Emoji art: The aesthetics of 💩

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibility of art made using emoji (picture characters like the pile-of-poo glyph in the title). That such art is possible is apprarent from some specific examples. Although these cases are often described in terms of "translation" between emoji and English, emoji cannot generally be given a literal natural-language translation. So what kind of thing is an emoji work? A particular emoji work could turn out to be (1) a digital image, like an illustration; (2) a specified string of emoji characters, in the way that a natural-language novel is a specified string of letters; or (3) a single-instance work, a particular display.

keywords: emoji, emoji art, *Emoji Dick*, emoji poems, art ontology

Emoji are picture characters familiar from smart phone text messages. Given their ubiquity, it is inevitable that emoji have been used in works of art. What kind of art are they, though?

I begin in §1 by discussing the history of emoji. One of the more notable emoji is the *pile of poo* which figures in the title of this paper. In §2, I consider the meaning of emoji and argue that there is not generally a natural-language translation for emoji. In §§3–4, I discuss some specific works of emoji art: Fred Benenson's *Emoji Dick* and Carina Finn and Stephanie Berger's emoji poems. In §5, I distinguish several possible ways of construing what constitutes an emoji artwork. Benenson's and Finn and Berger's works are best understood as specified strings of emoji in much the same way as a novel is a specified string of words or characters, but other kinds of emoji art is possible.

1   ASCII art, emoticons, and emoji

From the late-1970s and until the rise of the internet, computer users with modems could dial up to bulletin board systems (BBSs) and interact with other users. Interaction was constrained to strings of ASCII symbols; that is, mostly

just letters, numbers, and punctuation. Many users created images with these characters as their palette. Smileys or emoticons were the simplest possible ASCII art, using just a few characters to suggest a different symbol. A guide to the internet, written in the early 2000s for publication on the back of a regional grocery store's house-brand cereal, explains emoticons in this way: "A fun way to liven up a casual e-mail is through the use of emoticons. These keyboard symbols can help to visually emphasize particular thoughts or emotions" [9]. Many of the common emoticons are expressive faces, such as a happy face `:-)`, a sad face `:-(`, a winking face `;-)`, or a face with tongue sticking out `:-p`.[1]

As internet forums came to be presented as web pages rather than just as blocks of text, many were programmed to replace the string of characters corresponding to an emoticon with a single image. This would capture those characters wherever they occurred, however, regardless of whether they were intended as a smiley. It is common to convert `<3` into an image of a heart, for example, which incidentally makes a formula like $x < 3$ illegible. Many internet forums add extra smileys that can only be encoded with a proprietary string of characters; for example, the typed characters `:surprise:` might be converted to a cartoon face with a shocked expression.

It is important to note that emoticons exploited existing symbols. Punctuation, numbers, and letters which were not originally devised to look like eyes, tongues, or the lobes of a valentine heart were combined with other symbols to suggest those things by resemblance. This changed when a forum replaced an ascii emoticon with a single image. The code for the emoticon could then be completely arbitrary or linguistic. However, support for this varied from forum to forum. Although regular users of one service could use them there, they could not use them in messages to the outside or when using other services.

Emoji, in contrast, are single characters which can be accessed directly. They were originally introduced by Japanese telecom carriers in 1999. The encoding for text messaging had some extra space left over, so engineers added some expressive pictograms. Unlike emoticons, which used existing glyphs to suggest things like smiley faces, emoji were new glyphs specified directly. Marty Allen explains that emoji "are effectively their own font (or typeface). Like any font, they are broken into groupings or 'characters', but with Emoji, this idea is given a whole new meaning, as each character is much more than a single letter. Where a standard font is made of an alphabet that represents phonetic sounds, the Emoji font is a series of open-ended pictures and symbols. Their meanings are evolving and can change with each user's interpretation" [1, p. 8].

In the beginning, each Japanese telecom carrier had a different slate of emoji. So friends texting each other across different networks could not reliably send emoji to one another. Nevertheless, they became popular. In 2006, Google partnered with a Japanese carrier to add emoji to its Gmail service. It also took on the task of standardizing the code table for emoji. Darren Lewis, a

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[1] Computer scientist Scott Fahlman is sometimes credited with having invented the smiley emoticon in 1982, but surely it was invented independently many times. I began using `:)` (without the nose-hyphen) as a smiley face on BBSs in the mid 1980s. It was new to many of the people I interacted with, and we knew nothing of Fahlman.

software engineer at Google, recounts that "marketing people didn't even want us to call it emoji because it was this weird foreign Japanese thing" [18]. Although the similarity between the words "emoji" and "emoticon" might explain why the Japanese word was adopted so readily in English, there is no etymological connection; instead, "emoji" is a Japanese compound word meaning *image character*.

Because emoji were being used to transmit messages in a standard way, codes for various emoji were added to the Unicode character encoding system in 2009 [3]. Although Unicode is designed to encode the writing systems used by all languages, the inclusion of emoji is not strictly a linguistic consideration.[2] Rather, inclusion in Unicode was an extension of the work started by Google. People were using emoji in messages, and including codes for them in Unicode allowed those messages to be represented unambiguously. Someone sending a text message to a friend on a different carrier who receives the message on a different brand of device should be able to rely on the transmitted smiley face being received as a smiley face.

Apple added an onscreen emoji keyboard to its iOS devices in 2011, making them available to English-language users of iPhones and iPads. Users already familiar with smileys and emoticons readily adopted them. They have caught on since. Many more have been added to Unicode.

2   The meaning of emoji

In the passage cited above, Allen notes that the meaning of emoji are "open-ended" and variable. As a concrete example, take the *pile of poo* emoji:

💩

Unlike the smiley face or the heart, there was not a standard emoticon for a pile of poop. Neither is it something you would ordinarily scribble in a handwritten note to someone. Nevertheless, it was one of the most popular emoji in Japan when Google implemented emoji in Gmail. Some people at the Google corporate office resisted including it, considering it to be undignified or gross. Those working on the project stood their ground, like product manager Takeshi Kishimoto who insisted that it was "the most useful emoji." Test engineer Katsuhiko Momoi explains, "In Japanese that's called 'unchi.' It's a child word with a benign meaning. Once we bring poop outside of the Japanese community, we have all of these acquired meanings, so you've got a problem."[3]

It is important to note that the poop emoji cannot simply be translated into the words "unchi" or "poop". Although "pile of poo" is an English-language name for the glyph, the glyph itself is open to a wide range of intepretations. Note that the Unicode specification for the poop emoji does not give it a precise meaning. Instead, the Unicode document on Miscellaneous Symbols and

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[2]The aim of Unicode is "to support the worldwide interchange, processing, and display of the written texts of the diverse languages and technical disciplines of the modern world" [21].

[3]Quotes from the Google team are taken from "The Oral History Of The Poop Emoji" [18].

Pictographs includes the code 1F4A9 among "Comic style symbols" and gives this brief description [22, p. 10]:

> PILE OF POO
> = dog dirt
> • may be depicted with a friendly face

The equals sign here does not mean that the poop emoji is synonymous with "dog dirt", as if Unicode were specifying what sort of creature had taken the poop. Instead, it provides a further note about what is depicted in the emoji glyph itself using a different idiom. The Unicode standard specifies what the poop emoji is, but it does not provide an equivalent for it in another language.

Moreover, different systems represent the pile of poop differently. Google's original implementation was animated, a graphic with flies buzzing around a conical brown pile. Apple's implementation is static, with eyes and a smile. So, although there is no English-language word that can stand in for the pile of poo emoji, there are different digital images which can instantiate it. (See figure 4.)

There is no literal English-language equivalent for the pile of poo emoji, which allows people writing with it to use in disparate albeit imprecise ways. Arguably, this ambiguity is part of the symbol's usefulness. Google's Ryan Germick comments, "I would reject the notion that it has one meaning. It's a symbol in context… but I guess the most common use is probably 'that's unfortunate, and I would like to punctuate my comment with a reiteration that I am displeased at what has just been expressed.' It's the anti-like."

Of course, the pile of poop may, given some context, be used in a way that has an explicit emoji-to-English translation. As Ryan Kelly and Leon Watts explain, "speakers can use emoji to build forms of meaning that are uniquely interpretable within a particular relationship" [11]. Consider a specific example: Simone Giertz, who makes robots and posts videos about them on-line, bills herself as the Queen of Shitty Robots. She renders this in emoji as

<p align="center">👑💩🤖</p>

When she wears a t-shirt with that string of emoji on them and someone asks in the comments what it means, it is correct to reply that the shirt says "Queen of Shitty Robots" in emoji. However, that translation is only possible because of Giertz's stipulation. Since emoji have no grammar, the string of emoji themselves do not tell us that the pile of poop modifies the robot head. Grouping it together with the crown, we might translate the first two emoji as "crown of shit", echoing a line from the *Nine Inch Nails* song "Hurt".[4] The three emoji could instead be read as three activities ("I took some pampered me-time, went to the restroom, and went to work") or just as an inventory of three things (the odd list "a crown, a pile, a robot").

People write with emoji in order to exploit this interpretive flexibility, and they can elaborate in natural language if they want to mean something more

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[4] The whole line from the song is "I wear this crown of shit, upon my liar's chair, full of broken thoughts I cannot repair." Reading the first two emoji as invoking this line, the robot emoji might be read as a head full of broken thoughts.

precise than the emoji allow. In this way an emoji is like a gesture which can be used expressively in context but which does not have a literal translation. We can ask what someone means by sticking their tongue out, but it does not make sense to ask for a translation of *tongue-stuck-out* into English.[5]

So we should not take people literally when they write about "translation" of emoji. This is obvious in the case of the *The Emoji-To-English Dictionary: Your Text-Message Translation Guide*, which promises translations in its title but is basically a joke book. The string of emoji

⬆️ ⏳ 🔪 🍞

is given the caption "Best thing since sliced bread" [5, p. 14].

In the next two sections, I lay out two cases of works of art that incorporate emoji. The first, *Emoji Dick*, is a crowd-sourced emoji parallel to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. The second, emoji poems, are works which pair strings of emoji with English-language poetry.[6] Then I use these examples to interrogate the ontology of emoji works.

3 First example: Emoji Dick

Emoji Dick is the result of having on-line contributors render each sentence of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* as a string of emoji. Fred Benenson created it using Amazon's Mechanical Turk service, which allows users to do small amounts of work for tiny amounts of pay. For each sentence in Melville's novel, he had users generate three possible renderings and then had other users vote on which of the three was best.

There is an ineluctable slipperiness in the move from words to emoji. The famous opening sentence ("Call me Ishmael" [2, p. 15]) becomes

☎️ 👨 ⛵ 🐳 👌

The emoji rendering is suggestive of the original, perhaps, but hardly equivalent. The whale emoji is used, because a modern reader associates the sentence with *Moby Dick* and thus with a whale, but "Ishmael" is a biblical name with a host of associations that are necessarily lost in the emoji. Other sentences are rendered with utterly unrelated emoji. In a particularly egregious case, the one-word sentence "No" [2, p. 16] becomes

1️⃣ 2️⃣ 3️⃣ 4️⃣ 5️⃣ 6️⃣ 7️⃣ 8️⃣ 9️⃣ 0️⃣

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[5]Regarding the function of emoji as "paralinguistic cues" which "are used to modify meaning, convey emotion and interpersonal attitudes, or reveal contextual information", see also Pavalanathan and Eisenstein [16].

[6]As a caveat to a dour reader: My conclusions do not depend on any evaluation of these works. If one thinks that these are examples of good art or bad art, they will do just as well for my purposes.

Regardless, given the argument of the previous section, the "translation" could not literally be a translation anyway.

But is it art? Let's consider three possible reasons for concluding that it is not. In each case, I argue, the reasons are insufficient.

First, one might claim that *Moby Dick* is the artwork and that *Emoji Dick* is just a distorted rendering of the original.

However, this is not how we think about works in other media. If a dancer were to read *Moby Dick* and perform an interpretive dance based on it, we could recognize the dance as an artwork (distinct from the novel but inspired by it). If an artist were inspired by a novel to specify a string of emoji, we should similarly accept the emoji as being an art work. Therefore, *Emoji Dick* is not an impoverished instance of *Moby Dick*, but instead a new work— albeit one that is historically derivative of the original.

Second, one might object to *Emoji Dick* because the specific emoji were supplied by contributors to an on-line service rather than specified by Bensenson himself. The complaint is that there is no artist here and so *a fortiori* no art.

Of course, Benenson did not specify the emoji in *Emoji Dick* directly. Instead, he had a rule which he followed to produce strings of emoji. Yet we do accept algorithmic works as artworks in other media. Alvin Lucier's "I am sitting in a room" specifies a procedure for generating a tape recording, and we recognize an installation of "I am sitting in a room" as Lucier's artwork even when he had no hand in the actual recording. This parallels Benenson's specifying the procedure by which a string of emoji was generated, so we should recognize *Emoji Dick* as Benenson's artwork.

Third, one might think that the project of making *Emoji Dick* lacks the right kind of intention or content to be an artwork. Even if derivative works and algorithmic works can be art, not everything inspired by a novel and not every algorithm count as artworks.

The details of this objection will depend on one's theory of art. I do not know if Benenson intended *Emoji Dick* to be art, and I do not want to argue about what it might mean as an artwork. Rather, I simply note that nothing about the objection turns on *Emoji Dick* being comprised of emoji. If you are tempted by the objection, imagine an alternate work which is like *Emoji Dick* in being comprised of algorithmically generated emoji but which has whatever extra feature one thinks *Emoji Dick* is lacking. Let that thought experiment counterpart stand in for the actual thing.

4   Second example: Emoji poetry

Emoji poetry is a two-step process: One poet writes a string of emoji, and a second poet writes an English-language poem inspired by it. The genre was introduced by poets Carina Finn and Stephanie Berger [6]. Finn would send text messages to Berger in emoji, and Berger would text back a poem in English. For example, see figure 1 [15]. Others have been inspired by the idea. Figure 2 gives an excerpt of a string of emoji (billed as an "emoji poem") and two

Figure 1: The first lines of an emoji poem by Carina Finn and Stephanie Berger.

🎀🎀🎀🎀🎀🍵

📺📺📺👟☁️☁️💛.
🍺🍀🍀🍀💄💄💄.
🍸🍸🍸🍸🏞️🇺🇸🇺🇸💼
👜.

Gentlemen Prefer Bows Over Dinner
Old-time TV over Reebok, heaven over love.
After two beers their lips part; they get very lucky.
Four Martinis later, you're homeless in America,
carrying an old-fashioned medical bag around
like your mother's purse.

English-language poems inspired by it (billed as "translations").

Although they describe the English-language poems as a translations of the emoji, the context is not sufficient for the emoji to pick out the English-language poems. Unlike Simone Giertz' emoji monicker, there is no convention in place for reading the sequence of emoji. This is illustrated vividly in figure 2, where Carrie Fountain and Michele Battiste offer very different English-language counterparts to the emoji written by Jenny Browne. So emoji poetry does not strictly-speaking involve translation.

It unclear whether the string of emoji can even properly be called a *poem*. Because they lack syntax, emoji do not readily admit of any distinction between prose and poetry. Note, though, that we have the phrase 'tone poem' which describes musical works which are not *poems* in the narrow sense. We can similarly accept the compound phrase 'emoji poem' as a compound phrase referring to works which comprise or are partly comprised of specified strings of emoji.

Emoji poems are more obviously intended to be artworks than *Emoji Dick* is. And it seems to me that any plausible theory of art would count the English-language parts of emoji poems as art, if they were written and published as stand-alone poems. Since the English-language part is explicitly framed as a response to the emoji part, then it makes sense both to consider them together and to see them as an artwork.

5 The ontology of emoji works

Accepting that emoji art is possible, what kind of art is it? In the rest of the paper I want to consider what it takes to have an instance of an emoji work.

Figure 2: The first few lines from an emoji poem. The emoji were written by Jenny Browne, the first anglophone reply by Carrie Fountain, and the second by Michele Battiste [19].

🇺🇸🚫🏄🍩☔👌💃💃
💃🐘🌴🌍🔍 **. . .**

America Without the Rising Waters
is like doughnuts without doughnuts, rain
without fingers— it's like fingers dancing, dancing,
dancing across the dining table, coming for

your French fries, the elephant in the palm tree,
the world in a frying pan. …

Banner
I am not o.k. with America, its obsession with coastline and pastries, the same self-indulgences that clog our hearts are also the root of all evil and climate change. And all of us thinking we're A-OK and cha-cha-cha-ing through life, never realizing how redundant we are. There are other places in the world where elephants matter, where palm trees aren't grown to have their hearts consumed as easily as a fried egg. …

Without relying on any sophisticated theory, we can recognize that different media have different ontologies. For example: *Paintings* are single-instance works. A copy of a painting is a replica or a forgery rather than a new instance of the original. *Novels* can be multiply instantiated. One can print new copies of a novel just by printing the right words in the right order, and each copy counts as an instance of the novel. *Block prints* can also be multiply instantiated, but making new instances is harder. One needs to use the original printing blocks.

So traditional artworks give us several models we might consider when trying to understand emoji art. In the remainder of the paper, I consider three possible structures that an emoji artwork could have. I will argue that the examples considered earlier (*Emoji Dick* and emoji poems) have a structure like a novel, in that they are specified strings of symbols. In the course of the argument, however, we will see other possibilities and imagine emoji artworks with different structures. These considerations suggest that different emoji works can come in different forms.

5.1 Emoji works as digital images

Websites that publish emoji poems typically frame the emoji in a graphical speech bubble, as it would appear when sent as a text message received on an iPhone; for example, see figure 3. This suggests that the emoji part of the work be understood just as the picture. The ontology of emoji works would then be the ontology of digital images. Although the status of digital images is vexed, we need to resolve it anyway in order to think about other computer art.[7]

Although eliding emoji works into digital images would reduce the number of separate problems we face by one, it would also obscure what is interesting about emoji in the first place. Sending a text message with emoji is different than attaching a photograph to a message, both because emoji are selected from a small palette of options and because they are transmitted as encoded characters rather than as image files. When I text the poop emoji from my iPhone to someone who has an Android phone, it appears to me as a one digital image but appears to the recipient as a different digital image. They successfully receive my message if they are presented with whatever their device uses to represent the poop emoji. Because Android uses a different representation, they would not actually receive my message if by some strange glitch they saw an image identical to the one that appears on my screen. They must be presented with what counts as the poop emoji on their end.[8]

One might still say that an emoji work corresponds to a class of digital images: the work as it would appear on an iPhone, as it would appear on

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[7]Regarding digital images, see the debate between Zeimbekis [23, 24] and D'Cruz and Magnus [4, 13].

[8]Miller et al. [14] show that different representations of particular emoji can lead subjects to interpret them differently. Yet the possibility for miscommunication is not, by itself, sufficient to show that different emoji representations would make for different works. If space for divergent interpretations was sufficient to make something a distinct work, then no two users could encounter the same emoji work! As Miller et al. show, subjects can give divergent interpretations even to the same representation of a given emoji.

Figure 3: An emoji poem by Jenny Browne, the one excerpted in figure 2. This is how the image was published [19].

an Android device, and so on. These have developed over time. For example, variations on the *pile of poo* emoji are given in figure 4. Note that earlier versions of Android used a image with stink lines and flies, while later versions have eyes and a mouth. Different variations may be added in the future, as operating systems develop or emoji are implemented on new platforms. Some of these are bitmap images, while others are vectors graphics. Moreover, both *Emoji Dick* and emoji poems have been published in hardcopy volumes. Although a digital image is used in printing it out, the book itself has a cluster of ink on a page. So trying to track all the possible realizations of an emoji work would be a Herculean task.

5.2 Emoji works as series of glyphs

This difficulty in tracking all the possible realizations of an emoji work is analogous to the difficulty in tracking all of the possible realizations of a written work in English. A novel, for example, can be written out by hand or printed in an indefinite number of typefaces— including typefaces that have not been designed yet.[9] A written novel can be understood, in a nominalist way, as a class of inscriptions which stand in the same-novel relation to one another. In Nelson Goodman's phrase, each of the inscriptions is "spelled alike" [8, p. 140].[10] Non-nominalists understand written novels as something richer than just an equivalence class of inscriptions. Options include *inter alia* abstract universals, indicated types, or historical individuals. Although these options differ at the

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[9]Douglas Hofstadter [10] comments on "the fearsome complexity of the task of letter recognition" and illustrates the problem with a display of various letter As from actual typefaces.

[10]See also Goodman [7, p. 116].

Figure 4: Different images and glyphs used for the *pile of poo* emoji. (A number of these images are taken from emojipedia.org.)
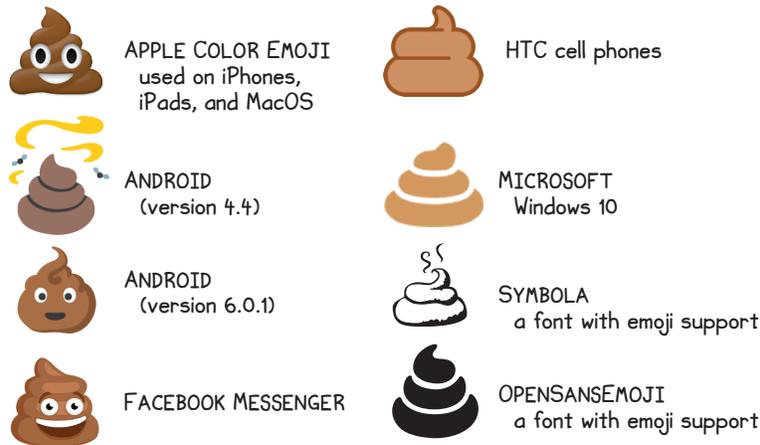
level of fundamental metaphysics, they agree that the novel corresponds to a specified string of words or characters (plus perhaps a requirement of historical connection).

I want to suggest that the emoji works discussed above should similarly be understood as a specified string of emoji (plus perhaps an historical connection). This treats emoji not as a font or typeface, but instead as something like an alphabet. The Latin alphabet can be realized by various fonts and handwritten in many ways. So too, there are various emoji fonts which can be displayed on screen or printed, and it is possible (although not typical) to transcribe emoji by hand.

5.3   Emoji works as single-instances

Once we recognize the emoji-alphabet analogy, it becomes possible to imagine single-instance emoji artworks. It is possible for an instance of a word or letter to also be a single-instance art work. For example, imagine that a painter paints an enormous capital letter A on a canvas, deliberately following the specification for the font Times New Roman. The resulting painting has something in common with all letter As and something even more specific in common with all Times New Roman capital As. To put the point in less nominalist terms: It is an instance of the letter A and of Times New Roman. Nevertheless, this particular painting is a single-instance work. If we shred it, we have destroyed the particular work without destroying the letter A or Times New Roman as such.

The parallel possibility with emoji is just as easy to imagine. Suppose that

the painter makes a *pile of poo* emoji on the canvas. It is at once an instance of the emoji and a single-instance painting.

6 Conclusion

In recent years, emoji have come to be familiar parts of our culture. Although commonly used in ephemeral messages, they can be used to make art— art which might take any of several different forms.

Works which incorporate emoji can have different structures. First, an emoji work may comprise the digital image which appears on-screen when someone views the emoji on an intended device. (A work that used emoji to render a picture might be best understood in this way.) Second, an emoji work can comprise a specified string of emoji. (Works like *Emoji Dick* and emoji poems are best understood in this way.) Third, an emoji work can be a single-instance work which includes representation of emoji. (The painted emoji imagined above would be best understood in this way.)

Note that these ontologies are not specified in terms fundamental metaphysics. Nevertheless, any reasonable metaphysical view will be able to accommodate them. A nominalist will describe them as an equivalence class of digital images, as an equivalence class of images and inscriptions, and as a particular thing (respectively). A platonist will describe them as a universal, a different universal, and a particular. Someone following Jerrold Levinson [12] will describe the first two as indicated types and the third as a particular. Someone following Guy Rohrbaugh [17] will describe all three as historical individuals. Someone following Amie Thomasson [20] will deny that any further description is required. These are sweeping metaphysical positions, and I remain neutral between them. It suffices to note that these disparate metaphysical approaches can all acknowledge the three structures distinguished above.[11]

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[11]The substantive question for understanding a particular emoji work is which of the three ontologies best fits the specific work. In evaluating this, we might defer to the artist's intention. Yet an artist might not have a determinate intention or might be in the grip of a bad theory. The general question of how to determine the ontology of emoji works opens onto the general question of how best to interpret artworks, something which runs well beyond the scope of this essay.

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