

INTRODUCTION

1. *The subject matter of this work*

The focus of this work is a philosophical consideration of a particular artistic issue: the limits of Abstraction in art.¹ However, proper treatment of that issue requires that it occur within a broader examination of several things that are relevant both to making and apprehending works of art in general,² and to the artistic and aesthetic properties of artworks. Because it is subjects who make and apprehend works of art; because both making and apprehending works of art depend on objects; because determining the limits of Abstraction must be based on investigating the subject-object relationship; and because consideration of the matter of Abstraction demands a wider reflection on art, it should be understood that this book contains a great deal of philosophy of subjects and objects and philosophy of art in addition to thinking that more specifically targets the particular artistic issue with which the work is concerned.

¹ I capitalize the terms ‘Abstract’ and ‘Abstraction’ to distinguish their use as terms of art from ‘abstract’ and ‘abstraction’ as terms of common parlance and philosophy because the use of these terms in the latter areas lack certain things of relevance to their use in art that this work identifies, and because Kit Fine has recently published a work called *The Limits of Abstraction* that differs in subject and intent from the topic of this book. I sometimes use the terms ‘minimal’ and ‘reductive’ as synonyms of ‘Abstract,’ where ‘minimal’ is written in lower case to distinguish it from Minimal art, whose objects are, nevertheless, of great importance to the history of Abstraction. When I speak of Abstraction it is to be understood that I am talking about Abstraction in art. And when I speak of the limits of Abstraction, it is implicit that those limits are the limits of Abstraction in art.

² It will be seen that speaking of “making and apprehending works of art,” both here and throughout, pertains to an artist’s effecting the intended identification of an artwork with some object, and a subject’s understanding of the intended identification effected. These are complex matters that involve a number of things. Part of understanding the complexity of making and apprehending works of art includes recognizing that an artist’s effecting the identification of an artwork with some object need not be limited to traditional kinds of artistic production, and that that which is apprehended may be the identity of an artwork rather than the object itself with which the work is meant to be identified.

The questions, ‘Does Abstract art have a limit?’ and ‘On what must the creative identification of any such limit rest?’ can be understood to arise in relation to certain works of Suprematism, Dadaism, Nouveau Réalisme, Fluxus, Minimalism, Conceptualism, Light and Space art, Body art, Land art, and Performance art, and in relation to other less classified or classifiable works of individual artists. As will be seen in the course of this work, these questions are of philosophical interest not only because of the depth and complexity of the problems that they define, but due to the relation of those problems to topics in the philosophy of subjects and objects, and to some wider issues in philosophical aesthetics.

The philosophical analysis of the framework in which artistic identification of the limits of Abstraction must occur treats that identification as an art-historical issue. Accordingly, publicity, or the possible understanding of a work’s identity by any number of subjects, is an essential aspect of the determination of Abstract art’s limits. This publicity is necessary to avoid the vapidness and critical and historical irrelevance of any artwork the knowledge of which would be confined to a single individual. Given this art-historical interest, the artworld is recognized as a sociological institution in relation to which investigations of the limits of Abstraction would have to be conducted, and within which the results of such investigations would have to be recognized and critically assessed. However, the requirement of the artworld for the recognition and assessment of a work does not mean that any object meant to be an artwork has to be exhibited in a gallery, museum, or alternative space. It only means that the artworld must be aware of any object in which a limit of Abstraction is determined if the object is going to have any critical and historical significance.

2. Artworks and subjects and objects

Although a philosophical work, as philosophical, cannot produce works of art that are more Abstract than any that has yet appeared, it can identify certain things with which even the more Abstract artworks cannot dispense. That identification includes recognizing that any artwork, including any of the more Abstract works, is an object of some kind of object; that each artwork has a particular identity; that the particular identity of an artwork indicates that it is logically

distinct and epistemologically distinguished from each object that lacks its particular identity; that the identity of an artwork depends on the intention of the artist whose work it is to effect the identification of the work with some object; that although artists may effect the identification of artworks with objects in a variety of ways, and notwithstanding the nature of the object that an artwork is meant to be, the artist's determination of the identity of an artwork depends on the use of at least one public perceptual object; that an artwork may or may not be meant to be identified with all or part of a public perceptual object that is used to effect the identity of that work; that understanding the intended identification of an artwork with some object depends on at least one public perceptual object that the work may or may not be meant to be, but that is relevant to the identity of the work; and that such understanding is presupposed by any appreciation of the work, and any assessment of its critical, historical, or philosophical importance.

3. *Artworks and artistic complexes*

It follows from the preceding points that an artist must be responsible for effecting a public perceptual object on which the identity of an artwork is relevantly dependent, such that, appropriate apprehension of such an object is a presupposition of understanding with which object the work is meant to be identified. An event of appropriately apprehending a public perceptual object on which the identity of an artwork is relevantly dependent produces an 'artistic complex' of which that apprehension, that object, and the subject whose apprehension it is are constituents. Such apprehension is appropriate when it is required to understand what the work is meant to be, such as seeing rather than touching for painting, and reading rather than hearing for language. Certain things are indispensable to the existence of any artistic complex, and certain things are unavoidable given its existence. Things of either kind of thing are said to be 'essential elements' of an artistic complex. These include: the subject, the perceptual object, and the subject's consciousness of the object that are constituents of the complex; certain properties of these things; certain relations that hold between them; conditions by which the subject, her consciousness, the object, their properties, and the relations that hold between them are constrained; and particular facts that

pertain to these things. It is part of the purpose of this work to identify these properties, relations, conditions, and facts, and to examine them to the extent required for the objective of this investigation.

The identification and examination of the essential elements of artistic complexes is important since identifying the limits of Abstraction in art is an art-historical undertaking. Accordingly, an artist must be responsible for the production of a public perceptual object on which comprehension of the intended identification of an artwork with some object depends. Appropriate apprehension of such a perceptual object is required to comprehend the intended identification of the work with some object. Such apprehension results in an artistic complex that has certain essential elements. As these elements are essential, how they might be used, in certain ways and combinations, as the most reductive ‘material’ there is for effecting the identification of artworks with the more Abstract objects would have to be artistically investigated. Although determining the limits of Abstraction in art must be an artistic and not a philosophical investigation, philosophy can state that any identification of a limit of Abstraction in art will involve an artistic complex in which the limit identified is comprehended. And philosophy can state in advance of, or in addition to, any artistic investigation of the limits of Abstraction that the identity of any of the more Abstract artworks possible will reflect the use of certain essential elements of any artistic complex in which that identity is comprehended to effect that identity. This is because the reflection in the identity of a work of any essential element that is used to effect that identity removes any conceptual gap between the object that the work is meant to be and the element that is used to effect it. As the most reductive material conceivable, use of essential elements of artistic complexes would not only allow the limits of Abstraction to be determined, but would determine the nature of the aesthetic of the more Abstract artworks that they could be employed to effect.

4. *Essentialism and essential elements of artistic complexes*

Because any creative determination of the limits of Abstraction in art would have to be based on working with essential elements of artistic complexes, and so would include a commitment to what Béla Bartok in another context called the “inexorable elimination of all

inessentials,”³ the language ‘Essentialist Abstraction’ or simply ‘Essentialism’ is used to refer to any creative investigation in which the limits of Abstraction would be identified. Thus the notion of essential in the use of the terms ‘Essentialist,’ ‘Essentialism,’ and ‘Essentially’ is meant to cover in a single concept any such investigation, and to underline to the importance of such an investigation the essential elements of artistic complexes. The notion of essential that the use of these terms reflect itself reflects the indispensability of certain things to the existence of an artistic complex, and the ineluctability of certain things given the existence of such a complex. The use of the notion of essential in regard to the elements of that entity does not permit the automatic extension of that notion to other areas of philosophical investigation. As will be seen in the book, I do maintain that certain things are essential to making art in addition to certain things being essential to artistic complexes, but it is not maintained universally that any kind of thing has an essence or essential property, other than the property that it has of obeying all of the laws of objects, which includes the law that any object has the property of being the object that it is. Therefore nothing of global metaphysical significance can be inferred from the use of the term ‘Essentialism’ in this work. Rather, its employment should be understood to be restricted to the project of determining the limits of Abstraction in art in terms of the use and reflection of essential elements of artistic complexes.

The terms ‘Essentialism’ and ‘Essentialist Abstraction’ are then used to pertain to any investigation that would occur of the limits of Abstraction in art—the limits whose creative identification must be based on and reflect the use of essential elements of artistic complexes. These terms are capitalized to tie them specifically to the project of determining the limits of Abstraction, but I use ‘essential’ in lower case when talking about the essential elements of artistic complexes. To speak of the ‘Essentialist’ is to speak of anyone who would be involved in such a creative investigation. Such remarks as: “It would be a task for Essentialism . . .;” “Essentialism must investigate . . .;” “Essentialist Abstraction would have to consider . . .;” and

³ Bartok’s quote refers to what music has to gain from studying folk music. See Tamplin, Ronald (ed.) *The Arts: A History of Expression in the 20th Century*, Oxford: Grange Books (1991) p. 52.

“The Essentialist would have to recognize . . .” that appear in this work refer to any creative effort to determine the limits of Abstraction in art. And the terms ‘Essentialist’ and ‘Essentialism’ that occur in such remarks reflect the fact that any such determination would have to be based on and reflect essential elements of artistic complexes that are identified and considered in this work. Any artwork that is one of the more Abstract possible, in being based on and reflecting the use of essential elements of artistic complexes, is an ‘Essentially Abstract’ artwork.

The notion of essential that pertains to my use of the terms ‘Essentialist,’ ‘Essentialism,’ and ‘Essentially,’ and to my speaking of the essential elements of artistic complexes, is intended to be consistent with any metaphysical view of the nature of the essential elements of such complexes. For instance, consciousness is an essential element of any artistic complex, and that remains the case whatever the metaphysical nature of consciousness is. Further, my use of the terms ‘Essentialist,’ ‘Essentialism,’ and ‘Essentially,’ in being specifically tied to determining the limits of Abstraction through the use of essential elements of artistic complexes, is meant to be distinct from any use of these terms in art-critical or art-historical writing that pertains to prior Abstract art.⁴

Determining the limits of Abstraction must be based on the use of essential elements of artistic complexes since anything that might be used to produce an artwork that is not such an essential element is dispensable. However, just as different colors, lines, and shapes can be combined in different ways to result in different things that are more or less Abstract, that different essential elements of artistic complexes may be combined or used in different possible ways to result in different objects in which different limits of Abstraction are differently determined must be recognized. Such different objects would differently reflect certain elements of artistic complexes that are used to produce them, and such reflection would be important

⁴ For instance, my use of ‘Essentialism’ differs from Mark Cheetham’s use of ‘essentialism’ when he says: “By essentialism I mean the search for immutable essence or truth and the concomitant ontological division between reality and mere appearance,” and when he says that he employs ‘essentialism’ “to refer to the belief in and search for the immutable and universal core of reality . . .” Cheetham, Mark A. *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press (1991). First quote p. xi, and second quote p. 38. Noting that difference does not denigrate the interest or importance of Cheetham’s study.

to the character of their aesthetic. In addition, because different kinds and forms of conscious event may be used in an investigation of those limits, and because these different kinds and forms of conscious event may be combined with agency to produce objects that are meant to be Abstract artworks, an Essentialist determination of a limit of Abstraction may involve a restructuring of certain relations between certain of the elements of an artistic complex. Any such restructuring would then form part of the aesthetic of any determination of any Abstract limit.

As will be seen in the course of this book, any attempt to determine the limits of Abstraction would be a deep and complex undertaking that would involve a number of different things. Accordingly, it should not be inferred from talk of the need to use essential elements of artistic complexes alone that any of the simpler objects that it is possible to effect is for that reason one of the more Abstract objects that it is possible to effect, or that there is a single standard means of equating the degree of Abstraction of an object with its simplicity or complexity, or that the notions of simplicity and complexity have absolute meanings apart from their application to different kinds of object that are put to different kinds of use in different kinds of situation. And because elements of artistic complexes may be used and combined in myriad ways to effect objects that artworks are meant to be, the nature of any limit of Abstraction, different kinds of limit that it may be possible to effect, and the degree of Abstraction of any limit, cannot be determined in advance of any creative utilization of such elements. The aesthetic of the creative determination of the limits of Abstraction also cannot be determined in advance of such a determination. However, it is clear that such an aesthetic would result from ways in which essential elements of artistic complexes are used. This may include novel uses of space, time, and language in addition to those things that have already been mentioned and those things that are identified and examined in this work.

Creative investigation of the limits of Abstraction in art does not presuppose knowledge of the results of the philosophical inquiry into what must underlie such an investigation. However, even though that is the case, effecting any of the more Abstract artworks possible would entail the conscious or unconscious use of essential elements of artistic complexes, and any identification of an artwork that is effected through the use of such elements would result in an

Essentialist artwork, or one that can be said to be Essentially Abstract, that would reflect the use of those elements.

5. *The format of this book*

This book is divided into four parts. Part One deals with issues prefatory to the project of identifying the limits of Abstraction, such as consideration of the meanings of the terms 'Abstract' and 'Abstraction,' and the relation of Modernism to that identification. Part Two is devoted to points that are essential to making and apprehending works of art in general, and so includes attending to things with which even the most Abstract artwork cannot dispense. The analysis of an artistic complex in Part Three includes the identification of things that are essential to the existence of any artistic complex, and things that necessarily obtain given the existence of such a complex, as well as matters that are relevant to each. Because such essential elements of an artistic complex must figure in any creative determination of the limits of Abstraction, Part Three's identification and consideration of them completes the inquiry into the things on which such a determination would rest. Part Four concludes the body of the work with remarks on effecting and comprehending the identity of an artwork as the focus of the creative determination of the limits of Abstraction, and on the indispensability of language to effecting and comprehending that identity, as that identity is determined in relation to the comprehension of language that pertains to essential elements of artistic complexes. Topics in the philosophy of subjects and objects that pertain to certain matters of the text are considered or elaborated upon in specialized appendices that appear after Part Four of the work for those who are interested.

6. *Concluding introductory remarks*

Many of the points made in this work may be required in, or may qualify, any conceivable world. However, I do not attempt to state the presuppositions of any possible reality that would permit subjects and objects and various relations to hold between them, but only attempt to identify what is required to make the most artistically

Abstract objects possible given the nature of this reality. Some of these considerations concern features of the world that, although contingent, are nevertheless essential to the project of determining the limits of Abstraction in art. In addition, an attempt to explain how or why things are as they are is for the most part superfluous to the project of identifying those things that constitute the conceptual and aesthetic framework for determining the limits of Abstraction in art, and to examining them and things that are pertinent to them in relation to their relevance to that framework.

I am not aware that anyone in the history of either art or philosophy has directly raised the question of whether or not Abstraction in art has a limit or limits; and, if it does, what that limit or those limits might be; how we could know or justify that any such limit is in fact a limit, and hence what that knowledge or justification would presuppose; and how any Abstract limit might be determined or exhibited in a particular work of art. I have found in thinking about these things that the issue of Abstract art's limits is profound and intricate and requires the kind of examination that I have attempted to provide in order for it to be adequately investigated. Although I believe that my consideration of the things noted is novel, thoughts of other thinkers in the worlds of both art and philosophy that are relevant to them are recognized at appropriate points in the text. Admittedly, relevance admits of degrees, and some of the references cited are more directly and others are more peripherally related to the issue of how the question of the limits of the Abstraction in art must be approached philosophically. Other works of still more general relevance are listed in the bibliography of the book, which is by no means exhaustive, but which reflects the complexity of the issues pertaining to Abstraction that this work addresses.

This book might have been reduced to a number of basic assertions from which creative investigations of the limits of Abstraction might then proceed. However, the work would then have been composed of propositions bold for absence of argument and sparse for lack of elucidation, giving it the character of the kind of artistic manifesto that is narrow and imperious, rather than consisting of some core thoughts buttressed by an amount and depth of reasoning required to render it complete and philosophical. An artistic manifesto is narrow and imperious, and so unduly restricted, when it, as Danto puts it, "defines a certain kind of movement, and a certain

kind of style, which the manifesto more or less proclaims as the only kind of art that matters.”⁵ A manifesto in the disagreeable parochial sense “singles out the art it justifies as the true and only art . . .”⁶ However, ‘manifesto’ can be used in a sense that is both wider and more tolerant than the preceding sense to describe writing about art or an artistic issue that delineates relevant conceptual and aesthetic aspects of a position as it considers carefully those things that are pertinent to the solution of an artistic problem, and does so while recognizing the creative and aesthetic legitimacy of other art forms and ways of making art to which it is neither superior nor inferior, but from which it simply differs. In this sense the present work can be understood to be a manifesto that is devoted to identifying and examining those things that are germane to the artistic problem that it considers.

This book is written for interested readers in the world of art in addition to the world of philosophy, and for sophisticated readers who may be intrigued by the subject matter of the book who are not members of either discipline. The concern for a broad heterogeneous audience having been noted, it must be admitted that much of the work is technical. However, the technical portions of the book are dictated by the complicated and recondite nature of much of its subject matter and cannot be avoided if that subject matter is to be treated thoroughly and properly. Some concepts, including novel concepts, that require definition or discussion are defined or discussed in the text in the least technical way possible when it is possible to do so without sacrificing either accuracy or clarity.

Before proceeding with the body of the text, I want to reemphasize that this book contains a substantial amount of philosophy of art in general, so that it may be of interest to philosophers of art whether or not they are particularly interested in the issue of the limits of Abstraction in art. And I want to reemphasize that much of the book is devoted to topics in the philosophy of subjects and objects, including different forms of conscious event, and different kinds of dependent and independent object, the identification of all of which, as far as I am aware, has not previously appeared in the

⁵ Danto, Arthur C. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press (1997) p. 28.

⁶ Danto, *After the End of Art*, p. 28.

literature. Although the things noted are included because they are germane to the subject matter of this work, I hope that the intrinsic interest of these things, and their significance to different parts of philosophy, will be thought to give their inclusion a value that supplements the value that they have because of their pertinence to that matter.