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Sue Spaid
ON WORK'S *PERDURANCE*: ARTWORKERS, ARTWORKS
AND CONTENTS

Abstract

This paper argues that "work" rather vividly captures the efforts of artworkers, who work tirelessly to ensure that myriad artworks "achieve work", as Arthur Danto termed it. More basically, "work" is what we know about an "artwork" that guides artworkers, whether curators, writers or art lovers to know how to place it (historically, politically, socially, artistically, culturally), much like scores, scripts and texts facilitate performances of musical, theatrical and literary artworks. In cheering on artists such as Danto's fictional artist J, who carried the indiscernible red square "triumphantly across the boundary as if he had rescued something rare", artworkers prompt their publics to appreciate such heroic events and/or unfamiliar objects as meaningful artworks. Being a shared, third-person account of an artwork's significance, work typically begins as a public discussion that inspires additional artworkers to generate articles, books, catalogues and reviews. This paper thus links Danto's focus on achieving work to Hannah Arendt's account of work, such that artists' *actions* yield artworks, whereas artworkers' work makes the artworld where artworks *perdure* as work. I begin by reviewing Danto's use of work and content in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. I next offer an alternative approach for "achieving" work and show how this process accords with Alfred North Whitehead's having distinguished "eternal objects" from "actual entities". My noting that work reflects the efforts of myriad artworkers working in tandem across the globe enables me to better assess how "work" as in effort and/or meaning relates to and/or survives an artwork's varying contexts.

Artworkers and work

With this paper, I aim to demonstrate the peculiar relationship between artworkers, artworks and work. In English people tend to use artwork and work interchangeably as if "work" is shorthand for "work of art", which some consider the more formal version of "artwork". An art critic might write, "This exhibition

featured 25 works” or claim that “this exhibition’s best works are x, y and z” as if artwork and work refer to the same thing, but do they really? I distinguish “work” by showing how artworks *achieve* work, which is typically different in kind than an artwork’s “contents”, another term that gets used interchangeably with “work”. When we wonder aloud, “What does this artwork mean?”, we might be mistaken if we deferred to its contents to generate its work and vice versa. Although I consider an artwork’s work distinct from its contents, there may be particular contexts, such as an artwork’s initial context, in which they are aligned. Imagine a fictional 15th century Coronation of the Virgin painting such that Jesus is seated on the same horizon as Mary, while crowning her Queen of Heaven. Renowned for its particularly electrifying depiction of this non-Biblical legend, its gilded rays alight heavenly crowns and earthly halos alike. When presented alongside artworks exhibited in “Feminist Art through the Ages” or “Invisible Energy: Artists’ Depictions of Sun Rays, Halos, Atoms and Electricity”, it prompts very different contents than when experienced in its original “Lady Chapel”. Contents end up context-dependent.¹

Given the etymology of the word “artwork”, it is understandable why “art”, though less so “work”, is shorthand for artwork. The English word “art” is derived from the Latin *ars*, whose various meanings include character, method, science, knowledge, learned skill/craft/art or trick/wile.² *Ars* became “art” in Middle English, which is rather close in spirit to German’s *Kunst* and Dutch’s *kunst*, whose references to skill, craft, know-how and knowledge derive from its root verb *kunnen* (can). English’s “artwork” thus resembles both *Kunstwerk* and *kunstwerk* and work of art, the direct translation of the French *œuvre d’art*. In Martin Heidegger’s seminal essay, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, he introduced “das Werk” to describe its special relationships to the artist, such that each originates the other, whereby work reflects some shared knowledge.³ Hardly an issue unique to English, work’s peculiar role warrants its in-depth assessment.⁴

As this paper clarifies, “work” rather vividly captures the efforts of not only artists, but critics, historians and stakeholders who work tirelessly to ensure that myriad artworks “achieve work”,⁵ as Arthur Danto termed it. On his view, work is constitutive of artists’ intentions, even if artists tend to leave it up to “artworkers” to do *all* the work (in terms of “work”) to tease out their inten-

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¹ Note that I only recently arrived at the view that an artwork’s work takes the form of common knowledge and is comparatively steadfast, while contents tend to shift depending on the context.

² <https://www.etymonline.com/word/art> Accessed 12 April 2021.

³ Heidegger 2006: 1

⁴ Exemplary of Danto’s using artwork and work interchangeably, the German translator of Danto’s *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* writes “unser nachstes Werk is...”. Danto 1984: 17.

⁵ Danto 1984: 125.

⁶ Spaid 2018: 1

⁷ Danto 1984:

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tions.⁶ More basically, "work" is what is known about an "artwork" that guides curators, writers, and art lovers alike to know how to place it (historically, politically, socially, artistically, culturally), much like scores, scripts and texts facilitate performances of musical, theatrical and literary artworks. Artworkers include collectors, critics, dealers, scholars, witnesses and other artists, each of whom plays a particular role in forming, articulating and publicising each artwork's work. In cheering on artists such as Danto's fictional artist J, who carried the indiscernible red square "triumphantly across the boundary as if he had rescued something rare",⁷ artworkers prompt their publics to appreciate a surface painted red as a meaningful artwork.⁸ Witnesses register such heroic events as work.

The first few times an artwork is presented, its work is so fresh that it is still undergoing development. By contrast, when a more seasoned artwork is presented, its work remains relatively intact despite its varying contexts, unless some artworker-devised context throws its work into doubt. For example, John Elderfield's mini-exhibition that paired Matisse and Picasso at MoMA in 1992, launched three decades of exhibitions aimed to capture Matisse's influence on Picasso (and vice versa), which scholars now consider as important for these artists' oeuvre's development as their respective Fauvist and Cubist origins. As a result of these exhibitions, the work associated with exhibited artworks likely expanded and/or shifted.

The artworkers for whom "work" matters most work in concert with team members to stage artworks for a public, whose exhibitions and performances engender each artwork's presentational history. Spread across the globe, such teams remain decentralized, since most contributors remain unaware of others' efforts until work is *achieved* and thus publicly accessible. Being a shared, third-person account of an artwork's significance, work typically begins as a public discussion that inspires additional artworkers to generate articles, books, catalogues and reviews. My notion of work thus links Danto's focus on achieving work to Hannah Arendt's account of work, such that artists' *actions* yield artworks, whereas artworkers' work makes the artworld where artworks *perdure* as work. That we readily discuss artworks in their absence is exemplary of work's perdurance. As Arendt remarks:

The work of our hands, as distinguished from the labor of our bodies, fabricates the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice, the world we live in. They are not consumer goods but use-objects, and their proper use

⁶ Spaid 2018: 114.

⁷ Danto 1984: 3.

⁸ To be clear, the view advocated here emphasizes the public's reception over time in contrast to institutional theories of art, intentionalist views and identity theories, where interpretations do the work.

To assess work's various roles, I begin by reviewing Danto's use of work and content in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. I next offer an alternative approach for "achieving" work and show how this process accords with Alfred North Whitehead's distinguishing "eternal objects" from "actual entities". My noting that work reflects the efforts of myriad artworkers working in tandem across the globe enables me to better assess how work, as in effort and/or meaning, relates to and/or survives an artwork's varying contents.

I imagine some readers finding my introduction either confusing or counter-intuitive. Most readers will admit that the medium for artworks can be anything. By contrast, the medium for work, even when poised as imagery, is words since we use words to articulate each artwork's work. Danto drew an analogy between deriving an artwork's contents and reading a text, but to my lights any notion of *reading* an artwork must be metaphorical, unless he meant inferring contents based on each artwork's placement in a curated exhibition. Artworks are by definition the kinds of things that prompt interpretations, so the very notion of "reading artworks" is an oxymoron, unless of course Danto actually meant work. But even work is never "read" directly from the artwork. It rather arises as a result of presentational histories, and as I noted at this paper's onset, it is rarely the same as an artwork's contents.

In art, every new interpretation of a work remains, as the skies, only under an interpretation: $I(o)=W$. Then every work works. Now o may be different if the achievement is important.

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¹² Danto 1981: 12

¹³ For more information

In art, every new interpretation is a Copernican Revolution, in the sense that every new interpretation constitutes a new work, even if the object differently interpreted remains, as the skies, invariant under transformation. 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: $I(o)=W$. Then even if *o* is a perceptual constant, variations in *I* constitute different works. Now *o* may be looked at, but the work has to be *achieved* [emphasis mine], even if the achievement is immediate and without any conscious effort on the observer's part.¹²

As the aforementioned Coronation of the Virgin thought experiment shows, every new interpretation constitutes a new content, though not necessarily a new work. Moreover, Danto could not have been using work and artwork interchangeably, since new interpretations of extant artworks don't generate *new* artworks in the sense that "constitutes a new work" would mean that a second artwork is present. A new interpretation either modifies/expands an artwork's extant work or proposes temporary/potential contents, which suggests that Danto used work and contents interchangeably, though not work and artwork.

Consider the aforementioned fictional exhibition "Feminist Art through the Ages", organized by several curators to highlight historical artworks' surprising depictions of gender parity. One suddenly notices the way the above-mentioned painting *Coronation of the Virgin* captures Mary's parity with Jesus, positioned as they are on the same horizon. Gender parity thus offers one potential interpretation of paintings befitting the Coronation of the Virgin genre¹³ (and by extension, *all* art befitting this genre), yet gender parity was a nonexistent notion until the late 20th century. If such paintings manifest gender parity, it is because medieval Catholics revered Mary as Queen of Heaven, owing to her relationship to Jesus, whose title "King of the Jews" warranted honoring her as "Queen Mother". Unlike Danto's distinctly titled indistinguishable red squares, Coronation of the Virgin paintings are typically titled *Coronation of the Virgin*, despite their being visually distinguishable. Their identical titles indicate their genre, not some interpretation, so Coronation of the Virgin paintings could conceivably have distinct works, depending on their historical conditions, presentational histories and provenance. Knowing their genre enables us to recall details that boost our appreciation. Adding what we know about each painting's provenance helps us demarcate "work", which will most certainly exclude gender parity until scholars officially tie gender parity to this particular genre. Even *Coronation of the Virgin* (1324), which is owned by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and thought to be the first, exudes gender parity. If artworkers studied all of the paintings titled *Coronation of the Virgin*, organized more exhibitions like "Feminist Art through the Ages" and started writing

¹² Danto 1981: 125.

¹³ For more information regarding this genre check out: Salvador-González 2013.

about “gender parity” as if it’s not only a persuasive feature of these paintings’ work, but it’s a necessary interpretation for conceptualizing the Coronation of the Virgin genre, the work tied to artworks befitting this genre might actually shift. In *Curating as Ethics*, Jean-Paul Martinon recalls Martin Heidegger crediting work with maintaining strife, the tension between world and earth; what Martinon characterizes as skies (in the half-light) and earth (in the dark). In reconceiving Heidegger, he writes, “In setting up a [sky] and setting forth the earth, the work is an instigating of this strife. This does not happen so that the work should at the same time settle and put an end to the conflict in an insipid agreement, but so that the *strife* may remain a strife. Setting up a [sky] and setting forth the earth, the work accomplishes this strife”.¹⁴ Martinon continues:

Work does not necessarily mean an activity that involves mental or physical efforts to achieve a result. Work should be understood here in its broadest sense and not with an exclusive utilitarian aim in sight. Work is simply what in that center –which is not one, strictly speaking –produces a change, what turns earth into and against skies. This means both “what is in the works” and “what is not in the works” –the [wrench] that prevents the work being carried out, for example.¹⁵

When I first noticed the *Coronation of the Virgin* genre, I was especially struck by their feminist sensibility. Not only is Mary regal and strong (a far cry from her sorrowful manner à la pitiful *Pietàs*), but they are always lusciously painted, as if being commissioned to interpret this genre was considered a huge honor and privilege worthy of great attention and masterful skills. For example, the Titian fans hosting titian.net claim that Titian’s relatively unknown *Coronation of the Virgin* painting, which rather explicitly suggests gender parity, remains his greatest creation!¹⁶ For these reasons, “gender parity” poses a plausible interpretation. In the context of “Feminist Art through the Ages”, *Coronation of the Virgin* paintings definitely convey “gender parity” as one of their contents, though this could not have been its original “work”. Each time each one is exhibited anew, the curator employs an appropriate interpretation to position it within the exhibition, so an artwork’s contents are comparatively temporary, befitting its current show. Some consensus about acceptable contents expands work.

Curators must take care not to use artworks to illustrate their pet theories. Veteran curator and museum director Marcia Tucker noted that it’s imperative for curators to suspend their judgement, but she addressed how doing so leads

them to discover them”.¹⁷ She adds:

It takes a while to saying, to suspend judgement about art you’re looking at. I met my own terms, that I was approaching what the work’s terms meet them.¹⁸

Kevin Melchionne says “art insiders are unwittingly” because after with the works the reasons for some whatever contents

I wonder whether the Critical Monism Danto terms their that each artwork contexts. As already the work, ever so out helpful ways to paintings as exempl if one admits that admitted to seeing Danto remarks

“It should not be object to the traditional form of the work picks out”.²²

¹⁴ Martinon 2020: 56.

¹⁵ Martinon 2020: 56.

¹⁶ <http://www.titian.net/coronation-of-the-virgin/> Accessed 14 April 2021.

¹⁷ Spaid 2020: 192.

¹⁸ Tucker 2008: 2.

¹⁹ Melchionne 2001.

²⁰ Stecker 1997: 1.

²¹ Danto 1981: 72.

²² Danto 1981: 12.

of these paintings' the Coronation of the Virgin might actually be a Heidegger credit-card and earth; what happens (in the dark). In setting forth the conditions so that the conflict in an insipid way up a [sky] and set-artinon continues:

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is especially struck by (a far cry from consciously painted, earned a huge honor). For example, the known *Coronation of the Virgin* remains his visible interpretation of the Virgin's contents, though one is exhibited in position it within temporary, befitting expands work. their pet theories. that it's imperative now doing so leads

them to discover the "work's terms", which stretches "understanding to meet them".¹⁷ She adds:

It takes a while to get the hang of it, to learn to listen carefully to what an artist is saying, to suspend judgement, to avoid thinking about whether or not you can *use* the art you're looking at. When I first started going to studios, I was looking for work that met my own terms, even if I couldn't quite define them. But after a while, I realized that I was approaching the whole enterprise from the wrong end. I needed to find out what the work's terms were and then see if I could stretch my own understanding to meet them.¹⁸

Kevin Melchionne has noticed a related concern. "At times what art world insiders are unwittingly experiencing are the reasons rather than the works themselves" because after all "reasons have their own beauty, which is easily confused with the works themselves".¹⁹ In this context, I imagine Melchionne means the reasons for some particular artwork's inclusion in an exhibition, which reflects whatever contents the curator aims to highlight, not the work.

I wonder whether Danto's using contents and work interchangeably inspired the Critical Monist²⁰ view, such that artworks have only one meaning, what Danto terms their *internal* sense.²¹ I imagine that Critical Monists rather mean that each artwork has just one work, though many contents, given its varying contexts. As already noted, insightful exhibitions can shift meanings, and thus the work, ever so slightly, as critics, curators and scholars identify and test out helpful ways to interpret artworks. Once you see *Coronation of the Virgin* paintings as exemplary of gender parity, there's no going back I'm afraid, even if one admits that such an interpretation is totally prochronistic. Even if Danto admitted to seeing it too, his theory couldn't admit this interpretation.

Danto remarked that interpretations help us pick out the form of the work.

"It should not be automatic to assimilate the distinction between interpretation and object to the traditional distinction between content and form, but in a rough way the form of the work may be that gerrymandered portion of the object the interpretation picks out".²²

¹⁷ Spaid 2020: 193.

¹⁸ Tucker 2008: 2.

¹⁹ Melchionne 2011: 10.

²⁰ Stecker 1997: 134.

²¹ Danto 1981: 72.

²² Danto 1981: 125.

I have primarily experienced *Coronation of the Virgin* paintings as members of museum collections. Once I realized how much I appreciated this particular genre, I started seeking them out whenever I found myself in places that might house Gothic and/or Renaissance paintings. To quickly identify relevant candidates, I scan painting galleries with “gender parity” in mind.

Words and common knowledge

To my lights, “work” relays a particular artwork’s significance for art history, which is why I associate work with Whitehead’s notion of *eternal objects*.

Work reflects some description of its value, what Donald Davidson termed a “pro attitude”. Simply put, work describes those artistic efforts, ideas and influences that engender its relevance. In explaining the artwork’s significance, it is/does the *work* [emphasis mine]. As an artwork’s conceptualized counterpart, work reflects spectators’ assessment of its significance²³.

Another reason I link work to eternal objects is that the artwork can disappear, but the work remains, as was the case with Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) which existed *as work*, though not *as an actual artwork*, until 1950 when the New York dealer Sidney Janis purchased a urinal in a Paris flea market and requested Duchamp to sign it R. Mutt, so that he could display it in the exhibition “Challenge and Defy” on view at his gallery.

Exemplary of enduring memories, work outlives artworks that either vanish or are destroyed, enabling work to continue to influence art history²⁴ (and thus to instigate strife). Prior to *Fountain*’s reappearance, its work was formulated as follows: 1) In 1917, *Fountain* was considered too indecent an object to be exhibited in an exhibition supposedly open to every association members who paid the requisite fee, 2) its rejection caused a backlash, leading writer Louise Norton and gallerist Alfred Stieglitz to rally to its defense and 3) Duchamp acknowledged authorship by presenting both a 1917 photo of a urinal hanging in his studio and a miniature *Fountain* in his *Boîte-en-valise* (1936-1941). Hardly Duchamp’s first publicly exhibited “readymade”, *Fountain* received broad (and especially negative) attention early on, engendering its legendary status among the pantheon of artworks that have changed people’s ideas regarding what counts as art.

Duchamp built *Bicycle Wheel* (1913/1951) for a later Sidney Janis gallery exhibition “Climax in XXth Century Art, 1913” (1951). Having acquired it for their collection, artworkers Sidney and Harriet Janis could loan it at will.

²³ Spaid 2020: 15.

²⁴ Spaid 2020: 16.

Bicycle Wheel (1913/1951) primarily reflects art (should people influence on late process, innovation to formulate work. For David knowledge²⁵ such *x*”. For example, *Wheel* was Duchamp to 1918 likely in regarding “singular work that endures

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²⁵ Lewis 1969: 52-5

²⁶ Spaid 2020: 73.

²⁷ Duchamp 1973:

²⁸ Danto 1981: 3.

Bicycle Wheel (1913/1951) exemplifies the “readymade” genre, yet its work primarily reflects its originality as a precursor to both Dada and participatory art (should people be allowed to spin the wheel). In addition to describing its influence on later artworks, work sometimes reflects an artwork’s underlying process, innovative form or motivation (its movement or genre). Another way to formulate work is to consider it *common knowledge* about a particular artwork. For David Lewis, common knowledge takes the form of second-order knowledge²⁵ such that “every artworker knows that every artworker knows that *x*”. For example, every artworker knows that every artworker knows that *Bicycle Wheel* was Duchamp’s first readymade, whose presence in his studio from 1915 to 1918 likely inspired New York Dada. What Critical Monists have in mind regarding “singular interpretations” likely reflects “some combination of the work that endures and the convention that develops to explain its significance”.²⁶

And Duchamp would likely agree. In 1957, he delivered the paper “The Creative Act”, which articulates how work and world join forces: “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the *work* [emphasis mine] in contact with the external *world* [emphasis mine] by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act”.²⁷ Interpretation is team work and every stakeholder works hard to *achieve* work on the artist’s behalf. I next explain why Danto must have meant work, when he characterized the “contents” of the red squares exhibited in his fictional exhibition “Nine Red Squares” (1981).

Common knowledge and “Nine Red Squares”

Danto never specifies whether he considered “Nine Red Squares” a *fictional* group show (all but two things made by different artists), a *fictional* solo exhibition (each thing made by the same artist), or a list in his head for the purpose of philosophical musing. In order to distinguish contents from work, I treat “Nine Red Squares” as a group show (everything made by different artists except J’s untitled painting and his rescued lead slab). As briefly mentioned, Danto characterized “work” in terms of words and repeatedly attributed aboutness to work, though not artworks. In introducing this set of nine things, he remarked, “[A] title is more than a name; frequently it is a direction for interpretation or reading, which may not be helpful, especially when someone perversely gives the title *Annunciation* to a painting of some apples”.²⁸ Given this remark, his giving

²⁵ Lewis 1969: 52-57.

²⁶ Spaid 2020: 73.

²⁷ Duchamp 1973: 140.

²⁸ Danto 1981: 3.

syntactically identical “nine red squares” distinct meanings is no less perverse, especially since two paintings titled *Red Square* anticipate hurdles. Even so, he had little qualms generating semantically different interpretations for nine red squares from either painting titles or artistic moves, which for him inform “the work”. The titling of artworks and/or making strategic moves enhance(s) work’s perdurance, which bolsters my claim that in formulating the work artworkers make the artworld, even if the main impetus for formulating the work is to grasp the artwork at hand.²⁹

In the context of Danto’s fictional exhibition “Nine Red Squares”, we would ordinarily infer identical contents from nine indiscernible objects, unless of course our common knowledge of each red square’s work dissuaded us from doing so.³⁰ Prior knowledge of at least one object’s work might be sufficient to tip people off that each has a distinct work, but we would still need to do extra work to discern the other squares’ works (work is rarely readable from exhibitions). That Danto readily differentiates the “contents” of otherwise identical objects indicates that he rather means “work”, which artworkers have been finessing ever since each red square’s first public presentation. I feel certain of this for several reasons. It generally takes a lot of evidence to persuade people to see familiar artworks in a new light, so work typically overrides contents gleaned from novel contexts. Imagine how much effort it will take for people to start seeing *Coronation of the Virgin* paintings as exemplary of gender parity. Titles alone are insufficient to convey nonidentity, especially since artists don’t necessarily title their own artworks. Like proper names, titles are rather empty singular terms that particularize objects, and thus lack meaning. Moreover, the Association of American Museums credits audiences with reading only 7% of available didactic material, so titles are insufficient for specifying work.

Danto clearly has ready access to some widely shared, third-person account that is known to artworkers, whose “job is to pool [their] resources to glean [the] best meaning, not to impose a framework that trains its meaning”.³¹ Although Danto implies that his knowledge of each red square’s significance is due to his special talent at reading artworks, we rather owe our familiarity with an artwork’s work to artworkers’ ceaseless efforts to get the work out there. Note: no one ever says “get your artwork out there”.

²⁹ An artwork is always prior to its work.

³⁰ Stephen Prina’s solo exhibition “Monochrome Painting” (1989) at the Renaissance Society, Chicago, US featured a “dozen green rectangles”. Knowing that their scales reference the actual proportions of monochromes by Malevich, Reinhardt, Richter and Ryman distinguishes these paintings by work, though not content. Similarly, the work of each of Danto’s “Nine Red Squares” distinguishes.

³¹ Spaid 2018:123.

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³² Spaid 202 5.3 “Events”. I

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³⁶ Spaid 20

Whitehead considered events *actual entities*, which means they are causally-determined and make things happen, twin conditions that are particular of artworks currently on public view.³² Whitehead termed the way actual entities can be rejected or excluded negative prehension. Generally speaking, an event is a "group of such incidents, a multiplicity of becomings: what Whitehead calls a *nexus*, ...a mathematical set of occasions [singular events], contiguous in space or time, or otherwise adhering to one another".³³ Steven Shaviro juxtaposes Whitehead's notions of actual entities (artworks *qua* events) and eternal objects (what I term work) to describe how particular artworks end up becoming objects of care, which he calls the process of actualization. "The process of actualization follows a trajectory from the mere, disinterested (aesthetic) "envisagement" of eternal objects to a pragmatic interest in some of these objects and their incorporation within "stubborn fact which cannot be evaded".³⁴

Shaviro notes that such becomings mark a "radical break with whatever was there before. For its part, continuity always has to *become*, precisely because it is never given in advance. [...] [A]n object can only endure insofar as it renews itself, or creates itself afresh, over and over again".³⁵ Temporary exhibitions, created by teams of artworkers, test work's perdurance, since such experiences reflect new interpretations that invite artworks to be seen afresh. Every time a curator pulls an artwork out of storage to reconsider its relevance for a new age, its meaning stands to become enriched. Danto warns us that this risks to become the next Copernican Revolution, but this is only possible if novel interpretations inform work, and work remains strife. Persuading artworkers of their outré views not only requires an immense amount of work, but it tends to destabilize the artworld. Consider the roar should "gender parity" become the *Coronation of the Virgin* genre's identifying feature.

The very act of seeing an aspect anew grants one access to previously inaccessible references that are obviously *in the world*, though not yet in the work, unless one can prove salience.³⁶ For example, the curators who include *Nirvana* (1981), which Danto exhibited in "Nine Red Squares", in "Elated, Exalted and Ascendant Spiritual Painting from the Eighties" defend its inclusion by pointing out features that lend credence to their view that this painting inspires

³² Spaid 2020. For more information regarding the way artworks set events in motion, see Section 5.3 "Events". I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out related notions in Literary Theory.

³³ Shaviro 2009: 17.

³⁴ Shaviro 2009: 37.

³⁵ Shaviro 2009: 19.

³⁶ Spaid 2020: 177.

feelings of elation and exultance. This notably contradicts Danto's claim that *Nirvana* refers to "Red Dust", since "it is a metaphysical painting based on the artist's knowledge that the Nirvanic and Samsara orders are identical and that the Samsara world is fondly called Red Dust by its deprecators".³⁷ Even if this Samsara/Red Dust story *caused* the artist to paint *Nirvana*, this point proves irrelevant for the curators' purpose. One can easily imagine *Nirvana* one day achieving its art historical significance (work) from an exhibition context that stresses ascendance, leaving the artist's intention to elude the public.³⁸ One final question remains: Which has the final word, the work each artwork achieves or its temporary contents?

Actual entities and contents

At this paper's onset, I noted that work and contents are most closely aligned when artworks are presented in their original contexts, such as the fictional 15th century *Coronation of the Virgin* on view in its original Lady Chapel, as compared to later exhibitions elsewhere. Franz Meyer, the former director of both Kunsthalle Bern and Kunstmuseum Basel, made a similar point. He remarked: "If the context of an artwork's presentation has always mattered, the second part of the 20th century has shown that artworks are so systematically associated with their *first exhibition* [emphasis mine] that a lack of documentation of the latter puts the artists' original intentions at risk of being misunderstood".³⁹

Quite remarkably, the very process of becoming an actual entity, such that a museum treasures an artwork as an "object of care", almost always requires clipping the exhibited artwork from its original context. An exhibited artwork's current contents, as demonstrated by the slew of "Matisse & Picasso" exhibitions (1992-2020), risk overshadowing whatever work it once achieved. With so many persuasive exhibitions, the recent emphasis on their artistic friendship could override individual artworks' respective significance for Fauvism and Cubism. If the curator isn't careful, an artwork's novel contents could *defeat* work by eclipsing whatever common knowledge once ensured its perdurance as an "eternal object", which may be why Danto termed it a Copernican Revolution. In most cases, however, artworkers consider such contents temporary, mere prospecting on the curator's part not a conviction.

My effort to distinguish artworks (works of art) as exhibitable things from contents and work whose mediums are words helps to clarify several related points. Such distinctions cohere with Danto's view that aboutness addresses

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³⁷ Danto 1981: 1.

³⁸ Spaid 2020: 182.

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⁴⁰ Martinon 2020

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work, the Critical Monists' insistence that artworks have many interpretations though only one meaning and work's epistemic advantage concerns common knowledge regarding an artwork. Although it may seem that contents are flexible, whereas work is effectively unchanging, I view work as rather evolving, as scholarship grows. Either the common knowledge associated with work expands to accommodate complementary contents, such as gender parity in connection to Coronation of the Virgin paintings; or new contents alter our knowledge, leaving extant work forever modified. Such changes to work, however slight, reflect an artworld consensus. No one artworker's views prevail. Despite art historian Clement Greenberg's myriad efforts to frame modern art as progressively flatter and immediately graspable, flatness and immediacy are hardly 50's era paintings' defining features, even though he considered them *necessary* aspects. A Rothko is neither immediate nor flat!

These distinctions also help us to judge whether some interpretations are better than others. Artworkers tend to gravitate towards and eventually endorse those alternative contents that enhance their understanding of an artwork's import and ignore those deemed distracting, far-fetched, irrelevant or fleeting. As new contents gain currency, artworkers adapt an artwork's work to accommodate useful interpretations supported by evidence. As Melchionne warns, spectators sometimes confuse reasons (contents alighted by the exhibition) with the work (art historical justification), giving greater weight to the artwork's contents. This emphasis on contents may even steer artworkers in the wrong direction, which is why interpretations that stick tend to be supported by solid evidence. Louise Norton exalted *Fountain* as the "Buddha of the Bathroom", an interpretation that is common knowledge, yet its work excludes this fascinating analogy, even if that image is what prompted legions of artworkers to become the very stakeholders who fought for *Fountain's* right to exist. *Fountain's* work made its reappearance possible, giving artworkers something to discuss, since the actual entity was long gone. This is yet again another example of work engendering change, as it "turns earth into and against skies". ⁴⁰

In this era of "Big Art", collectors wielding the "art-as-bullion" approach store invaluable artworks in "freeports" (tax-free storage vaults). Not only does this take artworks out of circulation, but their literal removal from the artworld means that recently created things lack work. Treated more like investments than artworks, they accrue capital on the backs of sales of that artist's other artworks, but they are neither discussed nor exhibited, since such holdings are huge secrets. The tax burden for removing them from storage is so high that it's unlikely that their owners would consider sharing them with the public. As a result, nothing "happens" and no one knows what "caused them", so they are not actual entities. It's fair to say that such things are no longer art, since the event of art is on

⁴⁰ Martinon 2020: 56.

hold. Exemplary of the public's role in formulating work, several collectors have created private museums where spectators experience their collections firsthand as actual entities, whose secret power is making things happen.

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Andrea Baldini
ARTISTS AS WORKERS
IN A POST-PANDEMIC

Abstract

Artists have been on the frontlines of the economic crisis, facing freelancing and self-employment as the main reasons of their work exceptionalism. It finds its core in the making of art and show its limits and neglected relations (or should be regarded as such). There is much to be learned from this. I call this view *artwork exceptionalism*, a desire to recognize the economic strengthened public

1. Introduction

A recently released report of December 2020 shows a 20 percent from on the decline is in an industry that suffered so much from the world-leading

¹ <https://www.osce.org/data-research/recent-trends-and-issues>