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Introduction: What Can the Philosophy of Science Do for the Philosophy of Art (and Vice Versa)?

Over the past thirty years or so the notion of *representation* has moved to center stage in the philosophy of science. Various accounts have been given of this notion, with examples and counter-examples drawn from both science and art. Thus, for example, certain formal accounts of the relationship between a given representation and the system represented have been taken to be ruled out on the basis of the claim that such accounts fail for certain cases of representation in art, leading to the obvious objection that the relevance of such cases for representation in science is simply not clear. More generally, the extent of that relevance has not been systematically analyzed or discussed and the question whether a 'one size fits all' notion of representation can be maintained has not been addressed.

But of course, there is vastly more to the philosophies of science and art than is captured in discussions around representation! Consider the ontological questions 'what is a theory?' and 'what is an artwork?' The former has also begun to achieve a certain prominence in the philosophy of science following the widespread adoption of the so-called 'model-theoretic' or 'semantic' approach which analyzes or represents (that word again!) theories in terms of families of scientific models. Some have argued that this approach *identifies* theories with such models, leading to well-known concerns, whereas others have resisted this move, leaving the question still to be answered. On the philosophy of art side, the related question is of course the focus of considerable discussion and here again considerations from that discussion – in this case at the meta-level of philosophical reflection, rather than at the 'object' level of artistic examples – can be exported to the philosophy of science. Again, however, the issue of relevance arises: to what extent is a scientific theory like a piece of music? Or a work of literature?

It was in order to initiate a discussion of these questions of relevance between the two fields that the workshop 'What Can the Philosophy of Science Do for the Philosophy of Art (and vice versa)?' was held in the School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science, University of Leeds, in October 2012. The idea was to bring together interested people in an informal context to discuss the above questions in the context of four presentations drawing on examples, moves and considerations from painting, music, literature and art in general. Our intention is that the workshop will be the first of several, involving other speakers of course, and held in other locations, but all focusing on the interactions and inter-relationships between these two important fields. To further the project, this *Newsletter* prints two presentations from the conference; the next issue will contain the other two.

Steven French
Dean Rickles
George Darby
Otávio Bueno

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can easily imagine advances in technology that would enable us to both generate and detect a greater range of the spectrum, sampling more regions.

I think what this brief survey shows is that musicology really demands a deeply interdisciplinary approach. It is therefore perfectly understandable to find the music theorist David Lewin writing that “[a]ctually, I am not really sure what a ‘theory of music’ might be” (1986: 377), for a theory of music might well be a theory of many things! Of course, one need not cover all aspects for all kinds of purpose. I don’t expect musicologists to become neuroscientists. My point is, at the deepest level, if we want to understand *why* musical structure is the way it is – e.g., rather than simply accepting the structure as *basic* and performing standard analyses of it – then, it requires an integrated approach. However, the kind of integrated analysis that results (involving observer selection effects) makes this an ideal case study for philosophers of science.

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Essentialist Abstraction

Jeffrey Strayer

Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne

In 1910, Wassily Kandinsky painted *Abstract Watercolor*, which is typically taken to be the first work of abstract art in history. The ground for organic abstraction was prepared by late Turner, and evolves from him through Kandinsky, and through minimally figurative works of such painters as Soutine, (some) Matisse, and late Monet, to de Kooning, Pollock, and Rothko.¹ Geometric abstraction stems from Cézanne, through the Analytic Cubism of Braque and Picasso, to Robert Delaunay, Malevich, (some) Matisse, and Mondrian, and then to Minimalism. A different approach to abstraction was taken by Marcel Duchamp in his readymades, such as *Bottle Rack*, that dispensed with creation in having been simply excerpted by choice from preexistent reality. And Rauschenberg combined the selection of Duchamp with reductive art’s elimination of subject matter in his *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. Building on the extreme reductivism of Judd, LeWitt, Martin, Morris, Newman, Rauschenberg (the white paintings) Reinhardt (the black paintings), and Ryman, such Conceptual artists as Robert Barry, Victor Burgin, Christine Koslov, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner used language to produce works that were even more radically abstract than those that influenced them. In 1965, Kosuth exhibited a transparent sheet of glass as a token of a type of work that he called *Any Five Foot Sheet of Glass to Lean Against Any Wall*, and it is clear that language here does more than function as a title. Some four years later, at 1:36PM, June 15, 1969, Robert Barry wrote ALL THE THINGS I KNOW BUT OF WHICH I AM NOT AT THE MOMENT THINKING, using that language, with the time and date appended, to identify the work with something of which not even the artist himself could be aware.² One thread of art history then proceeds, through a fairly anfractuouse route, from realistic art at one point in history to what might be thought to be the limit of abstraction determined in a work produced on a June afternoon in 1969. What could be more abstract than a work that neither we nor

the artist can experience?

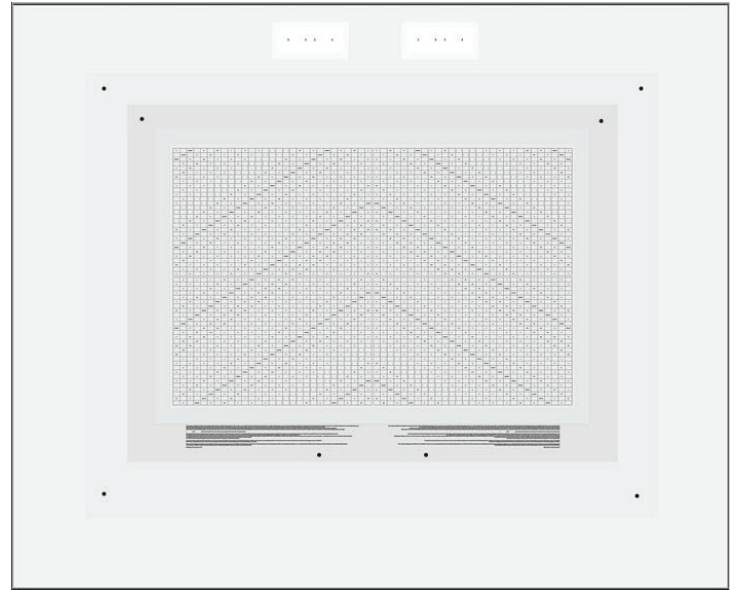
Questions that I have asked myself as a thinker—as both a philosopher and an artist—include: Is it possible to make a work that is even more abstract than Barry's *all the things I know . . .*? How would one go about doing that? If you can get rid of subject matter, color, opacity, the standard act of creation, and even an object of experience, is there anything else with which you can dispense? What *can't* you get rid of? Could things that can't be gotten rid of then constitute the most severely reductive 'material' of ultimate abstraction?

To answer these questions philosophically, it seemed to me that one would have to identify the fundamental elements of making (in an expanded sense of making) and apprehending (in sometimes novel senses of apprehending, following Barry) works of art. This is what I attempted to do in my book *Subjects and Objects: Art, Essentialism, and Abstraction*. I tried to identify what is philosophically required to make and apprehend works of art in general, with an idea of what then would be required to make the more abstract works possible in particular.³ This proved to be no easy exercise, and I uncovered layers of depth and complexity in the question of what is required to make and apprehend works of art, including radically abstract works, that I had not anticipated when I began to think about it. I not only had to consider things that had been done, but had to imagine what might be done, and I thought of things, both as a philosopher and as an artist, that would not have occurred to me had I not asked the question.

However, I knew that, even should it prove possible to identify what is necessary to make and apprehend art, philosophy itself could not identify the limits of abstraction in art. It can only identify the 'material' with which the artist must work. Or, it can only tell the artist what is unavoidable, but the artist himself must try to figure out what to do with what is essential, and must accept the creative challenge of investigating the aesthetic, artistic, and philosophical possibilities of working with the ultimately reductive material identified.⁴

As an artist, I am interested in using the indispensable conditions of making and apprehending works of art to produce works of art that, among other things of interest, reside at the limits of Abstraction.⁵ What are these indispensable conditions? To produce a work of art an artist must single something out that the work is meant to be. That is logically unavoidable. Something must be conceptually delineated, or marked off from everything that it is not, or there is no work to discuss, interpret, or evaluate, or even to know of as something with a particular identity that everything else lacks.⁶ Whatever is so delineated is an object. The term 'object' here is to be understood in the widest possible sense, and so to go beyond physical, perceptual, and existential objects to include things that are purely intellectual, conceptual, or imaginary. It is to be understood to be synonymous with either 'thing' or 'entity,' and to lack ontological commitment. That is, an object that an artwork is meant to be need not exist or have any sort of being conceivable—other than its being the object that it is—but may rest entirely on the possibility of its conception. Indeed, an artwork may in fact be the very event of understanding its identity as that event of that understanding, as is the case with *Haecceity 9.1.0*. An artwork may also depend on the attempt to conceive of its identity, but in such a way that, as with *Haecceity 12.0.0*, its identity is linked to the necessary failure of that conception.⁶

As does each individual entity, a particular object that a particular artwork is meant to be has a particular identity that everything else lacks. It must be possible to understand the intended identity of an artwork. That understanding rests on a public perceptual object. While that is the case, an artwork need not be either any perceptual



Haecceity 9.1.0. Jeffrey Strayer (2009). 48" x 92." Contact prints and paper mounted to Gatorfoam with Plexiglas, hexagonal bolts, washers, and screws. German Silver metal frame. Image courtesy of the artist.

object on which understanding its intended identity depends, or any other perceptible object.⁷ And it may not be possible to be aware of, or to perceive or otherwise experience, the object itself *that* a work is meant to be, as opposed to being aware that it is to be understood as a particular object.⁸ It is only necessary to be able to understand what we are to understand the work to be.⁹

So, an artist must single something out that a work is meant to be; that something is an object with a particular identity that everything else lacks; it must be possible for others to understand the intended identification of a particular artwork with a particular object; and that understanding rests on a public perceptual object or objects.

When a subject attends to a perceptual object on which knowledge of the identity of a work depends, an 'artistic complex' results of which the subject, the perceptual object, and her consciousness of that object are constituents. Consciousness is an essential element of an artistic complex, as are the subject's agential, indexical, epistemological, historical, and causal relations to the perceptual object of the complex. Spatial and other apprehensible properties of the perceptual object that mark it as perceptual, and that provide a route to knowledge of the work's intended identity, are unavoidable aspects of an artistic complex, as are the time that the complex exists, and its coming to be and ceasing to be in time. These, and other things identified in *Subjects and Objects* that will be characteristic of any artistic complex, can be thought of as "material" to be used in some way to produce the objects that the more Abstract artworks possible are meant to be.¹⁰ How consciousness and agency can be used as media, and how elements of artistic complexes can be used in the production of artistic identity, are complex and interesting matters that, I believe, have rather remarkable artistic and aesthetic potential, extending considerably beyond the determination of Abstract limits, which is fertile enough ground of its own.

Because works from what I call the "*Haecceities Series*" only result from, or consist of, things that are essential to making and apprehending works of art, or since I am only utilizing things that are indispensable

to conveying and effecting the identity of an artwork, I call what I am doing "Essentialism."¹¹

Language must be used to identify the limits of Abstraction by 'specifying,' or conceptually delineating, objects with which artworks are meant to be identified.¹² To use language to effect and convey the identity of a work is to use it as a medium. And since it can be written to combine with consciousness and agency to produce the identity to be understood, these things too become media of Essentialism.¹³ An essentially Abstract artwork results from using language to engage the comprehension of that language in the identification of what all or part of the work is meant to be.¹⁴ The ways in which this can be done turn out to be intriguingly myriad, and to result in the determination of a number of different Abstract limits, and a number of things of interest beyond that determination. In engaging a subject's comprehension of language to affect the Essentialist object to be comprehended, one utilizes the conscious comprehension of identity that is ineliminable from even the most Abstract artwork. Choice can also be engaged in the construction of identity. And, generally, part of the creative identification of the limits of Abstraction includes using language and its comprehension to address, either explicitly or implicitly, necessary elements of artistic complexes as they are utilized in the determination of what a work is meant to be.

As every artwork must have an identity – must be intended to be identified with *something* of some sort – each artwork is *this* particular thing that it is, and no other thing, no matter how similar it is to anything else, and despite its nature. Thus an artwork's identity is particular. The word 'haecceity' comes from the Latin *haecceitas* for thisness. And as each particular artwork has to be identified with an object that is this thing and no other thing, and as language has to be used to single out the more Abstract artworks possible, I call each specification of the *Haecceities* series a "Haecceity" to emphasize the importance of the thisness of each artwork, the particular identity that it has that everything else lacks.

How language is utilized in relation to essential elements of artistic complexes has an aesthetic in addition to an artistic and philosophical function. Most artists who have used language have written it in a straight line, as it would appear in a book. Such use neither recognizes, nor attempts to solve, four interrelated problems that come

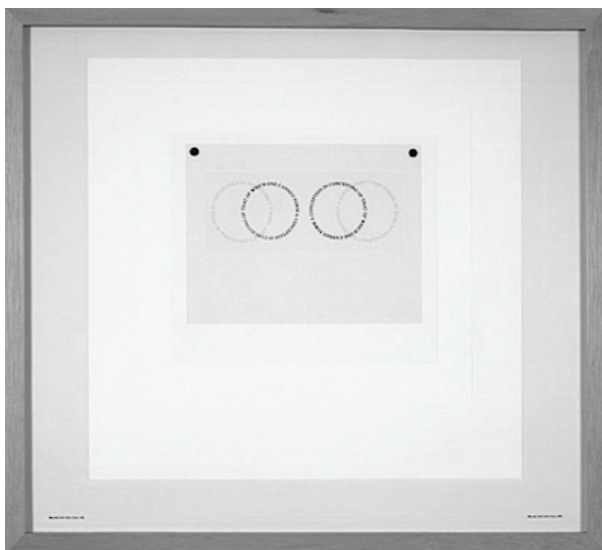
with the artistic use of visible language on a two-dimensional surface. These are the problems of number, distribution, figure-ground, and asymmetry.¹⁵ To solve these problems I use either circular language, whose visibly reflexive form often mirrors the reflexive form of its comprehension, or I use linear language that is repeated and distributed in correlated sets of matrices according to an algorithm that I discovered that ensures that the language of a pair of correlated matrices is repeated a number of times vertically, and a number of times horizontally, equal, in each case, to the number of words of which the specification consists.¹⁶ This algorithm solves at once all four of the language-surface problems cited, and the algorithmic repetition and distribution of language has both a philosophical and an aesthetic effect on the issue of identity, and on the Abstract limit that is determined in a particular identity.

I am not only attempting to identify different limits of Abstraction, but am equally concerned with things that are of philosophical and aesthetic interest and importance to that identification. These include, but are not limited to: thingness; the relation of thisness to its comprehension; how identity stands in relation to its determination; the subject-object relationship; novel notions of artistic media, including, as noted, the use of consciousness and agency in the identification of Abstract limits; the multifarious nature of the aesthetic; and problems that are raised by, and knowledge that is due to, the identification of Abstract limits that would not arise, and would not be possible, apart from that identification.

Selected works from the *Haecceities* series, as well as reductive limits identified by them, and things that are of aesthetic, artistic, and philosophical relevance to those limits will appear in my forthcoming book *Haecceities: Essentialism, Identity, and the Limits of Abstraction*.¹⁷ Works from the *Haecceities* series can be found at my website at <www.JeffreyStrayer.com>.

Notes

1. The artists named in this first paragraph as important to various strands of abstraction are not meant to exhaustively identify figures of importance to those lines of art-historical development. I will be bold enough to suggest though that the importance of Turner to the history of art, and to abstract art in particular, can hardly be overestimated. His blurring of the distinction between recognizable objects; the integration of positive and negative space; the more formal than natural use



Haecceity 12.0.0. Jeffrey Strayer (2002). 20 1/4" x 22 7/16". Transparent print, screws, contact print, and paper mounted to Gatorfoam. Image courtesy of the artist.



Haecceity 12.0.0 (detail). Jeffrey Strayer (2002). Image courtesy of the artist.

of color, line, and shape; taking time out of the picture and putting it into the observation of the work – which his composition favors the extension of – and taking narrative out of the work and replacing it with the narrative of the past and future history of art, make Turner, to my mind, the first Modernist in painting, not Manet, as Clement Greenberg would have it. At a Turner exhibition Rothko is reported to have said, “This guy Turner learned a lot from me.”

2. By the very nature of the language, Barry could not then be aware of any individual member of what, one supposes, was a very large class of epistemological entities, without thereby excluding the object of awareness from membership in the class of things delineated by the language. The radical nature of this work comes from its use of language to identify an artwork with an object that cannot be experienced, that is, *of* which we cannot be aware, as opposed to being aware that the work is to be understood to be to what the language refers.

3. Leiden, *The Netherlands*: Brill (2007). Information about this work can be found at my website, including an interview in which I talk about *Subjects and Objects*; see <<http://www.jeffreystrayer.com/written-interview-landing.php>>.

4. Perhaps it is worth noting that I did not first write the philosophy and then start to make the work. Rather, the two projects were pretty much intertwined from the start, and I had started to use language in the interest of what I call ‘Essentialist Abstraction’ before I started to write the philosophy that it conceptually presupposed. In fact, I do not think that I could have written *Subjects and Objects* had I not been an artist in addition to being a philosopher. And it seems fair to recognize the influence of philosophy on the art. Art and philosophy in my work then have had a symbiotic relationship that I anticipate will continue.

5. I capitalize “Abstraction” both to distinguish it from the association of abstract objects with spaceless and timeless entities – although an Abstract entity can be spaceless and timeless it need not be – and to recognize its relation to art, and to the reduction of art to its essentials. And I speak of the “limits” of Abstraction because there is more than one.

6. Conventionally, one singled out an artwork by creating it, by painting it or sculpting it, for instance. Duchamp showed that one could simply select something and exhibit it as a work of art, as long as that intention was understood. And certain Conceptual artists showed that language could be used to single out works of art by specifying them.

7. See <<http://www.jeffreystrayer.com/sequences/sequence-9.php>> for *Haeccesity* 9.1.0 and <<http://www.jeffreystrayer.com/sequences/sequence-12.php>> for *Haeccesity* 12.0.0. These two *Haeccesities* illustrate different ways in which identity can be investigated in relation to its comprehension. Each image can be enlarged by clicking on it. The ‘supporting language’ beneath the matrices of *Haeccesity* 9.1.0 should be read to see its language, and to understand how it is distributed algorithmically in the matrices above it.

8. The perceptual object of a *Haeccesity* artwork is only the work of art if its language can be understood to refer to it, as in *Haeccesity* 2.0.3: this here now. See <<http://www.jeffreystrayer.com/sequences/index.php>>. Other than that sort of case, the perceptual object of a *Haeccesity* artwork can only be understood to be part of the work with what is singled out by the language that it contains..

9. This is the case, for instance, with *Haeccesity* 12.0.0, the language

of which is reproduced in this article, and the link to which appears in endnote seven.

10. This at least is what is the required artistic and philosophical starting point, but, as seen in a *Haeccesity* such as 12.0.0, one can use language to experiment artistically with that requirement. And even in *Haeccesity* 12.0.0, it singles out what is named by its language, which is distinct, as a kind of Essentialist impossible object, from everything that lacks the identity of that object. On the use of the term ‘Essentialist’ see below. On impossible objects see *Subjects and Objects*

11. See <<http://www.jeffreystrayer.com/events.php>> for a lecture and PowerPoint illustration on these matters.

12. There is precedence in the history of art for an artist himself naming what he is doing. Malevich gave the name ‘Suprematism’ to his work, and de Chirico called what he was doing ‘Metaphysical Art.’

13. The use of language to single something out that an artwork is to be understood to be I called ‘specification’ in *Subjects and Objects*. George Dickie said that Barry’s *all the things I know . . .* “was not crafted with anything, it was just specified.” Dickie takes this either to show that the Barry piece is not a work of art or, if it is, it has “transcended the need for a medium.” (See Dickie, George, *The Art Circle*, New York: Haven (1984) pp. 59-61.) I think that Dickie is wrong on both counts, and I defend a new and wider notion of medium and media that is required to accommodate certain works of Conceptual art, and what I am doing in the *Haeccesities* series. On the notion of a medium see *Subjects and Objects*, pp. 234-253.

14. See, for instance, *Haeccesities* 9.0.0 and 9.1.0 at <<http://www.jeffreystrayer.com/sequences/sequence-9.php>>.

15. An object that is singled out by a *Haeccesity* is said to be ‘ideational,’ and an ideational object can be understood to be the artwork of the *Haeccesity* by which it is specified. An object is ideational when its identification with a particular artwork is implicitly or explicitly dependent on a concipient’s understanding of a *Haeccesity* that specifies the object in relation to that understanding. See both *Subjects and Objects* and *Haeccesities*.

16. I talk about these problems in a videotaped interview that can be seen at my website at <<http://www.jeffreystrayer.com/artwork-interview.php>>. None of the Conceptualists who have used language have addressed, nor have their appeared to understand, these problems.

17. For instance, *Haeccesity* 7.0.0 has 33 words. There are two correlated pairs of matrices in the perceptual object of this work. Two *Haeccesity* matrices are correlated when they can be theoretically combined to form a new matrix consisting of them, so that the new matrix would contain the information of each matrix of the correlated pair of which it consists. In the case of *Haeccesity* 7.0.0, its language reads correctly 33 times vertically and 33 times horizontally in the matrix that would result from combing a pair of correlated matrices, and so 66 times in all in that matrix, albeit in different beginning and ending cells in each column and in each row of the matrix. As there are two pairs of correlated matrices, the language reads correctly 132 times in all. See <<http://www.jeffreystrayer.com/sequences/sequence-7.php>>.

18. I talk about this work in an interview that can be seen at <<http://www.jeffreystrayer.com/written-interview-landing.php>>. The current introduction to the work, and a provisional TOC, are at <<http://www.jeffreystrayer.com/limits-of-abstraction.php>>.