

Lies in Art

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Abstract

This paper aims to show that any account of how artworks lie must acknowledge (I) artworks can lie at different levels of their content: what I call ‘surface’ and ‘deep’, and (II) for an artwork to lie at a given level, a norm of truthful communication such as Grice’s Maxim of Quality must apply to it. A corollary is that it’s harder than you might think for artworks to lie: Quality is not automatically ‘switched on’ during our engagement with art. However, I show how a work’s curation and genre-membership can ‘switch on’ Quality, allowing artworks to lie at different levels.

Keywords: lies, artwork, curation, genre, H. P. Grice

1. Introduction

Klein’s *Leap into the Void* (1960) shows the artist supposedly hurtling himself off a roof, unprotected from the concrete below. The photograph is an illusion. Two negatives were montaged together, one showing Klein leaping into a tarpaulin, the other showing the scene without the tarpaulin [Fineman 2012: 181]. The work contains the falsehood that the artist jumped off a roof unprotected. We might wonder whether Klein and his artwork would have been banished from Plato’s Republic for telling ‘wicked lies’ [375BCa: 84].

But does this artwork lie? Plato believed that artworks always lie because they are false imitations [375BCb: 403, 405]. Others, such as the art critic Deborah Solomon, have claimed that art never lies [Sharma 2014]. Plato was wrong: it’s harder than you

might think for artworks to lie because some are true, and even those that are false are not meant to be taken seriously. But the critic is also wrong: artworks can sometimes lie, when we legitimately expect the truth from them but they speak falsely.

Philosophers, such as Cooke [2019], are beginning to explore this reasonable claim that artworks can sometimes lie.¹ In this paper I argue that (I) artworks can lie at different levels of their content: what I call *surface* and *deep* levels, and (II) for an artwork to lie at a given level, a norm of truthful communication must apply to it, but this isn't straightforward in the artworld. In particular, curation and genre make it context-sensitive whether an artwork lies.

Throughout, I focus on art displays in the 'artworld': the social institution composed of people creating, viewing, criticising, and selling fine art [Becker 1982: x]. I shall have in mind mostly gallery and museum displays, and film screenings.

2. My argument

First, context affects whether an artwork lies. Suppose *Leap into the Void* were shown at an exhibition entitled 'Dangerous Performance Art.' It's displayed with Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971), where the artist was actually shot in the arm, and Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 5* (1974), where the artist actually jumped through flames. Here, *Leap into the Void* might well be a lie. It would be claiming that the artist leapt unprotected, which the artist knows to be false, and that would be a lie. Or, suppose the work were shown at an exhibition entitled 'Trick Photography', displayed alongside Wright and Griffith's *The Cottingley Fairies* (1917), a photograph now widely known to be a fraud. Here, *Leap into the Void* could not lie. It would not, in this context, be seriously claiming that Klein

¹ This has implications for art interpretation [Cooke 2019] and defining lying [Viebahn 2019].

leapt unprotected.

Whether an artwork lies depends on whether it ought to tell the truth in the first place. In ‘Dangerous Performance Art’ there would be a legitimate expectation that the works document actions that actually took place. But in ‘Trick Photography’ it would be inappropriate to expect the works to depict reality. Only if an artwork ought to tell the truth about something can it lie about that subject.

For a believed-falsehood to be a lie, it must be expressed in a context where the truth should be told: where it’s legitimately expected that speakers are following a truth-oriented norm. According to H. P. Grice, conversational contexts routinely assume such a norm, which he calls the Maxim of Quality: ‘Do not say what you believe to be false’ [1975]. Call a context governed by such a truth-norm a *Quality Context*. Sometimes this norm applies to our engagement with artworks. In terms borrowed from Grice, that first exhibition ‘Dangerous Performance Art’ provides a Quality Context; its title leads us to expect accurate representations. By contrast, the second exhibition does not: the inclusion of ‘trick’ in the title alerts us to a trick. I shall argue, first, that a *Quality Context is required for an artwork to lie*.

Second, at what level is an artwork a lie? If *Leap into the Void* was exhibited in a Quality Context, it would be what I call a ‘surface’ lie. Its surface content is false: it depicts an event that did not occur. And it has been plausibly observed that artworks can lie in this simple way. According to Brandon Cooke, *The Eternal Jew* (Hippler 1940), a Nazi film which ‘overall...makes the claim that Jews are subhuman’, is ‘a clear and pure example of artwork lying’, because it includes ‘staged scenes’ offered as an ‘accurate documentary’ of Jews [Cooke 2019: 261]. Like *Leap into the Void*, the film contains surface falsehoods in its fictional scenes, which are conveyed in a Quality Context, as a documentary.

But an artwork might lie at a *deeper* level too. While Cooke is right to treat *The Eternal Jew* as a lying artwork, the film could lie even if it did not contain staged scenes: it could tell a ‘deep’ lie that Jews are subhuman. This is my second point: artworks can lie at different levels – in a *deep* way or *surface* way.

This is because, first, artworks have layers of meaning which can differ, or coincide, in their truth-value. Artworks can possess surface believed-falsehoods and deep believed-falsehoods, such as *The Eternal Jew*, and also Titian’s *Rape of Europa* (1559-62) which has a surface falsehood in that it depicts an abduction that did not happen,² and a deep falsehood in its eroticisation of rape (readers should be mindful that I return to this claim about rape in detail later). Or, an artwork can be true at both levels. Nick Ut’s *The Terror of War* (1972) is true at its surface in that it depicts a real event – a napalm bombing – to convey a true deep message about the horrors of war. Moreover, an artwork can possess surface falsehoods and deep truths, such as Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), which falsely depicts at its surface a lightbulb in the sky during an air raid, but like *The Terror of War* it is deeply true about war’s barbarity. And conversely, a work can possess surface truths and deep falsehoods, such as Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), which uses documentary footage of the 1934 Nuremburg rally. The propaganda film thus has a surface truth, but it is deeply false about the righteousness of Nazism.

And, second, the Quality maxim can apply to these distinct levels: there can be a legitimate expectation of truth from a work’s surface or depth, or both, or neither. This means that a work can be a surface lie, deep lie, both, or neither. *Triumph of the Will* and *Rape of Europa* could be deep lies, and *The Eternal Jew* could be both a shallow lie

² More precisely, this painting might present a *fictional truth*: within this Greek myth it is true that Jupiter – disguised as a bull – abducts Europa. However, this is still *literally false* of the actual world. For truth in fiction, see e.g., Lewis [1978].

and deep lie. As I shall show, various factors will determine Quality, such as the beliefs of the artist, curator, and viewer, and also the work's curation and genre.

In sum, an account of lies in art must acknowledge that (I) artworks can lie at different levels of their content, and (II) for an artwork to lie at either level at all, Quality must apply to this level. A corollary of this is that it's harder than you might think for artworks to lie. Quality is not automatically 'switched on' during our engagement with art. Consequently, it's difficult for artworks to lie at either level. But, a work's curation and genre-membership can switch on Quality, allowing the work to lie.

I've offered a sketch of how artworks can lie at different levels depending on their context. In what follows, I strengthen this argument. As a preliminary, we can note the assumption that artworks can express messages with truth-values. I won't argue for this, but I agree with a growing consensus that this is the case.³ I've said that lying requires a context where the truth should be told: it requires a *Quality Context*. Section 3 offers support for this. And I've said that, while artworks do not have a Quality Context by default, Quality can be 'switched on' in different contexts, and can vary for different levels of a work's content. Section 4 argues for this: I unpack the surface-depth distinction, and then argue that there is no default truth-norm for art. But when there is such a norm, that provides a context for a work to tell lies at different levels.

3. Lying requires a Quality Context

Cooke uses a 'Traditional Definition of Lying' [Mahon 2016] to understand how art might lie:

³ Artworks might be truth-evaluable because they express propositions: see e.g., Korsmeyer [1985]; Grzankowski [2015]. Cooke also appears to make this assumption [2019: 262].

to lie =_{df} to make a believed false statement to another person with the intention that the other person believe that statement to be true [2019: 259].

With this in mind, Cooke gives the following definition of how an artwork lies, of ‘artwork lying’:

Artwork lying/to lie via artwork =_{df} to deliberately promote the belief that P via the intended appreciative engagement with the artwork, where P (i) concerns purported facts external to the work, (ii) is believed by the artist to be false, and (iii) P is (one of) the meaning(s) of the work. [ibid: 261]

More precisely, Cooke considers what it is for an artist to lie via their artwork [ibid: 260], and we can speak of the artwork lying derivatively on the artist’s beliefs (although as I shall show, the curator can also be relevant). Moreover, the ‘intended appreciative engagement with the artwork’ refers to the fact that ‘the lie is “told” by way of the correct experience of the work as a work of art’, in contrast to the artwork being used to lie about something unrelated to its meaning:

If I were a mover, I might try to impress a romantic interest with my wealth by ‘borrowing’ my client’s Rembrandt and displaying it in my living room as if it were mine. If this counts as a lie, it is not artwork lying in my sense of the term. [ibid]

Here the focus is on what the *mover* has lied about: she uses the painting as a mere visual aid. This contrasts with our concern with what the *artwork* lies about on the basis

of the artist's beliefs concerning that work. Like Cooke, I focus on artworks lying, where the lie is part of that work's content.

We can begin with Cooke's definition, but we must scrutinise the context of an artwork's attempted lie if the lie is to be successful, that is, felicitous regardless of whether or not it deceives someone. Cooke briefly mentions context: he gives examples of artworks, which '[...] can be considered paradigms of artwork lying since their respective genres and their contexts of presentation indicate that they are clearly in the business of truth-telling [...]' [ibid: 262].

Some artworks are 'in the business of truth-telling', and that is why they can be lies. Cooke's thought is a good one, and it needs to be further unpacked. Crucially, we must observe that the artworld is a complex space where several factors affect this truth-telling. I suggest this notion can be understood as following a truth-telling norm in the artistic discourse. To understand this, let us consider the more familiar way we lie, in ordinary speech.

Plato was wrong about what lying involves: while necessary, expressing believed-falsehoods is insufficient. I can utter something I believe false without lying, as when I utter 'I am thy father's spirit' in a play, or when I wink or smile to signal sarcasm or a joke. Such utterances are not lies because they are not genuine assertions: in joking and in acting, and with many utterances in fictions in general, believed-falsehoods are not asserted.⁴ Such utterances should not be taken seriously; the falsehoods are not claimed to be true. For instance, most fictive utterances act as an invitation to imagine some state of affairs; they are not straightforwardly claimed about reality. This is why we generally do not accuse fictional books or films for lying *simply* because they do not accurately represent reality.

⁴ It's broadly accepted that a lie is an 'insincere assertion' [Fallis 2009; Carson 2010; Saul 2012].

To lie, I must at least intend my utterances to be taken seriously, in a context where we ought to speak truthfully: a context governed by some conversational truth-norm, such as Grice's Quality maxim 'Do not say what you believe to be false' [Fallis 2009]. A context which is governed by a truth-norm, such as Quality, is what I am calling a *Quality Context*.

What determines a Quality Context in relation to lying is complex, and there's not yet a consensus. It is accepted, though, that it's necessary for at least the *speaker* to believe Quality is in force. If I say something I believe false to you, but I'm acting, then I'm not lying. This is because I don't intend you to take me seriously, even if you do so. To lie, I must believe our conversation is governed by a truth-norm. Some hold that the hearer needn't also believe this [Fallis 2009: 48; Saul 2012: 18–9], although others think they do; Seana Shiffrin [2014: 116] and Thomas Carson [2006: 294–5] claim that *both* the speaker and hearer must be aware that a truth-norm is in force.

This is not the place to wholly define a Quality Context. For our purposes, we need only observe that various factors will determine whether a context is one of Quality. They will include at least the beliefs of the speaker, perhaps the hearer's beliefs too, and the surrounding contextual structures which justify these beliefs. For example, the conventions of a stage-play, with a curtain, dimmed lights, and hushed audience, signal that there is no norm for speaking truthfully in the play. Here, it would be legitimate, and likely, that actors will not believe that Quality is in force. By contrast, the conventions of a biology lab, such as white coats and measuring equipment, signal that this is a context where the truth ought to be told. Here, it would be legitimate, and likely, that interlocutors believe Quality is in force.

In general, if the speaker, and perhaps also the hearer, reasonably believe a situation to be a Quality Context, this will usually guarantee (and will sometimes be

explained by the fact) that Quality is so occurring. I won't settle here whether hearers must also believe Quality obtains, but in general, lies happen in situations where a truth-norm is in place, which, due to objective contextual signals, is normally clear to both the speaker and hearer.

Crucially, Quality is by *default* 'switched on' in everyday conversation. It is implicitly presumed that we ought to speak truthfully, unless there are signals to the contrary: the norm can be 'turned off', for instance by winking. Giving such signals means that others '[...] will not expect you to obey the norm, they will not think that you ought to obey the norm [...]' [Fallis 2009: 53].

By contrast, the maxim is not by default switched on in a stage-play. This is the case with fiction in general; it's not automatically the case that we ought to take a work of fiction as a straightforward report on reality.⁵ As I show, though, contextual clues such as genre will affect this – they can switch on Quality, and so deem it appropriate to expect truths from the work.

In sum, for an utterance to be a successful lie, it must be made in a context where Quality is already 'switched on'.

4. Lies in art

Because a Quality Context is necessary to lie, we should make it necessary for an artwork to lie and add it to Cooke's definition. To lie, the artwork must deliberately promote the false belief that P, but this must also be done in a Quality Context. To lie, the artwork must be able to assert something in the first place. What does this look like in the artworld?

⁵ This is echoed by Lamarque and Olsen's 'no truth' theory of literature [1994].

As a starting point, we can note that in the artworld there tends to be two kinds of person who use an artwork to express something. The *artist* creates the work, and a *curator* can put the work to a particular use in different contexts (and sometimes the artist is the curator). These are our counterpart ‘speakers’. We can speak of the artist or curator lying via the artwork (or the artworks lying derivatively on the artist or curator’s beliefs). As with Quality Contexts in conversation, at least the artist or curator must believe that an art situation is one of Quality. Viewers – our counterpart ‘hearers’ – may have to believe this too (I’m inclined to think they do), depending on how we think Quality Contexts generally work.

As with conversation, this belief that a truth-norm is governing an artworld context will be justified by objective structures. I will focus on just two types: the artwork’s genre, and its curation. For example, if the artist is aware that their work is being presented as an authentic document of an event, it will be legitimate and likely that they believe this documentative genre signals that the truth ought to be told here, and viewers will likely share this belief. Genre and curation will influence the artist’s, curator’s, and viewer’s beliefs about Quality, affecting whether an artworld context is one of Quality.

With this in mind, I’ll now show that Quality Contexts are not straightforward in the artworld. First, Quality doesn’t apply coarsely to an artwork as a whole. Artworks can have distinct layers of content, to which Quality might apply all at once, to neither, or to one or the other. Second, Quality is not a default feature of the artworld like it is in conversation. These two points together show that it is *difficult* for artworks to lie, but when Quality is ‘switched on’ – by genre and curation – a work can lie at different levels.

4.1. *The surface-depth distinction*

To lie, we must believe that what we say is false. With art, falsity is complex because artworks have layers of meaning. Consider *Guernica*, which depicts the air raid that destroyed Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. When we ask what *Guernica* is about, we answer that it depicts this event. But we notice that the *way* the attack is depicted serves to express something more, something deeper: a message about war itself. Picasso stated about the painting: ‘I clearly express my abhorrence of the military caste which has sunk Spain in an ocean of pain and death’ [Blunt 1969: 9]. And art historians have described the mural as a ‘protest-painting’ against the barbarity of war [Foster et al. 2004: 285].

Artworks can contain different layers of meaning in this way, and we can use ‘surface’ and ‘deep’ to refer to these layers, drawing here on a range of related distinctions which have already received comment. Here is DeWitt Parker distinguishing ‘surface meaning’ from ‘depth meaning’:

Many poems and some works of plastic art possess what I like to call “depth meanings”— meanings of universal scope underneath relatively concrete meanings or ideas. Thus in the following line of one of Frost’s little poems

Nothing gold can stay

the word “gold” has its usual *surface meaning*, but underneath that is its *depth meaning*, precious; so in addition to saying that nothing golden can endure, the poet is saying that nothing valuable can abide — a more universal statement.

[1920: 32]

‘Surface’ is unpacked as ‘concrete’ and contrasted with meanings that have more ‘universal’ scope. Related distinctions seem implicit in the contrast between ‘descriptive’ vs. ‘moral’ messages [Korsmeyer 1985: 203], ‘strategy/choice’ of visual language vs. ‘thesis’ of this choice [Carroll 2001: 166–170], and ‘subject level’ vs. ‘a perspective...that informs the subject matter and moves beyond the immediate events portrayed’ [Lamarque 2009: 150].

With these conceptions in mind, we might say that surface contents in *Guernica* include, roughly, *a lightbulb hangs above the attack*, and *a horse is impaled*. These are part of the work’s ‘subject level’ or ‘descriptive’ content. The painting’s deeper content includes *war is barbaric*; perhaps the ‘thesis’ or ‘moral message’ of the work, moving beyond what is depicted.⁶ Some surface content is false. The deep content is true.

However we might unpack the surface-deep distinction, what is important for our purposes is that artworks can be true or false at different levels: these levels may differ or coincide in truth-value. An artwork with a true surface content can have a deep falsehood, as does *Triumph of the Will*. Conversely, a false surface content may be used to suggest a true deep content, as in *Guernica*. There can be false content at both levels, as in *Rape of Europa* and *The Eternal Jew*. And there can be true contents at both levels, as in *The Terror of War*.

⁶ I don’t mean to place ‘surface’ content in a particular depiction theory; it could be understood under any core approaches (via resemblance, convention, or psychology).

4.2. *The artworld is not a default Quality Context*

In contrast to everyday conversation, the artworld does not facilitate a context systematically enough to possess Quality by default. It cannot ensure that Quality is *automatically* in effect for either level of an artwork's content. The norm is not automatically in place just because we're dealing with art, in contrast to conversation. So, lies in art are going to be harder to come by compared to lies in ordinary speech.

You might think that Quality *is* automatically in force in the artworld but is often 'switched off' or flouted, as Marcia Eaton argues [1980: 25]. Perhaps the goal of artistic discourse is to do with how something is expressed, as well as what's expressed. Viewers and curators of a Titian exhibition might be more concerned with the master's style than with the truth of his work. Since technique is the focus, truth is almost irrelevant, so Quality is switched off here.

However, for a norm to be switched off or flouted in a particular situation, it needs to hold as a default feature of that type of situation in the first place [Stokke 2018: 140–1]. It only makes sense to flout a communication norm if that norm ordinarily holds steadfastly. So, there's a difference between a norm automatically applying and sometimes being flouted or switched off, and that norm not ordinarily applying at all. In conversation, Quality applies by default and speakers can switch it off, perhaps by winking. This is not so in the artworld: Quality isn't a default norm there.

The reason for this is that artworks are complex objects of communication, conveying messages (if any) at different levels and in varying curated displays. This makes it tricky to track uniform truth-value norms in the artworld. Artists are not usually guided by maxims like 'Do not say what you believe to be false'. And art viewers frequently don't believe that Quality is automatically in effect either. It's

inappropriate to expect that artists and their artworks should just make straightforwardly true statements in all artworld contexts unless signalled otherwise. And artists and their works are not frequently rebuked for expressing falsehoods, whether surface or deep ones. The reasons for this are familiar.

First, in many artworld contexts, the truth-value of a work is not a concern. For instance, some exhibitions focus on aesthetic experience, not surface or deep truth-value. If what matters is beauty, then truth is not the point [Korsmeyer 1985: 260]; it is not a primary concern for the artist, curator, or viewer. This is familiar in 20th and 21st century exhibitions. For example, shows which focus on style will not usually have Quality in effect. *JMW Turner: Adventures in Colour* (2016) focused on Turner's use of colour. The paintings may still have possessed true or false contents, but the exhibition's goal focused on the artist's techniques. It was not the case that the truth should be straightforwardly told. This may well have reflected Turner's intentions – given his concern with colour, it's plausible he wasn't intending his work to be viewed in something like a Quality Context.

Even in cases where artworks are clearly trying to convey a message, it's often inappropriate to expect that these works be straightforwardly true at their surface or deeper level. This is because many artworks represent fictional situations, and because audiences and artists are often not concerned with fully accurate representation. Indeed, most artworks are at least false at their surface, and this is considered legitimate by artists, curators, and viewers alike. For example, it was appropriate in the 16th century for painters to depict biblical figures in inaccurate clothing [Varriano 2006: 119], and it was usual for portrait artists to ignore their sitter's blemishes [West 2004: 131], thereby conveying surface falsehoods about the complexion of the portrayed. In fact, these cases might constitute what we could call *Anti-Quality Contexts*, with norms such as 'do not

paint the patron's face warts and all'.

Second, there are many exhibitions of art where it's *unclear* whether the truth should be straightforwardly told. For example, the exhibition *Pictures* (1977) questioned authenticity and originality in photography. Referencing images in mass media, the artists and their works challenged authorship by stealing other images [Foster et al. 2004: 580]. The viewers' expectations about whether the works should tell the truth, at their surface or depth, were deliberately challenged. So, it was unclear whether the works should have been simply telling the truth. Given that the artists and curators were aiming to complicate truth here, they won't have believed that this exhibition was governed by a straightforward truth-norm.

Contemporary artworks in particular are often knotty and perplexing, especially in their deep truth-value. For instance, many post-1960 artforms deliberately complicate the nature of truth and falsehood at a deeper level, by critiquing conventional political viewpoints and institutions (consider, for example, Merlin Carpenter's paintings which critique systems of art reception and consumption). To demand of such artworks and their artists that they should not speak falsely does not reflect current artistic production and consumption, and oversimplifies and does a disservice to the intricate nature of such works.

In sum, the artworld's frequent indifference to straightforward truth-value, the precarious and unclear expectations of truth-value, and the common expectation of falsehoods, make it complex and unclear whether the truth should be told in the artworld. These factors, rather, make it clear that artworks and their artists frequently need not tell the truth in a straightforward way. This shows that Quality doesn't apply systematically for either level of meaning in art. Artists, curators, and viewers legitimately do not believe that Quality is automatically in force in the artworld.

Of course, we don't attend galleries expecting that everything will be false, or that truth is irrelevant. Rather, the artworld is a complex space with shifting norms. Each presentation of art is different, so it's difficult to track uniform communicatory norms throughout all exhibitions. And a norm like *the truth should be told* is not universally and clearly held as it is in conversation. In ordinary conversation, Quality is just assumed to be in play unless indicated otherwise. But in artworld contexts it takes more for the participants – the artists, curators, and viewers – to be justified in believing they are communicating in a Quality Context.

Since it's not a default fact that artists or their works should tell the truth at either level of their work's meaning, our Quality condition for lying will in many cases be unsatisfied. If an artwork is not in a Quality Context, then it cannot assert things to the viewer. If it cannot assert things then it cannot lie, because lying is asserting a believed-falsehood. In a nutshell, straightforward truth-norms in the artworld are tricky to pin down, and this makes it difficult to lie there.

4.3. Switching on Quality

We've seen that Quality Contexts depend on the artists' and curators' – and most likely the viewers' – belief that Quality is governing the context. Objective contextual factors will justify and cause this belief. While Quality is not a default feature of the artworld, it can be switched on in an exhibition by these factors. In particular, *curation* – the exhibition or event in which the work is shown, and the *genre* of the artwork – the style of the artwork in relation to the artist's oeuvre and other works within art-historical

movements, can deem it appropriate to expect that the truth should be told. An exhibition can form a 'local' Quality Context.⁷

For example, *THIS PLACE* (2015) at the DOX Centre consisted of twelve photographers' works exploring the complexities of Israel. Curation made it clear that the photographs were *documenting* events in Israel. Like media images, the artworks acted as insights into a volatile place. Information on the gallery walls stated that the images combined to create 'a heterogeneous narrative of a conflicted, paradoxical and deeply resonant place [...]' [Cotton 2015]. The artist statements and curatorial information next to each artwork thus enabled the curator to invite the viewer into an investigation about Israel and its politics.

Moreover, the prevalent genre here was documentary photography, and we tend to expect that such photography should tell the truth. *THIS PLACE* was composed mainly of these kinds of photographs, creating (curating) an archival or museum aesthetic; notable places where communication should be sincere and truthful. In contrast, *Pictures* subverted this documentative genre, which partially explains why it was unclear what to expect from the show's pieces, and so precluded Quality from taking effect there.

Presuming that the curator, artists, and viewers involved in *THIS PLACE* were aware of the curatorial narrative and genre of these works (and I speak from experience as one of the viewers), it will have been legitimate, and likely, that they believed Quality was in force. Quality was switched on: the artworks ought to tell the truth here.

Local Quality Contexts in the artworld are not at all unusual. For instance, Quality will likely apply in many exhibitions of church art, political art, and realist 19th century

⁷ Cooke gestures to this when he briefly observes that paradigm cases of artworks lying are due to their 'respective genres and their contexts of presentation' [2019: 262].

art. This is because these genres tend to strive for accuracy in what they represent, whether of morality or the realities of ordinary life. But the point about Quality not occurring by default still stands. Whether Quality has been switched on when we enter a gallery depends on the genre of the works, and how they have been curatorially arranged.

So unlike everyday communication, the artworld doesn't constitute a Quality Context by default, unless there are signals to the contrary. I've shown what some of these signals might be: curation, and genre-membership. These can switch on Quality, enabling the artworks to assert and therefore lie. Indeed, this point will generalise to works of fiction too; while they contain mostly falsehoods (or merely fictional truths), certain conditions can switch on Quality in our consumption of the work. For instance, whether a novel aims to convey some truths about reality will be signalled by contextual clues, such as its genre: it might be 'historical fiction', for example. Moreover, a painting that depicts a fictional event may be a 'moral allegory'; a genre which signals that while the work depicts something that didn't happen, it's still aiming to convey moral truths.⁸ The next section considers more closely how this interplay between a work's context and its levels of meaning affects what lies it can tell.

4.4. Deep lies and surface lies

We've seen that lying in art requires that the artwork be displayed in a Quality Context, and moreover, how Quality can be switched on by curation and genre. But recall that artworks can be false at different levels. *Guernica* possesses a surface falsehood and a

⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

deep truth, and *Triumph of the Will* a surface truth and a deep falsehood. *Rape of Europa* and *The Eternal Jew* are false at both levels.

Cooke states that artworks ‘clearly in the business of truth-telling’ have the opportunity to lie. We’ve unpacked this notion in terms of Quality, but we need to also capture the fact that artworks have different levels of content, and that a Quality Context can varyingly apply to these levels. So we need to inspect the contexts in which the above artworks have been shown, or might be shown, to ascertain whether they lied or could lie. And as I’ll show, curation and genre-membership can construct Quality Contexts which apply to different levels of a work’s content, generating surface lies and deep lies.

We must first observe that even in a Quality Context, particular things expressed should not be taken seriously, and so count as neither assertions nor lies. For example, in the UK it’s generally inappropriate to provide a list of ailments when asked how you are by a stranger. Rather, one typically answers, ‘I’m fine thanks’. Such pleasantries should not be taken seriously: it’s odd to rebuke someone for uttering such polite falsehoods. However, if someone replied by listing his achievements, this content should (and likely will) be taken seriously. If what he says is false, it’s appropriate to rebuke him for uttering such falsehoods. So, if Quality is widely in effect in a context, it might not apply to every sort or level of expressed content. It’ll be appropriate to take some content seriously, but not all.

Similarly, a context can affect different levels of an artwork’s meaning. In a Quality Context, some of a work’s content ought to be true, but not necessarily all of it. That is, the Quality Context’s scope can vary. The maxim might apply to the deep level in a *deep Quality Context*, or at the surface level in a *surface Quality Context*, to both, or to neither. Depending on which levels of an artwork ought to be true, different lies

can be told. Consider the following examples.

First, we saw that a surface lie could be expressed by *Leap into the Void* if it was shown in a surface Quality Context, such as our imagined ‘Dangerous Performance Art’ exhibition. In actual fact, Klein displayed the work on newsstands throughout Paris; bewildered viewers interacted with the artwork in the way they would newspapers [Fineman 2012: 189]. Klein and his viewers thus believed Quality applied at the surface of his work, which possessed content Klein believed (and knew) to be false.

Second, a work could tell a deep lie while merely being false at its surface. While *Rape of Europa* is false at its surface level about the god Jupiter disguised as a bull abducting a woman across the ocean, it hasn’t been *lying* about this because this shouldn’t be taken seriously. It’s the nature of such mythology-paintings that they do not depict events that actually happened. Like with fiction more generally, this myth-genre precludes surface Quality from switching on; this shallow falsehood is not being asserted. But the painting also possesses a *deep* falsehood in its eroticising of rape. There is ample evidence for this, found in the work’s composition and art-historical context.

The painting’s composition blurs the lines between consent and refusal, pleasure and fear. Art historians note its portrayal of Europa as a fearful and willing victim deriving pleasure from the assault [FitzRoy 2015: 48]. Europa’s precarious posture suggests that the sex will be non-consensual [Eaton 2003: 161], but there is a ‘palpable, erotic charge’ [FitzRoy 2015: 2] found in the focus on Europa’s erogenous zones and sensual textures – the frothy sea foam, her wet clothing [Eaton 2003: 161, 166] – and her clutching Jupiter’s horn. A potent power dynamic is also evident: Europa is haplessly splayed on Jupiter’s back, but he moves in a controlled way. His dominance is accentuated by his harnessing of the viewer’s gaze, contrasted with Europa’s obscured

face. This is a ‘standard artistic device for psychological identification’ [ibid: 178], wherein the viewer is called to adopt Jupiter’s point of view, thus ‘[...] the work calls upon viewers to be sexually aroused by Europa’s helplessness, fear, and vulnerability; to find her both terrified and sexually excited, willing and resisting [...]’ [ibid: 177–8].

Moreover, this painting belongs to the ‘heroic rape’ genre – found in Western Medieval and Renaissance art – where the depicted rape of a mortal woman by a Greek or Roman god was eroticised [Brownmiller 1975: 283–308]. This ubiquitous imagery, which would ‘justify’ sexual violence, was used in upper-class Italian marital gifts as lessons for the bride, visualising ‘ideal traits’ expected of her, such as submissiveness. Such works also served as erotica for the male viewer in private and public spaces [Wolfthal 1999: 10–24].⁹ Indeed, *Rape of Europa* was commissioned by Philip II King of Spain to form part of his erotic collection, composed of other ‘poesies’ (poems in paint) by Titian [FitzRoy 2015: 11]. And Titian himself outlined in a letter his goal for these works, including *Rape of Europa* – that they have erotic appeal for the male viewer [Wolfthal 1999: 18].

The work’s depiction, genre, and historical function explain its ‘ethically defective vision of rape’ [Eaton 2003: 165], perpetuating rape-myths such as ‘rape satisfies women’s secret desires to be taken and ravished [...]’ [ibid: 163]. This strongly suggests that the work possesses false deep content about the nature of rape. But could this also be a *lie*?

Rape of Europa’s ‘heroic rape’ genre signals a didactic function, purporting to tell the truth about how women should be treated. It can therefore switch on Quality at the work’s deeper level. At least in past displays, then, there was legitimate expectation that

⁹ This genre may not pertain to *all* depictions of gods interacting with mortals. Lefkowitz [2002] argues that Ancient Greek vase imagery of god-mortal rapes merely concerned power relations between gods and mortals and was not addressing mortal-mortal norms. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this.

this painting tell deep truths, about marriage and sex. That this work possesses deep falsehoods about rape and has been shown in deep Quality Contexts has thus enabled it to tell deep lies about rape. And given that this painting is still a ‘heroic rape’ work, it may *still* be lying about rape, for this genre may keep deep Quality switched on. Indeed, this might dominate the work’s curation; perhaps however the painting is displayed, its genre will switch on deep Quality, prolonging its didactic function.

And a work could tell a deep lie even if it contained true surface content. Recall that *Triumph of the Will* expresses a shallow truth, but a deep falsehood about the righteousness of Nazism. The film was first screened in Ufa-Palast am Zoo, a major cinema in Berlin, which can be considered a *Non-Quality* Context given that mostly fictional films are screened in cinemas. However, in its opening sequences, the film professed its documentary genre [Sennett 2014: 51]. It’s likely, then, that this established both a surface and deep Quality Context during the film’s screenings. So, it was the case that the truth should be told not only about the footage at the surface, but also about the nature of Nazism at its depth. The film thus told surface truths about the rally but was also able to tell deep lies about Nazism being a morally good regime.

Third, an artwork can be a surface lie and a deep lie all at once, if Quality applies at its surface and its depth. Like *Triumph of the Will*, *The Eternal Jew* states in its opening credits that it’s a ‘documentary’ of Jews, and this false claim was expanded in the film’s advertising [Clinefelter 2000: 135–6]. It’s likely, then, that the presence of this purported genre established both a surface and deep Quality Context during the film’s screenings. The film thus told surface lies about the events depicted. But we should note, in response to Cooke, that it is not only the faked footage that could make the work a lie. According to Richard Taylor, *The Eternal Jew* argues that ‘the Jew is an oriental barbarian who has insinuated himself cleverly into European society, and now

exploits it parasitically' [1998: 175]; this is one of the work's deep falsehoods. Since Quality applied to these deeper claims too, the film was also in a position to tell *deep* lies about Jews.

Lastly, an artwork can be neither a surface lie nor a deep lie. This may occur when the work contains falsehoods, and when it does not. *Guernica* contains surface falsehoods, for example, in its depiction of a lightbulb. But this is not a surface lie because there is no surface Quality Context: it's notoriously not the case that works of the Cubist genre ought to accurately represent their subject. Again, like with fiction more generally, this Cubist-genre precludes surface Quality from switching on; these shallow falsehoods are not being asserted. Rather, *deep* Quality Contexts have been established. *Guernica*'s first exhibition was at the Paris World's Fair, where it was clearly the case that the truth should be told at a deeper level about war [Clark 2013: 240]. Given that *Guernica* spoke the truth there about war's brutality, it didn't tell lies. And most straightforwardly, an artwork that is true at both levels is a lie at neither. With the documentative photograph *The Terror of War*, legitimate expectations of truth are met both in its surface truth about a napalm attack, and in its deeper truth about the horror of war.

Now, to confirm that these works are indeed lies, we'd need to know the beliefs of their makers and curators. For, lying involves expressing something you believe false, and one might question whether Hippler, for instance, believed that his *The Eternal Jew*'s deep content was false. And indeed, it may turn out that some of these creators (and curators) believed the work's deep content was true.

These doxastic issues are important, but what my examples do is illustrate different combinatorial possibilities, once we distinguish surface and deep content and note that Quality can be switched on or off at each. *Leap into the Void* is a surface lie

about an artist's action. *Rape of Europa* could well be a deep lie about rape, but not a surface lie about a bull despite this surface falsehood. *Triumph of the Will* could well be a deep lie about Nazism, but not a surface lie about a rally, given its surface truth. *The Eternal Jew* is a surface lie about particular individuals, and could well be a deep lie about the nature of Jews. *Guernica* contains neither deep nor surface lies, despite its surface falsehood, and nor does *The Terror of War*, given its deep and surface truth.

In sum, belief, Quality, and an artwork's content interweave in a complex way; it takes a particular kind of context for an artwork to lie, and this context will affect the level of the work's lie.^{10, 11}

5. Conclusion

Plato would have been right to accuse *Leap into the Void* of lying, but for the wrong reasons. It's not just that the work is false in that it shows an event that didn't happen. The work is a *surface lie* because it was knowingly displayed in a surface Quality Context.

In sum, our understanding of how an artwork can lie must do justice to its curation and genre, and the levels of its content. Does its curation or genre switch on Quality: should we expect the truth? And does Quality apply at its surface or depth: at which

¹⁰ This presents an objection to Mahon's [2019] claim that novels never lie because they do not assert. If what I've said is true, then a novel can assert at its *deeper* level because the work's genre might switch on Quality here. If a novel can assert, it can lie.

¹¹ Some hold that lying concerns 'what is said', not 'implied', which instead constitutes *misleading* content [Saul 2012] (although Viebahn [2017] rejects this). If true, then perhaps only deep and surface false content which forms 'what is said' by an artwork can constitute lies. It's not clear how to distinguish between 'what is said' and 'implied' in artworks though, and I don't think this distinction maps directly on to the surface/deep distinction. For example, surface content can be implied: *Rape of Europa* has the surface content that *Europa cannot breathe underwater*, which may be implied by the way Europa is carried above the ocean.

level should we expect the truth?

Because Quality in the artworld is not a default norm like it is in ordinary speech, it's therefore much harder for artworks to lie compared to lying with speech, and this disparity has been overlooked. My arguments show that if the surface or deeper contents of a work ought not to be taken seriously – perhaps because of the work's genre or the way it has been curated – then the work cannot lie.

And I've shown that artists are not the only potential culprits of lying in art. Curators could be guilty too. Curators, along with a work's genre, can switch on Quality, and so affect the lies told by a work. This raises further questions about this new topic. Who is responsible for generating Quality Contexts in the artworld: the artist or the curator? Moreover, whose beliefs are relevant for assessing a work's content and display, and therefore any lies it might tell?¹²

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