"This is not Art" — Should we go Revisionist about Works of Art?

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ABSTRACT. To propose a revisionist ontology of art one has to hold that our everyday intuitions about the identity and persistence conditions of various kinds of artworks can be massively mistaken. In my presentation I defend this view: our everyday intuitions about the nature of art can be (and sometimes *are*) mistaken. First I reconstruct an influential argument of Amie L. Thomasson (2004; 2005; 2006; 2007a; 2007b) against the fallibility of our intuitive judgments about the identity and persistence conditions of various kinds of artworks. Second, I present three objections to this account: two of them concern the semantic and pragmatic rules regulating the use of art-kind terms, while the third one is based on the assumption that the history of art partly comprises a series of successful attempts of transgression of artistic conventions and expectations, therefore our artistic intuitions are dynamic. Taking this point I finally argue that in philosophy of art we need a "reverse" methodology: first we have to provide a general definition, containing all the sufficient and necessary conditions of artworks ("being an artwork") *in any period* within the history of art. Only after completing this task are we ready to answer the metaphysical question about the ontological status of works of art.

1. Introduction: Metaphysical Background

To propose a revisionist ontology of art—for example, by claiming that Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* is an action-type which can survive the burning of any canvas—one has to hold that our everyday intuitions about the identity and persistence conditions of various kinds of artworks can be massively mistaken. What does this mean?

Ontologists usually attempt to answer two questions which, although related, are nevertheless different. The first one concerns the real constituents of the world:

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(I) What is there?

Or, in plain prose: *What are those things in our world which can rightly be said to be genuine elements in the objective structure of the universe?* (Of course "thing" and "world" are used here philosophically neutrally and in the broadest sense possible.) To be or not to be is a matter of theoretical categorization: to be assumed as a thing is to be subsumed under one of the categories in our coherent ontological theory.[1] While enumerating real constituents of the world, the ontologist has two ways of pairing things familiar from everyday life (or from scientific theories) with ontological categories. Either she takes the existence of familiar entities (chairs, pebbles, persons, works of art etc.) for granted and assigns to them a category (or a combination of categories) or she takes the categories (and the possible combinations of categories) for granted and tells us which familiar objects should be subsumed under them. To take an example: if our ontology consists of, say, particulars and (Platonic) universals, the question of chairs (as one of the paradigmatic cases of ordinary physical objects) should be raised in this form: is there any category or combination of categories in the theory that we can appeal to in accounting for the existence of chairs (answer: yes, every chair is a particular [object] instantiating the form of chairness). Whenever a familiar entity cannot be linked to any ontological category, we should say that there is no such entity in the world; it simply does not exist.

Revisionism in ontology is often interpreted by making reference to our "natural", pre-philosophical conceptual scheme. To propose a *revisionist* (or revisionary) *ontology of X*, where *X* can be replaced by an expression functioning as a name of some everyday type of entities (e.g. types of ordinary objects, including artworks), is to maintain that—contrary to what we might think in normal circumstances—*X*s in fact do not exist.

The second question posed by ontologists concerns the nature of existing things:

(II) What is the nature of existing things?

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[1] Put it in Quinean terms: to be is to be the value of a bound variable in a first-order theory, the predicates (viz. the only non-logical vocabulary) of which can be interpreted as ontological categories.

Or again, in plain prose: *What are the identity and persistence conditions of those entities that are considered to be genuine elements in the objective structure of the universe?* The identity and persistence conditions for a thing determine what kind of changes the given thing can undergo without ceasing to be that particular (type of) thing. For example, if our metaphysical theory of chairs defines an equivalence relation between elements with respect to which they belong to the set of chairs by appealing, at least partly, to functional concepts (e.g., a chair is a physical object consisting of a seat, legs, back, and often arms, designed to accommodate one person), then a physical object which, due to any change, is unable to fulfill this function, is not a chair anymore. (Of course, a chair cannot survive its physical destruction either. That is why we emphasized that the equivalence relation in question is only *partly* defined by functional concepts.)

If someone proposes a revisionary ontology in the second sense, she must claim that our intuitive judgments about the identity and persistence of things are incorrect. In everyday life we are inclined to think that a particular novel cannot survive the destruction of all its physical tokens and the memories thereof (despite Professor Woland's memorable words in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*: "manuscripts don't burn"). However, a revisionist metaphysician working with a Platonic ontology will most probably claim that we are in deep error: in genuine reality novels are eternal forms that need not be spatiotemporally instantiated. If she wants to convince her philosophically uninitiated audience, the best she can do is to suggest an "error theory", which explains why our intuitive judgments are mistaken. For instance, she might argue that the reason why we systematically confuse genuine beings with their particular instances is that in everyday life we use our senses, not our intellect to grasp the existence of things. (One might deny that this line of argument can even *in principle* be appropriate for convincing anybody who is not well-equipped with sophisticated philosophical tools. But this objection is of no importance here. Nothing hinges on the particular details of the error theory offered by the revisionist metaphysician; the crucial point is that she bears the burden of providing some explanation for the systematic error in our intuitive judgments. This is a stringent demand—not always met by revisionist ontologists.)

In sum: while the first question (*What is there?*) aims at understanding

by what ontological categories we can theoretically "segment" reality, the second question (*What is the nature of existing things?*) concerns the identity and persistence conditions of those "segments". Naturally, identity and persistence conditions on the one hand and ontological categories on the other hand are two sides of the same coin: identity and persistence conditions are derivable from the corresponding ontological category, and categories should be individuated by these conditions. Nevertheless, the answers to these metaphysical issues perform slightly different explanatory tasks in a full-fledged ontological theory: enumerating existing things type-by-type only *implicitly* entails that we specify the nature of the things belonging to these types, and *vice versa*.

In what follows I will reconstruct an argument against the very possibility of a viable revisionary theory of art. Many of the current metaphysical debates about ontology of art are devoted to answering the second question: What is the real nature of artworks? This question is very often formulated in terms of their "ontological status", whilst there is no universally accepted definition of ontological status among philosophers. Roughly, there are two ways of interpreting a question like "What is the ontological status of paintings?". Either it means "To what ontological category do paintings belong, hence what *type* of identity and persistence conditions do paintings have?", or it means "What are the *particular* identity and persistence conditions for paintings?" These are not the same questions. We can easily imagine two philosophers of art who fully agree that paintings are, say, abstract entities (Platonic universals, propositions, action-types etc.), but embrace completely different theories about the equivalence relation defining the set of paintings. Paintings *as paintings* can be equivalent to each other with respect to intrinsic/qualitative properties (Kivy, Stephen Davies), extrinsic properties (Walton, Levinson, Dickie) and even normative ones (Wolterstorff)—depending on what kind of theory we happen to accept. If we are only interested in what type of beings paintings (or works of art) are, then we do not need an elaborate theory providing the *differentia specifica* for paintings (or works of art) to discern them from other things which also belong to the same ontological category. However, insofar as our account is elaborate enough to provide some property (or cluster of properties) as *differentia specifica* for artworks, we have an explicit definition for "being an artwork".

2. An Argument against Revisionism in Art Theory

Now let's see an argument by Amie L. Thomasson (2004; 2005; 2006; 2007a; 2007b) concerning the possibility of providing a revisionary ontological theory of art. (This will be my reconstruction, but I think Thomasson would accept my formulation. At least I hope so.)

1. If someone proposes a revisionary ontology of art (or of an art kind), she must hold that our everyday intuitions about the identity and persistence conditions of various kinds of artworks can be massively mistaken.[2]

2. Whenever an intuition or an intuitive judgment is mistaken, the sentence expressing the intuitive judgment is false.

3. Sentences expressing our intuitive judgments can be false if and only if competent speakers of language L are able to use singular expressions and sortal terms in L in an intuition-*neutral* way. (Otherwise they will be analytically or quasi-analytically true.)

4. Competent speakers of L are not able to use singular expressions and sortal terms in an intuition-neutral way, because [CC] singular expressions and sortal terms refer by means of conceptual content associated with the terms by competent speakers of L, and [OS] the conceptual content associated with the terms incorporates intuitive judgments of competent speakers of L about the ontological status of the referred thing or kind.

5. Therefore, sentences expressing our intuitive judgments cannot be false.

6. Therefore, our intuitive judgments cannot be mistaken.

7. Therefore (from 1. and 6.), revisionary ontologies of art are non-starters.

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[2] Instead of "intuitive judgments about the identity and persistence of artworks" below I use "intuitive judgments" for shorthand.

Thomasson's argument is formally valid: the truth of the conclusion is entailed by *modus tollens* from the succession of conditional (and bi-conditional) statements. What is at stake is the viability of the premises.

The innocence of the first premise is beyond doubt: it is true due to the (stipulative) definition of revisionary ontology. The second premise may be supported by a principle claiming that the truth of any propositional content p does not depend on the bearer of the content; if p, the propositional content of a mental state is true, then p must also be true if it is the propositional content of a sentence. (Granted that it does not contain indexical elements the interpretation of which is determined by the actual bearer of the content or it is not self-referring in a way that fixes the connection between the bearer and the content.) Thus the onus is on the third and fourth premises.

Thomasson makes three theoretical moves in order to support the third and the fourth premise. The first one concerns how expressions get their reference in natural languages; the second consists of acknowledging the supposed theoretical consequences of the so-called *qua* problem; the third one draws a philosophically important distinction between natural kinds (natural kind terms) and artifactual kinds (artifact-kind terms).

Reference for singular terms and sortals. Setting aside the details and taking the question in its most abstract form, there are two models of how natural languages carry out reference to objects. A (singular or sortal) term picks out its reference in the world either by means of some *conceptual content* associated with it by the speaker and the audience (or by the properly weighted majority of the members of the speech community), or there is an *established connection* between expressions and referents which guarantees the attainment of reference without any conceptual transmission. The best candidate for this role of grounding the reference of linguistic items may be some (at least partly) *causal relation* obtaining between the referent and the expression.

According to the first model (hereafter dubbed the Conceptual Model), whenever linguistic expressions refer, they refer to those (type of) things in the world which uniquely satisfy the requirements specified in the conceptual content. According to the second model (hereafter dubbed the Causal Model), by contrast, whenever the appropriate (causal) relation ob-

tains, linguistic expressions *do* refer—irrespective of what properties the referents actually have (or thought to have by the language users).

There are many arguments for and against each model and about the range of applications of them in describing natural languages. (E.g. whether the second model fits well with proper names, as claimed by the proponents of direct reference theory, but has serious difficulties whenever we try to extend the theory to artifact-kind terms. And so on.) But what is important here is the general structure of interpreting metaphysical debates in the frame of these models.

Thomasson seemingly accepts that ontological disagreements can be settled in entirely different ways depending on the nature of reference in the language used by debate participants. If sortal terms are "mere tags" (denoting all members of the kind solely in virtue of there being a causal relation between the first, "introductory" use of the term and a sample of the kind), then we have a genuine opportunity for substantial metaphysical debates about the true nature of a given kind, *while both parties are using the same terms.* According to Thomasson (2005, p. 221), the "discovery view of knowledge" is based on the assumption that

> the world contains a broad range of fully determinate, mind-independent facts about which everyone may be ignorant or in error, but (some of) which the scientists seek to discover by substantive empirical investigations. Thus, one acquires knowledge about, say, the biological nature of whales by ostensively applying the term 'whale' to *this kind of thing* and undertaking substantive empirical investigations about them (their internal structure, genetics, etc.) in order to discover the real truth about whales' biological nature, which may overturn our common-sense views about them.

The picture lurking behind the theory is roughly the following: human beings first "tag" segments of reality by newly introduced linguistic expressions, and then try to discover the nature of the segments tagged—expressions are perfect means to secure the common ground for alternative scientific and metaphysical views.

Proponents of the Conceptual Model would describe the situation in a radically different way. Let K be an arbitrary kind term, and $p_1...p_n$ the properties that jointly constitute the conceptual content associated with

K. Whatever is the real nature of members of *K*, it is beyond dispute that all of them have p_I—if the term refers at all, it must refer to something which is p_I. Consequently, we can have genuine debates only about such properties and features that are *not* determined by the conceptual content associated with the term. (The chemical structure of water might provide adequate illustration. It is reasonable to suppose that in natural languages the conceptual content associated with names of natural kinds contains only observational, perceptual properties. However, one can argue that this piece of knowledge concerning the structure of H_2O molecules—due to scientific education—has already been built into the conceptual content associated with "water" in the last fifty years.) As far as metaphysical debates are concerned, everything hinges on which properties we take to be constitutive to the conceptual content associated by the term. If these properties actually fix the ontological status of the things/kinds in question, revisionary proposals are nonstarters or at best should be understood as advices of some reform in language use (or proposals for "revisions to our somewhat messy conceptual scheme" [Thomasson, 2007a, p. 200]).

The qua *problem.* Thomasson (2004; 2005; 2007a) argues that as far as singular expressions and sortal terms are concerned we should embrace a hybrid descriptive/causal theory of reference. Her main motivation in taking this move—i.e. proposing a hybrid account of reference according to which meanings of terms are determined partly by the concepts of competent speakers—is to avoid the so-called *qua* problem (Devitt–Sterelny, 1999). The *qua* problem immediately arises when a new term is introduced: on such occasions, the reference of a new singular/general term is radically indeterminate. E.g., is the speaker tagging the demonstrated shape (of which there are several instances) or the specific object in front of her? To adequately determine the reference of an expression, Thomasson and others argue, grounders—those who introduce the new term with a specific reference—need a disambiguating concept specifying the kind of thing (or sort of kind) to be picked out by the term to be introduced.

What is more, this disambiguating concept is doing full-blooded metaphysical work indeed: specifying the kind of thing (or sort of kind) to be picked out by the term is in fact fixing the ontological category which the thing belongs to, thus implicitly laying down the identity and persistence

conditions, which makes it *that very kind* of thing.[3] So we have good reasons to accept [CC] and [OS] in premise 4. But we need one more step to fully assess the perspectives of revisionary metaphysics of art.

Names for artifact-kinds. According to Thomasson, there is an interesting asymmetry between natural kind terms and artifact-kind terms (such as „novel", „painting", „symphony"). As she (2007b, p. 65) puts it:

> Accepting a hybrid view of reference may still leave much of the spirit of the above view [the view that general terms may refer directly to genuine kinds in the world with natural boundaries, so that the term's extension is determined by the nature of the kind, independently of all human beliefs and concepts] intact, for it does not impugn the idea that general terms may pick out their referents independently of any human concepts about the particular nature (though not the category) of the kind involved.

Artifacts *as artifacts* are made with some specific intention on their creator's part ("creation" here involves intentional use of the object without altering its found features)—and "the relevant sort of intention to make a thing of artifactual kind K must involve a substantive (and substantively correct) concept of what a K is, including an understanding of what sorts of properties are K-relevant" (Thomasson, 2007b, p. 59). Therefore first creators of artifacts—some of them can be considered as grounders of artifact-kind terms and all of them as grounders of proper names for particular artifacts—are epistemically privileged as far as the nature of artifactual kinds is concerned. It cannot turn out that *Mona Lisa* would survive through complete destruction of its canvas, simply because *Mona Lisa* is a painting, and the grounders of "painting" decided to use this term to such things that cannot survive their physical destruction (and Leonardo da Vinci's creative intentions were in accordance with his predecessors').[4]

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[3] The thing's ontological category is already fixed, independent of the grounders. What is being fixed is that the term in question picks out *that thing of that ontological category.*

[4] Julian Dodd (2012) proposes an alternative account based on Gareth Evans' theory of reference according to which we are not forced to take this third move.

Before I present my objections to Thomasson's account in part 3, I would like to offer a few remarks aimed at clarification. First, the afore-mentioned ontological disambiguation should not be considered as achie-ved "by a philosophical and explicit decision on the part of grounders about what their term will refer to, but rather by appeal to background prac-tices already in place that co-evolve with the use of the art-kind term" (Thomasson, 2005, p. 225). Therefore doing (non-revisionary) philosophy of art does not simply mean providing some sort of conceptual analysis carried out in the philosopher's armchair; she must investigate current practices of art as well.[5] Second, Thomasson (2006, p. 250) openly de-clares that "artwork" or "work of art" is not a category-specifying term (like "thing", "object" or "entity"), because it does not "come associated with the criteria of identity that are needed to disambiguate the cate-gory of entity to be referred to". However, she thinks that conventional names for particular art-kinds—such as "sculpture", "painting", "collage"—are category-specifying terms, so we could give precise answers to the question of the ontological status of (the members of) these kinds by an-alyzing their proper use of the terms and investigating the related artis-tic practices. (As far as Thomasson's own metaphysical position is con-cerned, she claims that some types/kinds of artworks are abstract artifacts [Thomasson, 2004].) Third, while in *Ordinary objects* Thomasson explic-itly identifies associated conceptual content ("what is in the head") with the meaning of the term in question and claims that "basic identity and ex-istence conditions are fixed analytically in fixing reference" (Thomasson, 2007a, p. 63), proponents of the Conceptual Model need not hold that the associated conceptual content should be taken as a part of (or should be identified with) the meaning of the singular or sortal term. The crucial point is that—in the case of artifact terms—the conceptual content that

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[5] Thomasson (2006, p. 249) illustrates her point with the following examples: "That is, we help establish what ontological sort of thing we are referring to by, e.g. considering works to be observable under some conditions but not others (as, e.g., a painting may be seen this month at the museum, a performance of a musical work may be heard tonight only, while the work itself may be heard in any of three major cities any night this month); or by treating works as destroyed (or not destroyed) in various circumstances (e.g. a fire may destroy a painting but not a symphony); or by way of what we consider to be saleable and moveable (e.g. whether we treat the work itself, or only rights to it or copies of it to be capable of being bought and sold), and so on."

was used to fix the reference at the first, "introductory" use is somehow *present* in the subsequent uses of the term as well. So statements expressing the identity and persistence conditions of an artwork *as a particular type of artwork* are true only by virtue of the structure of our conceptual schemes.

3. Fallibility of Artistic Intuitions and the Task of Philosophy of Art

In what follows I will outline three objections to Thomasson's argument against the fallibility of our intuitive judgments about the identity and persistence conditions of various kinds of artworks. The first and the second concern the (semantic and pragmatic) rules regulating the use of art-kind terms, while the third one is based on the role of intuitions in philosophy of art.

First Objection. Thomasson's account offers us a somewhat strange philosophical "package deal": we can buy the possibility of genuine metaphysical debates (proposing revisionary theories of art by using the same vocabulary as in everyday life) only if we purchase the (Purely) Causal Model in addition. She claims that the fallibility of our intuitive judgments about artifacts stands or falls on the possibility of using artifact-kind terms as "mere tags"—but this inference is too quick. Irrespective of whether sortal terms refer directly or rather via some kind of associated conceptual content (which establishes the reference of terms), in everyday situations competent speakers *are* able to cancel or withdraw conceptual contents which are pragmatically or semantically connected to linguistic items. Therefore, the friend of everyday intuitions and the revisionist philosopher can in principle have common grounds for debating the ontological status of *one and the same thing*.

    (Imagine a revisionary philosopher saying the following to the friend of intuitions: "Yesterday I saw *Mona Lisa* hanging on the wall in one of my friend's apartment. I mean, I saw a painting that you would think of as a forgery of the *Mona Lisa*. But look, in my theory paintings are individuated by intrinsic aesthetic properties, so every perceptual duplicate of

Mona Lisa is also the *Mona Lisa*. If you are interested in this topic, next time I will tell you what's the problem with your naïve conception of artworks.")[6]

Second Objection. There is a common mistake lurking behind this inference and Thomasson's analysis of the *qua* problem: namely, ignorance about the communicative aspects of language use. Once we realize that so-called grounding situations ("initial baptism" by a singular term or a sortal) are real communicative situations, the *qua* problem evaporates. In real communicative situations, there are many ways in which "what is in the head" can contribute to specifying the information that the competent speaker intends to convey: relying on semantically encoded linguistic meaning is only one of them. Perhaps it may be true that "external context alone is inadequate to determine what our terms refer to" (Thomasson, 2006, p. 248), calling for either *contextual presuppositions* (which are activated only in some types of conversational environment), or *encyclopedic knowledge* (which constitutes the cognitive background of our utterances in everyday situations) that can enter into the process of reference-fixing. These two aspects cannot, however, be assumed to remain constant for all subsequent uses: we have no reason to assume that contextual presuppositions varying with conversational environments and encyclopedic knowledge permanently overridden and updated by new information about the (physical and social) world can regulate every subsequent use of the term in question. Fixing the reference by the first, "introductory" use is not a matter of invariant factors that are somehow present in the whole "life" of the term.

In sum: in order to account for the terms' first, "introductory" use by appealing to "what is in the head", we do not need to posit some kind of structured propositional content which determines—in a direct way (being part of the meaning) or indirect way (being part of the current practices of treating and using the referents)— every subsequent use of the terms.

Third Objection. Finally, there is a further problem with Thomasson's account. [OS] suggests that our ontological intuitions are *static*—a suspicious

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[6] Cf. Bács–Tőzsér (2013).

claim when it comes to the metaphysics of art. The history of art partly comprises a series of successful attempts to transgress artistic conventions and expectations. Once we realize this subversive character of art, our intuitive judgments about the identity and persistence conditions of artworks become *dynamic*: we have no reason to assume that future artworks will have the same nature (ontological status) as the now-familiar ones. (Of course this is not necessarily so: a member of some art community may be reluctant to appreciate new forms of art. Perhaps certain revisionary proposals were motivated by this reluctance.)[7]

Accordingly, everyday intuitions cannot be used the same way as elsewhere in philosophy: they cannot serve as a basis for a "timeless", robust (but perhaps inconsistent) folk ontology. Given the essentially subversive character of art, any account is highly implausible if it is based on the assumption that the basic identity and persistence conditions of an art kind (e.g. painting, symphony, novel, etc.) are fixed quasi-analytically by the first, "introductory" use.

I find that from this last point we can also draw a more general moral: in philosophy of art we need a "reverse" methodology. First we have to provide the general definition of an artwork containing all the sufficient and necessary conditions of artworks ("being an artwork") *in any period* within the history of art. (A Danto-style definition, which grasps the common nature of artworks by some representational property, would be a potential candidate—if providing such a definition is indeed possible)[8] Once this is done, we are ready to answer the question: "To which ontological category must an artwork belong in order to fulfill the identity and persistence conditions determined by the definition of art?" Our answer will be essentially revisionist in nature: any intuition that is based on some *restricted* (and partly normative) concept of art can, in principle, be mistaken. In sum: in the philosophy of art, providing a revisionist ontology of art is not

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[7] Thomasson (2006, p. 251), interestingly enough, considers this kind of subversivity— but she allows for such variations appearing in different cultures, only in the case of the general term „artwork". However, an artwork cannot be subversive as an *artwork* without being subversive as a *special kind of artwork*. Therefore if Thomasson claims that „artwork" is not a category-specifying term, on what grounds does she maintain that artifact-kind names are?

[8] Cf. Danto (1981).

simply one of several possible roads: it's the only road to travel.[9]

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