

The Artistic Metaphor

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Abstract

Philosophical analysis of metaphor in the non-linguistic arts has been biased towards what I call the ‘aesthetic metaphor’: metaphors in non-linguistic art are normally understood as being completely formed by the work’s *internal* content, that is, by its perceptual and aesthetic properties such as its images. I aim to unearth and analyse a neglected type of metaphor also used by the non-linguistic arts: the ‘artistic metaphor’, as I call it. An artistic metaphor is composed by an artwork’s internal content, but also by its *external* content, which is provided by the work’s artistic properties such as its history. The artistic metaphor has been gestured at but not afforded a considered analysis; I aim to do this. Identifying the artistic metaphor has at least two benefits. It shows how curation plays a role in generating metaphors in artworks, which has been overlooked, and it illuminates a potentially powerful tool to interpret and understand ‘conceptual’ art.

1. Introduction

Many artworks use metaphors without a linguistic medium, such as painting, photography, drawing, sculpture, sound art, installation, and performance art. For example, Van Gogh’s paintings have been described by art historians as a ‘bundle of metaphors’ (Rough, 1975, p. 366), and Picasso conceived of his own works as ‘plastic’ metaphors (Gilot & Lake, 1964, pp. 296–97). Metaphor is frequently used in art as a moral and political tool. For instance, A. W. Eaton analyses metaphors in artworks which ‘suggest’ a connection between persons and objects. Often, a woman is represented as an inert object to be consumed or used (Eaton, 2012, p. 288) such as in May Ray’s *Le Violon d’Ingres* (1924). Moreover, Ai Weiwei’s *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), which consists of millions of porcelain sunflower seeds, has been interpreted as a metaphor for the downtrodden Chinese populace under Mao Zedong.¹ The use of metaphor in this installation invites us to see the Chinese people under Mao *as* sunflower seeds, conveying messages about famine, individuality, and oppression.²

¹ See Cunningham (2011), Chayka (2010), and Bingham (2010).

² Metaphors have also been ascribed to performance and sound art: see Mullane (2010), and Wishart (1996, pp. 165–67). For example, Pavlensky

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Philosophical analysis of metaphor in the arts has mostly focused on content that is *internal* to the work of art. That is, metaphors in non-linguistic art are normally understood as being completely formed by the work's perceptual and aesthetic properties, such as its images. *Le Violon d'Ingres* uses this type of metaphor, wherein a woman is depicted as a violin: the metaphor is composed of two images that are visibly connected to each other. I shall call this the 'aesthetic metaphor'; I use the term 'aesthetic' to capture the internal, perceptual features of an artwork. There are several different accounts of this aesthetic metaphor, though they share a common core in their focus on the artwork's internal content. Their disagreement merely concerns the *exact* way the work's internal content interacts within the metaphor.

Understanding the aesthetic metaphor in this unified way reveals an analysis of another type of metaphor used by non-linguistic art, which has been neglected: the 'artistic metaphor', as I call it.³ The artistic metaphor has been gestured at but not afforded a considered, unified analysis; my main aim is to do this.

The artistic metaphor is composed partially by an artwork's internal content, but also by its *external* content, which is provided by the work's artistic properties, such as its history and genre.⁴ Artistic properties of an artwork are not straightforwardly *perceived* in the work; we don't perceive these contextual properties in the way we perceive a work's images or sounds. Thus, I draw on a distinction between aesthetic properties and artistic properties,

[...] taking the former to be perceptually striking qualities that can be directly perceived in works ... and the latter to be relational properties that works possess in virtue of their relations to art history, art genres, etc (Adajian, 2018).

Once we identify the artistic metaphor, we are then in a position to explain how *curation* plays a role in generating it, which has also been overlooked. And as I shall show, Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* –

described his *Fixation* (2013), where he nailed his scrotum to Moscow's Red Square, as a metaphor for Russia's political indifference; see Walker (2014).

³ Danto (1981, p. 173) uses the term 'artistic metaphor' at least once, though he appears to use it as a general term for a metaphor in an artwork, rather than for the particular type I'm identifying.

⁴ I don't intend to implement a hard and fast rule for what counts as 'internal' and 'external' content, and there will likely be cases of overlap, where it's unclear whether the metaphor is aesthetic or artistic.

wherein the oppressed people under Mao are represented as seeds – is an artistic metaphor facilitated by curation. The oppressed people under Mao constitute content given externally and aided by curation, and the ceramic seeds constitute content internal to the work itself.

I shall first explain, in Section 2, what metaphor involves and how generally it manifests in non-linguistic art. In Section 3 I outline and unify the aesthetic metaphor. In Section 4 I use this analysis to understand the artistic metaphor. My analyses of both types are teased out from existing accounts of metaphor in art. While my primary concern is to identify the artistic metaphor, showing how it differs to the aesthetic metaphor also unifies diverse accounts of how non-linguistic artworks use metaphor in general.⁵ I close by considering the role of curation, and I conclude with noting some implications my analysis has for theories of art, and conceptual art in particular.

I will not provide *definitions* of metaphors in art, or extensively evaluate candidate accounts. Rather, I want to draw out the neglected artistic metaphor; only by doing this are we then in a position adequately to evaluate the approaches. Lastly, I will be concerned only with the non-linguistic arts that belong to the ‘artworld’: the social institution composed of people creating, viewing, criticising, preserving, and selling fine art (Becker, 1982, p. x). I shall have in mind primarily gallery and museum displays of art.

2. What is metaphor?

To understand artistic metaphor, and how it differs from the aesthetic metaphor, we need to clarify what metaphor is. Normally considered a non-literal use of language, a metaphor is a device ‘in which one thing is represented (or spoken of) as something else’ (Camp & Reimer, 2008, p. 846). This is familiar in literary artworks, and everyday speech:

- (a) Our brains ache in the merciless iced east winds that knife us⁶
- (b) Alison has a heart of gold.

⁵ Another way to label the aesthetic/artistic metaphor distinction could be ‘perceptual’/ ‘conceptual’ or ‘sensory’/ ‘cognitive’ respectively. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this. However, to capture the art-specificity of the metaphors I’m concerned with here, I use ‘aesthetic’/‘artistic’.

⁶ From Wilfred Owen’s ‘Exposure’ (1946).

Here, the wind is represented as knives, and Alison's heart is represented as golden. Metaphor often draws a resemblance between two or more things not normally associated: the wind described by Wilfred Owen does not actually contain knives. Rather, 'knives' is used metaphorically to convey the extremity of the cold. One way of achieving this is by applying a property to something to which such labels do not normally apply; 'calculated category mistakes' as Nelson Goodman calls them (1976, p. 73).

The distinctive representation achieved by a metaphor is often understood as an interaction between two types of domains. In Owen's poem, the *wind* is what he's attempting to describe: it constitutes the 'target domain'. The object or concept whose features we map on to this target in this case are *knives*. This object and its relevant features form the 'source domain'. In Owen's metaphor, the features of knives (sharpness, danger, pain) are mapped on to the wind, resulting in an effective way of describing the wind as freezing.

In general, then, a metaphor occurs when features from a source domain are mapped onto an object or concept in the target domain, forming a new meaning binding the two domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).⁷ An object/concept, *A*, is non-literally represented as an object/concept, *B*, which yields a metaphorical meaning, *C*.⁸ That is, the mapping leads to a kind of transformation of the target object (Black, 1979). I shall refer to this interaction of domains as *source-target domain interaction*.

This domain interaction, and the general system in which a metaphor can occur, needn't be linguistic. This is because the essence of metaphor '...is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5) and is 'primarily a matter of thought and action, and only derivatively a matter of language' (op. cit., p. 135).⁹ The key is in the speaker's, listener's, or

⁷ This is a popular interactionist view of metaphor: see Richards (1937); Black (1962; 1979); Bache (1980). Source and target domains have been referred to respectively as 'vehicle' and 'tenor' (Richards, 1937), 'vehicle', 'topic' (Feinstein, 1982), 'primary subject', 'secondary subject' (Black, 1979) 'home realm', 'target realm' (Goodman, 1976). Following Carroll (1994) I use 'source'/'target' terminology.

⁸ I consider how metaphor functions in non-linguistic art objects without drawing conclusions about the nature of the *meaning* this metaphor might generate. For the relationship between literal and metaphorical content see Borg (2001), and Camp & Reimer (2008).

⁹ This might involve a kind of 'seeing-as', where we 'see' the target in terms of the source: see Black (1962, p. 41).

viewer's conceptual action of fusing source and target domains together, and this could be prompted by non-linguistic means such as images, or even sounds.

3. The aesthetic metaphor

Le Violon d'Ingres is an image of a woman combined with one of a violin, representing a woman *as* the instrument. This artwork is an example of a familiar type of non-linguistic metaphor used in artworks, and which is most attended to by theorists. Many different philosophical accounts of metaphors like this have been given – each aim to understand how a metaphor might manifest non-linguistically in a work of art.¹⁰ While these accounts appear scattered, and in some cases are presented as rivals – for example, Noël Carroll criticises Virgil Aldrich's account of metaphors in pictures (Carroll, 1994, pp. 361–62) – they can be unified by their common claim that the content of such metaphors is provided wholly perceptually, where the content of both a source and target domain is detected in our direct experience of the work itself, of its perceptual and aesthetic properties.¹¹ I propose to call metaphors like this 'aesthetic metaphors'.

Crucially, the concepts or objects in both of the domains to be fused in the aesthetic metaphor are provided by the work visually, audibly, via touch, taste, or smell, depending on the artwork's medium; that is, *internally*.¹² I call this fusion where both domains are internal to the work: *internal-internal domain fusion*. This internal-internal fusion is the defining mark of the aesthetic metaphor, and the differences between existing accounts of the aesthetic metaphor merely concern how exactly this fusion happens.

First, and most familiarly, the internal-internal fusion might be entirely *visual*, where both domains are provided visually by the work. The most recognisable way this happens is where there are

¹⁰ See, for instance: Aldrich (1968); Danto (1981); Heffernan (1985); Hausman (1989); Carroll (1994); Forceville (2008).

¹¹ I use 'aesthetic' loosely to refer to the perceptual content of an artwork, whether this involves grasping the depiction in the work, or more broadly to include the cognitive qualities this perceptual experience might afford. I am neutral on the broader debate about the nature of the aesthetic: see, for example, Korsmeyer (1977) and Shelley (2003).

¹² This echoes Beardsley's notion of 'internal' artwork evidence: 'evidence from direct inspection of the object' (1981, p. 20).

two images fused into one.¹³ I'll call this the 'graphic hybrid', which is considered to be the 'truly pictorial counterpart of metaphor' (Heffernan, 1985, p. 177). For example, a sculpture which represents Napoleon as a Roman emperor is a graphic hybrid (Danto, 1981, pp. 167–68). Carroll (1994) offers an extensive account of this aesthetic metaphor, though he calls it a 'visual metaphor'. According to Carroll, this composite image is a fusion of at least two disparate visually recognisable objects, typically by superimposing one image over another image.

Consider the image of the woman combined with one of a violin. One depicted object forms the source domain: a violin, and the other depicted object forms a target domain: a woman. The viewer is prompted to map the associations of violins on to the woman (Carroll, 1994, p. 355).¹⁴ This has been considered 'homospacial thinking', which 'consists of actively conceiving two or more discrete entities occupying the same "space", a conception leading to the articulation of new identities' (Rothenberg, 1980, p. 18). This conceptual mapping might expose the supposed instrumental features of women such as being objectified or being played.

Another way internal-internal domain fusion can be entirely visual is where there are not two fused images, but where an object which forms a target domain is depicted in a certain style, where the style itself forms a source domain. 'Style' includes the visual quality of line, colour, and shapes used. For example, Gainsborough's *The Mall in St James's Park* (1783), which depicts women promenading down a tree-lined walkway, has been interpreted by Arthur Danto as a metaphor for 'time and beauty' in its transformation of the women 'into flowers and the *allee* into a stream they float along' (1981, p. 172).

The target domain consists of the women depicted. The artist's flowing and delicate brushwork forms a distinctive style with flower-like and earthy features, which compose a source domain. These features are visually mapped onto the target: the images of the women are fused with the flowery manner in which they are depicted. We then supposedly get the metaphor that, roughly, 'the women are flowers flowing down a stream'. This is a more subtle kind of internal-internal domain fusion compared to that in the

¹³ 'Image' is interpreted loosely to include the visual aspects of painting, drawing, sculpture, installation, and film.

¹⁴ Or, the woman might form the source and the violin form the target, in which case the viewer would be prompted to map the associations of women on to the violin – Carroll considers both directions (1994, p. 350).

graphic hybrid. Here, it is the *way* a subject has been represented which gives us the source domain. This ‘stylistic hybrid’, as we can call it, is a ‘[...] fundamentally homogenous image which ... recognizably represents the whole of one object, yet does so in such a way as to elicit its visual resemblance to another’ (Heffernan, 1985, p. 177). The stylistic hybrid has been gestured to in several accounts on metaphor in art. As well as Arthur Danto and James Heffernan, it’s been analysed by Virgil Aldrich (1968), Carl Hausman (1989, p. 137), and Charles Forceville, who calls it an ‘integrated metaphor’ (2008, p. 468).

While less common, internal-internal domain fusion might be entirely auditory, or perhaps even olfactory, gustatory, somesthetic (relating to our sense of touch), or involve a combination of these perceptual properties. For instance, an aesthetic metaphor would be conveyed by a moving-image of women overlaid with the sound of chickens clucking. Here, the clucking sound would form a source domain, and the image of the women would form a target domain. This would compose the (likely sexist) metaphor, roughly, that ‘women are chickens’. Here, the source content is given in an auditory medium, and the target content given visually. We can call such aesthetic metaphors with combined perceptual qualities ‘multi-sensory aesthetic metaphors’.¹⁵

So we have the following types of aesthetic metaphor: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, somesthetic, and multi-sensory. To the best of my knowledge, no one has given a full-fledged account of auditory, olfactory, gustatory or somesthetic types, but these shouldn’t be ignored. They most likely have manifested in artworks which make use of non-visual perception, like in performance art or sound art. The *visual* aesthetic metaphor, on the other hand, is considered the paradigmatic example of a metaphor in the non-linguistic arts.

4. The artistic metaphor

Aesthetic metaphor doesn’t capture all there is to metaphor in art. Many artworks use non-linguistic metaphor, even though they lack internal-internal domain fusion, and this demands explanation. Weiwei’s *Sunflower Seeds* is not an aesthetic metaphor, because it contains no internal-internal fusion; there is no fusion of two

¹⁵ Forceville (2008) calls them ‘multi-modal metaphors’. For other variants of visual aesthetic metaphor see Forceville (2008, pp. 464–66).

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domains which are given aesthetically. For instance, there is no fusion of two images; this would be achieved if the seeds were, on closer inspection, constructed as tiny Chinese people. But we just have millions of seeds.

Rather, *Sunflower Seeds* is an *artistic* metaphor where the content of one of the domains is not given straightforwardly by our perceptual or sensorial experience of the art object. The content of this domain, usually the target, is *external* to the piece. That is, one of the metaphor's inputs is provided by the work's artistic properties, which belong to the work's external context.

An artistic property of a work of art is any property external to what we perceive in the work itself, but which still partly determines that work's meaning and identity.¹⁶ That is, artistic properties are not strictly perceived in the artwork in the way we experience its images, for instance. Rather, they are external to the work but are still essential to what it does and says. For instance, Robert Stecker notes that Sherrie Levine's photographs have 'art-historical value in marking an important stage in the development of appropriated art...' (Stecker, 2012, p. 356). This artistic property pertaining to the work's contribution to a particular genre forms part of that work's identity and meaning. As Carroll observes, in addition to attending to a work aesthetically,

[...] we also contemplate artworks with an eye to discerning latent meanings and structures, and to determining the significance of an artwork in its art historical context (1986, p. 57).

I will not completely define 'artistic property', but familiar artistic properties include: a work's genre, the artist's intentions, the circumstances of the work's creation, and the cultural significance of particular symbols used in the work.¹⁷ For example,

In a painting, it may be appropriate to interpret a dove carrying an olive branch as symbolizing peace...though such things are apparent only to someone who views the works in terms of the conventions of religious iconography [...] Also, one work may quote from, refer to, or allude to another and, again, this takes us beyond consideration solely of its internal features [...] It

¹⁶ Danto showed this using his five red canvases thought experiment (1981, p. 2). For further support see Davies (1996, p. 22; 2016).

¹⁷ See Carroll (1986) for more on artistic properties. While I'm concerned with an artwork's 'artistic' properties, I remain neutral on what contributes to a work's 'artistic value', which I take to be a neutral concept concerning how good an artwork is *qua* artwork – see Hanson (2013).

can be intended to emulate, subvert, reject, or redirect the default art traditions, genres, and practices of its time (Davies, 2016, p. 51).

The artistic metaphor differs in an important way to the aesthetic metaphor. With the aesthetic metaphor, both the source and target domains are presented to the viewer explicitly – perceptually – by the work, most often visually. For example, a source domain and target domain are given by the image of a woman overlaid with an image of a violin. In contrast, the artistic metaphor somewhat withholds a domain, usually the target. As Hermine Feinstein observes, in some metaphors in art ‘while the [source] is given, the [target] often is withheld’ (1982, p. 50).

Analysing the aesthetic metaphor as essentially using *internal-internal* domain fusion illuminates how the artistic metaphor works. Rather than using internal-internal domain fusion, the artistic metaphor uses internal-*external* domain fusion. In the artistic metaphor, one domain – normally but not necessarily the source – is detected in the work’s perceptual content. But the other domain – normally but not necessarily the target – is detected externally.

By drawing on accounts of metaphor in art which independently hint at this artistic metaphor, we can tease out at least three main ways that this internal-external fusion can occur, drawing on the following: knowledge surrounding the work’s symbols; the viewer’s interaction and experience of the work; and the relevant art history and the work’s genre. These artistic properties will likely overlap, and I do not take this list to be exhaustive.

4.1. *Symbols provide the target domain*

Roughly speaking, a symbol is anything that stands for something else (Hospers, 1946, p. 29). Language is the most familiar symbol system, but symbols can also occur in perceptual media, i.e. visually, sonically, and so on. While there has been research on auditory symbols in music (Lippman, 1953), the visual symbol is the most common in the non-linguistic arts, so I’ll focus on this. Evidenced by iconographic discipline, art is full of visual symbols. For instance, in Christian paintings the halo is a symbol for sanctity and white is a symbol for purity (Hospers, 1946, p. 38). These depicted objects carry ‘symbolic associations,’ which ‘add up to’ or ‘[serve] as a collective sign for’ the meanings of the work (Weitz, 1950, pp. 149–51).

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I want to suggest that these perceptual symbols can sometimes provide target domains. In contrast to the aesthetic metaphor where the fusion between source and target is entirely perceptual, the set of associations that symbols carry can itself function as a target domain, but it's external to the work; the object or concept this set might provide isn't found perceptually in the artwork.

We can observe this internal-external fusion in *Sunflower Seeds*: the ceramic seeds are symbols, which when inspected yield target domains. In propaganda images of the time, Chairman Mao was depicted as the sun, and the people of China as sunflowers turning towards him (Tate, 2010). And interviews with the artist indicate personal associations with the sunflower seed as a symbol, including friendship and compassion in a dark time:

In China, when we grew up, we had nothing [...] But for even the poorest people, the treat or the treasure we'd have would be the sunflower seeds in everybody's pockets (Weiwei, 2010).

Once we consider *Sunflower Seeds* in relation to the connotations of the symbols used in the work, we see that together they make salient Chinese politics, and the merciless consequences of autocracies. The perceptual parts of the work form a source domain, the features of which are mapped on to the targets made salient by symbolic knowledge. For example, our target – Chinese society under Mao – is made salient by the sunflower seed symbol in this artwork. So, this society under Mao's rule will be represented as Weiwei's vast space of sculpted seeds. This asks us to consider particular sunflower seed-features from the sculpture (the source domain), and apply them to the reality of people's lives during the Cultural Revolution (the target domain).

The perceptual properties of Weiwei's installation have distinctive qualities given by the way Weiwei has crafted and displayed the seeds. This contributes to the qualities to be mapped on to our target domain. For instance, it's relevant that the seeds have been carefully crafted one by one in a significant material; porcelain (Bingham, 2010). This tactile and strong quality of these seeds in the source domain combines with the target domain comprised of the Chinese people under Mao's rule, generating content about individuality and strength under repression and poverty. Roughly: the seeds in the work are small but many, and uniquely sculpted; the people under Mao's rule are small but many, and uniquely sculpted.

Sonia Sedivy's account of metaphors in pictures hints at this type of internal-external domain fusion too. She considers Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* (1563) which depicts the building of a large tower in

Antwerp. The work is apparently a metaphor for the rapid modernisation of Antwerp. According to Sedivy, the image of the tower is insufficient to determine the metaphor the work conveys: ‘we need to rely on extra-pictorial knowledge in order to apprehend the metaphor’. In the case of the Bruegel painting, this external knowledge comprises the ‘relevant biblical knowledge’ (Sedivy, 1997, pp. 105–107). Here, the tower is a symbol which is given visually, that is, internally to the work. The set of theological associations of this symbol constitutes an external target domain to be fused with the internal image of the tower.

4.2. *The viewer provides the target domain*

Artworks are often designed to hold a direct relationship with the viewer, with the expectation that their viewer have a certain experience. In particular, some artworks aim to represent the spectator’s life. This is the second external factor I want to consider: the life of the viewer. In such cases, the metaphor is composed of a source domain generated by the perceptual content of the artwork, and a target domain is generated by concepts drawn from the viewer’s life. Danto implies this kind of external target domain when he writes about characters in literature:

[...] the greatest metaphors of art I believe to be those in which the spectator identifies himself with the attributes of the represented character: and sees his or her life in terms of the life depicted: it is oneself as Anna Karenina...where the artwork becomes a metaphor for life [...] (1981, p. 172).

Here, the viewer’s life is represented as Anna Karenina: ‘...to see oneself as Anna is in some way to *be* Anna, and to see one’s life as *her* life, so as to be changed by experience of being her’ (Danto, p. 173). The metaphor prompts us to map features from this source domain – Anna’s personality and virtues – onto our life and mind. This again constitutes a form of internal-external fusion. The source domain is internal to the work of art, and the target domain is external, in that it offers the viewer’s life and emotions: ‘you are what the work is ultimately about, a commonplace person transfigured into an amazing woman’ (ibid).

With non-linguistic art, a piece might prompt its viewer to represent some property of themselves as an image or sound – as a particular perceptual object. Feinsein considers this type of external factor when theorising about what he calls ‘visual metaphors’.

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According to Feinstein, when attending to an artwork we can sometimes ask what emotions the work might elicit. The work provides a source domain, and the target domain is composed of the concepts or objects a viewer might bring to the domain interaction, which might be drawn from ‘past experience, current interests, needs, emotional set, and so on...’ (Feinstein, 1982, p. 51). For instance, a viewer’s experience of chronic pain might be represented as a particular colour or shape in an artwork, perhaps generating a metaphor such as ‘my pain is that jagged black line’.

Sunflower Seeds appears to draw on this external factor too: the work represents particular human lives – those who lived under Mao’s regime – as sunflower seeds. But it’s important to note that *Sunflower Seeds* initially invited contemporary viewers to directly interact with the work by handling the seeds up-close, and walking and lying on them. This suggests that the work was prompting all viewers to imagine their own life as a seed amongst a vast swathe of seeds, and to contemplate the resulting messages this representation might convey, about personal identity and one’s rights within different political regimes. A comment by the artist about this work captures this intended global identification with his viewers: ‘I always want to design a frame or structure that can be open to everybody’ (Weiwei, 2010).

Taken in isolation, *Sunflower Seeds* gives us millions of tiny seeds. But when considered in relation to the concepts generated by aspects of the viewer’s life and experience, the motifs of the individual and the society can become apparent, and form an external target domain. The features of the source domain provided by the seed installation are then mapped on to this target domain by the audience’s conceptual act of fusion. Viewers are asked to represent their own life as one of Weiwei’s seeds: *Sunflower Seeds* becomes a metaphor for an individual’s position in their own society; a metaphor for their place in the world.

4.3. Artwork history provides the target domain

Often when we inspect an artwork, we either have or seek knowledge about its history. Where does the work sit in the artist’s oeuvre? What were the artist’s intentions for the work? What genre is it a member of? What was it responding to? These questions generally concern what we can call the ‘art history’ surrounding the work of art. I want to suggest that the particular history of a work can provide concepts which form target domains external to the work itself.

The concepts that form this target domain can be fused with the source domain offered by features internal to the work, such as its visual or sonic content.

For example, Weiwei is known for his object- and performance-based oeuvre, which is driven by questions about autocratic power, issues of poverty and hard labour, and disappearing Chinese cultural history. *Sunflower Seeds* is part of a large series of works by the artist that have been crafted in porcelain, such as oil spills, pillars, and watermelons (Tate, 2010). The medium and genre of *Sunflower Seeds* also provides information. The fact that the work was designed to be an interactive installation is significant here. The immersive experience the work elicited helped the viewer identify closely with the seeds. This close engagement provided opportunity for careful contemplation about individuality, fragility, and social cohesion. The production of the work is also relevant. The seeds were painstakingly and individually crafted in porcelain. This precious material has deep historical roots with Jiangxi, China. The curator who showcased *Sunflower Seeds* in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall writes:

Historically famous for its kilns and for the production of imperial porcelain, this region is still known for its high quality porcelain production. The sunflower seeds were made by individual craftspeople in a 'cottage-industry' setting, rather than in a large-scale factory, using a special kind of stone from a particular mountain in Jingdezhen (Bingham, 2010).

This type of production emphasises that each seed in this vast swathe – each individual – is uniquely crafted, evoking 'the quest for individuality in a rapidly transforming society' (ibid).

Lastly, learning of Weiwei's intentions will assist understanding of the work in a way that goes beyond what immediately meets the eye.¹⁸ For instance, the artist's personal experience of the Cultural Revolution and his own precarious relationship with the Chinese government generate target concepts and ideas to be fused with the source domain provided by the seed installation. A selection of quotes by Weiwei about his *Sunflower Seeds* highlights concepts about the role and value of the individual, and the effects of violent regimes:

¹⁸ For debate about how an artist's intentions might determine the meaning of their work, see for example Levinson (2010) and Carroll (2000). Here I merely draw on the fact that knowing the artist's intentions might at least guide, if not determine, interpretation.

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It's a work about mass production and repeatedly accumulating the small effort of individuals to become a massive, useless piece of work. China is blindly producing for the demands of the market ... My work very much relates to this blind production of things [...]

From a very young age I started to sense that an individual has to set an example in society. Your own acts or behaviour tell the world who you are and at the same time what kind of society you think it should be.

Only by encouraging individual freedom, or the individual power of the mind, and by trusting our own feelings, can collective acts be meaningful (Weiwei, 2010).

Taken in isolation, *Sunflower Seeds* gives us a source domain. But once we consider this blanket of seeds in relation to its history and genre and to other works by the artist, target domains become salient: contemporary and historical Chinese politics, the merciless consequences of autocracies, and our relations in a collective. In other words, the work's history provides the target domain. Again, viewers are invited to represent Chinese society under Mao as Weiwei's seeds. *Sunflower Seeds* becomes a metaphor for this event in Chinese history, and for the role and value of the individual in society.

Danto hints at this broad art-historical artistic property in relation to metaphor when he considers Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* (1964). When Warhol piled up the copies of commercial packaging in Manhattan's Stable Gallery in 1964, this action posed the question: What is art, anyway? There, the concept of art as a theoretical concept was made salient. The work made 'a revolutionary and ludicrous demand, not to overturn the society of artworks so much as to be enfranchised in it, claiming equality of place with sublime objects,' and in doing so, it raised questions about how we should understand, and value, an object as art (Danto, 1981, p. 208).

The artistic property to be fused with *Brillo Box* was the concept of art itself; a concept which has become a focal point of critique in the artworld during the last century. According to Danto, the concept of art was brought into fusion with the perceptual content of the work. There, the source domain was composed of a pile of Brillo boxes. The target domain, consisting of the concept *art*, was provided externally, this time by the action of installing such pieces into a gallery. Consequently, Danto calls *Brillo Box* a 'brash metaphor': the 'brillo-box-as-work-of-art', which 'brings to consciousness the structures of art' (ibid).

In sum, the history of a work, including its genre and relation to the artist, can provide concepts which form target domains external to the work of art itself. These concepts can fuse with the source domain provided by the work's internal features, generating artistic metaphors. The Chinese people under Mao and the nature of individuality are represented as millions of seeds, and the concept of art itself is represented as a Brillo box.

5. The curator

Curation plays a vital role in generating artistic metaphors. In particular, the curator frequently facilitates internal-external domain fusion, and is more vital for artistic metaphors compared to aesthetic metaphors where the viewer can go further in deciphering the work's metaphor unaided by a curator. When looking at *Le Violon d'Ingres*, I can see f-holes on a woman's back. Of course, an amount of background knowledge is still required to understand this aesthetic metaphor. I need to understand that I'm looking at the back of a woman, and that the f-holes are signalling the structure of a string instrument. But the artwork is offering these domains explicitly – perceptually – in this case by a fusion of images in a graphic hybrid.

By contrast, in artistic metaphors the target domain is not straightforwardly represented by the work's perceptual content such as its images or sounds. That is, the target concept or object is not offered to the viewer by the work's internal properties, in contrast to *Le Violon d'Ingres*, which offers both the violin and woman's body in a visual way.

Curation can be the way to make target domains salient to the audience, so that they can grasp the domain fusion being attempted between the artwork and its external context. That is, curation aids provision of target domains.

The context of display, such as an exhibition design with particular curatorial strategies, can offer and bring a target domain, which is composed of an object or concept, into fusion with an artwork. For instance, curation can provide information about particular symbols used in a painting, information about the history and intentions surrounding a sculpture, and the positioning of an installation might encourage viewers to identify personally with the piece. The internal content of the artwork provides a source domain, and the curator can illuminate a target domain in line with this work.

For example, several viewers probably did not fully grasp *Sunflower Seeds* at first glance. Uninformed viewers would not know just from

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consulting the work in situ that the seeds were supposed to represent a particular community, or even people in general. First, the viewer may not know about the symbolic significance of the sunflower seed, nor that the sunflower was a symbol of Mao. Second, viewers may not know about the artist's history, his oeuvre, and political motivations. And third, viewers may not understand the nature of interactive installation. They may not realise that they are being invited to contemplate their own life as a seed. Curation is needed to provide this information, in order to illuminate our understanding of the work in front of us, and to grasp the artistic metaphors present there.

The curation of *Sunflower Seeds* provided the three external factors we considered above. The Turbine Hall was filled with 100 million seeds, which were arranged in a rectangular bed with a 10 cm depth. Open free to the public, viewers could gaze at the landscape from a bridge, or they could interact with the seeds at close-range. The way the work was curated encouraged different types of participation by the audience, and in doing so, made salient concepts drawn from the personal experience of each viewer. Moreover, in the exhibition space there was a video showing the production of the seeds in Jiangxi. There were statements on nearby walls and in booklets about the Cultural Revolution in China, Chairman Mao, the Chinese people under his rule, and their relation to the sunflower symbol. This information about the work's symbols, its history of production, and the artist, was strictly speaking external to the work itself, but provided target domains.

With *Sunflower Seeds*, target domains are not strictly perceived in the installation: there's no graphic hybrid of images, for instance. The bed of seeds is the only perceptual part of the artwork. But external target domains were made salient by curatorial factors: the way the work is configured; the viewing platforms and permission for viewer interaction; the information on the walls; and the film nearby. Without this curation, viewers would be left in the dark, and the work's artistic metaphors most likely lost on them.¹⁹

Curators have a lot of power over what artistic metaphors might be conveyed by an artwork. Works can be shown in contexts and exhibitions with curatorial aims in control of the curator rather than the artist. Indeed, after artists have died, curators and museums can have substantial free reign over their art.²⁰

¹⁹ For more on the role of the curator see Ventzislavov (2014).

²⁰ For example, *Francis Bacon/Henry Moore: Flesh and Bone* (2013) showcased Bacon's paintings and Moore's sculptures: two artists never before exhibited together in a public gallery.

In relation to metaphor, an artwork can be placed in a context which may provide a target domain not envisaged by the artist. For example, even if Weiwei did not intend *Sunflower Seeds* to be a metaphor for Mao's brutal rule over China, a target domain formed of these concepts could still be provided by the way an exhibition has been curated. Here, if the curator made explicit the work's history and genre, for instance, the metaphor could be reasonably interpreted even if the artist did not have it in mind and was merely treating the seeds as a painstaking exercise in ceramics.

However, plausibly *not anything goes* in the curator's production of artistic metaphors. There will be normative restrictions to what the curator can add to the internal-external domain fusion. Most importantly, the curator must (i) respect the source domain in the work, and (ii) provide an appropriate target domain which aligns with the artwork's identity and history.

First, the source domain is already given by the work, so the curator must attend closely to what the work offers perceptually for this constrains the source domain she can use. For instance, what is the work an image of? What does it sound of? The curator cannot use or create source domains haphazardly. For example, the curator cannot use *Sunflower Seeds* to convey the metaphor that 'the Chinese people under Mao are a river', for there is no river (there is no water at all) in the piece, actual or depicted. So, the curator must appeal to the millions of seeds as a source domain, not water.

Second, the curator must respect the artwork's history when providing target domains. With *Sunflower Seeds*, concepts of power, individuality, and liberty are more appropriate contextual factors to fuse as targets with the piece, compared to the activity of gardening or even Van Gogh's sunflower paintings. This is because the curator is generating a metaphor using Weiwei's *artwork* and not just any old sculpture of sunflower seeds. The history of an artwork is integral to its identity and meaning.²¹ So, curation must respect this when placing the work in new situations. Taking an artwork too far away from its historical origin risks treating the work as any old sculpture of seeds, thereby no longer dealing with the *artwork* but with an arbitrary collection of porcelain objects. As such, the nature of gardening or Van Gogh's oeuvre look irrelevant to *Sunflower Seeds*, and so will likely be unsuitable target candidates about which *Sunflower Seeds* could be a metaphor.

²¹ This is a dominant view and forms the backdrop for core debates in philosophy of art. See Davies (2016, pp. 50–87).

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The constraints to curating metaphors deserve more attention than I've given here, but the thought is this: in order to facilitate production of artistic metaphors, curators must be sensitive to the work's perceptual content, and to its artistic properties such as its history.

6. Conclusion

The literature on metaphor in the non-linguistic arts has been biased towards the aesthetic metaphor, which I have characterised by its use of *internal-internal domain fusion*. This kind of fusion is the common core to diverse accounts of the aesthetic metaphor. Both the source and target domains are comprised of internal, perceptual qualities of the artwork; two images, an image and a sound, and so on. I focused on the visual type, the graphic and stylistic hybrid in particular.

Analysing the aesthetic metaphor in this unified way, by employing internal-internal domain fusion, has revealed an analysis of the overlooked artistic metaphor. This metaphor instead uses internal-*external* domain fusion. One domain, usually the source, is detected perceptually in the work of art. The other domain, usually the target, is provided externally by the work's artistic properties. I explored the following as candidates: symbolic connotations, which might be drawn from cultural heritage; the viewer's own life and emotional experience; and the work's surrounding art history and theory.

Artistic metaphor accommodates the use of metaphor in more artworks, such as Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds*, than could be accommodated solely by the aesthetic metaphor. Moreover, as a mechanism, artistic metaphor has explanatory power: it explains the distinctive import of works like *Sunflower Seeds* in their use of representation to promote new experiences such as imagining one's life as a seed. It's because such works invite us to see a target domain (a particular society, for instance) in terms of its source (millions of porcelain seeds, for instance) that it achieves these effects. Artistic metaphor is therefore an indispensable tool for analysing and interpreting many artworks. In this concluding section I will note some implications this has for theories of art more generally, and in particular the interpretation of conceptual art.²²

²² I mean to refer to conceptual artworks of the Conceptual Art movement, as well as those works before and after this period, for instance

The fact that the artistic metaphor, with its reliance on artistic properties, accommodates the significance of certain works is another argument (if we needed another) to acknowledge the importance of artistic properties to appreciation and understanding of art more generally. It encourages us again to move away from the restricted aesthetic approach, which gained traction in the early 20th century, and which insisted that the content and appreciation of art derives from the work's perceptible features alone (as well as perhaps knowledge about its artform – its 'Waltonian category', such as its being a painting).²³ If we applied this traditional framework to a work like *Sunflower Seeds* and merely appreciated the craftsmanship of the installation, then we would miss the point of the piece. We'd miss the potent metaphor integral to it, and not be conscious of its political power and distinctive representation, i.e. its invitation for us to see or think of people as these seeds.

This traditional approach, which would often be used to interpret more traditional mimetic or narrative works of visual art, is precisely not the way to approach conceptual art such as *Sunflower Seeds*. Rather, the content and value of such works is to be grasped via the work's external relations, as well as its internal properties. As Stephen Davies notes about many artworks, conceptual and non-conceptual, there is an 'impossibility of separating formal factors from aspects of content that are not straightforwardly visible' (2016, p. 61). We likewise cannot separate the forms in *Sunflower Seeds* from what these forms are metaphorically signalling beyond the visible.

Unearthing the artistic metaphor therefore furthers the mid-last century critique of traditional aesthetic theory; the challenge that maintains that 'awareness of a work's artistic properties is crucial not only to understanding it but also to identifying it as the artwork it is' (Davies, 2016, p. 52).²⁴ If we don't permit such external properties, as the traditional approach would have it, then we lose

Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) and much of contemporary art today; sometimes called 'neo-conceptual' art.

²³ Proponents of this 'aestheticist' view include Bell (1914), Beardsley (1981), Stolnitz (1960). Acknowledging that artwork 'categories' affect aesthetic perception is sometimes considered an enhancement of this view, where a work's content is still determined by direct inspection of the work, but only with the correct perception which requires knowledge of the artform, e.g. impressionist painting – see Walton (1970).

²⁴ Other proponents of this critique include Danto (1964; 1981), Dickie (1964) and Carroll (2001).

these metaphors and so lose a powerful explanation of many works' content and value.

Indeed, many artworks pose a problem to traditional theories of art in their reliance on artistic properties. Much 20th and 21st century art, and conceptual art in particular in its challenge and reconfiguring of modernism, 'downplays...sensuous aspects of its appearance' (op. cit., p. 64). The main aim of conceptual art is supposedly to 'replace matters of the senses with those of the intellect' (Schellekens, 2007, p. 72), where the 'idea is King' (Wood, 2002, p. 33). Different kinds of ideas are central. For example, works from the Conceptual Art movement (1966–1972) such as Robert Barry's *Inert Gas Series* (1969) critiqued the nature of art itself. Other conceptual works since have explored wider philosophical ideas, such as Michael Craig-Martin's *An Oak Tree* (1973). And later conceptual works tend to centralise socio-political ideas (Schellekens, 2007, pp. 72–73), such as Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* and Adrian Piper's *The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1–3* (2013–17).

Given that the artistic metaphor is partly generated by artistic properties, it therefore could be a friendly tool for interpreting conceptual art in particular, an artform which has a striking reliance on artistic properties. And indeed, my main example in this paper is considered a paradigmatic piece of conceptual art (Weiwei has been named one of the most prominent 'conceptual' artists of our time; concepts play a crucial role in his work).

Artistic metaphor looks like one of the important ways that at least some conceptual art functions. For example, it explains well the distinctive knowledge that some such art can generate. Far from providing trivial knowledge, conceptual artworks can evoke 'what-it's-like' cognitive effects in viewers, making us experience certain ideas in an 'artistic way', as Peter Goldie argues (2007, p. 167).²⁵ For example, when viewing *Sunflower Seeds*, I can quietly hold a single seed in my hand and then look up to have my visual field dominated by millions more seeds. I can then imagine my own life as a seed in this vast swathe. The artwork allows me to contemplate these ideas in an effective and emotional way. The use of the artistic metaphor is thus an important and overlooked way that some conceptual works might generate this kind of knowledge that Goldie so commends.

²⁵ This rejects the claim that conceptual art can offer only trivial knowledge: see Young (2001).

On closer inspection, however, the artistic metaphor may be in tension with conceptual art's apparent demoting of perceptual qualities of the work, and prioritising of ideas over these sensorial qualities. This subduing of the art object's material, which Lucy Lippard dubbed the 'dematerialisation' of the art object, has been taken to be a paradigmatic feature of conceptual art, albeit analysed in different ways (Lippard, 1973).

For example, this notion could be analysed in terms of the role of sense experience. Robert Hopkins observes that our perceptual experience of visual conceptual works, such as Duchamp's *Fountain*, 'is merely a means of access to their nature' but is *not* 'the medium of appreciation because the artistic features appreciated do not enter experience in the way the notion of medium requires' (Hopkins, 2007, p. 56). For Hopkins, this distinction goes some way to capturing the problem with conceptual art: 'for other art, sense experience plays the role of medium of appreciation; whereas for conceptual art, it provides nothing more than means of access to the work'. Hopkins claims that this feature holds, *prima facie*, of 'most, perhaps of all, the works that have been considered conceptual' (ibid). According to this suggestion, with conceptual art, 'the conception is key', and how it is executed is 'largely irrelevant' (op. cit., p. 58).

But the artistic metaphor, with its use of a source domain, emphasises the indispensability of sense experience in determining a work's content and value. In contrast to Hopkins's claims, perception of a work that uses artistic metaphor is more than a mere mode of access. Rather, our perceptual experience of the source domain is meant to permeate the work's target domain; it alters the very experience of the artwork. This is precisely what metaphor is – it involves experiencing one thing in terms of another. And crucially, we've seen that this source domain has particularity. *Sunflower Seeds* is not suggesting that seeds in general or the generic type of object 'seed' are to be conceptualised as people in a society. Rather, it is specifically *those* seeds in the work itself – which are crafted, arranged, and interacted with in a specific way – which provide the source features to be mapped on to the target concept. These particular aspects of the source are integral to how the artistic metaphor functions in this work of art.

This specificity of the source domain and its crucial function in the work's artistic metaphor therefore suggests that at least with some conceptual art, we cannot dispense with the roles played by sense experience and the work's execution in our appreciating of the work beyond their functioning as a mere means of access. To grasp the artistic metaphor, we must experience both its source and target in a way

that resists the ‘dematerialisation’ of the conceptual art object. As Peter Lamarque argues, the conceptual artwork cannot be *reduced* to an idea, for we would lose an integral part of the experience and appreciation: ‘perceiving the ensemble, however deliberately unaesthetic, and perceiving it as a work, are integral to the apprehension it demands’ (Lamarque, 2007, pp. 15–16).

However, while the work’s perceptual aspects play an important role in our appreciation of conceptual art, they may still be *subservient* to the ideas conveyed. Indeed, Lamarque gives the work’s perceptual qualities a subservient role to the conceptual content conveyed (op. cit., p. 9). It is a further question, and one I won’t attempt to answer here, as to whether the artistic metaphor’s perceptual inputs (normally its source) are subservient to the overall ideas conveyed, for example particular themes like individuality and the oppressed society. But in general, we should be cautious about demoting the perceptual element of the source domain of those conceptual works which use artistic metaphor.

In conclusion, the fact that *Sunflower Seeds* uses artistic metaphor, and indeed, presuming that *Sunflower Seeds* is a conceptual work of art, therefore presents a problem to the claim that what is distinctive to conceptual art is its dematerialisation; that we can somewhat dispense with the work’s perceptual features and still grasp the work’s content and value, where the idea reigns supreme. On the contrary, the perceptual features of *Sunflower Seeds* – its tiny porcelain sculptures – are an important conduit for discovering its artistic metaphor, and the ideas consequently conveyed.

This tension between artistic metaphor and the dematerialisation supposedly central to conceptual art might suggest that artistic metaphor is not so friendly to the interpretation of such art. However, if this were the case, conceptual art would lose an effective tool to convey meaning, or cognitive and artistic effects; and we’ve seen how the artistic metaphor successfully captures the compelling force of *Sunflower Seeds*. Rather, perhaps the notion of dematerialisation needs to be analysed in a way that leaves more room for conceptual works that use their medium in a way that *is* integral to their content and value, and is central to their full appreciation. So perhaps we need a weaker notion of dematerialisation when analysing conceptual art.

This paper is not the place to fully explore these implications, but what I’ve noted here shows how much artistic metaphor has to offer the conceptual art discourse. Depending on how we characterise and identify conceptual art, the artistic metaphor could be a friend or foe.

I’ve aimed to show that the artistic metaphor deserves as much attention as the aesthetic metaphor in how non-linguistic artworks use metaphor. Moreover, by identifying and clarifying the artistic

metaphor, we have unearthed new questions about the agency of the curator in the artworld, and the nature of conceptual art.²⁶

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