

Perception, Context, and Categories of Art

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ABSTRACT. According to Kendall Walton, the correct perception of a work lies in perceiving it within the right “perceptually distinguishable categories” (PDCs), which are defined as categories the membership of which is determined solely by works’ perceptual properties. The correct PDC of a work, however, is determined by its historical context. Contextualists, who argue that a work’s aesthetic properties depend on its historical context, have proposed two challenges to Walton: PDCs fail to accommodate both an important feature of art—its artifactuality—and the aesthetic difference between forgeries and originals. Walton maintains that these challenges can be addressed without abandoning the concept of PDCs. My aim is to show that his replies fail, and that he need not restrict his account to PDCs. Only by accepting the contextualist view—recognizing the essential role of a work’s historical context—can we categorize and perceive a work correctly.

1. Introduction

In his 1970 paper “Categories of Art,” Kendall Walton attempts to incorporate two views that appear incompatible at first glance: *aesthetic formalism* and *ontological contextualism* (formalism and contextualism henceforth). The former, as represented by Monroe C. Beardsley (1981), holds that an artwork’s aesthetic properties depend solely on its nonaesthetic ones, and that perception is the only way to judge an artwork. The latter, by contrast, adds historical context as a co-determiner. Walton sides with the formalist in insisting that perception is the only way to judge a work. Yet he also argues that, to determine a work’s aesthetic properties, one must

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perceive it within its correct category—understood as, for example, media, genre, styles, forms, and so forth—that is perceptually distinguishable. Which category is correct, however, is determined by a work’s historical context, with authorial intention being the most important factor.

Contextualists have recently raised two objections to Walton’s thesis. First, the construal of PDCs—categories whose membership depends solely on a work’s perceptual properties—fails to accommodate the artifactuality of art: we perceive an artwork as an artifact that issues from an artist’s agency, yet PDCs cannot lead us to perceive a work as such. Second, contextualists contend that forgeries differ aesthetically from original works, even when they are perceptually indistinguishable, but Walton’s account has trouble accommodating the difference.

Walton (2020) offers three responses to these challenges. In this paper, I argue that his responses fail because of his adherence to PDCs. However, I do not entirely reject Walton’s account. I aim to show that he need not restrict himself to PDCs, since some non-PDCs are also aesthetically relevant, provided that this does not violate an assumption he accepts. This revision, I suggest, improves his account.

The next section reviews Walton’s account of the categories of art. Sections 3 and 4 examine the first and second contextualist challenges, respectively. Section 5 argues that Walton need not restrict the notion of PDCs.

2. Categories of Art

Walton’s (1970) “Categories of Art” (CA henceforth) aims to incorporate two contrasting views: formalism and contextualism.² According to formalism, represented by Beardsley, an artwork’s aesthetic properties depend solely on its nonaesthetic properties, both of which are perceptual (CA, 334, fn. 2; 335, fn. 4).³ For example, the aesthetic properties of a painting—the sense of mystery or tension—depend on its color, shape, and line (CA, 335). Since both aesthetic and

² Walton (2020) acknowledges that his later views may differ from CA. This paper treats CA as incorporating both Walton (1970) and Walton (2020) for a more charitable reading. References specify which text is cited.

³ Although formalism (and contextualism) proposes different ontological assumptions about artworks, this paper focuses on their accounts of artworks’ aesthetic properties.

nonaesthetic properties are perceptual, properties that are not perceivable—such as the historical context of a work’s creation—are not regarded as relevant in the appreciation of artworks. On this view, an artwork should be judged simply by what can be perceived in it (CA, 334). Contextualism, by contrast, holds that a work’s historical context can determine its aesthetic properties, even if it is not perceptual. For example, a composition may sound discordant initially but turn out to be satirical once we know the composer was making fun of incompetent composers in her time.

Walton agrees that aesthetic properties are perceptual, and that perception, rather than inference or cognitive penetration, is the only way to judge a work’s aesthetic properties. That is, in artwork appreciation, our perceptual processing is not shaped by cognitive states such as beliefs, which would otherwise provide direct input to perception and modulate experience (CA, 337–338, 365; see also Walton, 2020, 82).⁴ On this point, he follows both the formalist and Frank Sibley’s (1965) view. However, Walton adds what he calls the psychological thesis: what aesthetic properties a work seems to us to have depends not only on its nonaesthetic properties but also on the PDCs through which we perceive it (CA, 338).

According to Walton, a category is perceptually distinguishable if “membership is determined solely by features that can be perceived in a work when it is experienced in the normal manner” (CA, 339). More specifically, a work can be categorized into a PDC on the basis of being perceived as having certain standard, variable, and contra-standard properties, regardless of non-perceptual factors. A property of a work is standard with respect to a PDC just in case it tends to fit that work into the category in question (CA, 339, 348). A property is variable relative to a PDC just in case it is irrelevant to whether the work belongs to that category (CA, 339, 347–348). Finally, a property is contra-standard relative to a PDC just in case it tends to disqualify the work from that category (CA, 339, 352). Consider the category of painting: flatness and motionlessness are standard features; shapes, colors, and lines are variable; three-dimensionality would be contra-standard, thereby disqualifying certain artworks from being considered paintings. These three kinds of properties serve different aesthetic functions in the

⁴ The scope of aesthetic properties is controversial. Walton includes representational and resemblance properties as aesthetic (CA, 337), whereas Pettit (1983) excludes them. Walton also notes that many literary properties are not perceptual (CA, 335, fn. 5). Stacie Friend (2020) extends CA to literature. This paper, however, does not address the nature of aesthetic properties.

appreciation of a work, with variable properties being particularly aesthetically important (CA, 348).

By contrast, a category is a non-PDC if membership is determined necessarily by non-perceptual considerations of a work. For example, membership in the category of Brahms' music depends on non-perceptual factors—such as the composer of the music—and thus is not a PDC. The category of Brahmsian music, however, is a PDC, because a work can be categorized as such if it is heard as Brahms-style music solely by its sound, regardless of who composed it. In light of this, Walton restricts the relevant categories to those that are perceptually distinguishable, maintaining that only PDCs are such that works can be perceived within them (Walton, 2020, 81). Our perception of an artwork is altered by which of its nonaesthetic properties are standard, variable, or contra-standard relative to a given PDC (CA, 343).

Picasso's *Guernica*, for instance, can be viewed within both the category of painting and the imagined category of guernicas—whose members share the pattern of *Guernica*. It fits perfectly into both categories, yet each leads to a different perception of the work. When the piece is viewed as a painting, its flatness is taken as standard, and the pattern of *Guernica* is variable. It is then perceived as vital, dynamic, and disturbing, due to the expressiveness of its color surface. Conversely, when viewed as a guernica, its pattern becomes standard, while flatness is variable. It is then perceived as cold, lifeless, or perhaps boring or dull, since there may be other guernicas that have rolling, sharp, or jagged surfaces (CA, 347–348). This example, among others, shows that artworks should not be judged simply by what can be perceived in them, since the PDC through which we appreciate a work matters aesthetically. The next question, then, is whether *Guernica* is correctly perceived as a painting or a guernica. More generally, which PDC counts as correct for a given work?

Walton offers four criteria to determine whether a work is correctly perceived in a given category, based on the assumption that there is correct perception for a work (CA, 355–357). What follows are criteria for a work *W* to be correctly perceived in a category *C* (CA, 357):

- i) The presence in *W* of a relatively large number of standard features with respect to *C*.
- ii) *W* affords better aesthetic experience when perceived in *C*.

- iii) The artist of W intended it to be perceived in C.
- iv) C is well established in, and recognized by, the society in which W was produced.

Among these criteria, both (iii) and (iv) reflect the historical context of the work, while Walton considers (iii) the most important in determining a work's correct PDC, due to counterexamples to, and concerns with, the others (CA, 361). Given that a work's aesthetic properties depend on its correct PDC, and that the correct PDC is determined by historical context (especially authorial intention), it follows that a work's aesthetic properties are, in turn, determined by its historical context. The appreciation of artworks, therefore, cannot be separated from their historical contexts.⁵ In this sense, Walton incorporates both the contextualist and formalist view: a work's historical context determines its aesthetic properties, while perception remains the only way to judge them.

There is, however, an important distinction made by Walton (2020): the distinction between the category a work belongs to and the category in which a work is correctly perceived. He contends that a work may belong to a category, but that category may not be the one that reveals its aesthetic properties. For example, *Guernica* belongs to the category of guernicas, since it can be perceived as such, yet this category is not correct for determining its aesthetic properties, due to Picasso's intention. Conversely, the category in which a work is correctly perceived need not be the one it belongs to. For instance, if an artist intends to create a cubist painting, but it cannot be perceived as such—perhaps due to the artist's incompetence—it is still correctly perceived as a cubist painting, based on intention. Thus, the notion of the correct category and that of the category to which a work belongs are independent (Walton, 2020, 80). The four criteria, then, determine the correct category of a work, rather than the one it belongs to. This distinction allows Walton to avoid several potential problems.⁶

⁵ For discussions of criteria for determining a work's correct category, see Daniel Nathan (1973), Walton (1973), and Kiyohiro Sen (2022). Walton admits these criteria are inconclusive but retains historical context as essential (CA, 361–363). Whether a work has a single correct category, however, remains open (CA, 362–363; see also George Dickie & Kent Wilson (1995) for related concerns).

⁶ For example, Brian Laetz (2010) notes that Walton may conflate the correct category of a work with the category it belongs to. Madeleine Ransom (2020) addresses this via perceptual learning.

3. Challenge to CA: artifactuality

Contextualists, especially David Davies (2020), have raised serious challenges to Walton's thesis. The first concerns *artifactuality*, which Walton's notion of PDCs seems unable to accommodate. Recall that, according to Walton, a work belongs to a PDC if it can be perceived as such. However, many philosophers agree that when we engage appreciatively with, say, a visual artwork, we perceive it as issuing from an artist's agency. We apprehend a canvas as "an artistic, rather than physical, medium, that is, as composed of brushstrokes rather than mark, and design rather than pattern" (Davies, 2020, 78).

To illustrate the problem, Davies draws on Danto's example of a canvas that is perceptually indistinguishable from Rembrandt's *Polish Rider* yet was produced by an explosion in a paint factory (Davies, 2020, 78). Since the category of painting is a PDC, this canvas qualifies as a painting by Walton's definition, even though it is neither an artifact nor an artwork. In other words, members of this category are not required to be artifacts issuing from an artist's agency; some non-artifacts, or even non-artworks, can fall under it. As a result, the category itself cannot lead us to perceive a work's nonaesthetic properties as the properties of a thing made—as issuing from an artist's agency—but only as properties of a colored surface. This conflicts with the widely held view that we perceive artworks as artifacts issued from an artist's agency.

More generally, because artifactuality is a non-perceptual consideration, it cannot serve as a standard property in the categorization of any PDC. Consequently, PDCs cannot lead us to perceive an artwork as an artifact, or as something created through artistic agency, since their members are not assumed to be artifacts. Davies therefore argues that the appreciation of artworks cannot be adequately accounted for by PDCs (Davies, 2020, 78). If we are to perceive a work as an artifact within a category of art, the standard properties of that category must include artifactuality. In this sense, familiar art categories such as "painting," "film," or "music," when used to appreciate artworks, cannot count as PDCs in Walton's sense, since their standard properties must incorporate artifactuality.

In response, Walton argues that some kinds of PDCs (I call them *apparent categories*) can address the challenge (Walton, 2020, 82–83). He suggests that apparent categories such as "things apparently painted by someone" or "apparent artifacts" can satisfy the assumption, emphasized

by Davies, that we perceive artworks as artifacts. For instance, the brushstrokes in van Gogh's *The Starry Night* make it appear as though it was painted by him—or at least by someone. Because it can be perceived as something painted by someone, the work belongs to the category of things apparently painted by someone. Crucially, this categorization depends solely on the work's perceptual properties. Moreover, as Walton notes, “appreciators are often interested in the appearance itself” (Walton, 2015, 37; see also Walton, 2020, 82–83, 83, fn. 6), and we may thereby perceive objects in such apparent categories as artifacts precisely because they appear to be artifacts. Thus, while Davies's challenge is acknowledged and familiar art categories cannot be understood as PDCs, it does not follow that artwork appreciation cannot be achieved via PDCs. We need not abandon PDCs altogether, since apparent categories, Walton suggests, may help meet the challenge.

However, I argue that Walton's appeal to appearance fails in two respects: it lacks practical applicability, and it cannot fundamentally resolve Davies's challenge. As regards the first respect, since Walton holds that the artist's intention is the most important criterion for determining a work's correct category, it is doubtful that artists would intend their works to be correctly perceived in apparent categories. Schoenberg's composition illustrates this point: he intended his works to be correctly perceived as twelve-tone music, understood in Davies's terms, not as apparent twelve-tone music (CA, 360–361). Similarly, Picasso intended *Guernica* to be viewed as a cubist painting, not as an apparent cubist painting. If artists rarely intend their works to be perceived in apparent categories, then even if such categories enable us to perceive a work as an artifact, the problem of artifactuality remains unresolved. Artists generally intend their works to be correctly perceived within categories of art, as Davies construes them.

Some may argue that the other criteria—(i), (ii), and (iv)—could still establish that a work is correctly perceived within an apparent category, thereby addressing Davies's challenge. However, each of these criteria faces distinct difficulties. With respect to (i), *Guernica* could be equally well perceived as an apparent cubist painting or as an apparent guernicas, with no decisive reason for privileging one category over the other. As for (ii), one could always construct *ad hoc* categories for a work, effectively transforming a tenth-rate piece into a masterpiece (CA, 359–360). Criterion (iv) encounters the same limitation as (iii): a work's contemporaries rarely establish artworks within apparent categories. Just as *Guernica* was recognized and appreciated in its time as a cubist painting, not as an apparent cubist painting,

Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* was similarly established within the category of impressionist painting, not as an apparent impressionist painting. If criterion (iv), like (iii), has limited applicability, then, even if apparent categories allow us to perceive objects as artifacts, they are rarely the correct categories. Consequently, we generally need to rely on non-PDCs—categories of art in Davies's sense—to correctly perceive artworks. The remaining criteria, therefore, also fail to meet the challenge.⁷

As regards the second respect, even if we grant that most artists intend their works to be perceived in apparent categories, such categories cannot, strictly speaking, enable us to perceive a work as an artifact. As Walton himself notes, “appearances need not correspond to reality” (Walton, 2015, 37). Something may appear to be an artifact without actually being one, yet it can still be categorized within an apparent category and perceived accordingly. For instance, we can imagine an object that is perceptually indistinguishable from *The Starry Night* but was produced by an explosion in a paint factory—meaning that it is neither an artifact nor an artwork. Because it appears to be something painted by someone, it can be categorized within an apparent category.

If this is so, however, Davies's challenge remains unresolved. We do not perceive objects in apparent categories as artifacts, since members of such categories are not assumed to be artifacts. Some non-artifacts and non-artworks can be categorized within them, since PDCs, by definition, cannot be categorized based on artifactuality. At best, then, apparent categories allow us to perceive an artwork as *apparently* a thing made, not as *actually* an artifact. But this is unsatisfactory: we need to perceive a work as actually an artifact, rather than merely as apparently one. Thus, perceiving a work through an apparent category inevitably fails to lead us to perceive it as an artifact. More generally, since the categorization of any PDC cannot, by definition, involve artifactuality—a non-perceptual consideration—perceptual properties alone can never enable us to perceive a work as actually an artifact. The notion of PDC, as Walton construes it, should therefore be abandoned.

⁷ One might object that artworks are sometimes categorized posthumously to construct a compelling art-historical narrative, which does not fit any of these four criteria—for instance, Manet's paintings as proto-Modernist. However, such classifications still appeal to categories of art, rarely to apparent categories, and thus do not resolve the problem of practical applicability. I thank Prof. Matteo Ravasio for this point.

4. Challenge to CA: forgery

The problem of artifactuality shows that PDCs, as defined by Walton, cannot accommodate an essential feature of art. An equally serious challenge concerns forgery. Walton acknowledges that CA has difficulty accounting for the aesthetic difference between forgeries and originals (Walton, 2020, 82). According to contextualists, even when a forgery is perceptually indistinguishable from the original, the two differ aesthetically due to their distinct historical contexts of origin. This contextual difference renders them aesthetically distinct. However, because they share the same perceptual properties, they would, on Walton's account, fall under the same PDC and thus be correctly perceived as having the same aesthetic properties. Consequently, CA appears unable to explain how forgeries and originals can differ aesthetically.

Walton offers two responses to this challenge. First, he argues that we do not typically perceive or experience objects under the category of forgery or as things forged (Walton, 2020, 83). Perceiving such objects under these categories may have no effect on our perceptual experience. Indeed, he suggests, the difference between forgeries and originals may not be aesthetic at all, but rather artistic—that is, a non-perceptual one (Walton, 2020, 84, fn. 7). For example, we often value the “authenticity” of originals, but if we acknowledge a close connection between the aesthetic and the perceptual, such a value would not qualify as aesthetic. If this is right, then the difference between forgeries and originals, as asserted by contextualists, amounts merely to a value judgment. On this view, the problem of forgery falls outside the scope of CA, which is concerned with perceptual differences. The challenge, then, is sidestepped.

Walton's second response grants that even if the difference between forgeries and originals is an aesthetic one, their differing historical contexts may result in their being correctly perceived in different categories, and thus in their possessing different aesthetic properties. Importantly, the relevant categories may themselves be perceptually distinguishable in the strongest sense (Walton, 2020, 83). For instance, because originals and forgeries are produced in different manners, the original may be correctly perceived as, say, a painting or an apparent painting, whereas the forgery may not be correctly perceived in the same way. Given that their correct categories are distinct, they may indeed differ aesthetically. A similar point is already present in CA: even if two artworks are perceptually indistinguishable, they may nonetheless differ

aesthetically if they were created with different authorial intentions (CA, 364). In this way, the challenge from forgery appears to attack a straw man.

However, I argue that forgery is not entirely excluded from the discussion in CA, regardless of whether we typically perceive objects under the category of forgery. To begin with, Walton himself acknowledges that experts do sometimes perceive works as forgeries. For instance, some specialists perceive certain paintings as “van Meegeren-forgeries-of-Vermeer” (Walton, 2020, 83). In such a case—though atypical—works are indeed perceived within the category of forgery, thereby altering our perceptual experience. Consequently, at least some forgeries do differ aesthetically from their originals. The difference between forgeries and originals, in such cases, is not merely artistic but also aesthetic.

Moreover, the aesthetic difference between forgeries and originals does not rest fundamentally on perception. Even if we rarely—or never—perceive a work as a forgery or experience it differently, this does not affect the aesthetic properties it possesses. A comparable case helps illustrate this point. Suppose that *Guernica*’s correct category is the imagined category of *guernicas*; it would still possess aesthetic properties such as coldness and lifelessness, even if no one ever learned to perceive it as such. Our perceptual experience does not determine the aesthetic properties a forgery or an original possesses, because this is ultimately a metaphysical matter: whether they possess, in metaphysical terms, the same set of aesthetic properties—not a matter of how we happen to perceive or experience them. This claim rests on the view that perception plays an epistemic, rather than a metaphysical, role in artwork appreciation: it is our only means of discovering a work’s aesthetic properties. Accordingly, the historical context of a forgery determines the category in which it is metaphysically correctly perceived, and this, in turn, determines its aesthetic properties—even if we never perceive it as a forgery. The question, then, is whether Walton’s notion of PDCs can accommodate this aesthetic difference.

I agree with Walton’s claim that the historical contexts of forgeries and originals determine the correct category for perceiving them—a point already present in CA. However, the concept of PDCs cannot account for their aesthetic differences. To determine whether a forged object differs aesthetically from the original, we must correctly perceive it in the category of forgery. But this category is not a PDC: categorizing a work as a forgery depends essentially on its historical context; one cannot identify an object as a forgery solely by its perceptual properties.

Such categorization necessarily involves non-perceptual considerations, including who the artist was and which work was created first. For example, imagine two versions of *The Starry Night* that are perceptually indistinguishable, one of which is a forgery. Given their identical perceptual properties, we cannot determine which is the forgery and which is the original merely through perception. Only by appealing to their respective historical contexts—such as authorship and date of creation—can we establish which one is forged.

Some might wonder whether a forgery could nonetheless be perceptually distinguishable from the original, and thus whether the category of forgery could be a PDC. For instance, we might witness the act of forging, or the forged painting might include a caption that reads “This is a forgery.” The first case can be set aside immediately, since such a process is not among the object’s perceptual properties on which PDC categorization depends. The second case, however, would lead to a miscategorization: some members of the category of forgery would not be genuine forgeries. Imagine, for instance, an original painting on which the artist, for some reason, inscribes the caption “This is a forgery.” If the categorization of forgery depends solely on a work’s perceptual properties, an original could be categorized as a forgery, which is clearly absurd.

Thus, determining whether an object is a forgery necessarily requires appealing to its historical context—considerations such as authorship and order of creation—which are not perceptual. The category of forgery, then, is not a PDC. But if determining a forgery’s aesthetic properties depends on correctly perceiving it as a forgery, then the correct category that accounts for the aesthetic difference between forgeries and originals cannot be a PDC.

5. Abandoning the restriction to PDCs

Since PDCs cannot accommodate the contextualists’ challenges, they should be abandoned in the context of artwork appreciation. Instead, appreciation should be carried out through non-PDCs. This, however, raises an immediate worry that runs counter to a widely accepted intuition: that the aesthetic properties of artworks are to be perceived, and that perception is the only means of judging them. I argue that appreciating a work through non-PDCs does not violate this intuition. This, in turn, may point toward a revised version of CA.

Walton does not deny that some non-PDCs are aesthetically relevant (Walton, 2020, 81). In particular, he acknowledges that aesthetic property categories fall into this group, since certain (second-order) aesthetic properties of a work depend on them (Walton, 2020, 80–81; CA, 339). For example, to perceive a film as a horror movie, one must first correctly perceive it within another appropriate category—say, that of a zombie movie—in order to determine whether it possesses the aesthetic property of horridness, and thus whether it can be perceived as a horror movie. But, as previously noted, correctly perceiving a work as a zombie movie requires appealing to its historical context, particularly the artist’s intention. Therefore, aesthetic property categories are not PDCs, since categorization into them necessarily depends—albeit indirectly—on non-perceptual factors. Nonetheless, these categories are aesthetically relevant: some (second-order) aesthetic properties depend on them. In such cases, the standard properties of the category (e.g., the horridness of a film) count toward membership, while variable or contra-standard properties become salient in the perception of a work’s second-order aesthetic properties (Walton, 2020, 81).

Thus, even when we appreciate a work through an aesthetic property category, perception—not inference or cognitive penetration—remains the only means of judging a work aesthetically. The work must still be perceived within this kind of category in order to determine its aesthetic properties. Moreover, Walton’s psychological thesis is preserved: perceiving a work in different categories—including non-PDCs—leads us to perceive different aesthetic properties, depending on whether a work’s aesthetic property is standard, variable, or contra-standard relative to the category in which it is correctly perceived.

In this sense, Walton need not restrict CA to PDCs, so long as doing so does not conflict with the assumption that aesthetic properties are to be perceived. On the contrary, such a restriction renders his account vulnerable and seemingly excluding non-PDCs from aesthetic relevance. Furthermore, the problems of artifactuality and forgery can be addressed without undermining this assumption: categories of art can be constructed in Davies’s sense, and the category of forgery can be used to account for the aesthetic difference between forgeries and originals. CA thus moves closer to contextualism without entirely rejecting formalism.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that Walton fails to address the challenges posed by contextualists—namely, the problems of artifactuality and forgery. This failure stems from his continued adherence to PDCs. Moreover, his restriction to PDCs is unwarranted. I have shown that artwork appreciation need not be confined to PDCs, so long as this does not violate the assumption that aesthetic properties are to be perceived. This suggests a revised contextualist version of CA—one that retains the central role of perception, while incorporating historical context as a metaphysical determinant of aesthetic properties. Such a view brings CA into closer alignment with contextualism, without abandoning its formalist foundation. We must recognize the essential role played by a work's historical context. Only then can we perceive art correctly.⁸

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