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The Nature of Artistic Performance

1 Introduction

The aim of this book is to identify, explore, clarify, and perhaps even answer a range of philosophical questions that arise when we reflect upon the nature of the performing arts and our involvements with them. Most of us have participated in different ways in broadly artistic performances. Indeed, preparation for such participation begins early in life. Few of us manage to pass through primary school without finding ourselves on a stage trying to master a primitive instrument or struggling to remember our lines, under the nervously expectant eyes of our parents and friends. Some who emerge unscathed from such experiences pursue these kinds of activities in a more accomplished and self-assured manner not only in later schooling and university but also in adult life. They become professional or amateur singers or musicians, or participants in theatrical or dance productions, or orchestrators of the performative efforts of others. For most of us, however, our subsequent encounters with artistic performances are in the less heady role of spectator. We sit reverently at a performance by a string quartet or a theatrical troupe, or shiver under blankets at an open-air festival, or peer through lorgnettes at the posing of a diva, or pause in our evening meanderings to watch a street mime.

As you reflect upon your own encounters with the performing arts, it may seem strange to talk, as I did a few sentences ago, of the “philosophical questions” that arise when we reflect on such experiences. For our involvements with artistic performances hardly seem to generate such questions, apart from the ruminations inspired by the *content* of some performances we have attended – dark existential meditations inspired by a performance of *Hamlet*, for example. What I hope to show in the following chapters, however,

is that our experiences of the performing arts, whether as performers or as spectators, already implicate us in questions about the very nature of artistic performances, independent of their particular content.

But before we take up these matters, we must look more critically at some notions that I have thus far taken for granted. I have spoken of “the performing arts” and of “artistic performances,” and I have given some content to my use of these expressions by providing examples of familiar activities that might fall under these descriptions. But, we might ask, in virtue of what are these activities rightly brought under these descriptions? What makes a particular practice a performing art, or a particular event an artistic performance?

Consider the following response: a performing art is a practice whose primary purpose is to prepare and present artistic performances. This may be true as far as it goes, but we need to explain what it is for something to be an artistic performance. To answer that an artistic performance is the kind of event in which we actively participate or which we receptively encounter in the context of the performing arts is hardly illuminating. For we are simply moving in a narrow definitional circle. How should we try to break out of this circle? Since the circle involves two terms, we might try to give an independent account of one of them and then use this to explain the other. Suppose we take the notion of an artistic performance as our first term. Then we might characterize artistic performances in terms of some manifest properties that distinguish them from performances of other kinds. Given this analysis of artistic performance, we could define the performing arts as those practices designed to enable the presentation and appreciation of artistic performances so construed. We find something like this approach in Monroe Beardsley’s (1982) attempt to characterize the movements that make up artistic performances in dance in terms of their distinctively “aesthetic” qualities. Suppose, on the other hand, we take the notion of a performing art as our first term. Then we might characterize those practices we commonly think of as performing arts – theater, music, and dance, for example – in terms of “institutional” features that do not presuppose the nature of the performances presented within them. And we could define artistic performances as those that are presented within the context of such institutionally characterized practices. We find something like this approach in George Dickie’s “institutional” theory of what it is that makes something a theatrical performance.¹ After some preliminary remarks about the nature of performance in general, I shall explore this second kind of approach before considering the former alternative.

2 What is a Performance?

Since we are interested in the nature of artistic performances, and not simply in whether they are properly classified as theater or dance, we should

start by asking, in the most general way, what leads us to talk of a particular event as a *performance*. All performances, in the sense that interests us, are actions, whether individual or collective. In a collective performance, different individuals not only act but do so in a way that aims at some kind of coordination of their individual efforts. As actions, performances involve behavior that falls under at least one description specifying a purpose governing that behavior and, implicitly or explicitly, a result at which it aims. This is how the action of shutting the window differs from those bodily movements described in purely physical terms through which that action is accomplished. In so characterizing the sense of “performance” that interests us, we distinguish it from the use of the term to assess the behavior of things that may be incapable of action. We can mark this distinction by talking, in the latter case, of performance “in the merely evaluative sense,” and in the former case of performance “in the full sense.” When I describe to a garage mechanic my car’s erratic performance when I drive it in the rain, for example, I am not attributing actions to my car, but merely characterizing what it does in a context where this is a subject of evaluation. My car is in no sense a *performer*, even though what it does is indeed its performance in the merely evaluative sense.

But, if all performances in the full sense are actions, not all actions are performances in the full sense. It is unlikely that brushing one’s teeth in the morning, or walking to one’s place of work or study, would normally qualify as performances in the full sense, for example. We rightly describe an action as a performance in the full sense only if it meets certain further conditions. Suppose, for example, that Basil regularly carries an umbrella when he travels to work, and that he twirls it ostentatiously as he walks to and from the station. This could just be a nervous tic, but suppose that the twirling becomes more stylized and daring when he passes through neighborhoods where his actions are likely to be observed. It now starts to seem natural to describe what Basil does not merely as an action but as a performance in the full sense. Part of our evidence for characterizing what Basil does in this way is the patterns that we observe in his behavior, the actions that are repeated from one occasion to another. But a performance in the full sense need not be an instance of a type of behavior that is repeated in this way. Young Ben who stomps from the room slamming the door after being told that he can’t play his new video game on the family television may also rightly be described as giving “quite a performance” even if this is (happily) an isolated punctuation of the domestic calm.

What then are the features that distinguish those actions we are inclined to call performances in the full sense from other actions? First, as our examples indicate, performances in the full sense not only involve actions aimed at achieving some result, but are also open, at least in principle, to public scrutiny and

assessment. But this by itself obviously fails to distinguish performances from mere actions. Ben's mother may comment that he is getting better at brushing his teeth properly, but we would resist saying, on these grounds, that Ben's tooth-brushing behavior is a performance in the full sense. We might talk of it as a performance in the merely evaluative sense, since it is a regularity in Ben's behavior that we are evaluating relative to some standard. In this sense, parents worry about the performance of their children in school. But the worry would be different if it was reported that their children were "performers" in school, that their actions were performances in the full sense. To see why, it will be helpful to use a different example.

Consider how one might talk about one's local football team after watching them slump to yet another ignominious defeat. One might bemoan the performance of the team while also singling out the performances of certain players for particular vilification. But, as with Ben and my car, to talk about performance here is to talk in the merely evaluative sense about what someone or something does. It does not entail that the persons or things evaluated are *performers* in the sense that Basil can be described as a performer. But consider the footballer Edwin who "showboats" because he believes a scout from a big team is in the crowd. Confronted by the somewhat agricultural fullback of the opposing team whom he could easily outpace, Edwin makes a point of executing a smart "step-over" routine that leaves the fullback floundering in his wake. Here, as with the pupil who deliberately acts up in class, it seems right to talk not just of his performance, but also of him as *performing*. To perform is to act in certain ways *for* the attention of those who are or may be observing one's actions. The football player normally chooses to act in the way he does because of what his opponent is doing. His actions are guided by, and are responses to, the actions or expected actions of the other players. In the case of Edwin, on the other hand, his actions are guided not merely by what the other player does but by his expectations as to how the scout will evaluate these actions. He is acting *for* the scout, and it is these expectations that explain why he makes the particular moves that he does.

Thus the performer differs from the mere agent whose behavior is subject to evaluation in that she *intends* for her actions to be appreciated and evaluated, and thus is consciously *guided* in what she does by the expected eye or ear of an intended qualified audience. It is because we take Basil and Edwin to be so guided in their actions that we think of them as performing and of what they do as performances in the full sense. This is not to say that such performances require an *actual* audience – a point to which we shall return in Chapter 9. Basil's expectation that his umbrella twirling will be admired by startled neighbors interrupted in their breakfasting by the sight of his astonishing manual dexterity may be ill-founded. No one may observe him, but it still makes sense to say that he is performing. Similarly, if Ben's behavior

becomes more common, his parents may become immune to his tantrums, so that none of the expressive nuances of his stomping are registered, but he will still be performing. In fact, even the execution of ordinary mundane tasks can qualify as performances in the full sense. For example, if Ben brushes his teeth with special vigor and care on the assumption that his mother is watching him, in order to impress her, it seems reasonable to describe him as performing and what he does as a performance in the full sense. (In future, I shall speak here simply of “performances,” and use the term “performance in the merely evaluative sense” to talk of the other sense in which some behavior can be rightly described as a performance.)

None of the actions just described will strike us as “artistic performances” of the sorts to which I alluded in the opening paragraph. But the kinds of things done on stage by actors, dancers, and musicians are certainly *performances* in the sense just characterized. The musician’s manipulation of her instrument, the actor’s delivery of his line, or the dancer’s execution of a pirouette, have the form that they do at least partly in virtue of conscious expectations as to how these actions will affect and be evaluated by members of an intended audience, even if that audience is sometimes the performers themselves. This, however, brings us back to our earlier question: what is it that distinguishes *artistic* performances from the performances of Basil, Ben, and Edwin?

3 Institutional Theories of Artistic Performance

The second approach canvassed earlier holds that an artistic performance is one that takes place in the context of those established practices that we think of as “performing arts.” These practices, we might say, embody norms prescribing specific kinds of conduct for performers and for receivers of performances. We find such a conception of what makes something a *theatrical* performance in George Dickie’s argument for an “institutional” theory of art. Dickie proposes that to be an artwork is to have acquired a particular kind of status within what he terms “the artworld.” The artworld is “the broad social institution in which works of art have their place” (1974, 31). This institution comprises a set of systems of “established practices” which correspond to the different art forms. Each such system functions as a framework for the *presenting* of works of art. To be an artwork, according to Dickie, is to be an artifact a set of whose aspects has acquired, through the agency of some person or persons acting on behalf of the artworld, the status of “candidate for appreciation.” To be a “candidate for appreciation” is to be eligible for presentation within the appropriate system of the artworld, the aim being that receivers appreciate – find some value in – what is presented.

The theater is Dickie's primary example of a system of the artworld. In the theater, "the roles of the actors and the audience are defined by the traditions of the theater. What the author, management, and players present . . . is art because it is presented within the theaterworld framework. Plays are written to have a place within the theater system and they exist as plays, that is, as art, within that system" (Dickie 1974, 30).²

An analogous account might be given of works and performances in those other artworld "systems" that we intuitively view as belonging to the performing arts. A musical work or a work of dance, we might say, is something composed to be performed within the "musicworld" or the "danceworld." Dickie's concern is with defining what it is to be a work of art, rather than with the notion of an artistic *performance*, and we shall inquire shortly about the relationship between artistic performances and artworks. But we can offer a tentative "institutional" definition of artistic performance in line with the strategy canvassed above. An artistic performance, it might be said, is a performance that has had conferred upon it, by a person or persons acting on behalf of the artworld, the status of candidate for appreciation in the theaterworld, or the musicworld, or the danceworld. We can add additional artworld systems to our definition if we want it to cover events that fall within the rather eclectic category of "performance art" but that fit uneasily into the artworld systems listed so far. For example, Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969) involved following unwitting citizens through the streets of New York over a period of a couple of weeks, and Stelarc grafted an ear onto his forearm with the intention that it incorporate a microphone capable of transmitting to receivers what the "ear" was hearing.

Our tentative Dickiean institutional account of artistic performance began by characterizing the performing arts "extensionally" through listing the relevant conventions definitive of the artworld systems in question. We then defined an "artistic performance" as a performance having the status of "candidate for appreciation" in one of the performing arts so construed. But this account faces some serious objections grounded in a feature upon which Dickie insists. It should not be thought, he maintains, that there is a distinctive *kind* of appreciation for which artworks or artistic performances are candidates. Appreciation, in his definition of "artwork," is just what it is more generally outside the arts: "All that is meant by 'appreciation' in the definition is something like 'in experiencing the qualities of a thing one finds them worthy or valuable,' and this meaning applies quite generally both inside and outside the domain of art" (Dickie 1974, 40–41). He is motivated here by the concern that, if our definition specifies a more narrowly "aesthetic" kind of appreciation, we will be unable to accommodate many late modern artworks that deliberately eschew the aesthetic as traditionally conceived. But while Dickie is right to think that such works

must be accommodated, he is wrong, as we shall now see, to think that the institutional theorist can do so by simply denying that there is anything distinctive about the kind of appreciation for which artworks, and artistic performances, call.

The first difficulty arises if we ask how the presentational systems that make up the artworld differ from other practices that serve to present things as candidates for appreciation. In the context of our proposed institutional definition of artistic performance, the difficulty lies in identifying in a principled way the systems to be included in our extensional definition of the “performing arts.” The performances of university lecturers, for example, are presented in a context where there are norms that prescribe certain kinds of behaviors on the part of both participants and receivers. Given these norms, the performances clearly have conferred upon them by their performers the status of “candidates for appreciation,” if appreciation is simply a matter of the receiver’s finding value in experiencing those performances. As we saw above, we need a measure of flexibility in our conception of the presentational systems making up the artworld if we are to accommodate radical innovations in artistic performance. But what principled reasons are there for extending this conception to include the activities of Acconci and Stelarc while refusing to extend it to include the activities of university lecturers? If we deny ourselves any recourse to a distinctive kind of appreciation or attention appropriate to artworks, this challenge is difficult to answer.

It might be replied, of course, that it is simply a brute fact, admitting of a sociological but not of a rationally principled explanation, that we group some of these systems under the concept of art while excluding others. But this response leaves us unable to justify in any principled way our willingness or unwillingness to classify as artistic performances that occur outside our own immediate cultural context. Various kinds of dance, music-making, and role-playing as they occur in non-Western cultures, for example, will count as artistic performances, on the proposed account, only if they take place within presentational systems of the artworld. But, to the extent that the presentational practices of these cultures differ from our own, how are we to determine whether these practices are rightly seen as constitutive of artworld systems? We might appeal to obvious observable “similarities” between the performances licensed by the practices in question and practices in recognized performing arts. But this strategy quickly founders when we note, for example, that, in spite of Dickie’s insistence on the ancient ancestry of the theaterworld, much Greek dramatic performance resembled what goes on in our “sportsworld” in being presented competitively.³ If the institutional theorist is to meet these kinds of objections, she needs to bring into play something more fundamental that unites the systems within which

artistic performances can take place. I shall explore below the suggestion that the presentational systems characteristic of artistic performance are designed to foster a particular kind of appreciation. But this appreciation cannot be “aesthetic” in the traditional sense that associates the latter with the experience of something as beautiful.

A further difficulty arises even if we can identify in a principled and projectable way the presentational systems that enable artistic performances. How are we to delimit the relevant conventions in such systems so as to include performances of avant-garde theater and exclude stage hands who ham it up while rearranging props between scenes? It might be said that this distinction is embodied in one of the relevant conventions constitutive of the theaterworld system. One of the things that qualified theatergoers know, it might be claimed, is that the movement of props on stage by people who have not figured in the dramatic action is not part of the artistic performance. But of course this is not universally true. Certain modern plays – for example, Robert Wilson’s 1981 production of *Medea* – deliberately integrate such activities into the piece. This is why there is a problem in accounting for avant-garde theater, where “stagehands” may not in fact be stagehands but, rather, participants in the artistic performance itself. It is not, it seems, the conventions in themselves that exclude certain things going on onstage from the artistic performance, but the spectators’ independent ability to work out which things are part of the play and call, therefore, for a particular kind of attention.

4 Aesthetic Theories of Artistic Performance

This point is, I think, of great significance, and we shall return to it after considering the other approach canvassed earlier. This approach, it will be recalled, aims to give an independent account of artistic performances in terms of manifest features distinctive of such performances. It can then define the performing arts as those presentational systems designed to present artistic performances so conceived. This clearly avoids the kinds of difficulties seen to beset the institutional approach. For, if we have an independent account of the nature of artistic performance, we also have a principled way of determining which presentational systems are rightly included in the performing arts. But, as we shall see, this approach faces difficulties of its own.

I shall take as a model here Monroe Beardsley’s (1982) attempts to clarify the distinctive nature of those performances that we encounter in artistic presentations of dance. Like Dickie, Beardsley brings a more general theory about artworks to bear in his analysis. An artwork, for Beardsley, is an ordering of elements with the intention that they afford a markedly aesthetic experience, or an ordering of a type that is generally produced with such an intention.

Beardsley's conception of "aesthetic experience" underwent a number of changes. He increasingly stressed the phenomenal nature of such experience, which requires that we imaginatively attend to an object in an emotionally detached way. Pleasure in such experience arises from the discovery of relations between the elements of which the object is composed and from the formal and expressive qualities thereby apprehended.⁴ In his account of those dance performances that qualify as artistic, Beardsley makes two distinct claims: (1) a claim about the elements of which such dance performances are composed, and (2) a claim about how these elements are realized through the movements of the dancers and thereby made accessible to an audience.

In elaborating the first claim, he distinguishes between two senses in which a "medium" is involved in the creation and constitution of a work of art. The "physical medium" employed in a given artwork is the "stuff" of which the artist makes use in order to articulate some kind of aesthetic or artistic content. The "artistic medium," on the other hand, is what links manipulation of the physical medium to the articulation of particular meanings – to the expression of a particular emotional quality, for example. In the case of a painting, we can think of paint and canvas as the physical medium, and such things as brushstrokes and impasto as elements in the "artistic medium." To characterize a painting in terms of its artistic medium – as we standardly do in describing such a work and explaining our responses to it – is to see it as the realization in the physical medium of the expressive activity of the artist. We talk here about the brushstrokes and design, rather than the pattern of paint, and we see particular designs or arrangements of brushstrokes as articulating particular contents.

Beardsley draws an analogous distinction between the physical medium of dance – bodily movements – and its artistic medium – what he terms "movings" and "posings." The claim is that, in attending to a dance, we see what is going on in terms of movings and posings, and we interpret such movings and posings as representing or expressing or exemplifying certain qualities. One question, here, is how the movings and posings that make up the dance are related to the bodily movements performed by the dancers. Beardsley distinguishes two ways in which actions can be built out of one another, such that one act "generates" another. First, *causal* generation occurs when the performance of one action causally brings about some result in terms of which we can describe the second action. For example, I drive in the nail by hitting it with the hammer. In the case of *sortal* generation, however, doing one thing counts as doing another thing in virtue not of causal relations but of shared understandings in the cultural context in which one acts. The clearest examples of sortal generation involve social conventions. For example, if I raise my hand during the bidding at a public auction, I thereby make a bid for whatever is being sold.

Beardsley claims that the movings and posings constitutive of dance are sortally generated by the bodily motions of the dancer. But we must then specify the “generating conditions” in virtue of which certain bodily motions count as movings and posings and thus as elements in an artistic dance performance. This brings us to his second claim. He maintains that what counts are certain manifest properties of the bodily movements – what he terms “regional qualities” – the consequent “expressiveness” of which we take to be willed by the agent. This allows that even *practical* movements that have a certain social function, such as the North American pueblo corn dance, can count as artistic performances insofar as they have an expressiveness that goes beyond the execution of the motions necessary for the social function to be fulfilled. In the case of such a practically motivated ritual, “if ... there is more zest, vigor, fluency, expansiveness, or stateliness than appears necessary for practical purposes, there is an overflow or superfluity of expressiveness to mark it as belonging to its own domain of dance” (Beardsley 1982, 249).

The problems with any such attempt to delimit artistic performances in terms of manifest properties of the sort cited by Beardsley are well brought out in a critical response by Noël Carroll and Sally Banes (1982). They argue that the “superfluity of expressiveness” which he seems to regard as the distinguishing feature of artistic dance performance is neither necessary nor sufficient for the latter. It is not *sufficient*, because there are obvious instances of movements that manifest such superfluity yet which fail to be examples of dance performance. They cite the evident enthusiasm that might characterize the behavior of members of a group of socialist volunteers participating in the harvest. But, given our earlier remarks on what is distinctive of performance in general, it seems open to Beardsley to question whether what we have in this case is a performance at all. For it is not apparent that the behavior is consciously guided by expectations concerning the evaluating eye of an intended audience. If we take dance in the performing arts to involve a kind of performance, then it seems that Beardsley’s condition will apply only to performances and not to mere actions. Thus the socialist volunteers are not a counter-example to Beardsley’s account of artistic performance. But suppose the actions of the volunteers *did* qualify as a performance because they were performed for the anticipated eye of the party chairman. It seems very strange to say that the superfluity of expressiveness would make it a performance of artistic dance, so Carroll and Banes’s general point still stands.

More significantly for our purposes, they argue that “superfluity of expressiveness” is not a *necessary* condition for artistic dance performance, because there are incontestable examples of the latter that fail to meet this condition. They cite *Room Service*, a piece by Yvonne Rainer that falls within the more

general category of “task dances.” The dancers perform a series of ordinary movements that involve, among other things, the moving, arranging, and rearranging of objects such as mattresses and ladders. Carroll and Banes, who attended a performance of the piece, remark that one of the central elements in the performance is “the activity of two dancers carrying a mattress up an aisle in the theater, out one exit, and back in through another.” Crucially, the movements of the dancers were in no obvious way intensified so as to differentiate them from ordinary activities such as – indeed – moving a mattress around in a sequence of rooms. Carroll and Banes comment on the piece as follows:

The point of the dance is to make ordinary movement qua ordinary movement perceptible. The audience observes the performers navigating a cumbersome object, noting how the working bodies adjust their muscles, weights, and angles . . . The *raison d’être* of the piece is to display the practical intelligence of the body in pursuit of a mundane goal-oriented type of action – moving a mattress. (Carroll and Banes 1982, 251)

It is obviously essential for the successful performance of this dance work that it *not* manifest a superfluity of expressiveness which would make it observably different from the movements involved in the ordinary execution of the tasks in question. For the point of the work is to make those movements as such perceptible.⁵

If our characterization of artistic performance is to accommodate such contemporary works in the performing arts, therefore, we cannot appeal to manifest features of the sort cited by Beardsley. But what lesson should we draw from such cases? Commenting on the possibility that a choreographer might transform the activity of the socialist volunteers into a dance by placing them on a proscenium stage, Carroll and Banes assert that

in such a case, it seems to us that it is the choreographer’s act of framing, or recontextualizing, rather than an intrinsic quality of the movement, that is decisive. In general, whether one is speaking about art dance or social dance, the context of the event in which the movement is situated is more salient than the nature of the movement itself in determining whether the action is dance. (Carroll and Banes 1982, 250)

On perhaps the most natural reading of this passage, the act of “framing” or “recontextualizing” just is the act of presenting the movements of the volunteers on a proscenium stage. So read, Carroll and Banes are endorsing something like the institutional theory of artistic performance we had reason to question above. But the role they ascribe to the choreographer, or to the performers themselves, in constituting something as an artistic performance also

admits of a non-institutional reading – or, at least, of a reading that makes the role of institutions more oblique. In the following section, I shall develop an account based on such a reading, thereby weaving into a more textured account two threads introduced earlier. First, difficulties with Dickie’s institutional theory were traced to his refusal to countenance a distinctive kind of appreciation for which artworks and artistic performances call. And, second, I suggested that the distinction between performances and mere actions lies primarily in the way in which a performer is consciously guided in her actions by the anticipated evaluative attention of an intended audience for whom she performs. The account I shall develop brings these threads together by taking the attention solicited by artistic performances to be of a distinctive kind, in virtue not of their manifest properties per se, but of the way in which their manifest properties are used by performers to articulate the content of their performances. Artworks in general, and artistic performances in particular, call for a distinctive kind of “regard” from receivers in virtue of how they are intended to work. Like Dickie and Beardsley, I shall draw on a more general view about artworks in developing this account of the distinctive features of artistic performances. I shall conclude this chapter by fulfilling the earlier promise to address the relationship between artworks and artistic performances. This will establish the framework for our inquiries in the remainder of this book.

5 Artistic Performance and Artistic Regard

Let us return to Rainer’s *Room Service*. Richard Wollheim, himself arguing that there is a distinctive kind of regard for which artworks call, suggests that if we want to test any hypothesis about the spectator’s attitude to artworks, “it would be instructive to take cases where there is something that is a work of art which is habitually not regarded as one, and which we then at a certain moment come to see as one” (Wollheim 1980, 120). He offers familiar works of architecture as such a test case. But it is more illuminating for our purposes to focus on the kind of case that has been a mainstay of recent work in the ontology of art. I refer here to the *indistinguishable counterpart*, something that shares all of the perceptible qualities of the vehicle of a given artwork without itself being a vehicle of that work.⁶ Our interest here is not, as in most of the literature, in what makes one entity the vehicle for a particular artwork where another perceptually indistinguishable entity is either the vehicle for a different artwork or a mere “real thing.” Our interest, rather, is in how our manner of regarding – attending to – something that we take to be an artistic vehicle differs from our manner of attending to a perceptually indistinguishable mere real thing. Rainer’s piece offers a case of this sort. The sequence of movements

presented to the audience in a performance of her piece is not perceptibly different in any essential respects from the sequence of movements we might observe in a furniture warehouse. Her piece is nonetheless a work of dance because of how she wants her intended audience – people familiar with the more general traditions of the dance – to respond to an execution of that sequence. She wants the audience to attend to the movements with the same sort of care and intensity, and the same kind of “artistic” interest in grasping the *point* of the movements, as they would do if they were watching a performance of a more traditional work of dance.

We can note a couple of features of this attention. First, many details of the movements to which we would pay no regard if observing two people moving a mattress in a furniture warehouse are significant if we attend to those movements as a work of dance. In fact, every visible inflection of the bodies through which the act of moving the mattress is executed is significant in this way. We must therefore attend much more closely to the nuances of the movements than if we were observing perceptually indistinguishable movements executed in an ordinary setting. Second, as Carroll and Banes make clear, we are expected to look for a “point” to the sequence of movements performed. This is not merely the practical point of moving a mattress, but the point of presenting such a sequence of movements to us in a context where we are required to attend to those movements in the close and discriminating way just described. The actions of the dancers stand as *examples* of how the human body serves as an instrument of our desires and purposes. By being presented as such examples, they also serve as a comment on our embodiment as described by Carroll and Banes.

The difference between a sequence of movements that serves as the vehicle for an artistic performance and something, indistinguishable in terms of its manifest properties, that does not so serve, is, I claim, to be explained in terms of the kind of regard for which the first entity calls if we are to grasp the content being articulated through that sequence. “Content,” here, includes what the performance represents, expresses, or exemplifies both at the most immediate level and at the more thematic level that gives the “point” of the performance’s having the manifest features that it does. The artist prescribes or enacts a particular sequence of movements with the intention that it articulate a particular artistic content. She assumes that the audience will know that it is supposed to treat the sequence in particular kinds of ways, attending to it in what we may term an “interrogative” manner that seeks to make sense of the sequence in terms of reasons for it being ordered in the way that it is. Such an interrogative attention is informed by the belief that there is a more general “point” behind the sequence’s manifest properties, and that this point is being made by means of the more obvious representational, expressive, and exemplificational properties that it articulates.

It is not merely that artistic performance in dance involves the articulation of a content by means of a sequence of movements, however. A crew of furniture movers could communicate to a new recruit something of the form “this is how to hold a mattress when you move it” by executing the same sequence of movements as is incorporated in Rainer’s dance. But their execution of that sequence would not thereby be an artistic performance. What is also required is that the content is articulated in certain distinctive ways, and for this reason requires a distinctive kind of attention on the part of the viewer.⁷ We have seen that *close attention* to the details of the artistic vehicle is necessary if we are to correctly determine the content articulated, that artistic vehicles often serve to *exemplify* some of their properties, that many *different properties* of the vehicle contribute to the articulation of content, and finally that the vehicle not only serves a number of distinct articulatory functions, but does so in a “*hierarchical*” manner, where “higher level” content is articulated through lower level content.⁸

The suggestion, then, is that what makes something an *artistic performance* is not, per se, the elements of which it is composed or the way in which those elements are put together, but how the assemblage of the elements that make up the artistic vehicle is intended to function in the articulation of content. It is in virtue of these distinctive ways of articulating content that artistic performances must be *regarded* in a distinctive way. “Counterpart” cases, where the artistic vehicle is not visually discriminable from something that does not serve as an artistic vehicle, serve to make this manifest. But, as we have seen, for something to be an artistic *performance*, the actions of the agent must be guided – either immediately or through the instruction of the choreographer or director – by the expectation that they will be the object of this distinctive kind of regard on the part of an intended audience. Something like an institutional setting of practices and conventions of the sort to which Dickie alludes may be a necessary *background* for forming the kinds of expectations that artistic performance requires. On the more obliquely institutional reading of Carroll and Banes that I am proposing, Rainer’s act of “framing” or “recontextualizing” the movements executed by ordinary mattress movers is not merely an act of putting these movements on a stage, but also involves drawing upon institutionally grounded practices of attending to what is presented on stage in a particular way.

It is, I think, easy to see how the foregoing account of artistic performance as applied to a work like Rainer’s *Room Service* might generalize to other kinds of dance and to other performing arts like music and theater. What will remain constant in such a generalization is a distinctive kind of regard for which an artistic performance calls in virtue of the ways in which its content is articulated. What will vary is the nature of the artistic vehicle that is the proper object of such a regard. In the case of classical ballet and much modern dance, the artistic vehicle will be a sequence of movements – grasped

as “movings” and “posings” – executed in dialogue with a sequence of sounds. These sounds may issue from a live musical performance or from the playback of a recording of musical or more generally sonic material. In theater, the artistic vehicle will comprise not only the physical movements of the performers – grasped as represented or pretended actions – but also the sounds that they emit – grasped as represented or pretended speech acts such as statements, questions, commands, etc. In the case of music, the artistic vehicle will not be (or will not merely be) playings by the performers of their instruments but will be (or will also be) the sequence of sounds generated through these playings.

It is important to note one feature of the account of artistic performance that I have just sketched. In tying status as an artistic performance to being the intended object of a certain kind of regard, I have given an independent account, albeit somewhat schematic, of the distinctive features of that kind of regard, and have also related the necessity of such a regard to the manner in which the content of the performance is articulated. I have not identified it merely in terms of its being the kind of regard for which artistic performances, or artworks in general, call. The proposed account differs in this crucial respect from the kind of “historical-intentional” definition of art defended by Jerrold Levinson (1979). Simplifying a little, Levinson’s claim is that something is an artwork if its creator, at a time t , intends it to be the object of a regard of the kind rightly accorded to things already established as artworks at t . This allows for a plurality of kinds of regard that at any given time are rightly accorded to things taken to be artworks at that time. For Levinson what links these kinds of regard is *not* some feature specifiable independently of their being accepted ways of regarding artworks at t . On the proposal defended above, however, different ways of regarding artistic performances will count as properly *artistic* only if they meet the more general requirements that I have set out and are mandated by the way in which those performances seek to articulate their artistic content. Because Levinson deliberately eschews any such attempt to provide a principled way of identifying the kinds of regard that are proper to artworks, other than their being or having been accorded to such works at a given time, his account is threatened by the same sorts of difficulties seen to beset the institutional theorist who refuses to place constraints on the kind of appreciation for which artworks call.⁹

6 Overview

In looking at the different ways in which we might try to characterize what is distinctive about artistic performances, or about the performing arts as the context in which such performances are presented, I have drawn

freely on more general theories about artworks. But what is the relationship between artistic performances and works of art? In drawing upon more general views about the appreciation of artworks in characterizing the kind of regard required of one who views an artistic performance, I have implicitly assumed something like the following: an event counts as an “artistic performance” of the sort that is central to the performing arts if it manifests to receivers qualities that bear directly upon the appreciation of a work of art.¹⁰ It is in virtue of this that the performance must be regarded in the manner distinctive of our appreciative engagement with artworks. There are two obvious ways in which this requirement might be satisfied.

- (1) The performance may *itself* be an artwork, what the performer does being the artistic vehicle whose observable features directly articulate, perhaps in association with contextual factors, the representational, expressive, and formal properties that make up the artistic content of the work.¹¹ Thus we might speak of Vito Acconci’s enactment of *Following Piece* as a work of art whose artistic vehicle is the actions he performed in following his subjects. The performance event here plays a role analogous to that played by a particular painted surface in articulating the artistic content of a work in the visual arts. Or it might be claimed that the doing that is the artwork consists not merely in the actions performed but also in the sensible manifold that those actions generate, as in the case of an improvised performance by a jazz pianist.
- (2) The performance may play an essential part in the appreciation of *something else* that is an artwork through being one amongst a possible multiplicity of *instances* of that work. We speak here of a performance *of* an independent work. In this sense, the event attended by Carroll and Banes was a performance *of* Rainer’s work *Room Service*.

In order to clearly distinguish between these two kinds of cases, it will be useful to introduce some terminology. First, where, as in situations of type (2), a performance is of an independent work and contributes to our appreciation of the latter, we can term the artwork appreciated a *performable work* – or, to use Stephen Davies’s (2001) term, a *work for performance* – and the performance through which it is appreciated a *work-performance*. An artistic practice in which acknowledged artworks are designed to be performable works can be termed a *performed art*. In a performed art, our access to, and appreciation of, *works* (as receivers) is at least in part mediated by performances of those works, and thus by the activities of those in the *performing arts* such as conductors, directors, musicians, dancers, and

actors. This is because certain qualities of those works, relevant to their being appreciated as the particular works that they are, are realizable, and thereby made available to receivers, only in those performances. For example, at least part of what we appreciate in a symphonic work is various audible properties of the sequence of sounds prescribed by the composer. Only through the realization in a performance of what the composer prescribed can we experience those audible properties. The need to experience a performance of a performable work in order to properly appreciate that work is thus the analogue, in the performed arts, of the need to perceptually engage with a particular visible surface in order to properly appreciate a visual artwork. Drama, music, and dance are traditionally taken to be performed arts in this sense.

In a performed art, a performance can qualify as artistic in sense (2) insofar as it is a performance of a performable work. It is a further question whether such a performance may also be an artwork in its own right and thereby qualify as artistic in sense (1). Where, on the other hand, there is no performable work that a performance can plausibly be taken to be of – as, for example, with free improvisations in jazz – the performance, if artistic, must be so in sense (1) – that is, it must itself be a work of art, or so I shall argue. In such a case, we have what may be termed a *performance-work*.

Work-performances and performance-works are two conceptually distinct kinds of artistic performances. Furthermore, as we shall see, they raise distinct kinds of philosophical questions: in the first case, questions about the nature of performances *of* works, and, in the second case, questions about the nature of performances *as* works. While at least some artistic performances arguably raise both kinds of questions – performances of works that are also proper objects of artistic appreciation in their own right – it will be helpful to use the distinction between the two kinds of questions to structure our explorations in the rest of this book. Let me briefly sketch the itinerary for these explorations.

Performances of works: As we have seen, some performances in the performing arts are artistic in virtue of being performances of independent artworks. A number of important questions arise when we try to understand such performances. Most of them pertain to the work–performance relationship that obtains in the performed arts. I shall take classical music as the model for a performed art – I term this the “classical paradigm.” In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, I shall look at the philosophical questions that arise for this paradigm, both ontological (e.g., what is a performable work and what is the work–performance relation?) and epistemological (e.g., how do performances contribute to the appreciation of performable works?). A further question that requires serious investigation is the scope of the classical paradigm, and thus the extent to which the performing arts fall within the domain of the

performed arts. Traditionally, the performed arts have been taken to parallel, and provide the material for, the canonical performing arts – music in general, theater, and dance. In Chapters 5 and 6, I shall examine some recent challenges to this view.

Performances as works: Some artistic performances which are not plausibly viewed as performances of independent artworks seem themselves to be objects of artistic appreciation and evaluation. We can ask whether, in virtue of this, they are themselves properly viewed as artworks, and, if so, whether, by the same reasoning, we can view at least some performances of performable works as artworks. In Chapter 7, I argue for a positive answer to both of these questions. Performances of performable works may, then, be artistic in both senses distinguished above, whereas performances that are not plausibly seen as performances of performable works can be artistic in sense (1) but not in sense (2). In Chapters 8 and 9, I examine other elements that enter into performances in the performing arts viewed as works in their own right – improvisation, rehearsal, audience response, and the use of the body in performance.

Performances in works: Some activities that we encounter in the arts and that seem to be “artistic” are not artistic in sense (1) – they are not themselves objects of artistic appreciation and evaluation. But nor do they seem to be instances of independent works that contribute to the appreciation and evaluation of those works, thus they are not obviously artistic in sense (2) either. This, I shall suggest, holds for some performances or prescriptions for performances that we encounter in our engagement with late modern and “conceptual” art. In the final chapter, I shall look at the more general tradition of “performance art” and its relation to the performing arts.

Notes

1. Dickie’s “institutional theory” of art has undergone various refinements. For present purposes, we can focus on the canonical early version of the theory set out in Dickie 1974.
2. See also Thom 1993, 6: “True artistic performances [are distinguished] by the context in which they are given. In the case of true performances, there is an implicit social agreement that the performance will be given at a particular time and place and that both performers and audience will behave by mutual consent in more-or-less expected ways.”
3. See Storey and Allan 2005. For a different example, see S. Davies 2007, 24–25.

4. See, for example, Beardsley's essays collected in parts I and IV of Wreen and Callen 1982. For a good overview of Beardsley's evolving conception of aesthetic experience and its place in his definition of art, see S. Davies 1991, 52–57.
5. The Rainer piece counts against Beardsley only if it is rightly treated as a work of *dance*, and this, it seems, is something Beardsley might challenge. He argues elsewhere (1983) that Duchamp's "readymades" are not in fact visual artworks but unorthodox critical comments on visual art itself. So he might argue here that Rainer's *Room Service* isn't a work of dance but a theatrical work about dance. This kind of move is not completely ad hoc. As we shall see in Chapter 10, Stephen Davies has offered a similar analysis of John Cage's *4' 33"*. But there are good reasons to resist such a claim about *Room Service*. First, as we noted, the work belongs to the genre of "task dances," and is one of a number of works, by Rainer and other artists, that raise the same problems for Beardsley's account. They are treated in critical practice as interestingly different works, but if they are merely theatrical works about dance, it seems they are all making substantially the same point. Relatedly, the performers of *Room Service* and other "task dances" are trained as dancers, not as actors, and the works are presented in dance venues and reviewed by dance critics. These kinds of "institutional" considerations, while not themselves conclusive, place the burden of proof very much on Beardsley. Thanks to Andrew Kania for raising this issue.
6. See, for example, Levinson 1980; Danto 1981; Currie 1989.
7. Wollheim himself characterizes the kind of regard required to grasp the artistic statement articulated through an artistic vehicle as one which makes the vehicle "the object of an ever-increasing or deepening attention" (1980, 122–123).
8. These distinctive ways of articulating content resemble in certain respects what Nelson Goodman described as "symptoms of the aesthetic" (see Goodman 1976, 252–255; 1978, 67–70). They can be roughly correlated with what Goodman characterizes in more technical terms as the "syntactic" and "semantic" density of the symbol system to which the artistic vehicle belongs, the use of exemplification, the relative "repleteness" of the artistic symbol, and the serving of multiple and complexly interrelated referential functions.
9. I have suggested that what is distinctive of an artistic performance is that the performers intend that their audience accord the performance's artistic vehicle a distinctive kind of regard, a kind of regard necessary if the audience is to grasp the performance's artistic content and its "point." I have not claimed that they must also intend that their audience take an interest in the manner whereby this content is articulated *for its own sake*. We may think such an interest is necessary for a properly artistic appreciation of that performance – this is arguably a "dogma" of modernism – but that is a different matter.
10. I say "bear *directly*" in order to exclude from the domain of artistic performances events whose manifest qualities bear *indirectly* upon the appreciation of

artworks by providing information germane to the appreciation of those works – for example, a talk given by a curator about a painting in a gallery.

11. Throughout this book, I shall for convenience follow the general consensus in taking an artwork to be the *product* of the generative activity of the artist(s). What the artist produces, on this view, is an artistic vehicle that articulates an artistic content in virtue of those shared understandings we have termed an artistic medium. In the case of a work like Vermeer's *View of Delft*, for example, the artwork is the physical canvas understood as possessing certain representational, expressive, and formal properties. In adopting for convenience this view of artworks, I bracket my own view, for which I argued in my 2004, that artworks are properly identified not with the products of artistic activity, but with the activity itself as completed by those products. Nothing in this book, I think, turns on whether I am right in this, with one exception addressed near the end of Chapter 2.

I should also perhaps note that, while, in my 2004, I characterized the artistic activities that are, on my view, artworks as “performances,” I was not claiming that they are performances in the sense spelled out in this chapter. Artists are indeed guided by their expectations concerning the evaluative eye or ear of receivers, but it is the *product* of their activity, rather than the activity itself, that they expect to be evaluated in a certain way. See further my clarifications of what it is to act “for an audience” in section 1 of Chapter 9.