression that natural objects are… the results of deliberate, intentional human actions… This is why natural objects do not have styles" (88). One might on occasion have that impression; Walton mentions Half Dome in Yosemite, which "appears to have been sliced off by an incredibly gigantic bread knife" (88). Most of us know that that half Dome was not made that way, yet it might seem to have been, just as we might know that a picture was painted with careful deliberation while granting it the appearance of having been made in joyous abandon. Perhaps we see Half Dome only as the product of a *superhuman* action, but such creatures, if there are any, presumably have ways of doing things; if seeming to have been made is what matters, isn't that enough for a stylistic attribution?[8] Perhaps things that we know *can't* be made in a certain way will not seem to have been made in that way, in the relevant sense of "seems to". But natural scenes are sometimes consistent with their being human products; the Moeraki Boulders along the coast of Otago look very much like elements in a land-art installation of essentially human construction. From a certain perspective they seem to be artefacts, even though we know they are natural in structure and location.

I want to avoid the suggestion that some natural objects have styles. And I want to avoid the looming relativism of a view of style which depends on how things seem. Things seem different ways to different folk and we might that way end up saying that the style of something is observer-relative. But the question, What style is this art work in? surely has at least one right answer and many wrong ones. Among the wrong ones are answers based on how the work seems to you but which get no support from facts about the work's actual history of production. I suggest the following. First, we should separate two questions: Does this object have a style? If it does, what are its style qualities? The emphasis on how things seem is relevant to the second question, not the first. To have a style an object must be made; what its style is then depends, at least in part, on how it seems to have been made. Some sunsets may seem—for some people, under some conditions—to be made in certain ways. But not being made, they do not have styles.

How then does the way something merely seems to have been made get into a stylistic picture dominated by what actually happened? The answer is that how a work *seems* to have been made may be an important feature of how it *was* made. The work might have been deliberately and carefully made so as to appear to have been made in a casual or angry or joyous way, as the result of a casual or angry or joyous way of behaving.[9] That's one way; the connection

---

[6] Taken from the list of attributes Walton gives at p.74.

[7] I don't think my conclusions here are in conflict with the spirit of Walton's proposal.

[8] Walton does not claim that appearing to be made in a certain way is sufficient being in a style; only that it is necessary (88). He does not say what further conditions are necessary. My suggestion is that it be made to seem that way.

[9] Ryle says that "there is no more than a verbal appearance of a contradiction in saying… of a clown that he is deftly clumsy and brilliantly inane" (*Concept of Mind*, 261).

might not be so paradigmatically intentional. Your way of doing something may go beyond what you actively intend to do. It may be that the artist gives her work a casual or angry or joyous look, without thinking about it but also without it getting that look simply by accident; making things look that way is an aspect of what the artist does (to some extent) reliably in creative mode.[10] Since stylistic features are recurrent across many works we are unlikely to be often misled into thinking that a feature is stylistic when it is purely accidental; being misled would require a number of independent accidents all producing the same apparently stylistic feature.

So, an interest in style is an interest in how something was made, and something that was not made cannot rightly be of stylistic interest. When a work seems to have been made in a certain way there are two ways for that to connect with the notion of style. The first, more superficial way is for its seeming that way to encourage us to imagine it having a style. Walton rejects Goodman's idea that sunset's may have styles.[11] But it might be diverting to imagine the sunset in a certain style, as it might be amusing to imagine great uncle Albert as a badger, without having any tendency to think he is one. The second way is for how the object seems to be made to be seen as a nonaccidental product of the way it was made. In that case the way is open to the serious attribution of style.

Walton's list of stylistic properties includes *witty, morbid, sophisticated, sentimental, ponderous, deliberate, neurotic, anguished, pretentious, profound, flamboyant, expressive, reserved*—all suggestive of the following way of understanding stylistic attributions:

1. Works may correctly be described as "Φ" when they seem to have been made in ways that are Φ.

But we should not assume that stylistic attributions are always or even typically of a form which directly suggests a manner of making in the way that those cited by Walton do. Often we can talk about what is done by an artist in ways that illuminate style, without implying anything about the way of doing. Discussing Milton's poetic style as revealed in *Paradise Lost* Jenefer Robinson points to his "remarkable" decision to use blank verse, thus requiring other markers of the poetic, which he provided by "imbuing his poetry with a musical quality, achieved partly through diction but mainly through rhythmic manipulation".[12] Robinson is characterising style by specifying the result of Milton's labours: a poem in blank verse where poetic quality is provided by distinctive diction and rhythm. It would be odd to ask for a specification of *how* Milton did this, unless the request is for more detail about *what* was done: for more information about specific instances in the work of distinctive diction and rhythm, for example. A work may be said, as part of a stylistic description, to be poetic, but what is it for it to be made "poetically"? It does not help to say that calling the work poetic suggests or implies that the maker had, or appears to have had a "poetic nature".[13] John Pope-Hennessay notes the "decorative splendour and restrained naturalism" of the style of Gentile da Fabriano,

[10] You might attribute to a person a certain style of walking without supposing that they adopt that way of walking deliberately. But you characterisation would be undermined if it turned out that in every encounter you had with them they happened to be suffering a back injury, but one that infrequently afflicted them. That way of walking is not in this case an instance of style, not because it fails to be intentional but because it is caused in the wrong way (and no, I don't have a general account of what divides right ways from wrong ones).

[11] Walton cites The status of style, *Critical Inquiry*, 1 (1978), p.808. Goodman says "A Mandalay sunrise may be not merely a sunrise in Mandalay but a sunrise expressing the suddenness of thunder--a sunrise in Mandalay style" (p.808). There may be a sense in which sunrises and other natural things are expressive. I don't take that to imply that they have styles.

[12] Style and personality in the literary work, *Philosophical Review*, 94 (1985): 227-247.

[13] Unless that means simply "able to produce poetic works".

implying, I think, restraint on the part of Gentile but surely not attributing decorative splendour to anyone.[14] While this kind of art-critical vocabulary is not easy to interpret, a reasonable assumption is that what is here attributed is *being a (somewhat) reliable producer of decoratively splendid things*. On that reading (one I think we are entitled to even if it is not the author's own), Pope-Hennessy's stylistic attribution is more evidence against the cobbler model though it does not fall within the scope of 1.

The point generalises to a vast range of art-critical attributions that are not, or need not be, stylistic. Sibley, a great collector of these things, lists a number of such attributions, among them *unified, balanced, elegant, garish, integrated, lifeless, vivid, moving, tragic*.[15] These do not seem to invite the thought that there was something unified, balanced or whatever about the manner of the work's making.[16] Should we say that, for such attributions, there is no significant connection between the work and its making? Not at all. We admire the balance of the picture partly because it is the outcome of an admirable performance on the part of the maker: a maker who saw the need for or the merit in balance and had the skill, sensitivity, application and other qualities to provide it in the right way. Neither the maker nor her act should be called "balanced" on that account.

Let us call cases like those on Walton's list and falling within the scope of 1 "semantically marked cases"; they are cases where the or a literal meaning of the expression used to predicate something of the work points us towards something in the manner of making. Most art-critical or aesthetic attributions are not semantically marked. However, the existence of semantically marked cases of stylistic and more generally aesthetic/art-critical attributions will be no surprise to anyone convinced of the work-act connection.[17] "Aesthetic terms span a great range of types", as Sibley notes, and one type consists of attributions which instantiate the work-act connection in a very direct and obvious way. Intelligent plays come in all shapes and sizes; what they have in common is being (seeming to be) the outcome of intelligent making.

2. Widening the net

While attributions such as "restrained", "bombastic" and "angry" may be features of various styles, they are not essentially tied to style. As Walton notes, style attributions require something (it is not clear how much) in the way of projectibility. Finding a work in a sentimental style or finding the sentimentality of a work a feature of its style creates an expectation that we will find sentimentality in suitably related works.[18] But there is no incoherence in supposing that an artist working in a notably unsentimental style deviates from it on occasion and produces an idiosyncratically sentimental work, this instance having no projectibility. And the idea that this work manifests a lapse into sentimental thinking, or

[14] *Fra Angelico*, second edition, Phaidon Press, 1974, p.11.

[15] Aesthetic concepts, pp.1-2, in *Approach to Aesthetics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.

[16] Walton says that features such as balance and symmetry may be "felt to be ingredients of a work's style because they contribute to how works appear to have been made" (97).

[17] Wölfflin gives us semantically marked cases when he compares the "impetuosity" of Botticelli's style with the "deliberate modelling" of Lorenzo di Credi (*Principles of Art History*, seventh edition, trs M. D. Hottinger, 1932, G. Bell & Sons. First published in German in 1929). John Golding, discussing origins of cubism, says that "Picasso's work is crude and direct both in colour and execution. Cézanne's is the reverse" (*Cubism: A History and an Analysis, 1907-14*, second edition, 1968. London: Faber & Faber, p.50).

[18] What, then, is the projectibility of Robinson's attributions to Milton, as confined to *Paradise Lost*? Robinson might argue that the features she identifies are features of other works, but I am not sure she needs to. With a construction of the magnitude and significance of *Paradise Lost* there is scope for projectibility within the single work.

perhaps that its sentimentality is appropriate to the material, is of relevance for appreciating it even when its sentimentality is no aspect of the artist's style.

If style does not define the boundaries of this discussion, what does? The examples I took from Sibley were offered by him as aesthetic attributes, a category Walton expresses some scepticism about in his paper.[19] Much of what will interest me here will be aesthetic in character but my focus is on anything relevant to the appreciation of the art-work in question and I grant that art-appreciation is not exclusively a matter of aesthetic interest. I shan't try to draw a boundary between aesthetic- and non-aesthetic aspects of art appreciation; I hope all the examples I give will seem reasonable candidates for things relevant to the appreciation of works of art as art, rather than as, say investment opportunities. It will be evident that I take a great deal to be relevant from this point of view and some people will want a narrower characterisation. In many cases they will be able to substitute examples of their own that make the same points.

3. Historical theories of appreciation

The cobbler model does not apply to art: does it apply even to shoes? The model allows an interest in the history of a shoe's making in so far as knowing who made the shoe and how they made it is evidence for its possession of such purely utilitarian values as good fit and hard-wearingness. The model is not consistent with valuing shoes, even partly, *for* their origins, and people do sometimes value them in that way. But shoes are the sorts of things where an agent's valuing *could* correspond to the cobbler model and still be a valuing of shoes as shoes. That is not so for art. Rejection of the cobbler model requires us to say that appreciators should always be sensitive to acts of artistic making; facts about making are among the grounds one may have for an appreciative response, and not merely (defeasible) evidence that a certain response will be merited. Of course, most of us get by with a rather impoverished understanding of that history of making. In that, we fall short of being ideal appreciators; sometimes we fall short of being adequate ones. It does not show that we fail altogether to be appreciators. And the least well informed among us know something: we know that, roughly speaking, paintings are produced by applying pigment to a brush and transferring it to a surface. There is also evidence that people without specialist training and who may have little interest in the arts do regard art works as among the things which are valuable in virtue of their histories. Psychologists George Newman and Paul Bloom have found a widespread preference across a range of artefacts and activities for the item regarded as "authentic" as opposed to the copy, reproduction, or the fake. They suggest that these preferences, particularly in the realm of art, are apt to be produced by either or both of two tendencies in human thinking:

> *Assessment of Performance*: "…our assessment of an artwork is related to our intuitions about the processes that gave rise to its existence. Thus, an original is different from a forgery because it is the end point of a different sort of performance. The original is a creative work, whereas the forgery is not…. This proposal is supported by experiments that manipulate the circumstances under which an artwork has come into being. For example, Kruger, Wirtz, Van Boven, and Altermatt (2004) found that participants believe that a painting that took longer to paint is aesthetically superior and worth more money than one that was painted quickly, even though the two paintings are perceptually identical (also see Cho & Schwarz, 2008).
>
> *Contagion*: "An original Picasso may be valuable because Picasso actually touched it, and Picasso is a famous and well-known artist. In contrast, a forgery would not have

[19] Subsequently he has given more positive coverage to the idea; How Marvelous! *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 51 (1993): 499-510.

> been touched by Picasso and, therefore, would not contain any of his special essence. Such contagion effects are not limited to art; they extend as well to objects such as autographs, baby shoes, and the possessions of celebrities (e.g., Newman et al., 2011).[20]

It will be clear from what is said under *assessment of performance* that common ideas about how performance factors influence value need some refinement to gain any art-critical credibility: mere duration of labour should not on anyone's account be a factor.[21] Nor is *contagion* helpful for understanding serious art-critical judgement.[22] But the responses revealed by these experiments do suggest that common opinion is committed to the importance of history in art appreciation.

The alternative view I call *isolationism*. It is an extreme formalism: only the intrinsic properties of the work matter for appreciation, so history drops out of the picture because all relational properties of the work do so.[23] There is not much appetite for this view among philosophers.[24] Historical theorists deny isolationism. They are of two kinds, which I will call *contextualists* and *expansionists* (see Figure 1; I end up in the bottom right). Contextualists think that serious appreciation of the work requires some degree of understanding of its context of production (I have said that I am a contextualist, more particularly an anti-essentialist one). On this view, what we are appreciating is the picture on the gallery wall. We are appreciating it by learning to experience it in context: to experience it in the light of what may be understood about its history. Expansionists complain that the contextualists have an impoverished view of the work itself: in the case of painting, contextualists identify the work with the canvas on the wall, and then look around for some context within which that work needs to be seen. But on the expansionist view, what contextualists are calling "context"—or the relevant parts of it—is actually constitutive of the work itself. In the rest of this essay I am concerned with the dispute between contextualists and expansionists, leaving isolationism aside. I begin by saying more about what contextualism amounts to.

---

[20] G. Newman & P. Bloom Art and Authenticity: The Importance of Originals in Judgments of Value, *Journal of Experimental Psychology General*, 141(2011): 558-69

[21] This opinion seems not very robust; subjects pre-exposed to the view that "good art takes talent" did not go on to take this view (Cho & Schwartz, Of great art and untalented artists, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 18 (2008): 205-211). But the idea that protects them from this error is still one concerning process. For comment see G. Newman & R. Smith, Artworks are evaluated as extensions of their creators, in F. Cova & S. Rehault (eds) *Advances in Experimental Philosophy of Aesthetics*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019, pp.103-120. Newman and Smith say there is evidential support for the view that people regard art works as "extensions" of their makers, a view I hope to discuss on another occasion.

[22] See my "Aesthetic Explanation and the Archaeology of Symbols", *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 56 (2016): 233–246.

[23] For isolationism to have any plausibility colour would have to be an intrinsic property of the work; that won't be so if colours are dispositions to affect subjects.

[24] Perhaps the leading contemporary philosophical proponent of formalism is Nick Zangwill; see his "In Defence of Moderate Aesthetic Formalism", *Philosophical Quarterly*, 50 (2000): 476-493; as his title suggests, Zangwill is not advocating isolationism.

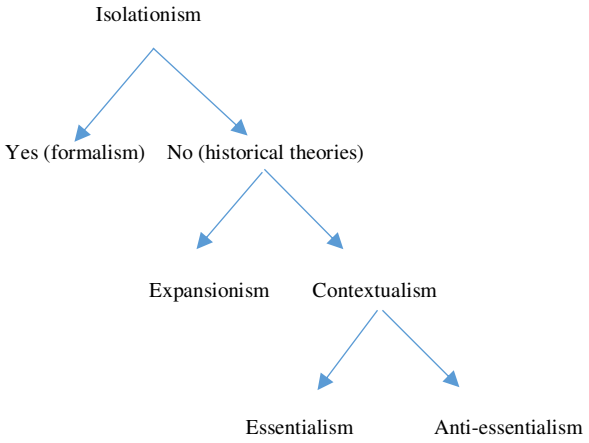

Figure 1

4. Isolationism

I limit the argument to a particular art form, painting. As Wollheim noted, there is a distinction between kinds of arts where it is at least plausible to identify the work with a particular physical object and kinds of arts where this is not true.[25] Painting belongs to the former kind while literary and musical composition belong to the latter. Arts of the first and second kinds differ in how they deal with the *individuation problem*: suppose two artists produce works which are indistinguishable in what we might call their manifest properties: two pictures that look the same, two quartets that sound the same, two novels with the same words. In the case of the pictures it is clear we have two works, since we have two spatio-temporally distinct objects.[26] That is not so clear in music and literature because there are no relevantly individuating objects: no physical instantiation of score or text can be considered to be the work. One solution that recommends itself is to think of musical and literary works as individuated not merely by distinctness of manifest properties but in addition by elements of context.[27] Such views bring with them a commitment to a metaphysical connection between work and context; context is part of what makes the work the work it is. But for present purposes I focus on the role of context in appreciation and ignore its (presumed) role in individuation. Perhaps on another occasion I shall be able to show that we can individuate musical and literary works without appeal to context. For now I focus on an art where we don't need to consider the individuation problem.

5. The limits of context

What is going to count as belonging to the appreciative context for a work of painting—the kind of art-making I am focusing on here? An obvious answer is: those things which might reasonably be cited in support of an appreciative judgement of the work. An advantage of this formulation is that it makes clear that the issue concerns the kinds of appreciation works *merit* rather than how they are in fact appreciated, which in many cases will involve inattention, lack of relevant knowledge or perceptual expertise and other deficiencies. The apparent disadvantage of putting it this way is that it tells us nothing about what these justifying facts are, a subject on which there is likely to be little critical consensus. But many theoretically

[25] *Art and its Objects*, New York: Harper & Row, 1968, Section 9.
[26] The two works may of course be very closely connected, as when a single artist produces two versions.
[27] See Levinson, What a musical work is, *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980):5-28, for a classical statement of this strategy.

significant stances are characterised in ways that leave their boundaries open. Radical pragmaticists think that pragmatic factors contribute to the determination of what is said; they don't agree about what those factors are. There will be different versions of contextualism, each setting the boundaries for particular cases in different places.[28]

My own sense is that we will often have to draw the net very wide. There are things about the artist's physical/intentional performance that we need to know about in order to appreciate the work: we want to know about the materials used, the artist's approach to problems posed by drying times (compare oils and fresco), who if anyone was the sitter and who the subject.[29] These sound comfortably like features of the act of making, though certainly relational ones. But we also need to understand the work's genre, the relation of the work to the artist's oeuvre, the influence of other artist's works, the work's intended location, the contemporary state of understanding of perspective. Baxandall, in his study of fifteenth century painting in Italy, has familiarised us with more distant connections: facts about the received understanding of the emotional stages of the annunciation, of physiognomy and of gesture; even contemporary ways of estimating volume can make us see a picture in a different light.[30] It seems best to say that what is relevant to appreciation is a whole range of things, hard to specify in advance, which have some bearing on the act of making it. Some of these may be features of the act itself, essential or not, while others are better described as simply part of the artistic context within which the act of making took place. With that in mind we might say that what we are interested in is not so much the relation between the work and the act of making, but the work and its artistic context, which will certainly include features of the act. But that seems to me not quite right. I do not want to treat the creative act as just one element within the class of contextual factors; it plays a more central role than that. Not having a very precise formulation, the best I can say is that the activity of making is context's *centre of gravity*; other things belong to context because they are helpful for understanding the activity of making a work of art, and their position in the order of importance is given by their degree of relevance to that activity. When we talk about context in other areas of inquiry we often present it as a set. Stalnaker talks about the context set—a set of possible worlds—which is "the context in which the speaker

[28] For a dispute about the context for Dutch art of the seventeenth century see, e.g., the review of Alpers' *The Art of Describing* by E. de Jong, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 14 (1984): 51-59. For reflection on the debate, see Mariët Westermann, Svetlana Alpers's *'The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century'*, *Burlington Magazine,* 153 (2011): 532-536.

[29] Davies has things to say on this topic with which I agree; see e.g. *Art as Performance*, Section 3.2 and pp.81-83.

[30] *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Oxford University Press, Chapter 2. Is the maker's health relevant? One's inclination is to say no. What of Lipatti's last concert, undertaken against medical advice, his death coming not long thereafter? Is calling these circumstances relevant to a genuinely artistic response to the performance a capitulation to sentimentality that a theory of appreciation ought to exclude? Recognition of the medical situation should not hide deficiencies in the performance (and some have been suggested); but it seems to me wrong to suppose that any inflection given to the experience of listening to that concert by knowledge of this part of background is artistically irrelevant; similarly with Beethoven's deafness and many like cases. But I'm inclined to contrast these cases with the case of Boswell, whose circumstances seem to me not appreciatively relevant (I follow Grant, J. Art and achievement. *Philosophical Studies* (2019). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-019-01324-x, Section 2.1). There is much room for disagreement here between contextualists about what is relevant context.

intends his statements to be received".[31] The context for an art work, as I mean it, is a structure: a set of elements with an ordering relation over them.[32]

I have cited various kinds of things as belonging to context; what is said immediately above suggests that they all earn their place in context in virtue of their contribution to understanding what the author did. Is that very large generalisation sustainable? I should like to see how far it can be defended. Discussing style much earlier I made the point that if style is a way of doing, it need not be concerned only with what is intended by the agent. Much that is relevant to describing what you do may have nothing to do with what you intended, and may be quite unknown to you. What of Baxandall's thought that fifteenth century ways of estimating volume, also referred to above, help us understand the relation between artist and viewer at this time? Baxandall suggests that this was in some cases at least a conscious manoeuvre: "When a painter like Piero used a pavilion in his painting he was inviting the public to gauge".[33] But even where the idea itself was quite outside the artist's awareness, a tendency to gauge might be part of the cognitive stock that helps determine the response of suitably positioned contemporary viewer, and thus part of the context in which artistic communication takes place.

6. Does the work have priority over context?

I have said that the activity of the artist, contextually understood, is central to appreciation of the work of art. While the action-in-context illuminates the work, it is also true that the work is uniquely placed to illuminate the action. For the best way to find out about what the author has done is to look at the result of the doing. We would not learn much of relevance to appreciation if (unusually) we were in a position to film the artist's application of paint to the canvas or their act of stone reduction; ungainly movements don't imply ungainly paintings. We want to learn about the elegance or incompetence of the artist's technique, the power or weakness of their conception, the limits of their imagination—from the finished product. In that case it might be thought that really there are two objects of appreciation here: the picture and its making, and it is no longer clear which if either has art-critical primacy over the other. It is true that one might be interested primarily in the act of making; your focus is the enigma of the artist's life and for you the pictures are clues to it. That is one approach; the art appreciator's is another. Let's distinguish them.

We may think of the work as instrumentally valuable; valuable because of what it reveals about context and in particular about the qualities and achievements of the maker. We may think instead of the work as having final *and relational* value. As Christine Korsgaard has made plain, thinking of something as having final value does not require us to think of its value as *intrinsic*: as dependent on features available only within the confines of the object itself.[34] Formalists, or some of them, may think of artistic value as final and intrinsic, so appreciation

---

[31] Stalnaker, *Context and Content*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.67.

[32] We might reduce the number of candidates for membership of context by saying more about what it is about the artist's activity that is relevant to appreciation. After all, plenty of stuff will not (normally) be relevant: shoe size, breakfast menu for the days of painting. In earlier work on the relation between the work and its making I emphasised the importance of understanding the artist's achievement.[32] James Grant (*ibid*) questions this. One reason is that there are excellencies predicable of an action which contribute to the merit of the work but which are left out by a focus on achievement; a performance may be better because it was done on a better instrument but this is not, or not necessarily, a mark of greater achievement. I hope to discuss Grant's argument in more detail on another occasion.

[33] Painting and Experience, p.87. Baxandall refers the reader to Piero's *Madonna del Parto*.

[34] Two distinctions in goodness, *Philosophical Review*, 92 (1983): 169-195.

is or should be independent of context.[35] We can deny that and insist that works have the artistic values they do because of their relation to context, yet still agree with the formalists that appreciators seek final value in the works that interest them. So there are three approaches to the relation between work and its making. The biographer seeking insight into the life of the artist finds instrumental value in the works when they disclose features of the maker's skills, dispositions and values. The formalist appreciator seeks final, intrinsic value in the works and ignores the maker and the making. The contextualist appreciator seeks a final value in the work that depends on its relations to other things, notably the activity of the maker, with the work itself functioning, in turn, as a rich source of evidence for that activity. While the second and third of these projects are incompatible, the first and third may be conducted by a single agent as part of a single, unified project: illuminating the work from the life and the life from the work, without regarding one as primary or as more important than the other. But they are distinct, separable activities.

7. Modal matters

The work—the picture on the wall—is one thing, the act of making it another. How closely connected are they? There are contextualists around for whom aspects of context are constitutive of the work itself; on Levinson's influential account a musical work is constituted partly by the identity of its composer and the time of its composition, and one might take the same view for other arts, including painting which is my exclusive focus here.[36] I am unconvinced that paintings have any essential properties beyond, say, being coloured surfaces. Perhaps the *Mona Lisa* has to be a coloured surface in every world it exists in; perhaps those colours have to be distributed in a way not very distant from the way they actually are distributed. But I see no grounds for insisting that the *Mona Lisa* could not have been painted by someone other than Leonardo sometimes after Leonardo painted it, or even that it might have been the accidental product of a paint spill. In the first of these two counterfactual circumstances the picture would merit a different kind of appreciation from the appreciation it actually merits. Perhaps in the second it would merit no appreciation at all. I find that untroubling. We do not suppose that admirable people are essentially admirable; we admire them for how they are in this world, not for how they are in every world. True, admirable personal qualities have some modal reach. An admirable person is, I suppose, admirable in nearby worlds, otherwise their apparently admirable actions would appear as accidents with no robustness under change of circumstance. Similarly with pictures: sensitive colour combinations manifest the sensitivity of their makers and sensitivity is something you must exhibit across a range of circumstances (it is not easy to say which ones). But sensitive people are certainly not sensitive under every imaginable change of circumstance.

Someone might insist on the following minimal modal connectedness between work and act of production. There are, they grant, worlds where the *Mona Lisa* has a different history from the history it actually has. But any world in which there is an object with exactly the production history actually possessed by the *Mona Lisa*, that object is the *Mona Lisa*. I see some reason to doubt even that. In this scenario, Leonardo puts the same samples of pigment on the same piece of wood in the same way as he does in the actual world. But that object ($Mona\ Lisa_1$) is immediately destroyed in an accident. Leonardo goes on to paint another picture ($Mona\ Lisa_2$), almost indistinguishable from the first, acting in a rather different way—he can now follow his memory of the earlier act rather than finding his way through uncharted territory. This picture

[35] I am not sure anyone is a pure formalist in this sense. The formalist project strikes me as better characterised as the attempt to minimise context. See again Zangwill, "In Defence of Moderate Aesthetic Formalism".

[36] "Ives's symphonic essay *The Fourth of July* is irrevocably and exclusively his, precisely in virtue of his composing it" (*Music, Art, & Metaphysics*, Cornell University Press, 1990, p.218).

goes on to have the exact same career—same owners, same fame, same influence—that the *Mona Lisa* actually has. Which picture in this world is the *Mona Lisa*? I struggle to find a decisive reason for one answer over the other; the fact that *Mona Lisa*$_1$ and the *Mona Lisa* are the products of the same creative act and are constituted by the same materials in the same way does not seem decisive in this case.

Even for me there is a modal connection lurking in this region. It is a connection between the work's context and what we might call its appreciative profile: all those aspects of perception, thought and feeling that form parts of whatever appreciative experiences the work merits. Change any part of context and you change some aspect of the work's appreciative profile. The context and the appreciative profile of a work vary from world to world. But they do not vary independently.

8. Contextualism vs expansionism

My contextualism insists that context and work are very loosely related. It is some distance from expansionism, which takes part of context—the act of work-making—to *be* the work. What the expansionists and I agree about is that understanding context is essential to appreciating the work. Where we disagree, how do we decide who is right? Expansionism comes in various forms and I mentioned my own earlier version of that view; I focus here on the version more recently proposed (and I believe currently held) by David Davies. On Davies' view the work itself—the *Mona Lisa* for example—is not the canvas on the gallery wall but rather what he calls the "generative act" productive of that canvas, which is henceforth to be regarded as the terminus of that act or, again in his terms, the "focus of appreciation" for the work.

A question that immediately comes to mind for anyone interested in the practice of art appreciation rather than in metaphysics is whether the dispute between contextualists and expansionists has any implications for how appreciative activity should be undertaken. As already noted, expansionists and contextualists agree that many things beyond the boundary of the canvas matter to the appreciation of the work. A contextualist and an expansionist may disagree about what exactly these things are. But two contextualists may disagree among themselves on this question, and so may two expansionists, and the possible within-group disagreements will mirror the between-group ones. In that case, contextualists will ask what pay off there is in moving to a metaphysical view at some distance from common understanding.

To this it may be replied that the difference is a philosophical one rather than an art-critical one, and such differences are worth settling. Expansionists have generally recognised that the burden of philosophical argument lies with them, that it is their obligation to convince people that contextualism is wrong. What arguments does Davies have that might achieve that? I have here space only to consider two.

Davies says that certain properties we naturally ascribe to the work itself could only be properties of the generative act; he cites "being Liszt-influenced", a property suggested by Levinson as attributable to Brahms' Piano Sonata op.2.[37] Davies might also cite any of the work-attributions I took from Walton earlier, such as *witty, morbid, sophisticated* and *sentimental*. How should we understand these? We say that people may be uncomfortable, and that chairs may be uncomfortable. We don't then struggle to find a metaphysics of persons and chairs that allows this to be seen as the attribution of a single property. We say instead that this

[37] What a musical work is.

is an instance of polysemy; something is predicated of chairs which is distinct from but closely related in understandable ways to what is predicated of people, and we use the same term in both cases. Carrie Figdor has recently argued recently that we should take the claims of scientists that animals, trees and even neurons "make decisions" literally.[38] Against this Edouard Machery argues that polysemy is so common a phenomenon across languages that it is more plausible to suppose that what is predicated of animals, trees, and neurons are things distinct from but intelligibly related to what is predicated of people.[39] Much the same can be said in response to Davies's claims about the quality of being Liszt-influenced.

Davies asks how the contextualist might explain our tendency to re-evaluate works on the discovery that they are forgeries: when we discover, for example, that the picture we thought was by Vermeer turns out to be by van Meegeren. Such re-evaluations make perfect sense if we think that the work is the generative performance, because the discovery of forgery is, in effect, an invitation to re-evaluate the performance itself. What is wrong with forgery is therefore something that is wrong with the performance. If forgery is something predicated of works, it is most naturally predicated of performances. Davies goes on to note the way Denis Dutton, a pioneering contextualist, has tried to connect forgery as a deficiency in performance with the work itself understood in a contextualist way, concluding that Dutton has to appeal to "shadowy" notions such as the way the picture "represents" or "embodies" the performance.[40]

I will briefly sketch a response. Suppose you greatly value the *Croix de Guerre* won by your mother in occupied France. You later discover that the medal was not hers but someone else's; even worse, you discover that your mother fabricated her war record and stole the medal. You cease to value the medal. When you did value it you did not value it for its intrinsic properties but for its relational ones. But, as we have seen, valuing it for its relational properties need not have been, and in this case was not, an instance of valuing the medal instrumentally. It was the medal that you valued, though you do not value it now; you would not have valued it were it not for the (presumed) actions of your mother in France, and you certainly valued your mother and her actions. But among the things you valued is also the *Croix de Guerre*. There are of course many differences between this case and the case of revising your valuation of a picture found to be a forgery. But the example is surely one of a rationally motivated change in valuing something which was the upshot of a certain process, where the reason for the change lies in your changed understanding of that process. That, I think, is enough to show that re-evaluating a picture on the discovery of its being the upshot of an act of forgery makes rational sense. Of course forgery is but one reason for re-evaluation: one might simply discover that the picture was not by the artist you thought it was by, without there being any implication of dishonesty; some re-evalation of the picture would be in order in that case also. Suppose, then, that you learned that your mother's *Croix de Guerre* had been accidentally swapped for that of another, equally deserving person at some stage; on learning that you would still probably change your valuation of the medal, though it would not be the so dramatic change of the previous case. Once again we have a case of a change in the value of something that results from a process because of a changed understanding of the process itself; the changed understanding of the process is one thing, the changed valuation of the result is another.

---

[38] *Pieces of Mind. The Proper Domain of Psychological Predicates*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

[39] What Do Plants and Bacteria Want? Commentary on Carrie Fidgor's *Pieces of Mind*, *Mind & Language*, forthcoming.

[40] Davies, *Art as Performance*, pp.202-204; Davies cities Dutton's paper "Artistic crimes: the problem of forgery in the arts", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 19 (1979):302-314.

As these final observations indicate, I am not inclined to rejoin the expansionist program. The failure of the cobbler model requires that we adopt some version of contextualism, and I have suggested that it be an anti-essentialist version. There is no need to go further.

Greg Currie
University of York