

Peter Lamarque

Work and Object: Explorations in the Metaphysics of Art.

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The title of Peter Lamarque's *Work and Object* is apt, and not merely clever, since a central thesis of the book is that works of art are philosophically distinct from the objects on which they depend. It seems plausible to suppose that things such as novels, plays, poems, and symphonies are distinct, as works of art, from the various kinds of markings on paper on which they depend. After all, there can be any number of copies of *The Stranger*, but this does not make that piece of literature more than the one work that it is. It may seem less plausible though, at least for the uninitiated, to suppose that paintings and sculptures are distinct from the material entities on which they depend. Might it not be thought that paintings, as the name would suggest, are just equivalent to the paint of which they consist? Could Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square* be understood to be just what it would be taken to be as a visibly reductive physical object—black and white paint on canvas? Although Lamarque maintains that there is a 'constituting medium or material' for every work (3), he says that artworks are 'underdetermined by physical or notational properties,' and 'are distinct from the 'objects' that constitute them' (viii). *Black Square* is a *work* of art, and not merely a physical *object*, in virtue of being a cultural artifact. And this means that its identity as that kind of thing—as well as its identity as a particular work—depends 'on fairly complex intentional and relational properties' in addition to physical ones (56). Part of an artwork's being a work of art rests on the artist's intention that it be so understood. And as that understanding is not limited to the artist's whose work it is, artworks are 'partially dependent on how they are *taken to be* by qualified observers' (viii, original italics). A work of art, as a work, is embedded in a culture that recognizes, interprets, and values art. Accordingly, any work has 'fundamentally different identity and survival conditions' from that of 'its constituting object' (4). Artworks, unlike objects, 'are grounded in human acts and attitudes; they are cultural, not merely natural, entities; they are created and can come into and go out of existence; they possess meaning and significance and are subject to interpretation; and they have intrinsic as well as instrumental value' (10,11).

The preceding points form part of what Lamarque calls 'desiderata for an ontology of works.' In addition to these desiderata, Lamarque says that artworks are public and perceptible, and have some essential and some inessential properties (but have them objectively); and no artwork is eternal, 'not even those that are types' (61). Although artworks depend on consciousness and agency, and are 'not simply changes in pre-existing objects or rearranged objects in the world' (53), they are real, not ideal entities (60). Lamarque thinks that the negative thesis that says that 'a work is not identical to its constituting material' (50), combined with the recognition of 'the cultural embeddedness of works', is compatible with a positive thesis that 'states what kind of entity a work is' (50). In his view, artworks result from human agency and intention; they

‘emerge when work on them has been completed...under a conception of the finished product’ (53); and, as completed, they ‘possess intentional properties of an aesthetic, artistic, or representational kind,’ that are only possible ‘in the appropriate cultural context’ (54).

This last point—that artworks cannot be produced except in social context in which ‘a sufficient number of informed practitioners recognize its status and respond appropriately’ (68)—underlines the dependence of art on the institution of art, which, in depending itself on such ostensibly mental phenomena as thoughts, actions, intentions, beliefs, and judgments, further underscores the relation of art to mind or consciousness. That recognition notwithstanding, Lamarque says that we ought to reject ‘strongly mentalistic accounts [of art, such as those] offered by Collingwood and Sartre. Works cannot exist *just* in the mind or in the imagination’ (54). I have added the emphasis in the previous quote since it seems to indicate, what I think is true, that a Conceptual artist, for instance, could create a work meant to exist in her mind alone. And were that the case, the public could not be aware *of* the private mental entity itself that the work is meant to be as opposed to being aware *that* the work is meant to be identified with such an object. And that understanding would depend on a publicly apprehensible object in which the intended identity of the work is communicated. This then does not undermine, but rather reinforces, what Lamarque says about the publicity requirement of art, and how such a work could be understood to be a work only in relation to a culture that is characterized by ‘appropriate beliefs, attitudes, modes of appreciation, and expectations for works to come into, and be sustained in existence’ (54).

However, the Conceptual work noted may be a problem for Lamarque’s view that a binding element of all the arts is the ‘experience of art as art’ (229). This is because, even though he admits on the same page that the term ‘experience’ is ‘vague’, and that it ‘is informed by knowledge about the kinds of objects being experienced,’ there really is no *a priori* restriction on an artist’s intending to identify a work with an object that cannot be experienced. Such an object could not be experienced by anyone, including the artist herself, no matter how wide and educated any experience relevant to understanding the intended identity of the work is allowed to be. What is true is that it must be possible to apprehend the identity of such a work through means, such as language, of conveying that identity. This is especially true if the work is meant to have any art-historical significance. And although that understanding *will* depend on a public perceptual object, neither the apprehension of that object nor the understanding of the intended identity of the work can be said to be an experience of the work itself, even if each—apprehension and understanding—is itself an experience. Acting as an artist, I can intend that an artwork of mine be understood to be identified with what is singled out by the italicized language *that of which one cannot be aware in conceiving of that of which one cannot be aware*. In this case it must be possible to be aware of the language that specifies the identity of the work to understand that identity, but, given the nature of the language by which that intended identity is specified, one cannot be aware of the object itself that the work is meant to be. That having been said, there are two things to be emphasized here. First, the example does nothing to undermine the dependence of art in general on experience, since a work that itself cannot be experienced depends on the experience of

understanding the intended identification of the work with an object that cannot itself be experienced. Second, there can be experiences that follow from that understanding, experiences that may be interesting and valuable, including, perhaps, an aesthetic experience of an intellectual sort that comes from understanding the work's intended identity, and seeing its relation to movements and works in the history of art. Although Lamarque does not consider this possibility, and its relation to kinds of necessary and possible experience noted, perhaps he would not disagree with the points made.

Lamarque says that the 'continued existence of any work depends on the continued possibility of the work's being *responded to* in appropriate ways' (69, original italics). The thoughts of the previous paragraph contest this point if any appropriate response is predicated on direct experience of the work itself, as opposed to the cognitive experience of the work's intended identity. If response is widened to include reaction in ways that are informed by, and appropriate to, knowledge of the work's intended identity—whatever the metaphysical nature of the entity itself with which the work is meant to be identified—then the point is surely correct. The use of the concept of possibility in talking about the continued existence of artworks is important for Lamarque, because 'it is not an essential condition for the continued existence of an artwork that it be constantly an object of attention or interest in some individual mind.' An artwork 'is not an "ideal" entity' (69). Rather, 'it is an *intentional* entity, depending essentially on facts about how it is *taken to be* by qualified observers' (69). For artworks to come into existence, and to be existentially sustained, the proper social conditions must obtain in which artworks are distinguished from Danto's 'mere real things' in being treated as 'cultural objects [that are] essentially dependent on cultural conditions and human responses,' and that, as artworks 'have intentional and relational properties essentially, as part of their natures' (76). 'What becomes of works when all human beings are finally extinct? The answer is: the works too vanish' (70).

Although these quotes underline the relation of artworks to culture, and to human beings and our various kinds of experience, Lamarque's position is perhaps too conservative. One does not have to insist that paintings are clusters of ideas to see them as radically discontinuous entities. Paintings are meant to be perceived, reflected on, and appreciated as fields of visual data. As such they depend on light and visual consciousness of them. One does not have to wait for the extinction of the human race for a painting to go out of existence. It ceases to exist, as an artwork—as the particular entity with the particular properties that its artist intended—the moment it ceases to be perceived. And it comes back into existence as a work when it is seen and attended to properly.

Work and Object stresses that, although artworks '*are* objects (broadly conceived) [they are] objects of a distinct kind, cultural or "institutional" objects. The crucial distinction is between that which depends essentially on human thought and cultural activity [(works)] and that which does not [(objects)]' (4, original italics). Although the connection between the cultural context and value of artworks is no doubt correct in providing both for the work-object distinction and the human interest in art, one wonders if the linking of culture and value might result in a restriction on what artists can and

cannot do. Noting that artworks are ‘objects of a distinct kind, cultural or “institutional” objects’ (4), means that they are situated in a culture that not only has an understanding and appreciation of art, but has a set of values by which art is assessed, and by which it may be fundamentally restricted. Lamarque recognizes that the social context in which art is produced and recognized as art is ‘always constrained, even if loosely, by practices, conventions, expectations, and interactions’ (68). And he says that value is central to art, and that, although ‘[t]here is no one set of values that applies across all works, even across works in a particular medium’ (1), for an object ‘to count as a work at all is already to be invested with some value, to invite and have the potential to sustain a minimal degree of interest of a specific kind’ (1). Given the relation of art to culture and value, one wonders what, if any, constraints might restrict avant-garde practice in the future. Although art always has been, and likely will be, limited by such contingent practical things as available technology and economics, might it necessarily be limited in some respects by ethics? Chris Burden can have himself shot in the arm and call it *Shoot*, but can he shoot an unwilling person in the arm, call it performance art, and have it be accepted as art? In particular, can an unethical action that is either a work itself or a part of a work ever be thought to be art-historically important? Could such positive aesthetic terms as ‘elegant’, ‘exquisite’, ‘moving’, ‘brilliant’, or ‘beautiful’ be applied to it?

Work and Object is a collection, following a fine introduction, of ten essays in analytic philosophy of art. In addition to the issues noted, a partial list of other things Lamarque considers includes: aesthetic essentialism, aesthetic empiricism, objects of interpretation, and perception in Conceptual art. I have focused on the main topic of the work, but would like to emphasize that there is much of interest and importance in these essays that I did not consider. The index could have used a bit more work, but the bibliography is good, and each note is right where it should be—at the bottom of the page. All of the writings are scholarly and articulate, and the book they together compose would make a fine addition to any thinker’s library.

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