

# Aesthetic Investigations

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*Special Issue – Isn't all art performed?*

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## 'Isn't All Art Performed?' Special Issue Introduction

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**Abstract:** We introduce the special issue on the question 'Isn't all art performed?' We believe the affirmative answer is obvious, but the way the issue is often addressed in the philosophical literature presents a tension worth exploring. Perhaps some misunderstanding regarding what is considered an artwork has led to some misunderstanding regarding what performances are and how important they are ontologically. The working intuition in most contributions to this issue is that an artwork does not exist unless it is performed.

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When we posed the philosophical question 'Isn't all art performed?', we did not imagine that such a question might present a dilemma. The answer is either so obvious that potential respondents did not imagine having much in the way of philosophical prestidigitation to offer or they had never considered this question before, so they felt unprepared to tackle it. Those who did find a way to address our provocation used this occasion to explore the aesthetic aspects of projects and professions rarely addressed in the aesthetics literature, such as improvised architecture, made-for-the-screen stand-up comedy routines, artistic modelling, everyday gift-reception and performance art.

We believe the affirmative answer is obvious, but the way the issue is often addressed in the philosophical literature presents a tension worth exploring – a tension that inspired the titular question and this special issue of *Aesthetic Investigations* as a whole. Typically, philosophers have considered 'performed

artworks’ to require scores, scripts and texts, thus excluding anything improvised or aleatory, autographic art, social practices, open-ended processes and even live-streamed performances. This is reflected in Andrew Kania’s recent framing of the problem: music typically admits of both the work itself and its performances, whereas jazz has only performances and sculpture has only work.<sup>1</sup> We worry that his view engenders a definitional dichotomy of work and performance, such that not all art forms require both dimensions.

Perhaps some misunderstanding regarding what is considered an artwork has led to some misunderstanding regarding what performances are and how important they are ontologically. In this special issue we explore performances as presentations of artworks, whether on stage, in an alley, in a museum, in a home, in a forest, online or in the classroom. The working intuition in most contributions is that an artwork does not exist unless it is performed.

Kania’s view seems to track that of Nelson Goodman’s *Languages of Art*, a book we admire. What we find important to question is how and why Goodman’s explanation of the two-stage relationship between scores, scripts and texts on the one hand and their performances on the other has become philosophical dogma. Goodman considered making an artwork’s reception its ‘end-product’. He briefly discussed, but thereafter rejected the possibility that ‘the lookings at a picture and the listenings to a performance qualify equally as end-products or instances’ of two- and three-stage processes, respectively.<sup>2</sup> This picture, compelling as it might be, is open to complexities that Goodman does not account for. For example, an artwork’s creation is non-controversially informed by an artist’s skill set, the gradual acquisition of which could be considered an initial stage in the making of the work. With the addition of this stage, the steps become four – from skill acquisition to execution to performance (performer’s interpretation) to public reception (spectators’ evaluations). These, of course, are not always easy to separate analytically, which is probably why Kania regards jazz improvisation as a one-step performance rather than the culmination of a musician’s lifework.

Having been a gallerist, Goodman would have probably agreed that someone, whether the artist or another person, must make a definitive decision regarding how best to pose even a modest sculpture. Such considerations might include, for example, whether to use a white pedestal or a raw steel table, whether to place it far from or adjacent other artworks and whether to position it against a wall or in the middle of the room, etc. Such decisions could be considered ‘performance decisions’, no different than opting to conduct a score faster or louder than its musical notation indicates, performing a stage play over the radio or carefully retyping pages from an extant text. It seems to us that ‘performance decisions’ guide repeat performances, a.k.a. instantiations, of all artworks.

This leads to the question, ‘When is a “performance decision” a performance and when is it an artwork all its own?’ This is a question that we, the

co-editors of this special issue, have been debating for five years. Ventzislavov considers curators artists in their own right, whereas Spaid sees curators as performing artworks on behalf of artists.<sup>3</sup> Neither side of this disagreement has to commit to Kania's picture – the difference between our views is not a matter of collapsing a two-stage art into a one-stage one. Instead, our disagreement can be viewed as an exploration of the nature of 'performance decisions' and their potential to add artistic value to already existing artworks. We are curious whether dancers, actors or conductors perform their skill sets on behalf of some artist or as their own artwork.<sup>4</sup> When the performer and artist are one and the same, as with most cases of performance art, this question becomes especially interesting.<sup>5</sup>

A related performance-artwork conundrum emerges in Darren Hudson Hick's analysis of Simon Morris' novel *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head* (2010), which was initially presented as a series of blog entries (2008-2009), for which Morris 'laboriously' retyped a page a day of Jack Kerouac's original manuscript for *On the Road*. To determine whether GIJKH is a new artwork, Hicks begins his assessment by pitting Morris's text against textualists like Goodman who require instantiations of literary works to be exact replicas. Morris's book, however, replicates his blog, but fails as an exact replication of Kerouac's manuscript, since it contains errors such as a left-hand quote mark instead of a right-hand one and fewer underlined words than the original manuscript. Hicks remarks, '[O]n Goodman's view, a copy with a single typo – even a single misplaced comma – would not be an instance of the work. Even putting aside the reverse ordering of pages, that single misdirected quotation mark on page 317 of GIJKH would disqualify it as an instance of the work'.<sup>6</sup> Hicks adds that many find Goodman's standard unrealistic since many reprints have typos.

If Goodman's standard is informed by some absolute measure of 'performative fidelity', we find it more realistic to think of fidelity as a matter of relative magnitude. Another complication is that fidelity is not just a matter of expressive similarity, but also of critical engagement. Sherrie Levine's re-photographing Walker Evans' images and Elaine Sturtevant's copying Frank Stella paintings are good examples of this. While these works sustain high levels of expressive fidelity to the originals, their critical intent and context guards them against charges of mere appropriation. Appropriation, indeed, if it is accepted as art, would most often exhibit the expressive qualities of the original faithfully, while shunning the critical tensions and opportunities that such transpositions catalyse. Levine and Sturtevant's artworks are discussed in wholly different terms than those by Evans or Stella, which would not be possible in cases of mere appropriation. The most extreme case along the fidelity spectrum is, of course, forgery. A good forgery is good precisely on account of its expressive qualities, but nonetheless a forgery because of its total obliteration of context. Goodman's hard distinction between autographic and allographic artworks, which he used to explain why forgeries could not

be artworks, still does not seem to capture the nuance of performance across the fidelity/criticality scale.

One way to challenge the philosophical dogma of Goodman’s hard distinctions is to propose compelling counter-examples. One such example, on Spaid’s view, is the understanding of exhibitions as new instantiations of autographic artworks. Hicks likely agrees since he quotes Marjorie Perloff’s remark that ‘context always changes content’.<sup>7</sup> This approach finds a parallel in the performing arts. As it turns out, when Gunther Schuller analysed multiple recordings of famous scores, he was quite surprised to learn that most were conducted in far less exacting ways than Morris’s modest modifications to Kerouac’s manuscript.<sup>8</sup> If we treat Morris’s effort as an instantiation of an extant text, rather than an artwork all its own, does it matter who reprints, reads aloud or records *On the Road*? For example, isn’t it the same joke whether a comedian tells it in a dark comedy club, then performs it live before a studio audience on multiple late-night TV shows, after which our friend repeats it over dinner?

Alternatively, when we get closer to expressive qualities, does it really matter whether Morris performs Kerouac’s script backwards or forwards? We agree that *recording* Kerouac’s manuscript in reverse chronology (reading the last page first, etc.) would likely result in a jumbled mess, making it difficult to follow its narrative. As Hicks points out, Morris’s story, unlike Kerouac’s, starts out west and ends up back east. In challenging the view that Morris’s book is merely an instantiation of Kerouac’s book, Hicks reminds the reader that ‘anything that is true of one [instantiation] is true of the other, including matters of interpretation and assessment’.<sup>9</sup> No doubt, we would assess a reversed narrative differently, granting each version its distinct critical dimension, which in turn would make them different artworks. However, Hicks describes Morris’s project as the writer’s attempt to get a better handle on Kerouac by typing the words as the author did. And in fact, Morris typed the pages in the same order as Kerouac, only he stacked the most recent page atop the earliest one, rather than behind it as one usually does. Although we consider Morris’s object to be a performance of an extant text, we find it exemplary of conceptual art since this instantiation directs our attention to literary issues regarding sequence, format and compliance, which gives the underlying text a new meaning.

It thus pays to consider Morris’s effort a new performance of an extant artwork. Although his book is in reverse order, a reader who wants to read Kerouac’s text could easily start from the last page and read forward, making it effectively the same text, plus/minus Morris’s minor modifications. Hicks seems to agree, since he credits both Jerrold Levinson and Gregory Currie with the view that Morris is closer in effect to a typesetter ‘involved in an act of *instantiation*, and not an act of *creation*’.<sup>10</sup> Had Morris read or recorded Kerouac’s manuscript *backwards*, it would truly be a different ball of wax. As it stands, however, the legitimacy of Morris’ claim to have made a new

artwork hangs on the critical dimension of its intention and reception. In terms of critical intention, the questions of whether ‘performance decisions’ are mere instantiations and what qualifies them as artworks remain beyond this issue’s purview. As to the critical reception of Morris’s novel, only time will tell whether it’s deemed a new creation.

Our special issue places an emphasis on the socially-constructed critical contexts that circumscribe an artwork’s public entry into the artworld. We appreciate how our contributors engage these contexts and shed light on the initial question we posed regarding artworks and their performances. Aurélie Debaene outlines several kinds of artist models to demonstrate how modelling is an artistic performance, which like jazz and improvisational theatre reflects an artist’s skill set. In addition to solidly convincing us of modelling’s artistic merits, she analyses specific cases such as life model Dominic Blake and models’ greater autonomy via Zoom. Kenneth Wilder’s paper on architecture as performance surveys some of Goodman’s distinctions, but reaches a conclusion that goes well beyond Goodman’s architectural paradigm. The performative aspect of architecture not only begins with design and construction decisions, but it culminates in the imaginary ‘enactment’ of a receptive audience. Frank Boardman gets closer to what we normally think of as the performing arts. In his definitional account of comedy specials, he explores the difference between one- and two-stage artistic processes and interrogates, among many things, the balance of performative authorship between the comedian’s live set(s) and the ‘special’ created by the filmmaker’s team. Sue Spaid describes how gift recipients must imagine how to fit unexpected gifts into everyday life, which requires them to interpret appropriate contexts. She compares this ‘agonistic’ process, which she terms enacting the gift, to artwork reception. Our issue of *Aesthetic Investigations* is rounded out by two related reviews and Gemma Argüello Manresa’s article regarding feminist pedagogical performance artist Mónica Mayer in the *Art and Artists* Section. Rossen Ventzislavov discusses a recent performance by legendary performance artist Ron Athey. His article tightens the focus on the relationship between authorship and context, asking what it means to be a creative agent in a polyvalent communally-driven art practice like Athey’s. Dror Pimentel’s evaluation of the ecological and social issues explored in the film *The Survivalist* (2021) demonstrates how interpretations are a kind of performance. Both reviews characterise what we term the fourth stage, or public reception.

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### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Kania 2011, 400.  
<sup>2</sup>Goodman 1976, 114.  
<sup>3</sup>See Ventzislavov 2014, and Spaid 2016.  
<sup>4</sup>See Rob van Gerwen 2012 for an insightful exploration of the connection between listening experiences and musical performances.  
<sup>5</sup>Tino Seghal, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Vanessa Beecroft and Anne Imhof seem

to challenge this assumption. But even though they could be identified as ‘director-artists’ who work with performers, their creative proximity to the final stages (staging and reception) marks them as performance artists all the same.

- <sup>6</sup>Hicks 2013, 156.  
<sup>7</sup>Hicks 2013, 163.  
<sup>8</sup>Schuller 1997.  
<sup>9</sup>Hicks 2013, 157.  
<sup>10</sup>Hicks 2013, 158.

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