

Kent Academic Repository

Full text document (pdf)

Citation for published version

Maes, Hans R.V. (2010) Intention, Interpretation, and Contemporary Visual Art. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 50 (2). pp. 121-138. ISSN 0007-0904.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayp051>

Link to record in KAR

<http://kar.kent.ac.uk/31439/>

Document Version

UNSPECIFIED

Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.

Users are advised to check <http://kar.kent.ac.uk> for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:

researchsupport@kent.ac.uk

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html>

Intention, Interpretation, and Contemporary Visual Art

Hans Maes

5 *The role of the artist's intention in the interpretation of art has been the topic of a lively and ongoing discussion in analytic aesthetics. First, I sketch the current state of this debate, focusing especially on two competing views: actual and hypothetical intentionalism. Secondly, I discuss the search for a suitable test case, that is, a work of art that is interpreted differently by actual and hypothetical intentionalists, with only one of these interpretations being plausible. Many examples from many different art forms have been considered in this respect, but none of these test cases has*
10 *proved convincing. Thirdly, I introduce two new test cases taken from contemporary visual art. I explain why these examples are better suited as test cases and how they lend support to the actual intentionalist position.*

Hypothetical Intentionalism vs. Moderate Actual Intentionalism

15 The role and significance of the artist's intention in the interpretation of works of art has been a topic of lively debate in analytic aesthetics. Opinions differ widely. Absolute intentionalism holds that a work's meaning and the artist's intentions with regard to a work's meaning are logically equivalent. Absolute anti-intentionalism, by contrast, claims that the artist's intentions are never relevant when determining the meaning of a work of art. Both extreme positions still have advocates today, but most participants in the debate seem convinced that an intermediary position is needed, explaining how intentions are relevant but
20 not solely determinant of a work's meaning.

Two of the best-defended intermediary accounts are hypothetical intentionalism (HI) and moderate actual intentionalism (AI)—the prefix 'moderate' typically added to underline the difference with absolute intentionalism.¹ AI holds that the intentions relevant to
25 the interpretation of artworks are the *actual* intentions of the artist, whereas HI maintains that what is relevant for interpretation is only our best-warranted *hypothesis* concerning the artist's intentions. This may seem like a minor difference of opinion, but it has engendered a lively debate. When Jerrold Levinson published his essay 'Intention and Interpretation: A

1 Absolute intentionalism or, as it is sometimes referred to, extreme actual intentionalism holds that the artist's intentions are not just relevant, but absolutely determinant for the meaning of a work of art. This view is often ascribed to E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967); P. D. Juhl, *Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); and S. Knapp and W. B. Michaels, 'The Impossibility of Intentionless Meaning,' in G. Iseminger (ed.), *Intention and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992, pp. 51–64).

30 Last Look' in 1992, he seemed to have thought that the discussion was drawing to a close, but in fact the opposite appears to be true. Gary Iseminger's 'Actual Intentionalism vs. Hypothetical Intentionalism' (1996), Paisley Livingston's 'Arguing over Intentions' (1996) and 'Intentionalism in Aesthetics' (1998), Deborah Knight's 'Not an Actual Demonstration: A Reply to Iseminger' (1998), Noël Carroll's 'Interpretation and Intention. The Debate Between Hypothetical and Actual Intentionalism' (2000), Saam Trivedi's 'An Epistemic Dilemma for Actual Intentionalism' (2001), Levinson's 'Hypothetical Intentionalism: Statement, Objections, and Replies' (2002), Robert Stecker's 'Moderate Actual Intentionalism Defended' (2006) suggest by their titles alone that the debate is ongoing and as antagonistic as ever.

40 This antagonism might seem strange at first because when it comes to interpreting specific works of art it does not seem to make much difference whether one belongs to one side or the other. As Noël Carroll admits, 'the two positions generally converge in their interpretations of artworks'.² Proponents of HI and AI will indeed usually reach the same conclusion regarding the meaning of a particular work of art. The simple explanation for this is that they agree extensively on the nature of interpretation. It is worthwhile pointing out just how much common ground there is before discussing any differences between the two views. I will initially focus on the example of a literary work of art, as both HI and AI were originally designed as theories of literary interpretation. (Because of space constraints I cannot discuss every variety of HI and AI that has been proposed. I will therefore limit myself to some of the best-known versions of both theories, most notably Jerrold Levinson's articulation of HI and recent defences of AI by Noël Carroll, Gary Iseminger, and Paisley Livingston. I trust, however, that the central argument of this paper will apply equally to other incarnations of these accounts.³)

55 HI and AI share the view that the meaning of a literary work is not the same as 'word-sequence meaning' and that a poem or novel cannot be adequately interpreted solely by means of attention to linguistic and literary conventions. The case of irony is often invoked to prove this point.⁴ Advocates of HI and AI also agree that an author cannot make words or sentences mean just anything by simply willing it. Hence, the meanings that a poet or novelist has in mind when creating her work may in some cases be different from the message that the poem or novel ends up conveying. In contradistinction to absolute intentionalism, both parties insist on a distinction between 'utterer's meaning' and 'work meaning'.

2 Noël Carroll, 'Andy Kaufman and the Philosophy of Interpretation,' in Michael Krausz (ed.), *Is There a Single Right Interpretation?* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002), p. 328.

3 I will indicate later how the same objection that is decisive against Levinson's version of HI can also be raised against Alexander Nehamas's 'postulated author' version of HI (see note 60 in particular). Nehamas's account states that the meaning of a work is determined by the best hypothesis that an appropriate audience would form about the intentions of an *ideal* author, or one it is reasonable to suppose was behind the work, rather than the *actual* author, as Levinson would have it. For a clear and concise overview of the different varieties of HI and AI, see Sherri Irvin, 'Authors, Intentions, and Literary Meaning', *Philosophy Compass* 1.

4 See, for example, Noël Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention: The Debate between Hypothetical and Actual Intentionalism', *Metaphilosophy* 31, p. 79; Stephen Davies, 'Author's Intentions, Literary Interpretation, and Literary Value,' *BJA* 46, pp. 233–235; Robert Stecker, 'Moderate Actual Intentionalism Defended', *JAAC* 64, p. 431.

As far as the latter is concerned, the shared view is that it should really be thought of in terms of the model of ‘utterance meaning’. Utterance meaning is the meaning that a linguistic vehicle ends up conveying in its context of utterance—a context that includes its being uttered by a certain speaker or author. Understanding an utterance and, by extension, understanding a novel or a poem thus requires reference to authorial or speaker’s intentions. Authorial or speaker’s intentions are not considered all-decisive, however. When the author appears to have some meaning in mind that is incompatible with or unsupported by what is written, both HI and AI will conclude that the author has failed to realize her intention.

Although HI and AI maintain that authorial intentions are not all-decisive in interpretation, they do agree that the main task of the interpreter is to make inferences about what the author or artist intended to convey by her work. They even agree to a very large extent about the inductive grounds for these inferences. Besides the work itself, these inductive grounds should include knowledge of the sociohistorical context in which the work was produced, the genre of which the work is a member, the author’s *oeuvre*, and ‘publicly accessible knowledge of the author’s distinctive cultural identity and situation’.⁵ All this information should be taken into account when one tries to find out what an author intended to convey by her work.

What HI and AI *disagree* about is the range of extra-textual information that is legitimately available to interpreters. HI holds that a well-informed or ‘appropriate’ reader should take into account all the information mentioned earlier, ‘but should stop short of the author’s actual pronouncements of intent to mean or convey this or that’.⁶ The main rationale behind this provision is that the work should be able to stand on its own. It is one of the ‘ground rules of the game of literary decipherment’, as Levinson puts it, that literary works do not require authors to explain what they mean.⁷ Direct authorial pronouncements of meaning should therefore be set aside. For HI, the meaning of a work of literature is just a well-informed reader’s best projection of the author’s intended meaning. (It should be noted that the best hypothetical attribution of intention to an author is, in principle, one that is *epistemically* best, that is, most likely to be correct given the work’s internal structure and the relevant surrounding context of creation. However, when there are different epistemically sound interpretations, HI explicitly stipulates that one should choose the interpretation that makes the work *artistically* best.⁸)

AI does not exclude any sort of evidence in advance when trying to determine a work’s meaning. Direct avowals of authorial intention, when available, are taken into consideration. In so doing, interpreters may discover that the author’s actual intentions are different

5 Jerrold Levinson, ‘Intention and Interpretation in Literature’, in *The Pleasure of Aesthetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 207.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, p. 208.

8 ‘[I]f we can make the author out to have created a cleverer or more striking or more imaginative work, without violating the image of his oeuvre underpinned by the total available textual and contextual evidence, we should perhaps do so’ (*ibid.*, p. 179).

from an informed audience's best hypothesis of authorial intention. Where this happens (and assuming that the author's intentions are supportable by the work), AI will defend the interpretation consistent with the author's actual intentions. Advocates of AI have argued that this accords best with our most defensible interpretive practices. Literary reviewers and critics give every appearance that they are concerned not just with an optimal construal of authorial intention but with an author's actual intention when determining the meaning of a novel or poem. Of course, as Carroll has pointed out, reviewers and critics will normally assume that their best construal of authorial intention—based on the work, the work's genre, and the author's public biography and *oeuvre*—will zero in on the author's actual intention and hence that they will be able to understand the work without having to appeal to direct authorial pronouncements of meaning. However,

that audiences usually embrace this rather natural default assumption hardly entails they would not revise it should evidence—such as contrary authorial avowals of intention—appear that is at variance with the default assumption. For a provisional default assumption. . . does not constitute an unbreachable rule of our interpretive practices.⁹

Test Cases

The debate between HI and AI has been conducted at a number of different levels. Most fundamentally, the dispute has been about the nature of utterance meaning. For AI, the meaning of an artistic utterance is determined by the artist's *actual* intentions in so far as they are successfully realized in the work. For HI, the meaning of a work of art is determined by the intentions that are *ascribed* to the artist by an appropriately informed and sympathetic audience. A related point of contention has been whether artistic interpretation should be seen as structurally different from ordinary linguistic interpretation. Both parties generally agree that in ordinary conversation we may quite properly get someone to explain further what she means if we do not understand what she is saying. But whether this option—appealing to direct pronouncements of intent—is also legitimately available in the sphere of artistic production and reception has been heavily disputed. AI has argued that it is; HI that it is not.¹⁰

In the course of the debate, both parties have also tried to point out logical flaws in the opposing position. For instance, AI states that the meaning of an utterance is the meaning successfully intended by an utterer. But, so the oft-heard objection goes, to determine whether an utterer's meaning is successfully intended it seems that AI needs an intention-independent conception of utterance meaning—success being a matter of utterer's meaning corresponding to the latter. Does this not reveal a vicious circularity at the heart of AI? It certainly poses a serious challenge to it. But, as defendants of AI claim, it is a challenge that can be met. One way to bypass this difficulty is to propose a rather minimal success condition to be weighed on artists' intentions. Both Carroll and Iseminger have done so (and I have taken up their suggestion in this paper) by holding that the meaning of

9 Carroll, 'Andy Kaufman and the Philosophy of Interpretation', p. 332.

10 For an extensive discussion of this issue, see Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention'.

an utterance is determined by an utterer's actual intentions just in so far as these are compatible with and supportable by the text or artefact taken in its intended context.¹¹

Charges of circularity have also been levelled against HI. In 'Intention and Interpretation in Literature', for instance, Levinson defines what it is to understand a work properly by referring to an appropriately informed audience's best hypothesis of authorial intention. At the same time, he suggests that we should judge what an appropriately informed audience is 'by what it would appear to take to understand a work properly'.¹² In itself this need not be a major worry for Levinson and HI since he does provide an alternative, non-circular way of determining when an audience is appropriately informed. Guided by the conventions that, according to Levinson, define the sphere of artistic production, he thinks that an appropriate audience for a given work of art can be profiled generally as one that takes into account all publicly available contextual information regarding the work and the artist's cultural identity. This suggestion is not without its problems, however, for it presupposes a sharp line between contextual information that is essentially public and information that is essentially private. Yet, as Levinson himself acknowledges, there is no clear and uncontroversial way of making that distinction. He does offer the following tentative solution: 'one might begin to refine the concept of a work's appreciative relevant public context by focusing on the idea of what the author wanted readers to know about the circumstances of a work's creation'.¹³ But since appeal is made here to the actual intentions of the author—something that is anathema to HI—Levinson cannot be too happy with this route and, indeed, in later writings seems to have abandoned it.¹⁴

It would take us too far to revisit all such arguments and counterarguments here and I am not planning to examine every point of discussion in detail again. Instead, I want to focus exclusively on what appears to be the easiest or, at least, most straightforward way to settle the dispute between HI and AI. That would be the production of a decisive test case. If we could find a work of art that is interpreted differently by HI and AI, with only one of these interpretations being plausible, that could serve as a possible tiebreaker. Test cases of this sort would certainly give us a strong reason to choose one account over the other.

In the course of the debate many test cases have been proposed. Most of the examples are taken from literature: Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*,¹⁵ Gerald Manley

11 According to Gary Iseminger, the meaning of the work 'is the meaning compatible with the text that the author intended' ('Actual Intentionalism vs. Hypothetical Intentionalism', *JAAC* 54, p. 321). For Carroll, 'authorial intentions are relevant to the interpretation of the meaning of texts where the intended meaning of the text is compatible with and/or supportable by what the author has written in terms of the conventions and histories of language and literature' ('Andy Kaufman and the Philosophy of Interpretation', p. 321). Paisley Livingston defends a more substantial success condition, but as I have argued elsewhere, his proposal faces some serious objections (see Hans Maes, 'Challenging Partial Intentionalism', *Journal of Visual Arts Practice* 7).

12 Levinson, 'Intention and Interpretation in Literature', p. 183.

13 Jerrold Levinson, 'Hypothetical Intentionalism: Statement, Objections, and Replies,' in: M. Krausz (ed.), *Is There A Single Right Interpretation?* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2002), p. 317.

14 For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Hans Maes, 'Art and Pornography', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 43, pp. 109–110.

15 Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention', p. 77. See also Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention. A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 160 and Paisley Livingston, 'Intentionalism in Aesthetics', *New Literary History* 29, section V.

165 Hopkins's 'Henry Purcell',¹⁶ Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*,¹⁷ Bruce Duffy's *The World as I Found It*,¹⁸ Rabelais's *Gargantua*,¹⁹ James Joyce's *Ulysses*,²⁰ Kafka's 'A Country Doctor',²¹ Natsume Soseki's *And Then*,²² George Eliot's *Middlemarch*,²³ William Blake's *Jerusalem*²⁴ and *The Sick Rose*,²⁵ A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*,²⁶ the works of Willa Cather²⁷ and Stefan George,²⁸ the New Testament Gospel according to Mark,²⁹ and the list goes on. Since both accounts are now taken to apply across the arts, examples have also been drawn from other art forms, such as film (Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space*,³⁰ Rob Reiner's *Stand By Me*³¹), music (Khatchaturian's *Masquerade Suite*),³² painting (the *pentimenti* in Johannes Vermeer's *Young Woman Reading a Letter at an Open Window*),³³ and even stand-up comedy (Andy Kaufman).³⁴ Yet, despite the wide range of examples and the great inventiveness of participants at coming up with ever new and surprising test cases, none has really tipped the balance in favour of either one of the accounts. To begin with, not every example has become the focus of serious debate. Those that have, moreover, are usually 'neutralized' in one of two ways. Sometimes it is argued that the work of art is in fact *not* interpreted differently by HI and AI. In other cases, the interpretations offered by HI and AI, while radically different, are considered equally plausible.

-
- 16 Gary Iseminger, 'An Intentional Demonstration?', in *Intention and Interpretation*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 77; Gary Iseminger, 'Actual Intentionalism vs. Hypothetical Intentionalism', *JAAC* 54, p. 319; Levinson, 'Intention and Interpretation in Literature', p. 192; Deborah Knight, 'Not an Actual Demonstration: A Reply to Iseminger', *JAAC* 56, p. 55.
- 17 Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention', p. 88.
- 18 Levinson, 'Intention and Interpretation in Literature', p. 210.
- 19 Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention', p. 91.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 21 Levinson, 'Intention and Interpretation in Literature', p. 184; Carroll, 'Andy Kaufman and the Philosophy of Interpretation', p. 24; Livingston, 'Intentionalism in Aesthetics', section IV.
- 22 Livingston, *Art and Intention*, pp. 152, 159.
- 23 Robert Stecker, *Interpretation and Construction. Art, Speech, and the Law* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 44.
- 24 Iseminger, 'Actual Intentionalism vs. Hypothetical Intentionalism', p. 320; Knight, 'Not an Actual Demonstration', p. 54.
- 25 Robert Stecker, 'Interpretation', in Berys Gaut & Dominic Lopes (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 239.
- 26 Stephen Davies, *The Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 120.
- 27 Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention', p. 88.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 30 Noël Carroll, 'Art, Intention, and Conversation', in Gary Iseminger (ed.), *Intention and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 201; Levinson, 'Intention and Interpretation', p. 200.
- 31 Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention', p. 89.
- 32 Levinson, 'Intention and Interpretation'.
- 33 Paisley Livingston, 'Pentimento', in Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston (eds), *The Creation of Art* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 101.
- 34 Carroll, 'Andy Kaufman and the Philosophy of Interpretation'.

Let me illustrate this. In cases where one interpretation seems clearly preferable, both accounts have claimed to support that interpretation. For example, proponents of both HI and AI agree, though on their own terms, that Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* should be interpreted as a hack film rather than as a subtle avant-garde film questioning accepted Hollywood codes. Carroll has argued that one can reach this conclusion only if one takes into account certain direct pronouncements of intent made by Ed Wood.³⁵ Levinson, by contrast, claims that it is simply the informed audience's best hypothesis (given what is publicly known about the film-maker and his solid track record of earlier hack films) that *Plan 9* was an attempt to imitate the Hollywood style in the cheapest way possible.³⁶

Another case in point is (the opening stanza of) Gerald Manley Hopkins's poem 'Henry Purcell':

Have fair fallen, O fair, fair have fallen, so dear
 To me, so arch-special a spirit as heaves in Henry Purcell,
 An age is now since passed, since parted; with the reversal
 Of the outward sentence low lays him, listed to a heresy, here.

As Gary Iseminger points out, two interpretive statements seem compatible with the text:

- (i) 'Henry Purcell' expresses the wish that Henry Purcell shall have good fortune
- (ii) 'Henry Purcell' does not express the wish that Henry Purcell shall have good fortune

Only one of these statements can be true. 'If exactly one of two interpretive statements about a poem, each of which is compatible with its text, is true, then the true one is the one that conforms to the meaning intended by the author.'³⁷ Thanks to one of Hopkins's letters, Iseminger continues, we know that he intended 'fair fall' elliptically to convey 'fair (fortune be)fall.' Thus, (i) and not (ii) is a true statement. While Iseminger thinks that this proves the superiority of AI, Levinson again disagrees. According to Levinson, there is no need to invoke Hopkins's direct pronouncements of intent. Given Hopkins's unusual metrical and grammatical practices in other poems, his known appreciation for Purcell's music, his religious views, and the demands of coherence with the remainder of the poem,

the informed reader's best projection of what Hopkins was intending to convey in the opening stanza will make it determinately the case that the wish for past good fortune in spiritual matters, rather than anything exclusive of that, is what is expressed.³⁸

When HI and AI *do* provide different interpretations, each will put forward their own interpretation as the most plausible without it being obvious which one is to be

35 Noël Carroll, 'Art, Intention, and Conversation', p. 201.

36 Levinson, 'Intention and Interpretation in Literature', p. 200.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 192.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 193.

215 preferred. For instance, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* has been used by both parties as evidence for their account. There has been no clear winner in the debate about this example, however, mainly because to this day there is no critical agreement about how the story should be interpreted. Is it a ghost story? Or rather a psychological story about a hysteric, hallucinating woman? Or is it perhaps a carefully designed hesitation between the two? There is some intuitive support for all three interpretations and critics are still divided.

220 Another example is Kafka's short story 'A Country Doctor'. In the story a country doctor gets pulled away from his comfortable home in the middle of the night to attend to a boy suffering from a horrible wound. The boy is beyond help, but in a last futile attempt the doctor tries out a cure, which involves getting into bed with the patient. Now, given what
225 we know about Kafka's habit of working late at night, his idea of writing as 'a calling', his familiarity with Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and given that he also wrote the story 'A Hunger Artist' about a man who starves himself publicly both as an artistic performance and as an admission that ordinary food holds no appeal for him, we might arrive at the following interpretation:
230

235 'A Country Doctor' is a stylized dream report. Its content is basically the conflict between ordinary, sensual life, as represented by. . . the doctor's comfortable home, and one's calling: to heal, edify, spiritually succor. The doctor is in effect an artist, as is, more transparently, the hunger artist of Kafka's later tale. He is caught betwixt and between, naked and disoriented, as was Kafka between his literary and his domestic duties and desires. And the sick boy is the doctor's younger self—through art/Arzt one primarily tries to heal oneself, and only secondarily others.³⁹

240 But suppose now that we find out that Kafka kept a secret diary in which he explains that his only intention in writing 'A Country Doctor' was to critique rural medical practices and ridicule their typical unpreparedness and lack of materials. To a supporter of HI, who denies the relevance of private avowals, this discovery would be of no interest. It would not make her change her interpretation of the story. Indeed, according to Levinson, it would be very odd to drop our best hypothesis of what 'Kafka the writer' is communicating in favour of what 'Kafka the person' might oddly have been intending to convey. Supporters
245 of AI, by contrast, think that this is precisely what the best critics and interpreters *would* do. Here is how Paisley Livingston defends this position:

250 We can indeed imagine a Kafka whose diary reveals stupid semantic intentions, but we can also actually read the remarkable diaries of the real Franz Kafka. . . . Recognizing that in some cases limited or boring semantic intentions are decisive of a work's features is the price we pay for an interpretative principle that allows us on other happier occasions to recognize that the artist's laudable and complex aims were decisive.⁴⁰

39 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

40 Livingston, *Art and Intention*, p. 165.

255 Kafka's secret diary would induce HI and AI to interpret 'A Country Doctor' differently, but as there is something to say for both interpretations the example cannot serve as a tiebreaker.

260 There are at least two more reasons why the test cases that have so far been the focus of debate have failed to decide the issue. First, both parties claim to give the most accurate account of our best interpretive practices but, oddly enough, they rarely refer to specific art critical essays or literary reviews to support their claims. The ideal case, of course, would be one where a work of art is interpreted differently by HI and AI with our best critics, art historians, or curators clearly and unanimously preferring one interpretation. But so far such a test case has not been produced.

265 Second, numerous test cases involve hypothetical reasoning and imaginary scenarios. We are invited, for instance, to imagine a secret diary revealing Kafka's real intentions or a hitherto hidden personal correspondence revealing how Jonathan Swift really despised the Irish and had a secret passion for the taste of human flesh.⁴¹ When one uses imaginary cases like this, one obviously cannot resort to existing reviews or criticism. But this is not the only difficulty surrounding thought-experiments. Philosophical thought-experiments are typically used to test and clarify our intuitions, yet it has been argued that at least some of those experiments do not offer reliable tests.⁴² Sometimes the imaginary scenarios appear too far-fetched to have any bearing at all on our ordinary intuitions; or they may be laid out in just a couple of sentences, resulting in a setup that is too vague and sketchy to provide definite answers or clear-cut conclusions.

270 Paisley Livingston's 'Soseki the Strange' might be a case in point. In Livingston's *Art and Intention* we are asked to think of a strange Japanese novelist who declares at a press conference that the three main characters in his trilogy of novels were meant to be the successive appearances of a Martian in disguise. This revelation appears consistent with the textual evidence in the sense that nothing in the novels explicitly contradicts such a claim. We also, says Livingston, have every reason to assume that the novelist is sincere and accurate in describing his intentions. Nevertheless, the Martian storyline seems completely tacked on and extraneous.⁴³ The question that Livingston puts to the reader is whether we should give these strange authorial intentions any weight when interpreting the text. But, one might ask, can we really answer this question on the basis of the available information? It seems that our decision in a matter like this will depend exactly on how 'extraneous' and 'tacked on' the Martian story really is. This, however, is never spelled out in the thought-experiment. Moreover, when we think about the different possibilities, we realize that there may be something intrinsically problematic about the

41 Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention', p. 88.

42 Peter Hacking, a long-standing critic of philosophical thought-experiments, even goes so far as saying that '[t]hought-experiments are no more experiments than monopoly-money is money' ('Analytic Philosophy: Beyond the linguistic turn and back again', in M. Beaney (ed.), *The Analytic Turn: Analysis in Early Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. ???.)

43 Livingston, *Art and Intention*, p. 154.

set-up of this particular case. For if the Martian storyline is *completely* tacked on and extraneous, it is almost impossible to believe that the novelist was sincere and accurate about his own intentions (one of the presuppositions of the thought-experiment). If, on the other hand, we were to know with absolute certainty that Soseki was indeed sincere and accurate about his own intentions, then it would seem highly unlikely that the Martian storyline would be completely extraneous, having no connection at all with the events described in the novel. An oft-heard caveat when dealing with thought-experiments is that ‘we are apt to overestimate the ease with which possibilities are ascertained. . . . Indeed, the possibility of an event is normally presupposed as soon as the speaker begins to talk about the event.’⁴⁴ Perhaps we should ask whether there really is this possibility of Soseki the Strange being accurate and sincere about his intentions *and* the Martian storyline being completely tacked on.

To sum up, the test cases brought forward so far do not fulfil their role as *experimentum crucis*. Not all of them invite different readings from HI and AI and when different interpretations *are* to be expected, it is difficult to decide which interpretation is the most plausible—all the more so since many test cases involve hypothetical reasoning and no specific use is made of existing interpretive criticism.

A New Type of Test Case

I will now introduce two new test cases. These are different from the above-mentioned examples in several respects, but most obviously in that they are taken from contemporary visual art—a domain of art that has been curiously neglected in the debate.

(1) Figure 1 shows a typical example of Gadha Amer’s paintings.

Here is what Arthur Danto wrote about her work in a review for *The Nation*:

A distance separates object from argument. . . . Her paintings look, the catalog concedes, ‘like finely drawn, delicate abstractions.’ The informed eye leads one to surmise that her work shows the influence of Cy Twombly. But as with Calame’s work, the eye is a very poor guide to what we in fact see. . . . the forms are not abstract but derived from images of women in pornographic magazines. . . . I found it as difficult to make out that I was looking at ‘sexually suggestive postures’ as I did to identify as female body parts—cut from the same genre of magazines—the things with which the Holy Virgin Mary is surrounded in Chris Ofili’s controversial painting from the Brooklyn ‘Sensation’ show. In any case, Amer is making, by means of stitched prurient imagery, some statement about the representation of women. One would not know this without help.⁴⁵

44 R. A. Sorensen, *Thought-experiments* (Oxford: OUP, 1992), p. 26.

45 Arthur Danto, *Unnatural Wonders* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 23.



1. Ghada Amer, *Anjie*, 2002. Acrylic and gel medium on canvas, 223.5 x 223.5 cm (88 x 88 in.). Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Read, New York.

(2) For the exhibition *Reconstruction #1*, set within the gardens and grounds of Sudeley Castle, England, in 2006, the Italian artist Benedetto Pietromarchi's created an installation consisting of two untitled and oversized light bulbs glowing in the castle's dungeon (figure 2).

325

The art critic and curator, Brooke McGowan, refers to interviews with the artist to elucidate the work:

'Some light bulbs can last up to eighty years,' the artist explains. Each such electrical object of illumination will eventually exhaust itself, burning out, as the filament evaporates and breaks. It is a delicate system destroyed quicker by its intensity. However, Pietromarchi's creations will last over a century, because of both the exceptional thickness of the filament and the low wattage used. . . . 'It is about childhood' he states, pronouncing that the tracing and curling lines of the glowing filaments evoke for the artist 'a memory that stays with you longer'. A memory reified, that outlives the one who remembers. Encased in Pyrex glass globes, the two light bulbs rest on stone pedestals. 'They are the same,' he says, referring to the basic and pairing form of the two illuminating sculptures. 'The same one, but with a different emotion or feeling to it.'⁴⁶

330

335

In both cases we can safely assume that interpreters who take into account direct pronouncements of intent, and those who don't, will reach different conclusions about the meaning of the

46 Brooke McGowan, 'Benedetto Pietromarchi', in *Reconstruction no. 1: Exhibition Catalogue* (Spear Media, 2006).



2. Benedetto Pietromarchi, *Untitled* (2006). Photograph © Matthew Leightonrachelleighon@mac.com
Reproduced with permission.

340

work. Danto says quite literally that without help from the artist even the ‘informed eye’ (what HI would refer to as ‘the appropriate audience’) would not guess that the work has a feminist theme. Similarly, without Pietromarchi’s statements one would probably not see the light bulbs as referring to childhood. This is true even if one were to learn more about Pietromarchi’s (publicly accessible) biography or *oeuvre*. For instance, when Pietromarchi presented his first UK solo show at the Trolley Gallery in 2005, the following information was made public:

345

350

his work is influenced by travel and attendant concepts of displacement. These influences merge with formal training in architecture and classical sculpture in London and Carrara. Three aspects: travel, architecture and figurative sculpture, form the basis of his work. . . . Bachelard, Kant, and Merleau-Ponty have informed and inspired aspects of the work. For his latest project, Pietromarchi fused lead sculptures in the studio, connected them to nineteenth-century glass buoys and then transferred them to the Mediterranean Sea. He later returned to film the suspended pieces, capturing an arresting tension between stasis and incident.⁴⁷

47 Originally published on the gallery’s website, later reprinted in Marina Warner, ‘Meteopathic’, <http://www.trolleybooks.com/gallery.php?gallery=13> (accessed on 11 January 2009).

355 None of this information will ‘make it determinately the case’ (to borrow Levinson’s phrase) that the installation with the light bulbs is about childhood or ‘memory reified’.

Some of the examples that we have discussed above also invited different interpretations depending on whether one takes direct pronouncements of intent into consideration or not (think of Kafka’s ‘A Country Doctor’). Nevertheless, the examples from
360 contemporary visual art stand out for at least two reasons. I will lift a sentence from Danto’s review of Amer’s paintings to illustrate each point.

(1) Danto says the following about contemporary art in general: ‘*Often* the distance between object and argument is so wide that without the text we would badly misread the object.’⁴⁸ In other words, it will *often* happen that interpreters who disregard direct statements by the artist reach different conclusions to those who do take them into account. I
365 have given two examples where this is evident but it would be easy to find similar cases in the world of contemporary art (when Danto writes about Amer’s work he casually mentions two other examples). When we return to the philosophical literature with its test cases from traditional and popular art, the contrast is clear. We are constantly reminded that test cases ‘are not easy to come by’ and that they have to be picked out carefully.⁴⁹ Proponents of both views have stressed how hard it is to find instances where HI and AI will produce different interpretations. For instance, Levinson points out that ‘the possibility of divergence between specific actual intent and best hypothesized intent given all appropriate reader data is fairly small’.⁵⁰ Stecker assures us that ‘[both views] have a tendency to reach
370 the same conclusions about the meanings works have’.⁵¹ Precisely because the possibility of divergence is considered to be so small, philosophers have often resorted to imaginary scenarios. As Carroll puts it: ‘since the hypothetical intentionalist and the modest actual intentionalist depend on much the same evidence, they generally deliver the same interpretations. However, there are *imaginable cases* where the results of the two methods will
375 diverge.’⁵² It is not necessary to resort to imaginable cases when one turns to the field of contemporary art. It is quite easy to find real examples. Contemporary art galleries, exhibitions, and fairs contain scores of works that would divide supporters of HI and AI.

(2) When visiting contemporary art galleries it frequently happens, says Danto, that
380 ‘without the explanation we have no way of knowing what we are looking at’.⁵³ If artists do not inform the audience about their intentions, the audience is often left puzzled and disoriented. Elsewhere Danto describes ‘a lot of the art being made today’ as ‘opaque artefacts we know to be meaningful but whose meaning we cannot grasp’ and as ‘alien to us. . . as if it belonged to a remote culture’.⁵⁴ With regards to the art of Amer or Pietromarchi this seems right on the mark. But this would not be a fair description of the

48 Danto, *Unnatural Wonders*, p. 22 (emphasis added).

49 Stephen Davies, *The Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 120.

50 Levinson, ‘Intention and Interpretation in Literature’, p. 186.

51 Robert Stecker, ‘Interpretation’, in Berys Gaut and Dominic Lopes (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 249.

52 Carroll, ‘Interpretation and Intention’, p. 80 (emphasis added).

53 Danto, *Unnatural Wonders*, p. 22.

54 Arthur Danto, *Embodied Meanings* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1994), p. xiii.

390 works of literature, music, or film that have been the focus of debate until now. None of these strike us as alien artefacts the meaning of which escapes us completely. In his discussion of William Blake's poem 'The Sick Rose', Robert Stecker stresses the fact that 'there are aspects of the meaning of the poem that it would be natural to say that we know prior to interpretation'.⁵⁵ The same is true for all the examples mentioned in the debate so far.

395 Their meaning is never a total mystery. Accordingly, there is always some common ground and only limited disagreement between those who take into account private avowals and those who don't. Sometimes disagreement is limited in the sense that only a small portion of the work is being debated, such as the final scene of the film *Stand by Me* (did the writer accidentally delete the document?), the concluding *Galop* section of Khatchaturian's

400 *Masquerade Suite* (an allusion to Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*?) or one section heading in Bruce Duffy's *The World as I Found It* (an allusion to Swift's *A Modest Proposal*?). But even in those cases where the work as a whole is under discussion, the discussion will always take place against a background of consensus. For instance, some have read A. E. Housman's *1887* as a patriotic poem in praise of the Queen, whereas others have read it

405 as a subtle example of poetic irony and as a scathing critique of the Queen. Although we ordinarily use a phrase such as 'complete disagreement' to describe a situation like this, we should not ignore the fact that there is actually a lot of common ground between the two interpretations. For instance, both parties agree that the poem is about the Queen of England and Shropshire lads who sadly died in foreign countries to save England and the

410 Queen. This kind of basic consensus regarding the poem's meaning is absent in the case of Pietromarchi's or Amer's work. There is no common ground *whatsoever* between Danto's initial interpretation of Amer's work as abstract paintings which show the influence of Cy Twombly and the interpretation he arrives at after taking into account the artist's own explanation of her work.

415 Hypothetical Intentionalism under Pressure

The examples from contemporary art may help to shed a new light on the debate between HI and AI. We have good reason to assume that these will prove to be better test cases than the tried examples. First of all, we are not dealing with thought-experiments or imaginary cases, but with real works of art. Second, we have access to what critics and curators have

420 said about these works of art, so we can use this material in trying to decide which philosophical account does a better job of reflecting our interpretive practices. Third, the test cases cannot be 'neutralized' in any of the two ways sketched above. HI and AI will produce different interpretations of these works, and, I will now argue, one interpretation has a clear advantage over the other.

425 As far as existing reviews and interpretations are concerned, they clearly seem to speak in favour of AI. Danto, arguably one of the most respected art critics today, readily admits that his first conjectures regarding Amer's work were false and that we should really understand her canvases as feminist statements. Thus, he rejects his best hypothesis in favour of

55 Stecker, 'Interpretation', p. 239.

430 an interpretation that takes into account the actual intentions of the artist. He is by no means the only critic to do so. Kimberley Lamm, for instance, explains how Amer's works 'at first glance seem to be Abstract Expressionist paintings but are actually pornographic images of women embroidered onto canvases with colored thread'.⁵⁶ By letting 'the thread spill from these images, pouring into rhythmic tangles that create visual affinities with Abstract Expressionism' Amer has made the pornographic content unrecognizable, thus creating work 'which defies voyeurism'.⁵⁷ However, given that the images are unrecognizable, one can only arrive at a feminist interpretation by taking the artist's actual intentions into consideration (especially since Amer's titles give nothing away).⁵⁸ In similar fashion, the art critic and curator Brooke McGowan does not consider Pietromarchi's actual intentions irrelevant. On the contrary, she takes them as providing the key to the meaning of this installation and quotes him extensively in the exhibition catalogue.

440 It would be very counterintuitive in these cases *not* to take the artists' explicit intentions into account. I cannot believe, for instance, that anyone who knows that Amer intended to make a statement about the representation of women in current society would simply disregard this information and still maintain that her work is a formalist exercise in the style of Cy Twombly. Likewise, if someone were to ask me what Pietromarchi's installation is about, now that I know his underlying intention, I would say that it is about memories and childhood. This seems the only reasonable answer.

445 Of course, advocates of HI who cannot bring to bear Pietromarchi's direct pronouncements of intent may propose several alternative interpretations. Here are just a few possibilities:

- 450 (i) Pietromarchi's light bulbs do not hang from the ceiling but are placed on pedestals. This indicates that we should really look upon them as sculptures. Pietromarchi received formal training in classical sculpture in London and Carrara and this shows. Just as, say, Michelangelo's *David* is more than life-size, so these sculptural light bulbs are larger in size than regular light bulbs. And just as Michelangelo's *David* will look young forever while the historical David became an old man, so these sculptural

56 Kimberley Lamm, 'Ghada Amer: Love Has No End', *The Brooklyn Rail* 9 (2008).

57 *Ibid.*

58 Other reviews that fit with Danto's experience and interpretation of Amer's work: 'An artist less well known, Ghada Amer, likewise hints at dirt. With colored thread alone, she constructs formless abstract drawings against painted panels. Take the Whitney's word for it: the threads, closely examined, show victimized women. I must be way too virtuous to make them out' (John Haber, 'Cleaning Up America's Act: The 2000 Whitney Biennial', 2000, <http://www.haberarts.com/whitny00.htm>, accessed on 1 May 2009). 'The unsatisfied desire to understand is transformed into material pleasure in Amer's more recent stitched canvases. In Gray Lisa (2000) pornographic images of women traced or copied from sex-industry magazines challenge us to rethink female sexuality, while unmotivated drips and tangles of brightly colored thread revel in their own excess' (Laura Auricchio, 'Works in Translation: Ghada Amer's Hybrid Pleasures', *Art Journal* 60, p. 26). '[W]hile reminiscent of abstract expressionism', Amer's work really 'serves to blur the boundaries as a means to represent the complexity of feminist thought, the debate over representation, and the self-assertion of pleasure' ('In-depth Art News: review of *Ghada Amer: Pleasure*', 2001, <http://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2001/08/01/28940.html>, accessed on 1 May 2009).

creations will shine longer than any ordinary light bulb. Greek and Roman sculptors mainly portrayed mythological figures, while medieval and Renaissance sculptors focused on biblical figures and scenes. Pietromarchi has chosen to portray the great myth of the modern era: technology.

460

(ii) Two light bulbs diffuse one light. This is a perfect symbol for what the union between two people should be like: harmony without loss of individuality. The light bulbs are placed at eye-level and have the same size as human heads to bring this association to mind. Knowing that this harmonious union is not meant to last forever gives the work a kind of tragic beauty. The bulbs have roughly the same life-expectancy, but it is very likely that one will fade out sooner than the other. When this happens the work's distinctly melancholic undertone will become more apparent.⁵⁹

465

(iii) As an artist Pietromarchi is interested in contrasts and tensions. In a previous project he attached contemporary lead sculptures to nineteenth-century glass buoys and then transferred them to the Mediterranean Sea. In this new work he is clearly pursuing the same line of research. He placed modern light bulbs in a medieval dungeon, thus highlighting the contrast between the light of the lamp and the darkness of the dungeon, between the fragility of the glass and the solidity of the old castle. On a symbolical level, this may be an attempt to come to grips with a deeper contrast. Medieval times, the so-called 'Dark Ages', are usually seen as falling in between the 'enlightened' eras of antiquity and modernity. Pietromarchi seems to challenge this received view. According to him the Dark Ages are not an interval but rather the perennial surroundings which are briefly illuminated by the frail light bulbs of reason. As such the work can be read as a comment on Immanuel Kant's famous essay 'What Is Enlightenment?'—a known inspiration to Pietromarchi.

470

475

480

All three hypotheses seem to make at least as much sense as Pietromarchi's own explanation. In fact, in light of the work's features and the relevant contextual information, they seem to make more sense. If we assume, for argument's sake, that hypothesis (iii) really is the (epistemically and artistically) optimal interpretation of the work, then proponents of HI are bound to say that Pietromarchi's work is about the contrast between the Dark Ages and the Enlightenment, even though nothing of the kind was on Pietromarchi's mind when he created the piece. This, I believe, is a very counterintuitive stance that few interpreters would support.⁶⁰

485

There seem to be two ways in which a supporter of HI could respond to this critical assessment. She could either challenge the claim that the interpretation of these examples by AI is more convincing or argue that HI can independently arrive at the same interpretation. Both strategies, however, are bound to fail.

490

First, the supporter of HI might throw doubt on the interpretation put forward by AI by insisting on the difference between an utterer's meaning and utterance meaning. If an

59 Felix Gonzalez-Torres produced a work with two clocks that more or less has this meaning.

60 The 'postulated artist' version of HI would fare no better in this particular case. Advocates of this version of HI would construct, on the basis of standard contextual information, an idealized artist whose intentions are able to account as fully as possible for the work's features. It is most likely that this interpretive procedure, too, would lead to interpretation (iii) rather than the meaning that Pietromarchi actually intended to put across.

495 informed audience's best hypothesis of Amer's or Pietromarchi's intention does not match
with the actual intention of the artist, then, the argument goes, this just indicates that the
artist did not successfully realize his or her intention. Thus, Pietromarchi may have *wanted*
to create a work about childhood memories, but in the end he failed to give proper effect
to his intentions in his artistic activities. His installation therefore does not have the mean-
500 ing he wanted it to have. In a similar way, the distinction between an utterer's meaning and
utterance meaning might be invoked in Amer's case. After all, Danto seems to refer to the
former and not the latter when he says that '*Amer* is making, by means of stitched prurient
imagery, some statement about the representation of women' (emphasis added).

I think it is very difficult to sustain this line of argument. To begin with, it is pretty clear
505 from Danto's review that he does consider Amer's intentions to be crucial in the interpre-
tation of the *work*. Without Amer's explanation of her own work, Danto claims, 'we would
badly misread the object' (note that he does not say that we would badly misread the *artist's*
intentions). And when he writes that 'the eye is a very poor guide to what we in fact see',
the implication is that what we in fact see are feminist works about the representation of
510 women as sexual objects (a view that is shared by most other critics). Upon learning Amer's
actual intentions, Danto does not hesitate to denounce his earlier interpretation. Likewise,
Brooke McGowan considers Pietromarchi's intentions as providing the key to the meaning
of the actual work and not the work that would have been on display had the intentions of
the artist gone well.⁶¹ So, the views of people in the art world do lend support to AI. By
515 contrast, if one does *not* take the artist's intentions into account, one will arrive, as I
have tried to indicate above, at a very counterintuitive interpretation.

Second, the advocate of HI might point out, as Levinson has repeatedly done, that an in-
formed audience is allowed to take into account *categorical* intentions, that is, an artist's ex-
plicit intentions for how a work is to be approached on the categorical level (as opposed to the
520 semantic level).⁶² If, by hypotheticalist lights, one is indeed entitled to know from the outset what
artistic category a work belongs to, then it might just be the case that HI and AI will come up
with the same interpretation of these examples. After all, if hypotheticalist interpreters can bring
to bear knowledge of the fact that Amer's *Red Diagonales* was not intended as an abstract paint-
ing, but rather as a conceptual work of art using stitchings instead of paint, then surely their
525 best hypothesis will *not* be that it is an abstract work in the style of Cy Twombly?

I am happy to grant this last point. The question, however, is not so much whether
knowledge of categorical intentions would change any initial thoughts one might have

61 As indicated earlier, I follow Carroll and Iseminger in proposing a minimal success condition to be weighed on artists' intentions (an intention is utterance meaning-determinative if it is compatible with and supportable by the text or artefact taken in its intended context). This minimal success condition is obviously fulfilled in the case of Pietromarchi as his actual intentions are consistent with and supportable by the work. (And McGowan does not seem to require anything more when she accepts Pietromarchi's intention as meaning-determinative.) Of course, the fact that Pietromarchi's intentions are successfully realized in the work does not, therefore, entail that the work is an artistic success.

62 Levinson, 'Two Notions of Interpretation', in A. Haapala and O. Naukkarinen (eds), *Interpretation and Its Boundaries* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1999), p. 17: 'readers who attempt to arrive at meaning by hypotheticalist lights are entitled from the outset to know, and so ideally do know, at least what category of offering they are dealing with'.

530 regarding a work's meaning, but rather whether it would allow HI to arrive at the same interpretation as AI. The answer to this question, I think, is 'no'. Even if you know that Amer's work is conceptual rather than abstract, this will not get you very far. Without some idea of what her semantic intentions were, it is very hard to guess that she has made a feminist work about the 'phallogentric' representation of women. The case of Pietromarchi's *Untitled* is even clearer. Knowing that Pietromarchi's work belongs to the category of installation art does not really help us in determining the *meaning* of the work. Without any 535 clues from the artist himself one will sooner come up with the interpretations (i)–(iii) listed above than arrive at the interpretation favoured by both critic and artist.

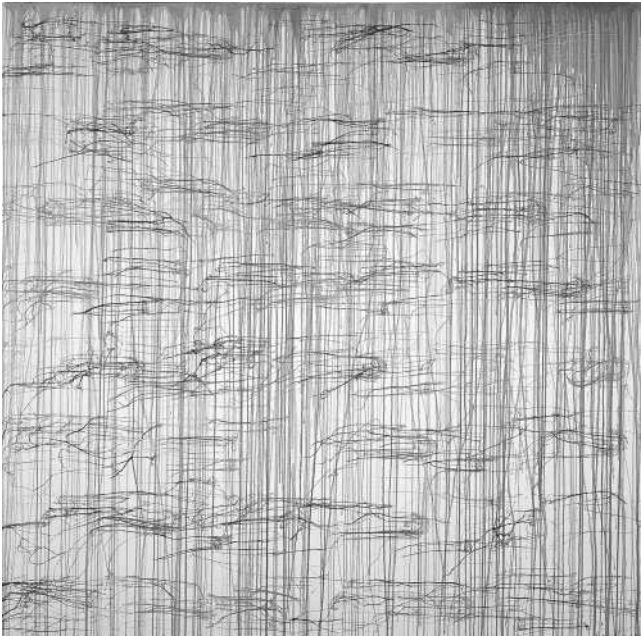
Conclusion

540 HI and AI are bound to support different interpretations of both the test cases I have discussed. In both instances the interpretation proposed by AI seems to fit better with our intuitions and with accepted critical practice. Moreover, these test cases do not stand alone. When we visit galleries or exhibitions of contemporary art we regularly come across works that are similar to the ones that I have discussed; works that, as Danto says, initially strike us as 'opaque artifacts we know to be meaningful but whose meaning we cannot grasp'.⁶³ Being puzzled, we will often look for reports of artistic intention to 545 solve our interpretive quandaries. These reports typically play a decisive role in the interpretation we ultimately arrive at. All this speaks strongly in favour of AI.⁶⁴

Hans Maes
University of Kent
h.maes@kent.ac.uk

63 Danto, *Embodied Meanings*, p. xiii.

64 I am grateful to an anonymous referee of this journal for many helpful comments and suggestions. I also wish to thank Rafael De Clercq, Jonathan Friday, Jerrold Levinson, Michael Newall, and Katrien Schaubroeck for their valuable input on earlier versions of this paper.



Reference: private use only



Reference: R

use only