

Jeffrey Strayer. *Haecceities: Essentialism, Identity, and Abstraction.* Brill 2017. 462 pp. \$203.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9789004338432).

Strayer is an artist and a philosopher, and in *Haecceities*, the second of his books on this subject, he utilizes his vast knowledge of both in his longtime labor of love: identifying the limits of abstraction, or what is minimally required of an artwork for it to remain an artwork at all. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ‘a haecceity is a non-qualitative property responsible for individuation and identity,’ or, according to Google, ‘that property or quality of a thing by virtue of which it is unique or describable as “this (one),”’ or, according to Strayer, ‘An object’s haecceity is the property that it has of being the particular object that it is’ (60). Thus, this is a work in the metaphysics of art, the project of identifying what art is, or, in this case, what an object has to have in order for it to be an art object. If the project of defining art can be divided into art in the classificatory sense (what makes something an art object at all) and in the evaluative sense (what makes something a good or bad artwork), Strayer’s work is concerned with defining art in the classificatory sense.

Strayer is nothing if not thorough. The intricate, architectonic sweep of the work is breathtaking. The first twenty pages of the book are taken up with explaining the grounding of abstraction in works by such conceptual artists as Marcel Duchamp and Robert Barry, and stating the thesis of Abstraction as clearly and comprehensively as possible. Strayer capitalizes some words, like ‘Abstraction’ and ‘Essentialism,’ to emphasize the difference between his use of them and more everyday uses. He then spends the next 314 pages diving into topics with section and part headings like ‘The Essential Elements of an Artistic Complex and the Idea of Essentialism or Essentialist Abstraction,’ ‘Space, Time, Language, and Objects, and Particular Matters of General Relevance to Essentialism,’ and ‘The Space of Apprehension and the Field of Understanding.’ In part five, the last part of the book before an appendix entitled ‘A Paradox of Identity?’ Strayer uses his own conceptual artworks as examples of the limits he explores. This latter part of the book—which goes into more detail explaining how his artworks illuminate his theories than in other parts of the book—is perhaps the most approachable part for one new to the subject, and could profitably be read in conjunction with the earlier parts of the book, in order to better understand the earlier propositions.

One thing the dedicated philosopher will love about this book is the way it takes a concept, such as an *artistic complex* (the combination of the art object, the subject, and the language that specifies the object, among other things), and explains it in every way possible. Strayer is such a meticulous writer that one may find oneself supposing that his office at Purdue University must be immaculate in its organization and object placement. Just to give a flavor of Strayer’s approach, here is an approximation of the steps he takes in the beginning of the book.

First and foremost, an artwork, to be an artwork at all, must be an object that has been selected to be an artwork. Second, there must be a subject who consciously comprehends what object has been selected to be an artwork, even if the subject doesn’t understand the object itself. Third, there must be a perceptual object that offers (at least) language that referentially points out what the work is meant to be. Fourth, the most abstract work, the work that has the least amount of elements possible and yet be an artwork, must be specified by language that points out the idea or ideas that the subject is to contemplate or aesthetically entertain in thought. Note, though, that the subject need not be able to comprehend the art object for the object to be art, since the object referred to may be non-existent or even logically contradictory. Strayer then continues in this way—though, again, in detail several

orders of magnitude beyond what is offered here—comprehensively addressing every possible subject-matter that may be involved in getting at the limits of Essentialist Abstraction. In figures throughout, he uses his minimalist conceptual artworks to illustrate his points.

Haecceities is indeed dense, but this is not a criticism. Strayer's book is a difficult read, but not because it has too much jargon or half-thought out ideas. It's well-written and there are not too many difficult words that a relatively well-read person familiar with philosophy must look up. Strayer is an excellent writer. The reason this book is so hard to read is that Strayer pursues the subject matter at a high level, and about as thoroughly as one could pursue anything. He has been working on this project—which includes his first book, 2007's *Subjects and Objects*, his second book, 2017's *Haecceities*, and, judging from how many different figures appear in the book, over a hundred artworks—for over twenty years. This is a man obsessed with getting it right.

In fact, finding anything other than descriptive things to say about this book seems superfluous. Few, if any, will find that Strayer has missed anything concerning the specific project he has set for himself. Everything one could want to know about the classificatory sense of Essentialist Abstraction is taken up here. However, here are three points to consider.

First, a metaphysical question: When some language singles out a concept that is the work of art, is *that concept* the work of art or is the *entertaining of that concept* the work? For instance, let's say the following is the language of an *Haecceity*: 'Everything I was thinking five minutes ago.' Now is everything I was thinking five minutes ago the artwork, or is my *now* thinking of what I was thinking five minutes ago the artwork? According to Dewey's definition of art as experience (which Strayer cites as influential on him), other more conventional art definitions, and some things that Strayer himself says, it seems that the work of art is *perceiving a painting*, not *the painting itself*. Yet, the concept of 'What I was thinking,' like the physical painting, is what is singled out by the specification language (138).

Second, four interrelated epistemological questions: Is it possible to fail to grasp the specified object of a *Haecceity* artwork, and if so, does one fail to know what the artwork is? What determines whether or not someone has apprehended the artwork specified by the language? Does an artwork mean whatever one thinks it means? Can one be wrong about what the artwork is intended to be? These questions are not asking how does one know whether one is wrong. That's a different question, and a question for all artworks. But with perceptible works like paintings, presumably it could be pointed out to someone that what they are missing on a canvas as they talk about what the painting means, is based on what everyone can see. In other words, the physical part of a perceptible artwork, like a painting, plays an important role in determining the difference between a good and bad interpretation. But what guides us to a successful interpretation of a conceptual artwork?

Third, two unfair complaints—unfair because they fall outside Strayer's stated project boundaries. First, in reading this book, the question may arise for one, how are we supposed to evaluate an Essentialist artwork? We are never provided a way to even begin to interpret these works in order to make aesthetic judgments about their quality. However, it would probably be missing the point to try to evaluate the aesthetic quality of these works since, presumably, their (main? sole?) purpose is to push metaphysical boundaries. Second, the text on many of these works is very small and, though sometimes it is repeated in larger text, at times one may have to give up trying to read the specification text (after using some pretty strong magnifying devices). The result, of not being able to read the text, and of not knowing how to interpret them for quality when one can read the text, may feel like a lost opportunity, insofar as one may find oneself struggling to find a way to enjoy these conceptual art works, which, of course, have a fascinating logical grounding as explained beautifully in the book.

Overall though, Strayer, in *Haecceities*, gives us a fascinating, extended intellectual meditation on the limits of abstraction in art, and does so with such a breathtaking relentlessness, that it is unlikely that anyone could ever write a more definitive book on the subject.

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