

Art and its Objects

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978-1-107-53441-4 — Art and its Objects
Richard Wollheim
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Second edition

With six supplementary essays



RICHARD WOLLHEIM



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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India
 79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.
 It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107534414

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First published in the USA by Harper & Row 1968
 Published in Pelican Books 1970
 Reissued in Peregrine Books 1975
 Second edition published by Cambridge University Press 1980
 Reprinted 1981, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1990
 Cambridge Philosophy Classics edition 2015

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
 Wollheim, Richard, 1923–2003.

Art and its objects : with six supplementary essays / Richard Wollheim. – Second edition,
 Cambridge Philosophy Classics edition.

pages cm.

ISBN 978-1-107-11380-0 (Hardback) –

ISBN 978-1-107-53441-4 (Paperback)

1. Aesthetics. I. Eldridge, Richard Thomas, 1953– writer of preface. II. Title.
 BH39.W64 2015

700.1–dc23 2015017317

ISBN 978-1-107-11380-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-53441-4 Paperback

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In Memory of Adrian Stokes
1902–1972

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Preface to this edition

RICHARD ELDRIDGE



Art and its Objects ends abruptly with the claim – surprising in an age obsessed with distinguishing between facts and values and with worrying about the logical status of value judgments – that, deliberately, next to nothing has been said in this book about the evaluation of art. Instead, Wollheim’s central aim is to understand what we are doing when we are either making or attending to art – an enterprise, as it were, of descriptive phenomenology. Two related, central ideas running through his account are that we demand a certain sort of experience from the things that we undertake to engage with as art, and that artmakers are typically responsive to this demand.

Both the nature of this demand and the available modes of response to it then emerge as far more complex and interesting than unidimensional accounts of art as a matter of pleasure or expression or form alone suppose. For one thing, works of art fall into types – poems, sculptures, operas, paintings, buildings, ballets, among others – not all of which require the work of art to be itself a physical object. More important, even when the work is a physical object, as in sculpture or painting, it has formal, expressive, and stylistic properties that are not reducible either to its physical features alone or to mere effects in the minds of its recipients. Hence Wollheim powerfully criticizes both sensuous-presentationalist-formalist theories of art and phenomenalist-idealist theories of art for focusing on only one aspect of works that typically and centrally involve the working of materials, against a background of practices and traditions, for the sake of complex, interrelated effects. What Wollheim calls ‘the working of the medium’ (p. 36) – pictorial, verbal, acoustic, and so on – matters.

There is no way apart from historically and critically informed experience of art to specify the materials and modes of working them that yield successful works. Both ‘the artistic impulse’ (p. 93) and the demands we make on art are, while rooted in biological facts about human beings, nonetheless not reducible to them. Art is related to life in taking up ‘deep feelings that pattern themselves in a coherent way over all our life and behavior’ (p. 97), but it also articulates and develops these feelings in

distinctive ways that outrun their biological bases, just as distinctive cuisines develop in ways that well outrun the human need for nutrition.

Hence art is, as Wollheim puts it, borrowing a phrase from Wittgenstein, 'a form of life' (p. 90). Along with religion, science, cooking, building, and many other practices, art is an irreducible and distinctive mode of the enactment, articulation, and development of the human. *Art and its objects* – both its aims and the things through which those aims are fulfilled – are, therefore, essential modes of human existence. This result, powerfully argued for and still unsurpassed in subtlety of development, is of the first importance not only for aesthetics, but also for philosophy of mind, value theory, and social philosophy. It is welcome to have it available for a new generation of readers.

Preface to the second edition



This essay is an expanded version of an essay originally written for the *Harper Guide to Philosophy*, edited by Arthur Danto. For the second edition I have kept the original text, and appended six additional essays. I have made changes in and additions to the bibliography. In writing the original text I was deeply indebted for advice and encouragement to Arthur Danto, Michael Podro, Adrian Stokes, Bernard Williams, and Margaret Cohen. In preparing this new edition I have benefited a great deal from criticism, suggestion, and assistance from David Carrier, Richard Dammann, Hidé Ishiguro, Jerrold Levinson, Charles Rosen, David Wiggins, Bruno Wollheim, and Henri Zerner: I have a singular debt of gratitude to Antonia Phillips. Two of the additional essays derive from a symposium held during the fifth Bristol Philosophy Conference in 1976 with Nelson Goodman and David Wiggins, from whose comments I learnt. I owe a very great deal to Katherine Backhouse who has typed and retyped the manuscript for both editions. I am grateful to Jeremy Mynott and Jonathan Sinclair-Wilson for editorial advice and assistance.

The argument



- 1–3 The question posed: What is Art? Scepticism whether a general answer may be given: such scepticism itself to be sceptically considered.
- 4 The physical-object hypothesis, i.e. the hypothesis that works of art are physical objects, introduced.
- 5–8 Over a certain range of the arts, e.g. literature, music, the physical-object hypothesis obviously untenable: for there is not here any physical object with which the work of art could *prima facie* be identified. However the untenability of the hypothesis over these arts said to raise no serious problems for aesthetics. The promise that we shall later return to these arts. (The promise redeemed in sections 35–7.)
- 9–10 The physical-object hypothesis now considered over those arts, e.g. painting, sculpture, where there is a physical object with which the work of art could *prima facie* be identified. Two difficulties for the hypothesis to be considered.
- 11–14 The difficulty presented by Representation or representational properties. A discussion of representation, resemblance and seeing-as, and the suggestion made that resemblance might be understood in terms of seeing-as rather than vice versa; the introduction of intention into any such analysis.
- 15–19 The difficulty presented by Expression or expressive properties. Two crude causal views of expression rejected. Natural expression and ‘correspondences’.



- 20 The physical-object hypothesis to be strengthened by a consideration of alternative hypotheses about the work of art:

specifically, over those areas of art where the physical-object hypothesis gains a foothold (cf. 9–10).

- 21 The Ideal theory, i.e. the theory that works of art are mental entities, and the Presentational theory, i.e. the theory that works of art have only immediately perceptible properties, introduced.
- 22–3 The Ideal theory considered. Two objections raised: that the theory would make art private, and that it disregards the medium. (The *bricoleur* problem, or the problem of art's diversity or arbitrariness introduced.)
- 24 The Ideal theory and the Presentational theory contrasted. Objections to the Presentational theory to be considered under two headings: those which dispute the exhaustiveness of the distinction between immediately and mediately perceptible properties, and those which insist that works of art possess properties other than the immediately perceptible.
- 25–31 The first set of objections to the Presentational theory considered. Difficulties for the exhaustive distinction between immediately and mediately perceptible properties are presented by meaning-properties and expression-properties. Sound and Meaning in poetry and the so-called 'music of poetry': the representation of movement: the representation of space ('tactile values'). The Gombrich argument concerning expression. (In the course of this discussion the notion of Iconicity briefly introduced.)
- 31–4 The second set of objections to the Presentational theory considered. Difficulties presented by properties that indubitably are not immediately perceptible, but are inherent to art. Genres and the 'radical of presentation': the spectator's expectations and the artist's intentions: the concept of art as something that the spectator must bring with him. The discussion broken off for a parenthesis.



- 35–7 The promise to consider those arts where the work of art clearly cannot be identified with a physical object now redeemed. Types and tokens, and the claim made that types may possess physical properties. Accordingly the arts where the physical-object

hypothesis evidently does not hold are less problematic for aesthetics.

- 38–9 Interpretation. Critical interpretation and interpretation through performance. Interpretation said to be ineliminable. The contrast between description and interpretation not to be narrowly taken.



- 40 The concept of art reconsidered, and the claim that works of art intrinsically fall under this concept. The suggestion, to which this claim gives rise, that the question, What is art?, may best be answered by considering the aesthetic attitude.

- 41–4 The aesthetic attitude, and distortions of it. Art and nature falsely assimilated. The connexion between seeing something as a work of art and that thing's having been made as a work of art. The amorphousness of the concept 'art', and the pervasiveness of art itself.



- 45 Art as 'a form of life', and the analogy between art and language introduced.

- 46–9 The concept of art as a form of life considered from the standpoint of the artist. The artistic intention, and the intentions attributed to individual works of art: the analogy with language properly understood does not require that we should be able to identify either of these apart from art and its objects. The so-called 'heresy of paraphrase'.

- 50 Art and phantasy contrasted: the fundamental error in the Ideal theory restated in the light of sections 46–9.

- 51–3 The concept of art as a form of life now considered from the standpoint of the spectator. Understanding works of art: Iconicity reintroduced, and the conditions of expression in art once more examined.

- 54 The work of art as a self-subsistent object: this conception qualified. The ‘invitation in art’ and ‘the transcendental’.
- 55 A third point of view on the conception of art as a form of life suggested. Art and how it is learnt. No more than a suggestion thrown out.
- 56 The analogy so far pursued (sections 45–55) has been between art and language, not between art and code: two contrasts contrasted. Style and redundancy.
- 57–8 Two limitations to the analogy of art and language. The fact that some works of art are in a (natural) language, and the lack of anything in art parallel to ungrammaticality or incoherence.



- 59 The last point suggests a consideration of the traditional demand of unity in a work of art. Unity considered, and three objections to any strict or formal explication of the notion.
- 60–63 Consideration of unity leads in turn to a consideration of art as an essentially historical phenomenon. Art’s historicity examined. The social determination of art. The *bricoleur* problem finally reconsidered.
- 64 Aesthetics: and how it might divide into the seemingly substantive and the seemingly trivial. The importance of the seemingly trivial in aesthetics for art itself: the perennial and ineradicable self-consciousness of art.
- 65 An omission recorded.