

Artwork Indication and the Standard of Neglect

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ABSTRACT. The paper seeks to demonstrate that in order to have determinate existence and individuation conditions, all artworks need to be articulated in a communicable form in order to be indicated as artworks. It therefore proposes a social notion of indication and offers thoughts on what this may mean for questions of artwork ontology and identity. It does this through examining a tension between a folk sentiment and a commonplace within aesthetics: The sentiment that our creations can sustain beyond our own lifetimes as a legacy of our lives and the commonplace that some artworks can be made, and exist as artworks within an artist's mind, without being articulated in a publicly accessible medium. This is called the 'mental composition' claim. This claim is tested through a thought experiment about the putative loss of an unarticulated poem, noting the difference between a work being neglected and falling into oblivion, concluding that whereas it may be possible for a token of an already articulated (literary) artwork to exist in someone's thoughts an artwork does not exist until it is articulated in a communicable medium appropriate to its form and thereby meets the standard of neglect - that is to be able to be judged separately from its author's existence, with an evidence base not reliant on reports about its author.

I.

In his essay "Oblivion",¹ the American poet Donald Justice wrote about Robert Boardman Vaughn, a poet, virtually unknown, who was yet special

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¹ Justice (1998). Justice (1995) also contains a poem on the same subject: "In memory of the Unknown Poet, Robert Boardman Vaughn".

to him and whose work he valued, but which, he thought, lay neglected. Vaughn had only three poems published in his lifetime and apparently ended his days wandering the streets close to his home, on the very margins of society, muttering to himself.

Justice sought to shine attention back on Vaughn's work through re-printing these three poems and through writing about the life of their creator and the emblematic role Vaughn played in his own development as a poet and notions of artistic creativity. In doing so, he served to throw attention on to those three poems and rescue them from the neglect in which they lay. What Justice could not do, however, was similarly rescue any 'lost' poems of Vaughn's street-tramping years. The verse Vaughn had articulated and reproduced in print was rescued from the neglect into which it had fallen by Justice but aside from that, all there was to write about was Vaughn, the man himself, whose story was rescued from oblivion somewhat by Justice's essay.

We perhaps all write with that fear of neglect. Sometimes perhaps, if we doubt what we are writing, we even comfort ourselves with its expectation. Darker than this however, is the knowledge that *nobody* will attend to the things we thought about but never worked into coherence – our private unrealized projects, our personal mutterings. Seen in this context, against our unrealised projects, the possibility of neglect is an *achievement*: It signals that we have made something capable of being neglected. It thereby introduces the possibility of its revival. Achieving a worst case scenario of neglect is some insurance against oblivion. These things we make can exist beyond our own existence: They can be written about separately to us.

I want to use these thoughts to make some points about the indication of artworks² and how the notions of *neglect* and *oblivion* might throw light on the existence and identity conditions of artworks. I will do this through

² The idea and terminology of artworks being 'indicated' by an author acting at a certain (art historical) time and place, to create as sound or word structure as an artwork derives from Levinson "Defining Art Historically" in Levinson (1990, 3-25). However, although I use this term throughout this essay, the account I offer could be applied *mutatis mutandis* to other kinds of historically based accounts of artwork making, such as, for instance, Noel Carroll's idea of a 'narrative' to provide identity conditions for artworks (Carroll 1988)

investigating the tension in a relationship between a particular folk belief and a particular common view in the philosophy of art. In doing so, I shall distinguish between articulated artworks and unarticulated structures to argue that the latter are like our other unrealized projects, things we could have done but actually never did.

The folk belief is one to which I've alluded already: That the things we make somehow insure ourselves against oblivion, in that they, at worst, will lie neglected after our death, untroubling to the world but could, in principle, be revived irrespective of our fate. The commonplace in the philosophy of art is that some artworks can be made and exist as artworks in someone's mind. The tension is that these artworks would not meet the conditions required to be neglected; if they are composed in someone's mind. If they are never communicated these are works which can progress from composition to oblivion without achieving the possibility of neglect.

Another commonplace within the philosophy of art is to divide the arts into those that admit of composition and performance and those that do not.³ The former are art forms such as music, theatre, opera or dance, in which one *creative* artist can compose some structure which other *performing* artists can interpret to realize features that would, or may, not otherwise be manifested to an audience. The characteristics of these art forms are, amongst other things, a system of notation for composition and a separation in media between that notation and the medium in which the work is performed.

These features of these art forms, most especially the existence of a notation, invite the thought that for these art forms it is possible to compose an artwork privately in one's thoughts at some time and *then* at some later time articulate the *completed* artwork by committing it to the appropriate notation - with this articulation undertaken simply to record that already completed composition in a communicable form. This is probably a fair reflection of how some short literary artworks such as haiku, lyrics or sonnets actually are created. In literary and musical history stories of such mental composition of longer and more complex artworks also feature in stories of creative artistic genius. And in everyday discourse we'd

³ This is roughly the distinction between one-stage and two-stage' artworks set out in Goodman (1969, 114-115)

probably agree that someone could say “I have written a poem” because they have composed some verse in their head.⁴ Call this claim the ‘mental composition’ model.

We should clarify the ‘mental composition’ claim. It is *not* that the poem, etc. *is* a thought. Rather, it is that the *content* of a thought can be a poem – or perhaps that a poem can be structured within a thought and exist as an artwork in thinking a thought with that content. Undoubtedly, we can *think* a sonnet as well as *thinking about* a sonnet: So, the claim is that in bringing a sonnet to mind now, an instance of that sonnet is produced in our thought and this is the same if rather than bringing one to mind, I now compose one anew – so the only difference between the poem in my head and the poem on the page is one of transmission. This ‘mental composition’ is possible because the sonnet is notated in a certain structure of words and the metre, rhyme and scansion of the lines required for a sonnet are all specifications that can structure the content of a thought – we can form thoughts that have content in sonnet-form. So, when we compose a poem in our minds so that it is complete – as it would be had we simply called to mind a completely memorised an already existing poem that someone else had composed – then the claim is that we, in doing that, have brought an instance of an artwork into existence.

The ‘mental composition’ model faces two main challenges, it seems to me: First, the challenge of non-linguistic application and second, the challenge from complexity: To consider the first, literature aside, artworks do not exist in a linguistic form, only their notations do (or can do): Music is performed as sound – and I’m unconvinced that the content of a thought can be a sound, so the mental composition claim for music is that the *specification* of a sound in musical notation can be the content of a thought: I can think of the notation that would result in ‘Happy Birthday’. If so, then it’s *this* claim that the ‘mental composition’ theorist makes when applying it to the popular, if possibly inaccurate, stories of musical genius of Bach or Mozart.

The second, the challenge of complexity is that the ‘mental composition’ model is hard to envisage when applied to someone composing a

⁴ Stecker, Robert (1997, 62); Hospers, John (1985, 246) and Sharpe (1985, 439) all state this position without argument in significantly different contexts within the philosophy of art.

highly complex piece of music, such as a symphony, a complete literary work such as a novel, or epic poem. However, the ‘mental existence’ thesis – that an instance of an artwork can exist in the mind does not *require* the ‘mental composition’ model – as anyone who has ever memorized a poem, or taken the lead in a play can vouchsafe – and of course many people can memorise complete books. Moreover, *sections* of these longer works could fulfill the mental composition thesis. So, these two challenges are practical barriers and not constraints in principle to the mental composition model being one of the ways in which such works can come into existence.

However, this model is not available for art forms that do *not* admit the distinction between medium of composition and medium of performance or which do not have a notation. There's no way a painting or sculpture can be the content of a thought – whilst we can think *about* a painting, we can't *think* a painting. Nor would we assent to the claim that someone had made a painting by thinking it. Nor can someone completely compose a painting in their mind which they *then* transcribe to canvas, since, because there's no notation for painting, the transcription of the paint on to the canvas is actually part of what it is to make a painting – a painting is not made unless made in paint. For these art forms, the method and the achievements of *how* the medium itself is used is critically relevant to the identity and value of it as an artwork.

So, it appears there is a bona fide aesthetic and critical difference between different art forms that may re-enforce this cleavage into something approaching a principle about the applicability of the ‘mental composition’ model. However, I argue that this aesthetic difference does *not* reach down into questions of identity and argue that the indication of any artwork, within any art form, is bound by a common minimum criterion, that actually precludes the ‘mental composition’ model as sufficient to indicate an artwork.

2.

The idea is that a musical artwork (or by extension any artwork in a form that admits of a notation) is a structure of sounds etc that is brought into existence at a certain time by a certain author in a certain place, with the

spacio-temporal and personal aspects all essential to the description of the artwork, its identity conditions and its ontology – i.e. that they are 'indicated structures'.⁵ My concern now, is with the relationship between the 'mental composition' model and the indication of an artwork.

Let's return to Robert Boardman Vaughn cases – cases like his are ones where we may feel, like Donald Justice, the urge to bemoan the *loss* of works that may never have escaped a mind. Now consider this Vaughn-like scenario, which is an elaboration of an example from Robert Stecker,⁶ (but used in a different context): A poet, on his deathbed, announces that he has composed a wonderful sonnet about the human condition. Those attending are anxious to record the poem for posterity. However, by the time suitable recording equipment is at hand, the poet alas, has died. If this did happen we'd likely regret that this last poem was not able to be transcribed, bemoan the loss of his last poem and say that it fell into oblivion with him.

Now, imagine that the poet remains alive when the recording equipment arrives. We anticipate keenly his sonnet about the human condition. However, the poet then utters a series of inchoate noises and splutterings, not in any human language. In this version, we most likely *do not* bemoan the loss of a poem. We might think, whatever it is that the aged poet has produced, it is not a sonnet on the human condition. There are various reasons for our judgement: The utterance does not meet the demands of sonnet form, nor does it appear to be about the human condition, or anything else for that matter – in fact it is only a string of noises. More than likely we take it that no poem has been produced, dismiss the idea of having lost anything and pay no more attention to our concerns. The situation becomes one of regret about the frailty of human life, rather than the irrevocable loss to the world of an artwork.

The difference between the two versions is that in the first the poet dies before he articulates his thoughts in an utterance, whereas in the second we have an utterance that does not appear to articulate anything in any language – yet in the first we seem to want to bemoan the loss of a poem. If we do want to hold that we have lost a poem in the first version,

⁵ See Levinson (1990, 3-25) for the notion of 'indicated structures'.

⁶ Stecker (1997, 61)

this means there must have been a poem in existence before this time of the promised utterance, moments before the poet dies. This view therefore commits itself to the 'mental composition' model for the dying poet's supposed last sonnet.

The fact that we make different judgments in each case is relevant, although I think the judgments are confused throughout. We only make the different judgments because in one case the claimed poem was articulated in a communicable medium - speech. It is because a structure was articulated in the second scenario that we are able to judge the poet either to be tragically mistaken that he had composed a sonnet or alternatively that he tried but failed to articulate anything that *could* be his poem. It is the fact that *something* was articulated in an utterance which allowed us to determine whether this particular attempt to make an artwork was successful. This articulation of a structure of sounds and words by a definite person at a definite time became the basis upon which we based our judgments and which provided the test of the poet's attempt to indicate an artwork. This was true irrespective of the thoughts in his mind, or the thoughts that we believed were in his mind prior to him making that utterance. So, in the first case we have no evidence either way that the poet had composed a sonnet in his mind, whereas in the second case we appear to have some positive evidence that he did *not* do what he had claimed to have done.

Let's return to the first version, where the poet dies with the poem unarticulated and yet we feel a pang of loss. As we said, this pang of loss depends on us accepting, perhaps unconsciously, the 'mental composition' model for the dying man's claimed sonnet. This scenario is problematic since we have no objective evidence for the sonnet. Or rather, the evidence we have for the loss of the poem is the same as the evidence for its indication – and in both cases this evidence is a report from someone about their mental processes. So, our claim for *both* the indication of a mentally composed poem and the loss of that poem would be supported by a statement such as: "On the 1st January X communicated that he had composed a poem in sonnet form about the human condition to a reliable witness. X is a well-known poet that has written in sonnet form and written about the human condition and perhaps (we could add) who was known to do the bulk of his compositional work mentally."

Let us put aside all questions about the veracity of the poet's testimony,

and assume his sincerity. From the evidence available we do not know whether a poem has been indicated and lost, or whether it has simply not been indicated. The problem is that the evidence we have provides *no* criterion or criteria for the poem's reproduction or individuation. If asked, we would be unable to provide *any* details about the poem since all its properties qua linguistic structure are unconfirmed and indeterminate, with only its properties qua indication in any way determinate since we do at least know the author and context of production. Indeed its properties as a linguistic structure are so indeterminate that we could not say whether any poem found among the poet's papers was a draft of this deathbed composition.⁷ Nor, would we know which, if any, of the posthumously discovered poems, *was* that deathbed poem, since each would have an equal evidential claim to be the deathbed poem as all the evidence we have for that is the fact that the poet said he wrote it. These other poems in the archive all exist as structures, but the supposed deathbed poem does not – all we have is some evidence for an indicating event by a definite person.

In fact, in the first version of the scenario we have no basis for any beliefs about the *poem* – so regretting its loss is somewhat premature. What evidence we do have is about the *author*, not about the *artwork*. We must conclude then that the word of the author that he has made a poem is insufficient to indicate an artwork even if he did compose it in thought. Therefore, the mental composition model is insufficient to indicate an artwork unless accompanied by some *other* evidence.

To clarify, this is not a position which denies the subjective veracity of anyone's introspection. I am not claiming that the dying poet is wrong about the mental content of his own thoughts. Rather, my claim is that in *all* cases of successful artwork indication we have to do sufficient work to give our proposed artwork determinate identity and existence conditions that can be applied completely separately from our own identity and existence conditions. We need to free *its* potential neglect from *our* eventual oblivion. By working to this standard – call it *the standard of neglect* – we bequeath to our work the possibility of being neglected or appreciated on its own terms, independently of evidence about our lives. We can *never*

⁷ This claim echoes Wollheim's (1968, 387-400) position against artworks without content – that they supply no structure to identify future occurrences.

achieve this exclusively by framing a thought that has as its content something with the formal properties of an artwork. Whilst existing, unarticulated in our minds these things remain consigned to the same oblivion, on the same terms, as we do – and do not meet the demands of artwork indication.

This is because for *all* cases of never articulated 'mental compositions' we have reports only about the author, rather than the works themselves. We have a report that a potential author is laying claim to be an artwork indicating agent – and that's not a claim that implies anything about the properties of any artwork that might be indicated by that agent.

To argue that such artworks were indicated despite our permanent and irrevocable ignorance of them is to tacitly rely on a much more stringent but less intuitive general position that “whatever an author says is his artwork is his artwork”. This position is less intuitively plausible because it's easily shown to be false: It makes it impossible for there to be any defeating conditions for indicating an artwork and impossible to fail to indicate an artwork, thus rendering the concept of indication meaningless – it comes to mean something like ‘saying that’. So we cannot rely solely on the *claim* of an author that an artwork was made to know that an artwork was indeed made. An *articulated* artwork however stands open to scrutiny on all these fronts.

This leads me to the conclusion that the indication of a structure as an artwork requires that the structure is articulated in a communicable medium: There is a necessary publicity requirement involved in indication and it is this articulation requirement that stamps any given structure with its circumstances of indication. Without this publicity requirement structures may exist, but they are not indicated *as artworks*. So whilst some tokens of some artworks may be able to exist in thoughts and the ‘mental composition’ model may bring possibly poetic word structures into existence, mental composition alone will not make artworks out of poetic word structures. The potential of communication brings sufficiency to a claim of indication for an appropriate structure, whereas the proven lack of an articulation in some communicable medium guarantees its absence. Articulation in a medium is then a *necessary* condition for a structure to be successfully indicated as an artwork. Thoughts are not enough.

It's necessary that the result of an indication attempt can be grasped

by others separately to the act of indication. This means that indication is necessarily a *social* act. It's different from simply articulating, it's articulating one of a range of specific kinds of thing: An artwork, in a communicable medium appropriate to that kind of artwork, (so for example, one cannot articulate a *poem* in paint etc.)

So, let's return to think about the deathbed scene as reinterpreted through this analysis: In the second version of the death-bed scene – the one where the poet utters the incoherent noises – although the actions were potentially sufficient to indicate an artwork, in this case they do not because the thing indicated fails to have an appropriate structure to indicate any kind of artwork, let alone a sonnet about the human condition. In the first case – where death occurs before articulation – an appropriate structure may well be there inside the poet's head, but there is insufficient information for us to judge this, because that structure has not been indicated in an utterance.

So, whatever was inside the heads of Robert Vaughn as he tramped the streets, or inside the head of the poet in his dying reverie – quite possibly these were thoughts the content of which were rhythmical arrangements of verbal expressions – they were not yet indicated artworks. They were thoughts the contents of which might be artworks if they became appropriately articulated. Upon articulation they would have been indicated and given determinate identity and existence conditions separate and distinct to that of their utterer. Had they been so articulated they would have had their own independent fate as artworks, they may have then become neglected, lost or even revered.

My position allows there to be mentally composed structures of poetic language, but claims that these are not artworks, in the same way (to use another example from Stecker)⁸ that our unexpressed thoughts around a dinner table are not contributions to the conversation. They become so if we choose and are able to articulate them in some utterance.

My position asserts that if artworks are indicated structures, then they are indicated structures articulated in a communicable form. This effectively brings all artworks – those that admit of the distinction between composition and performance or otherwise, under a single rubric depen-

⁸ Stecker 1997

dent on the overarching social requirements of indication. If the indication of artworks is social, then it may be that artworks themselves may be too – the fact about indication may be masking an ontological fact about artworks.

Possibly then, articulation in a medium might be a requirement of artwork *ontology* – so that such articulation is woven into the very nature of being a poem or a musical composition, just as it is for being a painting. The difficulties of adequately describing a mental composition model for music may in fact suggest this. Alternatively, there may be a middle way that retains articulated indication and the possibility of mental existence, but only allows for mental existence for previously articulated artworks, so that articulation in a medium is a hurdle which, if met, *then* allows mental existence for tokens. This would allow a mental existence thesis but not a mental composition thesis. So, we would have social indication, *then* the possibility of mental existence. In balance, I think that this is my preferred view, since it would allow that remembering an already indicated poem can prevent it from being irrevocably lost.

The moral is that we should not grieve for the loss of Vaughn's unknown late poems for we do not know whether anything that had the potential to be a poem was lost. A poem is lost if all its instances are physically destroyed with no possibility of their recovery (e.g. in someone's memory): The same poem is mislaid if there is some possibility of its recovery, but no-one currently knows the whereabouts of any of its instances (i.e. it is lying unknown in an archive, or loft, being neglected). The same poem cannot, at the same time, be both mislaid and lost – and it has to have been made in order to be either. Similarly, authors are lost when all trace of them has gone, when perhaps we know only that they were a poet, and do not have even another author's literary commentary on their work, let alone any scraps from the works themselves. So, instead of mourning a loss of which we have no knowledge, we should instead celebrate Justice's rescuing from neglect the poems that Vaughn did write, whilst regretting that Vaughn lived a life in which so much more that could have been rescued from neglect is consigned to oblivion. In giving our work the chance to be neglected, we create the possibility of its retrieval, something that

cannot happen to our thoughts, or alas, to ourselves.⁹

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