ART AS NEGATION: A DEFENSE OF CONCEPTUAL ART AS ART

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, I went to the Columbus Museum of Art, which has a fairly expansive collection of contemporary, conceptual art pieces. In the thirty minutes I spent looking at their contemporary, conceptual art collection, I overheard a mom exclaim, “My kid could have done that!”, a man wonder out loud “why is this even in a museum?”, and yet another person remark on the (apparent) downfall of art. Remarks such as these seem to be an inevitable part of the experience when one goes to a museum with a conceptual art collection. Most people, whether they know a lot about art or very little, have something negative to say about conceptual art.

Conceptual art, perhaps more than any other type of art, seems to elicit strong reactions and opinions from the masses. It seems like almost everyone has something to say about conceptual art and, more particularly, how he or she does not understand it or appreciate it. Few take the time to learn about and appreciate the movement, and even fewer acknowledge its important place in the history and development of art. This ignorance and misunderstanding have led many to condemn and dismiss conceptual art as a whole, even going so far as to claim that it is not art. Part of this condemnation involves the desire to reinforce old notions about art: that it should be beautiful, be exemplary of the artist’s technical skill, and engage its audience either emotionally or aesthetically.

The movement, however, rejects these old notions about art, which only furthers its negative reception. It often employs anti-establishment, anti-art, and immateriality
themes and statements. One of the central goals of the movement is to challenge what we mean by the word “art” and to get people to question their own ideas and notions about what art is, how it should look, and its broader purpose in society and culture. Such a challenge should not be taken lightly, nor should it be the reason that the movement as a whole is rejected.

In this paper, I intend to address some of the criticisms levied against conceptual art, as well as show how older definitions of art, to which the critics of conceptual art often appeal, fail to capture and accommodate change in art. Moreover, I will explain how any definition of art should include conceptual art, and I will argue for a specific definition which I think better reflects our intuitions about what distinguishes art from non-art and avoids some of the pitfalls of previous attempts to define art. In doing so, I hope to foster an appreciation of conceptual art, as well as convince the reader that it is, in fact, art and that any viable definition of art should accommodate it.

In the first chapter, I offer a working definition of conceptual art and explain what distinguishes it from other types of art and art movements. I also examine its foundations and precursors, and I discuss two prominent contemporary conceptual artists. Such a discussion is necessary in order to foster an intellectual appreciation and understanding of the movement and its goals, while also clarifying a category of art that actively resists definition and categorization.

In Chapter 2, I discuss some of the theories of art that are not friendly to conceptual art, including Hume, Kant, Dewey, and Greenberg. Even though the first three philosophers never encountered conceptual art, their theories are nonetheless symptomatic of thinking that has contributed to conceptual art’s rejection and relegation.
to the category of “non-art.” Such philosophers focus on the visual aspects of art and how it is that those visual properties determine whether a given object is art or not. Even today, people still appeal to similar arguments in their discussions of what art should be and how it should look.

In Chapter 3, I examine some aesthetic theories that can accommodate conceptual art including those put forth by Arthur Danto, Sol LeWitt, and David Davies. The strengths of these definitions are that they are broad enough to include conceptual art, while also rejecting the notion that art has to be beautiful or arouse certain emotions in its viewers in order to be considered art. Even though I will reject Danto’s and LeWitt’s theories as overly broad and problematic, they are important in the discussion of how aesthetic theories can accommodate conceptual art. Davies’ theory of art as a performance, however, does not face the same issues, and I will argue for its adoption in the following chapter.

In Chapter 4, I will discuss the value of conceptual art, motivating its inclusion in the category of art as well as the adoption of a specific definition of art that can accommodate it. Previous views of art emphasized the viewer’s experience as the most important aspect of a piece of art and what gives it artistic value, but I think this is problematic. While some pieces of conceptual art have the ability to elicit emotional responses in the viewer, many do not. Moreover, many conceptual art pieces are not beautiful or visually appealing. Yet, people think that this is one of the purposes of art, rejecting any pieces that do not provoke an emotional or aesthetic response. However, I do not agree with this and, if we accept that art can have value beyond the quality of the viewer’s experience of it, it is easy to see why conceptual art can be valuable.
After establishing conceptual art’s value, I will critique functionalist definitions of art, which view art as fulfilling some kind of function. The majority of definitions I discuss in this paper are functionalist definitions, with one exception: Davies’ definition. His is a proceduralist definition. The problem with functionalist definitions, as I will explain, is that they fail to account for changes in art or, in the case of Danto’s and LeWitt’s, are too broad to be viable and useful. I also explain how the process by which these definitions are created ultimately contributes to their failure.

Once I have explained the problems with functionalist definitions, I will then argue for the adoption of Davies’ proceduralist definition. His definition not only captures many of our intuitions about art and the importance of the artistic process as a defining feature of art, it is also timeless and can account for works of art that never achieve acclaim or are never finished. He views the artistic process as that which makes something art, rather than art fulfilling some function. His definition gives due credit to the artistic process, while also reflecting our intuition about the artistic process as something unique to art. Moreover, it helps to explain why pieces like Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* are more valuable than the commercially available Brillo boxes on supermarket shelves.

Before discussing any aesthetic theories or the value of conceptual art, however, it is first necessary to explore what we mean by the term ‘conceptual art’ and how it is different from other types of art and art movements. I begin our discussion in the next chapter by giving some background information about the conceptual art movement.
CHAPTER 1

CONCEPTUAL ART AND ITS FOUNDATIONS

§1.1 Introduction

Few categories of art have the ability to elicit the masses’ opinions on art like conceptual art. From reactions of repulsion and shock to the viewer muttering under her breath, “I could have done that”, it seems almost everyone has something to say about conceptual art. However, few viewers of conceptual art appreciate and understand its mission and what the artistic movement as a whole is challenging and reinventing.

The controversy surrounding conceptual art comes, in part, from this misinformation and ignorance. Adding fuel to its condemnation, conceptual art often employs anti-establishment, anti-art, and immateriality statements and themes. Its very goal is to challenge what it means for an object to be art and to push the boundaries of such a category. That is to say, conceptual art is designed to challenge many of the preconceptions we have about art, society, and culture.

To accomplish this, conceptual artists employ a variety of new techniques, themes, and media that are different from those typically employed by other types of artists. The very nature and goal of conceptual art requires that it must be new and stir within the viewer feelings such as shock, repulsion, intrigue, disgust, or bewilderment. Without a proper understanding of conceptual art and what it is trying to accomplish, it is
no wonder that many people dismiss it immediately when it elicits such strong feelings without context or explanation.

This chapter of the paper will be devoted to exploring what the term “conceptual art” means and examining how conceptual art came about. Such a discussion is necessary in order to proceed to talk about conceptual art. Without a working definition of conceptual art and an understanding of its influences and motivations, it is difficult to understand and appreciate why it should be considered art.

§1.2: What is Conceptual Art?

At first blush, it may seem that conceptual art is quite simple to define. As opposed to other types of art that engage their audience emotionally or aesthetically, conceptual art pieces are more about the concept that they are trying to express and such works may or may not include visually appealing elements. Conceptual art pieces demand of their audience intellectual engagement. This definition is overly simplistic, ignoring the complex cultural, political, and artistic significance of conceptual artworks. Coming up with a more precise definition that actually outlines what unifying characteristics all these works have in common is a more demanding task.

The category of conceptual art is very broad and diverse. It includes pieces of all different mediums, techniques, and genres. With such a broad array of pieces included in the category, it can seem like a difficult task to come up with a good definition that is inclusive yet specific. Indeed, it has been difficult for philosophers, artists, and art critics alike to come up with a good definition of conceptual art. As Lucy Lippard once noted,
there seem to be as many definitions of conceptual art as there are conceptual artists (Goldie and Schellekens xi).

Those who have attempted to define conceptual art have relied on two different approaches: one historical and the other conceptual or philosophical. Examining conceptual art from the more historical approach, the term encompasses artworks from the artistic movement that took place between 1966 and 1972. Only pieces that were produced during this time period can rightly be called conceptual art under such a view. Of course, not all pieces produced during this time period would have been classified as conceptual art. To be included in the movement, they need to have also embraced the movement’s cultural and artistic goals. Perhaps the most important defining feature of the movement is the view that an artistic idea suffices as a work of art. Previous standards by which to judge art, such as visual appeal, artistic skill, and marketability were all rejected by the movement. Further criteria for what sets conceptual art apart from other kinds of art will be discussed later in this chapter.

Examples of conceptual art pieces from this time period include Christine Koslov’s Information No Theory (1970) and On Kawara’s series Date Paintings from 1966 onwards (Goldie and Schellekens xii). While many subscribe to this historical definition of conceptual art, it is relatively narrow and does not account for the many contemporary pieces produced after this time period that claim to have been influenced by the artistic movement that took place between 1966 and 1972.
The other definition of conceptual art is more philosophical or conceptual in its approach. This definition allows for pieces that were created after the 1960s and 1970s to still be considered conceptual art, provided that they meet other criteria. Though not entirely uncontroversial, the following criteria at least offer a working definition of conceptual art that explain how it is different from other art genres:

1. Conceptual art rebels against art’s traditional emphasis on visual appeal and beauty, focusing instead on ideas “dematerializing” the art object. Conceptual artists try to keep the material presence of the art object as minimal as possible, often in order to make the concept the most important aspect of a piece of art as opposed to its visual appeal or the artist’s technical skill.

2. Conceptual art challenges definition of artworks and the role of agency in making art. It seeks to challenge what we consider art by presenting us with objects that we may or may not consider art. Thus, a lot of conceptual art is “self-conscious” in that it is art about art.

3. Conceptual art seeks to revise the role of art. Art instead becomes a kind of art criticism that often promotes anti-consumerist and anti-establishment views.

4. Conceptual art challenges our notions of how art should be made and what techniques or materials should be used to create a work of art. Traditional artists rely on media such as paint, prints, clay, and metal to create their works of art. Conceptual artists, however, are not limited to just such materials. They employ new techniques and media, such as
photography, ready-mades, and events. Often, conceptual art employs several different types of media in one artwork.

5. Instead of relying solely on the use of images, conceptual art makes use of semantic representation in order to convey ideas. That is to say, conceptual art depends on meaning being conveyed through text or a supporting explanation as opposed to relying solely on pictorial images (Goldie and Schellekens xii).

In order to be considered conceptual art under these criteria¹, a piece need not meet every single criterion. Instead, just a few of these criteria may be met in order for a piece to be considered conceptual art. It should not be taken that meeting any of these criteria alone makes a work of art conceptual art. Whether a piece of art can be considered conceptual depends largely on meeting the last criterion: that there is some underlying concept behind the work that requires explanation either by the artist, title, or an accompanying explanation. The definition of conceptual art is kept overly broad because it encompasses many different types of works. By providing these criteria, one may begin to understand the goals of conceptual art pieces and what distinguishes conceptual art from other types of art.

Examples of such works that may be considered conceptual art under this definition include Joseph Beuys’ *Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) and Willie Doherty’s *Strategy: Sever/Isolate*, 1989.

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¹ As articulated by Goldie and Schellekens. However, similar criteria are articulated by Osborne and Wolf.

For the purposes of this paper, I will be relying on this working definition of conceptual art as opposed to the definition from a historical perspective discussed earlier. This definition is far more inclusive and promises a more useful approach for my argument. Moreover, this definition captures many of the intuitions we have about what conceptual art is: that it is not limited to just a specific movement in the 1960s and 1970s and that many artists create conceptual art today. It should also be noted that both definitions of conceptual art support my argument that conceptual art is art. Rejecting the broader definition in favor of adopting the historical definition alone does not lead to a successful challenge of my argument. It is just for the sake of clarity that I commit myself to this one definition of conceptual art.

§1.3: The Emergence of Conceptual Art

In order to understand conceptual art as a kind of artistic movement, it is important to understand its precursors. Its immediate precursor was the revival of the avant-garde in the 1950s, but conceptual art also has its roots in Dada and anti-art from the early 1900s (Osborne 53). There are a number of artists that figure prominently in the history of conceptual art and are credited with the movement’s launch of new ideas.

Perhaps the most important precedent for conceptual art was Duchamp’s use of readymades. Marcel Duchamp challenged the notion of the art object with his...
readymades in the early 1900s (53). He took everyday found objects and gave them a significant title, thus challenging what an art object is and provoking in the viewer a kind of intellectual reaction and engagement with the everyday object. He described his readymades as “anti-retinal”, dismissing the idea that artworks need to demonstrate artistic skill (Wolf). Duchamp sparked a new debate about what art is and provided a new medium by which artists could challenge the very definition of art.

His influence grew in the 1950s when he reissued some of his readymades, including *Fountain*, for display at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York (Wolf). Some artists including Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and composer John Cage saw his work and were inspired by Duchamp’s readymades to incorporate their own ideas and challenges to art into their own works. Cage, Rauschenberg, and Johns were important precursors to the conceptual art movement.

Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns transformed painting by questioning its status as art and utilizing new media in its production. For example, Jasper Johns in his work *Flag* literally asserts the painting as an object and sign in that it is just a depiction of the American flag made using beeswax, paint, newspapers, and plywood. The work challenges the viewer to question whether it is an American flag or merely a painting of an American flag. Johns himself said that it is both (“Jasper Johns *Flag*”).

Rauschenberg, on the other hand, in his work *White Painting* provides the viewer with a seemingly empty canvas, or a *tabula rasa*, on which shadows and varying light conditions produce unique designs (Osborne 58). *White Painting* challenges viewers to consider whether the empty canvas is the work of art or whether it is the shadows cast by lights that make up the art.
In France, Yves Klein also pushed the boundaries of art by creating new ways for viewers to experience art that challenged the very definition of painting and its materiality. In 1956, he created a series of twenty monochrome surfaces. Each was painted using pure pigment. The paint continues around the sides of the canvas, which de-emphasizes the presence of the canvas and creates a kind of wall of color that envelops the viewer. By removing line and form from his painting and reducing the presence of the canvas, he wanted to make the art object seem immaterial. Klein’s work thus challenged the notion of the art object as material, and influenced other conceptual artists after him to do the same (Osborne 62).

The 1960s saw another change in art that contributed to the rise of conceptual art. The emergence of fluxus and conceptualism marked a changing tradition in art. Fluxus artists embraced the change or “flux” in life, marking that as an essential characteristic of life’s experience. They incorporated this into their art and attempted to blur the lines between art and life. No longer was art something separate from life, but art could incorporate elements of the everyday. Fluxus artists utilized everyday found objects and simple activities and situations as stimuli. Some artists, for example, used printed cards and games, while others used newspapers, wooden boxes, or “trash” to create works of art. Any material was fair game. Those who were important to the fluxus movement included John Cage, George Maciunas, and Allan Kaprow (Wolf).
Also in the 1960s, minimalism and conceptualism were on the rise. Artists such as Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and Robert Morris embraced repetition, formal simplification, and industrial fabrication of artworks. They also started to create works that were too large for space in a home, thus rejecting traditional ideas about the space which artwork should occupy. These works were also created with different materials such as bricks or steel, and their production was often outsourced and works were mass-produced. These artists, then, were directly challenging the notion that art depended on the object itself and instead presented art chiefly as an idea rather than an object. Moreover, many of the artists saw their works as a challenge to the art market and institution, which emphasized the need to create an original masterpiece. Instead of furthering the idea that an artwork had to be unique and original, they created mass-produced art, often outsourcing the production to someone else entirely rather than the artists creating the pieces themselves (Wolf).

Central also to the movement was Sol LeWitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” published in 1967. This work is considered to be a kind of manifesto for the movement in that it justified the movement’s goals and challenged prominent theories of art at the time put forth by scholars such as Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg. Greenberg and Fried examined art through an analysis of form, colors, and materials, while LeWitt argued that what a piece of art looks like is not very important. Instead, what is important about a
work of art is the idea behind the work. The concept, therefore, is more important than the object, material, or form of the work (Wolf).

By the middle of the 1960s, it was clear that a distinct movement in art was forming. The conceptual art movement was gaining visibility during this time as more artists embraced its ideals and shows at art museums and galleries were dedicated exclusively to conceptual art pieces. In 1968, for example, a series of exhibitions dedicated solely to conceptual art promoted the movement in New York such that even the public became aware of the new movement in art. In 1969, a number of artists exhibited their pieces at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in an exhibit entitled “Information.” Even though many of the artworks were critical of the institutionalization of art, they were being shown in the very institution of which they were critical (Wolf).

There are many artists and artworks that are important to the movement during its prime in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* is emblematic of the movement and its goal of inquiring into the nature of art. In this work, Kosuth presents the viewer with three “depictions” of a chair: an actual folding chair, a picture of a chair, and a dictionary definition of chair. Of this work Kosuth wrote, “The art I call conceptual is such because it is based on an inquiry into the nature of art. Thus, it is...a thinking out of all the implications, of all aspects of the concept ‘art’” (Wolf). Through this work, Kosuth is challenging the distinction between object and
representation. The viewer is asked what constitutes “chair” – the physical object, idea, the representation, or a combination of all three elements (Wolf).

Yoko Ono’s *Grapefruit* is an early example of conceptual art and its link to Fluxus. *Grapefruit* is, strictly speaking, just an object. It is a plain and oddly titled book that contains approximately 150 sets of instructions for the reader divided into five sections: Music, Painting, Event, Poetry, and Object. Should the reader choose to follow any of the sets of instructions, it gives the reader the opportunity to create many different artworks herself. For example, one page is entitled, “Echo Telephone Piece” and instructs the reader to, “Get a telephone that only echoes your voice. Call every day and talk about many things” (Barliant). Thus, the work uniquely engages the audience in a way that other artworks do not. In this work, Yoko Ono diminishes the importance of the object, instead emphasizing the artistic idea and pushes the idea that anyone can be an artist (Wolf).

Walter de Maria’s work *Vertical Earth Kilometer* is also a prime example of the movement’s ideas and goals. There are a number of aspects of the movement that this piece embraces. First, he created a piece of work that no one except the artist has ever seen in its entirety. Using an industrial drill, he drilled a hole in the ground and inserted in the hole a brass rod. He then concealed it with a sandstone plate with a small
hole in the center to see part of the rod. The audience is forced to imagine the artwork itself, even though they cannot see it. Thus, the work challenges the very definition and nature of art by forcing the audience’s imagination to create and contribute to the piece of art. Second, the art is made of materials not typical of other types of art. Sandstone and brass are not typically used to create sculptures. Lastly, the art is a permanent installation, thus making it an affront to the commercialization of art: it cannot be sold, transferred, or exhibited in its entirety (Wolf).

§1.4 Conceptual Art Today

Having now discussed the foundations of conceptual art and some of the artists central to the movement during the 1960s and 1970s, I will now discuss in brief two prominent contemporary conceptual artists. It is important to note that many contemporary conceptual artists pay homage to the techniques, media, and ideas employed by conceptual artists during the height of the movement. Thus, even though conceptual artists today seek to push conceptual art forward with unique ideas and new techniques, they nonetheless acknowledge the importance of the artists that influenced and shaped the genre into what it is today. A discussion of conceptual art as it is today is central to understanding where the field is headed and how conceptual art has changed somewhat since the 1960s and 1970s.
Tatsuo Miyajima, for example, utilizes lights to express his vision and ideas. There are three concepts central to his work: everything changes and nothing is fixed, everything is connected, and everything continues forever (Miyajima). A prime example in which these concepts are reflected is his work entitled, *Mega Death*. The work is made up of 2,450 blue LED lights that act as a kind of countdown to Y2K. The blue color is supposed to symbolize death, and the numbers in the piece represent the number of unnatural deaths in the technologically and industrially dependent societies of the 20th century (Osborne 188). The numbers count down from nine to one, and go on to complete darkness to indicate zero without actually displaying zero. The process then repeats itself. The changing of the numbers represents the course of the human life, while the “zero” represents death. By referencing people who died in the same continuous lines of lit numbers, he instills in the viewer a sense that we are all connected in some way, even in death. These deaths, caused prematurely by revolution, conflict, or war, have no individuality any longer. They all look identical and the individual is lost in the mass of lit numbers. He also presents the viewer with the idea that things are always changing. Humans are always changing in life until they eventually die, and the process repeats itself as new people are born and live out their lives in a similar manner (Miyajima).

Miyajima’s work, though modern in its approach, nonetheless embraces the ideas of conceptual artists during the 1960s and 1970s. He embraces utilizing new media to
express his ideas, as opposed to relying on traditional media like paint or canvas. The concept is of the utmost importance, and the pieces rely on accompanying explanations to express these concepts.

Another prominent conceptual artist today is Jeff Wall, a conceptual photographer. He is often credited with creating the genre of “conceptual photography.” Often, his photographs are staged recreations of events he witnessed, and they depict hostage situations or the plight of the homeless. The photographs are designed to elicit strong reactions, including anger, shock, and awe. His photographs have been described as “anti-photography” because they are recreations of events that he witnessed in the past, but did not actually photograph at the time. This is unlike traditional photography, which often focuses on capturing an event at the moment it occurs (O’Hagan).

The content of his photographs leave viewers with a sense that he is commenting on social or political situations. For example, his photograph Listener seems to be a recreation of events that we often hear about in the media, especially in the age of the global war on terror, namely someone being taken hostage and then forced on the ground to display the power of the captors and the helplessness of the captive. Some have even pointed out that this photograph plays on classical depictions of Jesus (O’Hagan).

Wall’s photographs, then, are changing the field of photography in that photography no longer has to be about capturing something as it happens, but that it can be a medium for recreating events like painting or drawing. Moreover, Wall’s work is
politically and socially charged, like many conceptual art pieces. Thus, by challenging
the very definition of photography and making his photographs political, Wall is pushing
the boundaries and furthering the field of conceptual photography.

§1.5: Conclusion

This is not a complete history of the conceptual art movement nor is it a complete
survey of all the important artists that contributed to the movement. Instead, this is
merely a brief overview of the important precursors to the movement and several artists
such as Duchamp, Rauschenberg, Klein, and Johns who were involved in the movement.
Such an understanding of how the movement got started and its foundations is imperative
in order to understand contemporary conceptual art, given that contemporary conceptual
artists build off the ideas perpetuated by artists such as Duchamp and Klein. Though
perhaps it is no longer an artistic movement as it was during the 1950s and 1960s,
conceptual art is nonetheless an important and prevalent genre of art today.
CHAPTER 2
THEORIES THAT EXCLUDE CONCEPTUAL ART

§2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, some philosophers’ theories of art that are incompatible with conceptual art will be discussed. In highlighting how their theories preclude conceptual art from the category of “art,” I hope to illuminate the kinds of arguments made against including conceptual art within the category of “art.” In contrast to theories of art that allow for conceptual art to be art, the theories in this chapter focus on the visual aspects of a piece to determine whether it is art or something else. That is to say, what makes something art is a visual property, as opposed to something non-visual.

With the exception of Clement Greenberg, all of the philosophers discussed in this chapter wrote at a time before conceptual art existed. John Dewey was exposed to some of the precursors of conceptual art like Marcel Duchamp’s work, but he died before the conceptual art movement took shape. Immanuel Kant and David Hume, of course, were not exposed to any art that could even remotely be called conceptual art.

That being said, their philosophies are nonetheless important in our discussion. Though they may not have experienced conceptual art, many of these philosophers included in their writings a condemnation of sensationalized or vulgar art. Extrapolating from their commentaries on art they deemed unacceptable, one may reasonably conclude that they would not approve of conceptual art today, nor would they consider it art. Even
though they wrote a long time ago, these philosophers are still relevant in aesthetics today. Also, many critics of conceptual art today use similar arguments or build upon those provided by the philosophers in this chapter to dismiss the idea that conceptual art is art. Thus, by providing an overview of some of the older theories of aesthetics as well as a more recent theory, one can understand how it is that one may go about arguing that conceptual art should not be considered art.

§2.2 David Hume

In “Of the Standard of Taste,” Hume provides an account of how standards of aesthetic evaluation come about, how we are to account for differences in taste among different people and cultures, and how art is related to sentiment and morality. The difficulty in establishing a standard by which to evaluate art comes from a misperception about art in general. People suppose that beauty is within the piece of art, not in the mind. However, for Hume, that is incorrect. Beauty exists merely in the mind that perceives objects (Hume 80).

Given that beauty exists only in the mind, differences arise in how people perceive the same object. While some may see something beautiful, others may find it ugly or perverse. Hume thinks that it is feeling, as opposed to thought, that tells us whether an object is beautiful or not. It is the feeling, or sentiment, that is the beauty of the object. The differences in faculties can be attributed to whether someone has a refined or unrefined taste. Hume argued that those who look at a lot of art will have a more refined taste than average people who spend little time looking at or thinking about art.
Thus, the person who has more experience with art has a more refined taste and will be able to perceive the universal appeal of art better than the “average” person (85-86).

Developing such a refined taste is difficult, however. Very few people are “true critics” of art because very few people have the necessary qualifications: “Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice” (87). Not all critics are created equal either. Some critics will be better at evaluating certain types of art than others. For example, a critic well-versed in sculpture will be better at evaluating sculpture than a critic versed in painting but will not be good at evaluating pottery. Hume does acknowledge that even the best critics may be divided on their verdicts in regards to art and will fail to achieve universal agreement (87-89).

The disagreement among critics comes from the fact that it is impossible for even the best critics to be entirely impartial. They will always have some biases, which stem from their dispositions and cultural differences. Culture greatly influences how people view works of art, and even the critic cannot entirely separate herself from the values of her culture and the way in which her culture analyzes and views works of art. It is important, then, for critics to actively acknowledge their personal biases and work towards becoming increasingly more impartial (89).

For Hume, moral judgments are natural and immediate, and can enter into aesthetic evaluation. These moral judgments, however, vary from culture to culture. Different cultures find different things to be morally acceptable or objectionable. Thus, when presented with a work of art that is foreign to us, we may recoil with disgust because that culture’s values differ from our own (80).
Despite the disagreement among cultures, Hume does not opt for pure cultural relativism when it comes to evaluating a work of art. While an artist’s culture should be taken into account when examining a work of art, there are some things that clearly violate moral and aesthetic standards and should therefore not be accepted. Before dismissing a work of art that may be vulgar or present unpopular social views, one should take into account whether the piece has artistic merit that may override its content. If the piece is purely vulgar or sensationalized, however, it should not be accepted. He says of such pieces:

There is a species of beauty, which, as it is florid and superficial, pleases at first; but being found incompatible with a just expression either of reason or passion, soon palls upon the taste, and is then rejected with disdain, at least rated at a much lower value. […] A great inferiority of beauty gives pain to a person conversant in the highest excellence of the kind, and is for that reason pronounced a deformity (85).

Critics who are most able to judge art recognize the deformity present in vulgar works and thus rightly reject such works.

There are two important points to be made here. First, Hume does not present us with an explicit definition of art that could be used to test whether conceptual art is art. Second, he had never been exposed to conceptual art. It is only through conjecture, therefore, that we may get some idea about what Hume may think about conceptual art if he was alive today.

Despite these limitations, I contend that Hume would have been divided on conceptual art. His theory seems to accommodate some conceptual art pieces, but rejects
others. It could be argued that Hume would readily accept some conceptual art pieces, as long as they are not vulgar or designed merely to shock. Art pieces that comment on society, culture, and politics, as long as they have artistic merit that overrides their potential vulgarity or their presentation of unpopular views, are accommodated by Hume’s theory.

With regard to pieces that are designed merely to elicit a strong visceral reaction or cause the viewer to feel disgust, Hume would not be so generous. He would dismiss these pieces because they do not have overriding artistic merit. For example, Hume would not have accepted a piece like Ana Mendieta’s *Rape Scene* as art because the content elicits strong reactions and feelings of disgust in the viewer. Mendieta performed this piece several times in different locations. The areas she chose for her performance were areas in which a real rape had occurred and she devised a context for each scene in which her body acted as a kind of “readymade.” Each scene is designed to politically reappropriate the objectification of the female body by forcing spectators to confront the reality of what occurred there and to no longer see the female victim as an anonymous object (Osborne 160). Despite its merit as cultural and societal commentary, Hume would probably have condemned this piece to the category of the vulgar, rather than art, because of its controversial subject matter. Moreover, he would cite our feelings about the work, revulsion and discomfort, as indicative of the piece’s vulgarity.
Even though Hume never encountered conceptual art, his theory nonetheless adds something to the debate about whether conceptual art is art. Namely, he questioned whether vulgar images can be art, whether art has to be beautiful, who can judge whether something is art, and whether there can be universal artistic standards that determine what is art and what is not. Though these elements are not exclusive to Hume’s theory, his theory provided a foundation on which similar aesthetic theories were based, and his theory echoes some of the criticisms levied against conceptual art today.

§2.3 Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant is another philosopher who was never exposed to conceptual art, but who would probably disapprove of it based on the tenets of his moral and aesthetic theories. Interwoven into his ideas about art are theories of morality and beauty, which form the basis of his likely criticisms of conceptual art. While Kant may have accepted some conceptual art, he would reject any art that makes a political statement, is designed to elicit strong emotions, or may be considered vulgar. Since many conceptual art pieces fit into one of those categories, Kant would likely have rejected the conceptual art movement as a whole.

It is important to note that Kant’s theory of aesthetics, which he details in The Critique of Judgment, is complex and builds upon much of what he says in his other two critiques. It is my goal in this section to illustrate how Kant’s theory would likely exclude conceptual art, rather than give an exhaustive account of the complexities of his aesthetic theory. Such an account is beyond the scope of this paper.
There are three forms of aesthetic experience that Kant analyzes: the experience of beauty, the experience of the sublime, and the experience of fine art. Since the experience of the sublime seems to be limited to experiences of nature, it is not useful to discuss here. The experience of beauty and the experience of fine art, however, are important. Each of these experiences also has a connection in some way to morality (Guyer 312).

In experiencing beauty, what matters is whether the object produces satisfaction in the viewer. He says of taste and beauty, “Taste is the faculty of judging an object or a mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion apart from any interest. The object of such a delight is called beautiful” (Kant 42). This experience of beauty is universal and judgments about beauty are universal as well. When one asserts that something is beautiful, one is asserting that the pleasure one takes in that object is a pleasure that should also be felt by everyone else that looks at that object. The beautiful, then, is something that pleases universally. It is the recognition of a universal standard of beauty. Such a universal judgment about beauty is only possible, however, if each person sets aside personal biases and views the object with disinterest (42-45).

It is important to note that this does not mean that every beautiful object pleases everyone equally. There is room for personal preference and taste. One may prefer, for example, Salvador Dali’s *Swans Reflecting Elephants* to *The Persistence of Memory*, but there is a universal recognition that both paintings are beautiful. To prefer one painting over another is to say that one painting is more agreeable than the other to a certain individual (43).
For Kant, art is purposive without purpose, meaning that, while it appears to have been created for a purpose, it exists merely for the sake of being beautiful. It does not have another purpose and, as such, cannot be functional. For example, Kant would not think that a table used daily, regardless of how visually appealing it may be, can be considered art. Art is beautiful for the sake of beauty alone and not for another purpose (Guyer 316).

For Kant, there is a distinct connection between aesthetics and morality. First, he proposes that art deals with “concepts of reason,” which are concepts related to morality. Such moral concepts include themes like death, envy, vice, and love. A piece of art cannot merely represent these concepts in a mechanical way with attention paid exclusively to precision and method. Art has to have what he calls “spirit,” which is what stimulates the free play of imagination and understanding in the mind of the viewer. In a sense, ‘spirit’ is the creativity of the piece. Beautiful art, then, presents these moral concepts in a pleasing and imaginative way (Kant 142-143). It is important to note that Kant believes all forms of beauty, natural and artistic, can be regarded as expressions of moral concepts. Even a flower can suggest a moral idea to the viewer. Beauty and morality, therefore, are intertwined (Guyer 325).

Second, Kant thinks that beauty is a symbol of morality because there are similarities between our experience of beauty and the structure of morality. He suggests as well that this is the reason that we expect others to agree with our judgments about beauty. Of the similarities between the two he writes:

1) The beautiful pleases immediately (but only in reflecting intuition, not, like morality, in the concept). 2) It pleases without any interest (the
morally good is of course necessarily connected with an interest, but not with one that precedes the judgment on the satisfaction, but rather one that is thereby first produced). 3) The freedom of the imagination (thus of the sensibility of our faculty) is represented in the judging of the beautiful as in accord with the lawfulness of the understanding (in the moral judgment the freedom of the will is conceived as the agreement of the latter with itself in accordance with universal laws of reason). 4) The subjective principle of the judging of the beautiful is represented as universal, i.e., valid for everyone […] (the objective principle of morality is also declared to be universal) (Kant 181).

Like the beautiful, then, morality is universal, in accordance with universal laws, and interested.

Lastly, Kant seems to suggest that art can be conducive to the development of political ethics as well as personal ethics. This does not seem far-fetched, considering art is supposed to concern itself with morality and can be used to perpetuate certain morals. Art, then, can aid in the goal of establishing and perpetuating a lawful stable society (183).

There are a number of ways in which conceptual art violates or disregards some of the tenets of Kant’s aesthetics. First, conceptual art is not always beautiful. On Kawara’s *Date Paintings*, for example, would probably not be considered beautiful under Kant’s theory. In fact, many conceptual artists actively seek to challenge the notion that art must be beautiful by creating pieces devoid of visual appeal, or a play of forms. In the
context of Kant’s philosophy, these pieces would not be considered beautiful because they lack ‘spirit’ and therefore could not be considered art.

Second, many conceptual art pieces are designed to elicit strong emotions within the viewer. This is problematic for Kant because he thinks that the only appropriate way to view art is with disinterest or mild pleasure. Strong emotions, whether positive or negative, diminish the aesthetic experience.

Third, art for Kant exists merely for the sake of being beautiful. It is purposive without purpose. However, for many conceptual artists, art has a greater purpose than beauty or visual appeal. Art can serve as a social and political commentary by challenging the status quo or commenting on the immoralities of war and greed. Often, the major goal of political art is to bring attention to a particular issue, at times seeking to invoke social change by eliciting feelings of anger, disgust, or sadness in viewers. Victor Burgin’s Possession is a good example of how art can be a social commentary. By pointing out that the majority of wealth is owned by a small percentage of the population, the artist intends to bring attention to inequality, greed, and the concentration of wealth in a capitalist society.

Lastly, art is not necessarily about morality, as Kant suggested. For Kant, most things that are beautiful are also moral but, as demonstrated above, art need not be beautiful. Art need not always be concerned with morality, either. Conceptual art does not always deal with moral themes. Though political art can serve as a powerful
commentary on morality, conceptual art may be amoral in its approach. Consider *4 Red Squares* by Robert Barry. The piece is a commentary on spatiality and blurring the boundary between art and surrounding space (Osborne 104). The piece does not comment on nor does it perpetuate any moral norms. So, for Kant, this could not possibly be considered art since it is not only amoral, but it is also not beautiful.

Given these difficulties that Kant’s theory has with conceptual art, it is easy to see why Kant would probably dismiss conceptual art. Even though his theory is quite old, it is nonetheless very influential, even today. He inspired others, such as Clement Greenberg, to expand on the tenets of his philosophy and perpetuate the idea that art is, ultimately, about beauty.

§2.4 John Dewey

Although he never experienced conceptual art, Dewey is another philosopher who we can infer would reject conceptual art based on his views. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I will focus this discussion on the salient features of his aesthetics and how they conflict with conceptual art. It will be beyond the purview of this discussion, therefore, to give a complete and in-depth analysis and explanation of his 1934 book *Art as Experience*.

Unlike Kant who distinguishes art from other spheres of human experience, Dewey thought that art should not be considered a distinct and separate aspect of human
life. He believed that too many theories of art fail because they place art on a pedestal, one that distinguishes it and elevates it above other experiences (Dewey 204). That is not to say that art does not have a special prominence, but rather that it shares many of the features of everyday experiences. Aspects of art like form or rhythm can be found throughout ordinary experiences as well (Wartenberg 137). Part of Dewey’s goal, then, was to restore continuity between art and everyday experiences (Dewey 205).

Art denotes a process. It is a process of creating or doing, and involves activities such as painting, playing instruments, or writing prose. What distinguishes art from other activities, then, is that the artist seeks to create an object whose audible, visible, or tangible features will produce feelings of satisfaction in the audience. Only art is created with this sole aim in mind. Dewey writes, “The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver as he works” (208). Other objects may please us, but they are not made with the sole intention of producing satisfaction in their audience and thus cannot be considered art (207).

This definition indicates that art is dependent upon both the artist and the viewer and that the two play equally important roles. It also indicates that art must be perceived by an audience in order to be considered art. A work of art is incomplete unless perceived by other people. He writes, “The work of art is complete only as it works in the experience of others than the one who created it” (211). Moreover, each time it is aesthetically experienced, it is recreated. A piece of art continuously inspires new personal realizations and reflections in experience, thus making it an individual experience but also something universal as well (213).
Dewey articulates that art is made up of both the aesthetic and the artistic, and that an object must have both in order to be considered art. The ‘artistic’ refers to the physical object, while the ‘aesthetic’ refers to the way in which the object is experienced. The aesthetic, for Dewey, refers to “experience as appreciative, perceiving, and enjoying” (207). It is important to note that other experiences can have an aesthetic dimension, such as building a chair, but what is different about art is that it is created only with the intention of producing an aesthetic experience whereas other forms of activity are guided by other goals (207-208). He says, “To be truly artistic, a work must also be aesthetic – that is, framed for enjoyed receptive perception” (207). In the case of building a chair, the goal of such an activity is to create a useable piece of furniture on which people may sit. However, in the case of creating a sculpture, the goal is to bring pleasure to those that view the sculpture.

The incompatibility of Dewey’s theory and conceptual art lies in his idea that art is an experience that brings pleasure to its audience. First, conceptual art does not always, as Dewey requires, bring about satisfaction and pleasure in an audience. Often, conceptual art is about something intellectual rather than something visually appealing. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the goal of the conceptual artist is not always to create something that will satisfy and bring about pleasure in an audience. The goal may instead be to bring attention to a political, artistic, or cultural issue. Art, then, is defined by something conceptual rather than experiential.

Lastly, Dewey’s theory cannot accommodate readymades. Even though Dewey says that many of the features of an art experience are similar to that of everyday experiences, he still thinks there is a distinction between the two. The problem, then, is
how he can account for everyday objects that are turned into art. The experience of a readymade is identical to the experience of an everyday object and yet there seems to be a difference in the experience of each. Dewey’s theory cannot explain nor accommodate this difference, thus leading him to likely reject readymades as art.

Given some of the difficulties Dewey’s theory has with conceptual art, one may conclude that Dewey would have rejected conceptual art. Dewey argues that art is an experience, one that brings about pleasure and satisfaction in its audience. Conceptual art, however, does not necessarily bring about such an experience. Many conceptual pieces are not beautiful, nor are they designed merely with the goal of bringing pleasure to the audience.

§2.5 Clement Greenberg

Unlike the other individuals discussed in this chapter, Greenberg was alive and writing about art at the time that conceptual art burst onto the art scene. Though he was exposed to many different types of art, Greenberg was narrow in his appreciation of art. Although Greenberg praised abstract art and avant-garde art early on in his career, he was critical in his later writings of pop and neo-dada art. While Greenberg shied away from addressing conceptual art directly in his essays, his views on art, especially his views of the avant-garde, seem to indicate that he did not appreciate the direction in which art was heading. Part of his dislike of conceptual and pop art is rooted in his Kantian ideology in that he believed art is for art’s sake.

One of his most influential essays in which he discusses his view of the avant-garde is The Avant-Garde and Kitsch from 1939. This essay represents his earlier views
on the avant-garde in which he praised the avant-garde and its necessity. It is in later in his life, when conceptual art came into prominence, that he revised his position. I begin by examining this essay in order to give the reader an understanding of the progression and evolution of his ideas.

Greenberg begins the essay by explaining how the avant-garde came to be. He views it as a natural development of culture, a reaction and yearning to go beyond what he calls Alexandrianism, which is a part of the Western bourgeois society. Alexandrianism is art that reinforces established norms and avoids controversial issues. As culture became more materialistic and began revolting against traditional socio-economic boundaries, the avant-garde was born. It arose in reaction to the decline of taste in consumer society and defended artistic standards. It detached itself from society and criticized revolutionary as well as bourgeois politics. Artists began making art for “art’s sake” and “pure poetry,” rejecting some traditional ideas about art, including the notion that art had to be beautiful (Greenberg 7-8). He writes:

The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape – not its picture – is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself (8).

Art, then, is not about anything other than itself, and it is self-sufficient. He views the avant-garde as developing and shaping culture, and believes that it is necessary to maintaining culture itself (11).
He distinguishes the avant-garde from what he calls kitsch, which is commercial art and literature. As society evolved and became more consumerist, the proletariat became more integrated into society and demanded a new kind of culture for their consumption. Thus, kitsch was born. Greenberg condemns kitsch, explaining that it is for those who are “insensible to the values of genuine culture, [yet] are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide” (12).

It is important to note that the development and continued existence of kitsch is driven by profits. The avant-garde, however, resists the temptation of profits and instead creates more genuine art (13). Greenberg is critical of capitalism because he sees it as perpetuating the existence of kitsch and the decline of culture in general. Instead, he believes that it is socialism that will ultimately lead to the preservation of culture. He cites the development of the avant-garde as the indication of how socialism rejects and negates the capitalistic society, while it also maintains and propels culture forward (22).

Later in his life, Greenberg came to view conceptual art and the avant-garde in a more critical light, stemming perhaps from his views on Kant and taste. His interpretation and focus on Kant was prevalent in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, coinciding with the rise of conceptual art. Greenberg viewed conceptual art as rejecting taste and aesthetic quality in art. In a seminar about taste, Greenberg condemned conceptual art when he said:

When no aesthetic value judgment, no verdict of taste, is there, then art is not there either, then aesthetic experience of any kind is not there….it’s as simple as that. […] I don’t mean that art shouldn’t ever be discussed in terms other than those of value or quality. […] What I plead for is a more
abiding awareness of the substance of art as value and nothing but value, amid all the excavating of it for meanings that have nothing to do with art as art (qtd. in Costello 94).

This is critical of conceptual art because conceptual art requires that the viewer look beyond the art in order to discover what concept the artist is trying to convey. It requires looking at the art as more than just art for art’s sake, as something that conveys a more important broader message. The art, therefore, becomes secondary while the concept is of the utmost importance.

It has been suggested that Greenberg misappropriated Kant’s ideas in order to justify a condemnation of conceptual art. Nevertheless, his ideas that art should be for art’s sake and that aesthetic quality is central to a piece being art are important in his case against conceptual art and should be regarded as serious challenges to the conceptual art movement. Greenberg’s idea that aesthetic quality is a significant artistic concern is still a criticism waged against conceptual art.

§2.6 Conclusion

I have presented four different theories of art and how each theory cannot accommodate conceptual art. Even though the majority of theorists presented in this chapter never encountered conceptual art, their theories represent different types of arguments that are still used today as challenges to the idea that conceptual art is art. Their theories, therefore, remain relevant to our discussion and their challenges worthy of consideration. It is in the next chapter that I will examine theories that can accommodate conceptual art.
CHAPTER 3
THEORIES THAT CAN ACCOMMODATE CONCEPTUAL ART

§3.1 Introduction

In this section of the paper, I will discuss some theories of art that accommodate conceptual art. These definitions of what makes a work a piece of art are broad enough to include and accommodate conceptual art. They reject the very notion that a piece of art has to be beautiful or visually appealing, which many traditional and older definitions of art have proposed is a vital criterion for something to be art. Instead of defining art through its visual properties, these definitions attempt to define art through its non-visual properties. These non-visual properties are what distinguish art from mundane or everyday objects, and each definition discussed in this chapter differs with respect to which non-visual properties make something art.

It is important to note that this section is not a complete survey of all the definitions of art proposed over the years that allow for conceptual art to be considered art. Rather, it is my goal in this chapter to introduce a few noteworthy definitions of art that are broad enough to include conceptual art, while also acquainting readers with the types of arguments that can be made in favor of including conceptual art as art.

I have chosen these definitions because they represent two approaches to defining art: the functionalist approach and the proceduralist approach. It should be noted that
there are other types of approaches, such as the institutional approach\(^2\), but I think the two approaches discussed here are the most prominent.

First, there is the functionalist approach to defining art. Many definitions of art fall into this category, especially older definitions proposed by philosophers such as Hume, Kant, and Dewey. Such definitions define art by its function. Either the artwork has some function that it performs for its audience or it possesses certain properties that aid it in performing some function. A good example of the latter is Clive Bell’s theory of significant form. Art has certain visual properties that constitute “significant form.” Significant form is functional in nature in that it is the property in visual artworks responsible for eliciting aesthetic emotion in the audience. That is to say, this property aids the work in eliciting aesthetic emotion and the possession of this property is what distinguishes art objects from non-art objects (Davies 239). Of the theories of art that I discuss in this section, Danto and LeWitt’s theories may be considered functionalist in that they both think an artwork’s function is to express an idea to its audience.

The second kind of approach that I will discuss in this chapter is the performance approach to art, which focuses not on what a work is or its possessing certain visual properties but rather views art as a kind of creative process. The artwork, then, is primarily identified with the process by which it was created rather than the object itself that results from this process. David Davies’ theory of art is a performance approach to art (146-147).

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\(^2\) George Dickie is perhaps the most famous of those who have offered an institutional approach to art, proposing that art is distinguished from non-art by having acquired a certain kind of status within the “artworld.” The institutional approach has been largely discredited, however.
3.2 Arthur Danto

Arthur Danto is, perhaps, one of the most famous proponents of a very broad definition of art. While some have criticized his definition as too broad and one that may include non-art objects in the category of “art,” the strength of his definition is that it not only accommodates the vast array of works that most agree are art, but it also allows for future works of art, whatever they may look like, to be considered “art.” In this sense, his definition is timeless. It includes in the category of “art” works from Caravaggio’s paintings to Lichtenstein’s comic strips to conceptual pieces today such as Wall’s conceptual photographs. That is to say, it accommodates the vast diversity in art.

Danto, in his book What Art Is, recognizes the need for such a broad definition. A significant portion of the book is devoted to exploring how art has changed throughout history and, consequently, how more traditional definitions of art, such as those provided by Kant and Hume, have failed to account for these changes. More traditional definitions of art have focused on trying to find the visual properties common to all works of art. Such properties, if they could be found, would be the essential properties that distinguish art from non-art objects. Given the great variation in how artworks look and how art has changed throughout history, however, it is no surprise that philosophers have been historically unsuccessful in approaching art this way (Danto 35).

As an alternative, Danto proposes thinking of art in terms of what it embodies. Art embodies meaning. He writes, “The artwork is a material object, some of whose properties belong to the meaning, and some of which do not. What the viewer must do is interpret the meaning-bearing properties in such a way as to grasp the intended meaning they embody” (38). In other words, art is that which has an intended meaning behind it
and embodies that meaning. What makes something art is not a visible property, but rather a non-visual property (40).

This definition seems quite appealing, especially in its application. Rather than judge a work by the artist’s skill or how beautiful a work is, the viewer need only grasp the concept that the work is trying to convey in order to settle the question whether the piece is art. Such a definition accommodates conceptual art pieces since conceptual art relies heavily on the concept behind the work rather than on visual appeal or artistic skill. Under such a definition, even the most controversial artwork may be considered art as long as it embodies meaning.

Some may object that such a definition allows for non-art objects to be considered art, which is perhaps why Danto included another component into his definition: the artworld. In short, the artworld is artistic theory and knowledge of art history. To understand a work of art as art, one must have knowledge of art, artistic theory, and art history. A piece must occupy a place in the history of art, which it does by presenting a theory or interpretation. Without even a basic understanding of art history and art theory, an audience cannot appreciate an object as a work of art (Wartenberg 210).

To clarify his definition, one may break down his definition of art into four distinct components. To be a work of art, an object must i) have a subject, ii) have an attitude or point of view about the subject, iii) engage the audience and require the audience to interpret the meaning of the work, and iv) have a historical context (Adajian).

It is important to note that Danto formulated this definition with a particular goal in mind: distinguishing Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* from regular commercially available Brillo boxes. Even though Warhol’s boxes were almost identical to the mass-produced
Brillo boxes available on supermarket shelves, there seemed to be some sort of difference between the two. Danto’s theory addresses the difference. The reason Warhol’s *Brillo Box* is a work of art while the actual commercial box is a non-art object is that there are interpretations of Warhol’s work such that it possesses distinctive ontological properties. For instance, Warhol’s work may have the property of a commentary on the mass production of consumer goods, whereas the ordinary Brillo box has no such property. The mere possession of that ontological property, then, is why Warhol’s work is a work of art while the ordinary Brillo box is a non-art object (Wartenberg 209-210).

In order to clarify Danto’s definition, it may be useful to analyze two works of art using its criteria. Georges-Pierre Seurat’s *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* is considered by many to be a great work of art. In this work, Seurat utilizes the technique of pointillism to create a beautiful, almost dreamlike, scene in which Parisians enjoy their Sunday afternoon at a popular spot on the River Seine. The painting took almost two years to complete, given that Seurat meticulously placed dots side by side to make the image appear uniform when observed from far away. The hazy appearance created by this technique only adds to the warm sunny feel of the scene (Janes, Chilvers, and Zaczek 173).

Even though the park seems crowded, the way in which Seurat arranged the figures on the canvas makes it seem like they are disconnected from one another. The
figures are static, expressionless, and their faces lack detail. The painting instills a sense of timelessness in that the figures seem frozen, forever enjoying their afternoon at the park (173).

This painting should no doubt pass Danto’s criteria. The painting presents a subject and, through the use of color and design, presents a specific view of that subject. In this case, pointillism creates a dream-like scene of the Parisians enjoying their sunny afternoon. The painting also requires that the audience engage with the painting to interpret its meaning. To fully grasp the concept that Seurat is trying to convey, the audience must analyze the way in which he creates a dreamy scene through the resulting hazy effects of his pointillism method, the warm colors, and the faceless figures frozen in time. Lastly, one needs to understand how the work is situated within the history of art.

He invented the technique of pointillism, which is partially why this work is so revered. It occupies its space in art history through its novel effect and technique.

Having now applied Danto’s theory to a painting many consider art, let us turn to a more controversial art piece, namely, Lawrence Weiner’s work *Displacement*. *Displacement* is an installation piece that is meant to not only draw attention to the physicality of the space in which it is displayed, but is a commentary on the role of translation:

Just as translation implies transport, displacement, placement, and an exhibition site, it operates on different levels at different times: the studio

![Figure 15. Laurence Weiner, Displacement, 1991](image)
work, which consists of translating the material into a statement, public presentation of its translation, and finally, realization of the statement by others, a translation into their own reality that opens the field of interpretation (Osborne 186).

By reading the words written on the floor aloud, the viewer is almost engaging in this translation and interpreting the words in her reality.

Though it lacks the kind of technical and artistic skill exhibited by Seurat, it is still considered a work of art by Danto’s criteria. Specifically, Weiner reflected on the role of translation and on how something is lost in translation since much of translation depends on personal interpretation. The sentence on the floor, “each being equal & consistent” implies that nothing about translation is ever truly that way: each interpretation is unique and a reflection of the interpreter’s own reality. Thus, Weiner presents a view of translation that encourages the audience to literally engage in the work by reading the words on the floor aloud to understand its message. By presenting this view of translation, Weiner’s work situates itself into the broader art narrative and occupies its own place in the artworld.

Though Weiner’s and Seurat’s works are quite different, they are both considered art under Danto’s definition. They embody an idea, convey that idea to their audience, require audience engagement to understand the work, and situate themselves in an art historical context through their technique and interpretations. To fully appreciate them as works of art, viewers must have some understanding of art theory and the history of art.
§3.3 Sol LeWitt

Sol LeWitt was an important figure in the conceptual art movement, not just for his art but also for his ideas and philosophy of art. His philosophy and writings about conceptual art and its importance became a manifesto for the movement during the 1960s and 1970s, but his ideas are still important today in the discussion of conceptual art. He offers a broad definition of art, perhaps even more broad than Danto’s.

Like Danto, LeWitt purports that a piece must have some sort of idea behind it in order to be considered art. However, unlike Danto, LeWitt believes that the artist need not understand her own work in order for it to be considered art. Though she may have started with some idea initially, he envisions that the art “takes on a life of its own” and can turn out radically differently from how she envisioned it would. He writes, “Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist’s mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly” (LeWitt 692). Similarly, the viewer need not understand the work either or need not understand it in the way in which the artist intended. That is to say, the many different interpretations of the work by different viewers do not diminish the piece’s status as art (692).

LeWitt’s theory is also different from Danto’s in that ideas can be art and art need not ever be viewed by anyone or even materialize into an object outside the artist’s mind. He writes, “A work of art may be understood as a conductor from the artist’s mind to the viewer’s. But it may never reach the viewer, or it may never leave the artist’s mind” (692). Therefore, just the mere idea of a work of art, even if it never materializes into an actual piece of art, can nonetheless be considered art (692).

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3 In this paper, I am only examining his ideas about art, and I am not discussing his art specifically. I take the two to be separate.
The role of the artist lies in the conception rather than the execution of the work. Since the idea is the art, it does not matter whether the idea translates into an actual physical object. That is to say, the actual process of making a work of art is unimportant to the object’s status as art. LeWitt even goes so far as to say that the artist herself need not be involved in the actual execution of an idea. An assistant, working according to the artist’s plan, may create the art object without any assistance from the artist herself. The fact that the artist herself was not involved in the actual construction of the piece does not diminish its status as an art object because she conceived of its idea in the first place (Pillow 369).

In considering Seurat’s A Sunday on La Grande Jatte, then, both the actual painting and the ideas Seurat had about the work could be considered art under LeWitt’s definition. For that particular piece, then, his ideas about pointillism, what the painting may look like, and his conception of how the figures should look, for example, would all be considered art since they were about the painting.

Though it will strike many that LeWitt’s theory is too broad for a definition of art or a method to distinguish art from non-art, his theory nonetheless remains important because it allows for ideas to be considered art. Its strength is that it is overly broad and can accommodate into the category of “art” both works from the past as well as works in the future that have not even been thought of yet. Moreover, LeWitt’s legacy is that he was one of the important figures to challenge the notion that art had to be beautiful or that the form of a piece was of great importance.
§3.4 David Davies

Davies’ theory of art represents a shift from the functionalist theories of art proposed by Danto and LeWitt in that he approaches art by viewing it as performance. Rather than rely on how an object looks or what ideas it is trying to convey in order to determine its status as an art object, Davies believes that it is through the artistic process that the work becomes art. This is a shift from both Danto’s and LeWitt’s theories in that the idea is not what makes something a work of art; it is the process by which that idea is translated into a work that makes the resulting piece “art.”

This theory avoids a number of the pitfalls associated with some other definitions of art that I have discussed both in this chapter as well as Chapter 2. However, for the sake of brevity and so as not to distract from presenting Davies’ theory, I will not discuss these strengths here. An in-depth discussion of the strengths of Davies’ theory and how his theory avoids some of these pitfalls can be found in Chapter 4.

Davies outlines his definition of art as follows: “Artworks [are] performances whereby one or more individuals articulate an artistic statement by working in an artistic medium when manipulating a vehicular medium” (Davies 237). Art is a kind of performance, and gains its status as art through the process by which it is created. To understand this theory, however, one needs to break down and define its constitutive parts.

In order to understand what Davies means by “performance,” one needs to delve into action theory. Action-types are, broadly, the way an action can be done, while action-tokens are the specific ways, or instances, in which something is done. Davies thinks there is one action-type (namely, art-making) and there are many different action-
tokens by which individuals engage in art-making. That is to say, there are many different ways of making art, but they all are tokens of the same action-type (art-making).

Sculpting, painting, and drawing, for example, are all different action-tokens, but they are all ways of making art and are thus of the same action-type. Art is art, then, because the process by which it is created is an action-token of art-making (127-128).

To clarify when the practice of making is a practice of artistic making, Davies relies on Nelson Goodman’s account of symbolic functions that are aesthetic (250). Goodman, in articulating what sorts of symbolic functions are characteristic of art, talks of five “symptoms of the aesthetic”:

1) Syntactic density, where the finest differences in certain respects constitute a difference between symbols – for example, an undergraduated mercury thermometer as contrasted with an electronic digital-read out instrument;

2) Semantic density, where symbols are provided for things distinguished by the finest differences in certain respects – for example, not only the undergraduated thermometer again but also ordinary English, though it is not syntactically dense;

3) Relative repleteness, where comparatively many aspects of a symbol are significant – for example, a single-line drawing of a mountain by Hokusai where every feature of shape, line, thickness, etc. counts, in contrast with perhaps the same line as a chart of daily stockmarket averages, where all that counts is the height of the line above the base;
4) Exemplification, where a symbol, whether or not it denotes, symbolizes by serving as a sample of properties it literally or metaphorically possesses; and finally

5) Multiple and complex reference, where a symbol performs several integrated and interacting referential functions, some direct and some mediated through other symbols (Goodman 244-245).

These symptoms need clarification. First, pictures are distinguished from symbols of other sorts because they are syntactically and semantically dense. Marks on a canvas are relevant to pictorial meaning. Two nearly identical marks may be instantiating two different characters and these different characters may have different referents. Even a slight change in the marks that make up a picture can change the pictorial meaning, and even a simple picture can be dense in the sense that every single mark, regardless of how tiny or insignificant it may seem, may be relevant to the overall meaning in the work of art. To distinguish between pictures and diagrams, Goodman says that the difference is syntactic, in that it has to do with composition of characters and symbols (Giovannelli).

Second, pictorial systems are relatively replete. Many of the features of the picture are relevant to its interpretation compared to the interpretation of a non-pictorial system. He draws the distinction between the drawing and the stockmarket graph. In the graph, all that is relevant to the interpretation is how high the line is in relation to the base of the graph. However, in a picture, what is relevant to the interpretation of the image is the line, thickness of the line, and its shape. There are more aspects of the picture that are relevant to its interpretation (Giovannelli).
Third, the inclusion of exemplification in his “symptoms of the aesthetic” offers an explanation of the meaning in works of art beyond just denotation. Works of art appear to exemplify many things, while not literally possessing these features. For example, a work of art through its use of dark somber tones may express sadness, but a painting cannot literally be sad. A work of art expresses something when it metaphorically exemplifies it. Expression is not limited to feelings and emotions, either. For example, a painting may express a sense of movement in its design, but it does not literally have this property (Giovannelli).

Lastly, what he means by “multiple and complex reference” is that a symbol in a work of art combines with other symbols in order to generate a complex reference. For example, a picture of an apple taken in isolation does not have the same reference as a more complex image of an apple and a lot of other fruit on a table in a still life. Instead, the apple, taken with other fruit in a still-life, changes what the image stands for as a whole (Giovannelli).

It should be noted that Goodman thinks of these “symptoms” as clues to the aesthetic, rather than a specific definition or account of the aesthetic. The presence of one or more of these symptoms may not constitute an object or experience being aesthetic and, similarly, not all these symptoms need to be present in order for something to be aesthetic. Rather, these give some guidelines to investigate whether something is, in fact, aesthetic. To make this clearer, he draws a parallel to someone having a disease. Someone may have a disease without showing any symptoms, or may show symptoms of a particular disease without actually having that disease (Goodman 245).
Other parts of Davies’ definition demand clarification as well, particularly what he means by “artistic medium” and “vehicular medium.” Artistic medium is a way of characterizing the intentionality of the artist and the way she constructs, manipulates, and utilizes materials in her artistic process. It is not to be confused with the actual material or physical “stuff” of the piece, which is the vehicular medium. For example, artistic medium is the way in which an artist applies paint to her canvas, and the vehicular medium is the paint and canvas (Davies 56-60).

Lastly, the term “artistic statement” needs clarification. Davies writes, “The idea is that the artist produces an object or structure having certain meaningful or formally perceptible properties” (53). Artistic statements, then, are the representational, expressive, and formal properties articulated by the artist, and they are perceptible in the piece. These may include the design and linear structure of a piece or the color choices of the artist to convey a certain emotion (51-53).

It is important to note that Davies takes these elements as broadly construing meaning in a piece. He says, “To think of such properties as elements in an “artistic statement” articulated in the work is appropriate because such properties are “meanings,” broadly construed, conferred upon the product of her activities through the artist’s generational activity” (53). The artist, through her activities and process, produces a work which we may ascribe certain representational and expressive “meanings.” For example, an artist may choose dark colors to express a somber feeling in the work, which helps to convey that the scene that she is depicting is a sad one. Broadly construed, I take this “artistic statement” as a representation of the artist’s intentions and feelings and how she chooses to convey them in a work.
It may be useful to apply this definition to a specific artwork. Take, for example, Tatsuo Miyajima’s work *Mega Death* that was discussed in Chapter 1. The piece’s creation through carefully placing the LED bulbs and programming the computer which controls the countdown of the numbers from nine to one is an action-token of art-making. The vehicular medium is the materials that make up the piece of art. In this case, the vehicular medium is the LED bulbs, computers, electrical circuits, and projection videos. The artistic medium is the way in which the artist manipulated the vehicular medium in order to achieve the final product. In this case, the artist had to program computers and place the bulbs, electrical circuits, and projectors in such a way so as to make the numbers count down while being illuminated. It is the actual process by which the artist put together these materials into the final product. An artistic statement, on the other hand, is the way in which the artist conveys meaning. In this case, the artistic statements are the blue color that symbolizes death, the changing numbers, and the countdown of the numbers from nine to zero. The accompanying written explanation of the piece can also be considered an artistic statement since it helps to convey meaning in the piece.4

Davies’ definition of art can accommodate conceptual art because it defines art not by how it looks but rather by how it was created. Each conceptual art piece is the product of an artistic process that fits Davies’ criteria and thus can be considered art. The strength of his definition, then, is that it is broad enough to include conceptual art as well as more traditional art pieces.

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4 While the artist’s accompanying written explanation can serve as part of an artistic statement in this case, Davies does not envision an artistic statement exclusively as something written. An artistic statement is typically unwritten and includes aspects of the piece like color and composition. Moreover, a piece can have multiple artistic statements.
§3.5 Conclusion

In this section of the paper, I have provided examples of two types of approaches to the definition of art: the functionalist approach and the proceduralist approach. While these approaches are not the only ones to address conceptual art, I have chosen to discuss them here because of their prominence and importance. While Danto and LeWitt see art as performing some function (namely, expressing an idea), Davies defines art in terms of its being generated by an artistic process. It is that process that confers on an object its status as “art.”

I have provided an overview of the types of definitions that can accommodate conceptual art in order to provide some needed background to talk about my own views on conceptual art. While I have presented each view in this chapter in a favorable light, it should not be taken that I advocate for any one definition specifically. The next chapter is dedicated to discussing my own views on conceptual art and why I think it is imperative that any definition of art accommodates conceptual art.
CHAPTER 4
TOWARDS A PROCEDURALIST DEFINITION OF ART

§4.1 Introduction

Having now discussed some definitions of art that accommodate conceptual art as well as definitions which do not, it is important to examine why we should attempt to craft a definition of art that accommodates conceptual art. Not only will this require an explanation of the importance of including conceptual art, but it will also involve a discussion of the value of conceptual art. It is only after establishing the importance of this project that an argument for the adoption of a specific definition, or type of definition, can be motivated.

Based on the discussions in chapters 2 and 3, I will argue not only that a definition of art like Davies’ can accommodate conceptual art, but also that such a definition avoids some of the pitfalls of more traditional definitions of art as well as definitions like Danto’s and LeWitt’s. Moreover, I will argue that only a definition focused on the art-making process as the defining feature of art can accommodate all current artworks as well as future artworks. That is to say, such a definition will prove timeless and can accommodate works from Caravaggio to Jeff Wall.

§4.2 The Value of Conceptual Art
As discussed in Chapter 1, art’s value has typically been tied to the value of the viewer’s experience. Art has traditionally been discussed in terms of its beauty, its use of imagery, or how it can provoke certain emotions and thoughts in the viewer. People view art as portraying and showcasing many of the qualities we value in the experience of it. Its value is often reduced to the aesthetic pleasure it brings its audience or its ability to impact its audience in a meaningful way. Even today, both critics and non-critics alike still rely on this notion that art should be about the viewer and how it affects the viewer.

Conceptual art’s rejection of the emphasis placed on the viewer’s experience as that which gives a piece of art its value has contributed to its condemnation, especially by the public. Sure, some conceptual art pieces can provoke an emotional response or give the viewer pause, but many do not. Moreover, as has been discussed in previous chapters, many conceptual art pieces do not rely on visual appeal or beauty. They are often minimalist in presentation and may have little, if any, visual appeal. Some conceptual works, like Walter de Maria’s *Vertical Earth Kilometer*, challenge the very idea that art has to have a visible visual component in order to be considered art. Instead, conceptual art seems to be about the recognition of an idea.

However, the value of an artwork is not merely reducible to our experience of it. We tend to engage with works in many different ways, thus making art valuable for reasons beyond just the quality of the viewer’s experience. Art has cultural value, and we tend to treasure and value art even if we have never seen it in person. For example, many people have never been to the Louvre and seen the *Mona Lisa* in person, yet they still care about its preservation. If something were to happen to that painting, many people
that have not experienced it would still be saddened to learn of its destruction (Kieran 203).

I contend that part of what makes conceptual art inherently valuable is its underlying creative process and how it shows the artist, in a way. Part of what distinguishes art from non-art objects is the process by which it is created, a process riddled with creativity, imagination, and the artist’s own feelings, beliefs, and ideas. One can get a sense from the final product what the artist may have been thinking about, her motivations for the piece, and what her experience of the world is like, among other things. Art, then, can be considered a display of the artist and her own personality and ideas as well as a representation of the creative process. While all art is a demonstration of the artists’ thoughts, feelings, and ideas in some way, it is not always the first thing that comes to mind when we look at a piece of art. Instead, people are quick to judge whether the piece of art is beautiful or it causes them to feel a certain emotion, but they do not consider that the piece of art is also a presentation of the artist.

A good example of how art showcases the artist is Albrecht Dürer’s self-portrait. The portrait is remarkable for its resemblance to early depictions of Jesus and its similarities to religious paintings in the use of dark tones, symmetry, and the way in which Dürer’s hands are positioned, almost as if they are going to bless the viewer. It has been suggested that perhaps he is commenting on the artist’s supreme role as creator, or that he is responding to the tradition of imitating Christ. Either way, Dürer’s beliefs about Christianity and its
importance are showcased in the painting, giving the viewer a unique insight into the painter himself.

I contend that, instead of considering art in terms of how it affects the viewer, we should consider art in terms of how it showcases the artist and the artistic process. Thinking of art in this way and not in terms of beauty or its effect on its audience necessitates the inclusion of conceptual art in the category of art. To illustrate how conceptual art can showcase the artist, consider Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *Homeless Vehicle Project* of 1987-1988. It is designed to bring attention to the plight of the homeless and serves as a social commentary on their invisibility and isolation from the rest of society. It is also a commentary on the artist, who uses his art to bring about social discussions about causes for which he cares deeply including homelessness and veterans. When one engages with this art, it is not difficult to see the artist’s care and compassion that he felt for these people and their plight. The *Homeless Vehicle Project* was later incorporated into a larger project about homelessness that told the stories of several homeless individuals in New York (Osborne 184).

Another example of how conceptual art can showcase the artist is the *Tag um Tag guter Tag* (*Day by Day good Day*) series by Peter Dreher. He started in 1974 painting the same empty glass each day and, even after 40 years, is still working on the project. His piece is based on Edmund Husserl’s philosophy of the phenomenological reduction. Our perception of the world is prestructured with knowledge that we already have, and
therefore we do not see an object objectively. When he paints the glass, he tries to approach it with no preconceived notions and paint exclusively what he perceives at that moment. The result is that each painting is unique and reveals something new about the glass. He once remarked that, “[painting the glass] is the only place and the only hours when I feel really quiet. Maybe I don’t make the impression of being unquiet, but I am” (Tillman). In his daily life, he acknowledges that he has a lot of anxiety, and it is only when he is painting that he feels relaxed and composed. The paintings, therefore, in virtue of their being this quieting mechanism for him, showcase his anxiety and his otherwise stressful life. In a way, then, the paintings are the showcase of his identity, absent all of his anxiety and stress.

To illustrate the importance of the artistic process and how that makes an object valuable, consider the case of two identical objects. Object A is created deliberately, while object B is created accidentally. Though both objects may have value, we tend to value object A more because it is the result of a deliberate process. It is creative and imaginative in a way that object B is not. Thus, we value object A in virtue of its creative and imaginative process, not because it affords some better experience than object B (Kieran 205-206). While not a perfect analogy, such an analysis may help to explain why we value Warhol’s Brillo Boxes over commercially available boxes. Though indistinguishable from the commercially available Brillo boxes on grocery store shelves, Warhol’s work is more valuable because it is the result of a creative and imaginative process.

It is important to note that an artist’s process need not be visible in the final product in order for it to still be valuable. Part of why Duchamp’s Fountain, for example,
is so troubling is because there seems to be little evidence of Duchamp’s process. What sort of artistic process and manipulation of the object went into the work? At first glance, it seems like nothing (211). After all, Duchamp merely went to a store, bought a urinal, tipped it upside down, and signed it “R. Mutt 1917.”

While not a conceptual artist, similar critiques have been levied against Jackson Pollock’s works. His work is largely accepted as art and is fairly uncontroversial, yet the works do not showcase his painstaking and deliberate process. It appears as though he just threw paint onto a canvas but, in reality, a lot more went into the production of each of his paintings. He took great care in how he applied each color to the canvas and a lot of planning and preparation went into each painting. However, merely looking at one of his paintings does not tell you about his process.

If we are to abandon the idea that a work of art must, in some way, show the artist’s artistic and creative process, we can do away with the notion that the end product is of the utmost importance in discovering the artist’s process. Instead, the artistic process may be discovered in other ways by examining the artist’s motives for making the piece, her accompanying artistic statement, or an underlying message of the work of art. Thus, the focus of artistic appreciation should not be on the artist’s skill or apparent craftsmanship, but on the underlying creative thought processes that went into a work’s conception and creation. The presence of a genuinely creative and imaginative thought process is what makes a piece of art valuable.

So far, this discussion has centered on why conceptual art can be considered inherently valuable, and little attention has been paid to its instrumental value. Conceptual art, perhaps more than any other type of art, pays homage to how art can be
instrumentally valuable. Many conceptual art pieces call into question and challenge societal norms, political ideologies or actions, or moral norms. While political and social commentary is not exclusive to conceptual art, it is more pervasive in conceptual art than in other types of art. By presenting a specific issue, the work draws attention to and fuels a response to that issue. Take, for example, Martha Rosler’s *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*. This series of works done between 1967 and 1972 showcase the horrors of the Vietnam War. Rosler inserted pictures from the war into American home interiors. The stark contrast of the violence and horror of dismembered bodies and soldiers in uniform with the scenes of comfortable home life was shocking and fueled the growing anger Americans had towards the war. These images were published in a California alternative newspaper and, undoubtedly, brought many people’s attention to the horrors of the war (Osborne 153).

If we are to accept that conceptual art is valuable, for the reasons I have presented here, an explanation of why it is important that a definition of art accommodate it becomes possible. Without the notion that conceptual art is valuable, it is difficult to motivate an argument for why it is important that it be considered art. I will explore the importance of adopting a definition that accommodates conceptual art in the next section.

§4.3 The Problem with Functionalist Definitions of Art
As discussed in Chapter 2, traditional criteria-based definitions or views of art, such as those proposed by Kant, Hume, Dewey, and Greenberg, cannot accommodate conceptual art. While it is important that any definition of art accommodate conceptual art, these definitions’ inability to do so points to a larger problem with criteria-based definitions of art: they cannot accommodate change in art.

Criteria-based definitions of art rely on the notion that an object must meet or fulfill specific criteria in order to be considered art. Traditionally, the most often proposed criterion is that something has to be beautiful in order to be considered art. However, as has been demonstrated throughout this paper, art is not necessarily beautiful, nor does the artist always intend for her work to be beautiful. For example, Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* are not beautiful, and yet they are widely considered to be art. Another example of art that is not beautiful is Francis Bacon’s *Figure with Meat*. While adjectives such as disturbing and grotesque may be used to describe this painting, few people, if any, would consider it beautiful. Despite its lack of beauty, however, the painting is still considered to be a great work of art.

Such definitions of art are formulated by first looking at current art objects and, from there, identifying what they have in common visually. These definitions start from the artworks themselves, rather than thinking about what makes art different from non-art objects. The common visual criteria then become the basis for the definition of art, and anything that does not fit those criteria is relegated to the status of ‘non-art.’
This approach to creating a definition of art is doomed to fail, however. There is an underlying presupposition in this approach that art that currently exists is representative of all art that will exist in the future as well. In other words, the approach presupposes that every variety in art has been done already, and that art is going to remain relatively the same in the future. So, when specific criteria are proposed as the fundamental necessary characteristics of art, the definition presupposes that all art in the future will share these visual characteristics.

As has been demonstrated throughout history, however, art is not static. It is always changing and evolving. The concept of art has evolved greatly since the Renaissance and what was characteristic of art then is not necessarily characteristic of art now. Its evolution has not only been in the way in which it is created and its subject matter, but each art movement shaped and changed the definition of art as defined by movements that came before it. Surrealism, for example, focused on the presentation of reality and its juxtaposition with dreams. In a shift towards non-representational art, it focused on depicting scenes beyond reality and cared little for realism. After Surrealism had its moment, Abstract Expressionism came into favor and artists like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko turned art more towards the non-representational, thus redefining the notion of “art.” No longer did art have to be something purely representational or an imitation of reality, but the term “art” could encompass the non-representational. Pop Art challenged and shaped art once again by doing something completely new and incorporating elements of advertising, comic books, and mundane objects.

The problem with traditional criteria-based definitions is that they fail to account for such changes in art. They are only acceptable and useful until another movement
comes along in art, redefining what the term “art” means, and doing away with old presuppositions about art. When that happens, a new definition of art that includes current works must be proposed to accommodate the new movement, and the cycle of inevitable failure with a new criteria-based definition of art begins again.

In reaction to the failure of traditional criteria-based definitions like those proposed by Kant and Dewey, theorists like Arthur Danto and Sol LeWitt have proposed broader definitions of art that can accommodate conceptual art. Though these offer a more promising approach, they are also problematic and are similar in their view of art as the older definitions of art.

Both the older definitions of art as proposed by Kant, Dewey, Greenberg, and Hume and the definitions proposed by Danto and LeWitt are functionalist definitions in that they view art as performing some kind of function. Either the artwork has some function that it performs for its audience, or it possesses certain properties that aid it in performing its function. In the case of Danto and LeWitt, art’s function is to express an idea to its audience. In the case of Kant and Hume, art’s function is to be beautiful, visually appealing, and perpetuate morality. Any object that does not perform the specified function, according to each theorist, cannot be considered art.

Though Danto and LeWitt offer more promising approaches to art, they nonetheless fail to be viable definitions of art. In attempting to rectify the problems with the older criteria-based definitions of art and accommodate all the diversity in art, they went for functionalist definitions that are equally problematic. This problem may have stemmed from their approach in looking first at art pieces, identifying common
characteristics, and then proposing a definition of art based on those characteristics. The result, therefore, is a criteria-based definition that is impractical.

LeWitt’s definition is overly broad and problematic. First, the idea that ideas can be works of art is problematic. We tend to think that art cannot merely remain in the mind of the artist, but that it has to materialize somehow, whether into a sketched plan on paper or into a completed sculpture, to be considered a work of art. Art has to have the potential to be viewed by other people by existing outside the mind in some form. Moreover, LeWitt does not clearly distinguish between ideas that are art and ideas that are not. All he says is that, for an idea to be art, it has to be about art. That is not only too vague to be practical and it is circular, but it would seem to encompass things that are not art. For example, could this paper, since it is about art, be considered art? Could my ideas about this paper, since they are about art, even be considered art? Intuitively, the answer seems like my paper and my ideas about my paper are not art, but LeWitt’s definition does not definitively exclude them from the category of “art.”

Second, since the idea is the art, the role of the artist is fairly unimportant in the actual production of the piece. After the artist has come up with the idea, the actual materialization of the idea is relatively unimportant. The artist need not even be involved in the production of the piece. This does not reflect the value we place on the artistic process. We tend to think of art as having a component process that is, perhaps, just as important as the finished piece. As I will argue in the next section of this chapter, the value of the artistic process seems to contribute to the status of an object as art, which LeWitt’s view does not acknowledge.
Danto’s definition, though more narrow than LeWitt’s, is ultimately too narrow in its approach. To review, Danto thought that an object is a work of art if it i) has a subject, ii) has an attitude or point of view about the subject, iii) engages the audience and requires the audience to interpret the meaning of the work, and iv) have a historical context (have a place in the art world).

There is a distinct problem with this definition: it cannot accommodate “failed” artworks. Failed artworks are pieces that are never finished, never gain commercial success, or are never displayed in a gallery or museum. Since Danto’s definition requires that the work be viewed by an audience in order to be considered art and that art pieces successfully convey their message to their audience, it is easy to see why failed works cannot be considered art under such a definition. They may have never been completed so they do not adequately express their underlying concept, or they may never been viewed by other people. One could argue that the artist viewing her own work of art is enough to satisfy Danto’s criteria, but it seems like this is not the case since he requires that the audience interpret the art and “fill in” what is missing in the work of art. Given the artist’s unique position, to say that she “fills in” what is missing in her own work seems counter-intuitive and odd.

His definition does not seem to accommodate bad art either, since part of his definition requires that the art not only be viewed by other people, perhaps in a gallery or a museum, but that it have a place in the art world. Bad art in virtue of its being unsuccessful does not seem to occupy a space in the art world and art history, as Danto requires.
Even though some art is never finished, never viewed by others, or is just unsuccessful, it seems like it is still art. Under Danto’s definition, even works that are mostly complete, but lacking a few details, may not be considered art. For example, works that are mostly finished but do not adequately convey meaning to their audience cannot be considered art under his definition. However, such pieces can still have value, and showcase the artist and her artistic process, even if they cannot fully convey their underlying concept to an audience.

Something similar can be said about works that are either never viewed by others or are just unsuccessful, bad art. Danto’s definition seems to require that art achieve some sort of acclaim in order to be art. However, such a view is problematic. Some art pieces do not achieve acclaim, nor are they displayed in a museum or gallery, until after the artist is deceased. To say that such pieces start off as non-art objects and then become art once they are displayed in a museum seems arbitrary and problematic. Moreover, under his definition, some works may start off as art, but once they are packed away in storage, then perhaps they are no longer art.

There is some art, like *Vertical Earth Kilometer* as discussed in Chapter 1 that, in fact, is never fully seen by the audience. The art is largely underground, and only the artist has ever seen what lies below the plate. The only portion of the piece that is visible for the public is the plate. Even if the audience cannot see the full piece, it still seems like it is art. There is something about its process, as I will argue, that makes it art.

Under his definition, even art that is produced by local artists may not be art if it never achieves critical acclaim or the artist never shows her work in a gallery. However,

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5 Such a definition is problematic for performance art as well.
such works still seem to have value. I suggest that this value stems from their showcasing the artist and the artistic process. Any definition of art, in order to be viable, should accommodate failed works and recognize their value.

Given the problems with these functionalist definitions of art, that they are either too narrow or too broad, a different kind of approach to the definition of art is needed. In the next section, I will defend a particular kind of proceduralist approach as put forth by David Davies: art as a performance. The strength of this definition is that it does not rely on specific visual criteria for something to be considered art nor is it overly broad.

§4.4 Strengths of the Proceduralist Definition

As discussed previously, functionalist definitions of art are either too broad or too narrow. They fail because they view art as performing some kind of function, whether it be expressing an idea, being beautiful or visually appealing, or disseminating morals. The problem with these definitions is that they are based on how art is at the moment they are created, and they presuppose that future works of art will share the same characteristics as present art. However, as has already been demonstrated, art is always changing and evolving. New art comes along that does not share the characteristics of art as set forth in such definitions, and a new definition is then needed. Since these functionalist approaches to art have failed, a different approach to the definition of art is needed: one that is timeless.

I discussed in Chapter 3 such an approach: Davies’ proceduralist approach to art. There are a number of strengths of this theory. First, it accommodates failed works of art. Art need not be finished or be displayed in a gallery for others to enjoy in order to be
considered art. Even a piece that is locked in storage forever, never viewed by anyone but the artist, could still be considered art. The piece is art in virtue of its being created by an artistic process.

It also avoids some of the criticisms associated with definitions of art that view the idea as the most important component of a piece of art. Some of the criticisms levied against Danto’s theory, as well as LeWitt’s, is that the theories include non-art objects in the category of ‘art.’ This is because they have to be overly broad to accommodate the diversity in art, while also providing some functionalist criteria for art. Where these definitions fail, however, Davies’ definition does not.

It is also a timeless definition of art. It can accommodate the changes in art throughout history, and it can accommodate future works, whatever they may be. The proceduralist definition succeeds in being timeless, while still encompassing current works of art in a way that no functionalist definition has been able. This is because the definition does not define art by its visual characteristics and thus does not limit itself to works of art that only look a certain way. Rather, it defines art by something that will always, no matter the art movement, time period, or type of art, be characteristic of art: the artistic process.

From Renaissance works to contemporary works, art has always been created through some distinct, identifiable, artistic process. Of course, the way in which art is created has changed over time, but there is still an identifiable artistic process with each and every work of art that is created. Artistic processes are diverse in that they may include molding clay, using acrylics on a canvas, using a blowtorch to bend and shape
strips of metal, or inscribing one’s name on a urinal, for example, but they are all artistic processes nonetheless.

The ways in which we make art in the future may change and evolve, but art will always be created in some way that is identifiable and distinctly artistic. It is impossible to conceive of art that will not have at least some thought and creative process behind it, even if that process is very minimal. To conceive of art without an artistic process is to conceive of something that belongs in the category of the ‘non-art.’ Thus, by defining art in virtue of its artistic process, the definition is timeless and can accommodate all future works of art as well as all art that currently exists.

A timeless definition not only provides stability, but it fulfills one of the many goals of philosophy. As mentioned earlier, the philosophical project of attempting to define art has failed repeatedly. Part of this failure has stemmed from previous definitions’ inability to adapt to change in art. A definition such as Davies’ that can accommodate change in art promises stability and consistency in language, which is preferable to a constantly changing and evolving concept.

More importantly, however, adopting a timeless definition such as Davies’ fulfills one of the many goals of philosophy. Part of philosophy’s project is to understand our world and to provide answers to questions that other disciplines cannot answer. Rarely, if ever, does philosophical inquiry provide definitive answers to such questions. That is not to say, however, that we have not tried. In this case, the project to define art has been something that has baffled people for generations. Many have attempted to define art, but none have succeeded. Adopting a definition like Davies’, however, would be a success.
for philosophy. It would constitute a rare instance in which a philosophical question was finally settled in a decisive manner. It would, simply put, be a triumph for the discipline.

Lastly, unlike the functionalist definition of art which requires that art perform some function, the proceduralist definition recognizes and gives due credit to the artistic process as that which defines and makes something art. It captures and reflects our high esteem of the artistic process, while also accounting for what it is that distinguishes art objects from non-art objects.

We seem to value the artistic process greatly and place a lot of emphasis on knowing how a work is created, the artist’s influences and ideas about her own work, and how the artist came up with the idea for her work. We spend a great deal of time in museums not only looking at the work of art itself but also looking at its accompanying description or artist statement. The description, which often includes an explanation of an artist’s influences and inspiration for the piece, seems to be an important part of viewing and understanding a work of art.

This appeal to and high esteem of the artistic process also gives a satisfactory explanation of why Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, identical to commercially available Brillo boxes, are more valuable and artistic than the commercially available Brillo boxes. There was an artistic process that went into Warhol’s work, whereas there was no such process in the creation of the commercially available Brillo boxes.

§4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have not only offered a view on why conceptual art is valuable, but I have motivated the adoption of a proceduralist definition of art. Davies’ definition
of art, unlike other theorists discussed in both Chapters 2 and 3, offers a better approach to defining art that reflects our intuitions about art, avoids many of the problems associated with functionalist theories, accounts for failed works, and is timeless. Perhaps most importantly, it gives credit to the artistic process as that which distinguishes art from non-art objects. Such a distinction also helps to explain some of the ambiguities found in current works of art, including why Warhol’s Brillo Boxes are works of art and ordinary Brillo boxes are not and why readymades are works of art.

Having now reviewed previous definitions of art, their difficulties, and my argument for the adoption of Davies’ proceduralist definition of art as preferable to functionalist definitions, I will make some concluding remarks in the next chapter and briefly review what has been discussed in Chapters 1-4.
CONCLUSION

Conceptual art is, perhaps, the most controversial type of art. Even those who know little about art have something to say about it, commenting “my kid could have done that” or “why is this even in a museum?” Part of this condemnation of conceptual art comes from misunderstandings about what conceptual art is trying to accomplish as well as its use of anti-establishment, anti-art, and immateriality statements and themes. Its goal is not only to push the boundaries of the category of art and what it means for an object to be art, but also to challenge viewers’ preconceived notions about art. Chapter 2 was devoted to exploring the defining characteristics of conceptual art, its goals, some precursors to the conceptual art movement, and some contemporary conceptual artists.

One of the most damning criticisms of conceptual art, however, is the criticism that it is not art. Such a criticism not only affects how people perceive conceptual art and conceptual artists, but it reinforces old, traditional views of art: that art has to be aesthetically appealing or elicit emotional reactions from the viewer. This criticism relies on older conceptions and definitions of art, which I outlined in Chapter 3. The definitions and views of art proposed by Hume, Kant, Dewey, and Greenberg are representative of older conceptions of art. While Hume, Kant, and Dewey never encountered conceptual art, their beliefs about art are still influential today. Even the common person, who has never studied any of these philosophers’ ideas, still invokes some of the tenets of their
aesthetics in their criticisms of conceptual art: that art has to be beautiful, please the viewer, or elicit some emotional reaction in the viewer.

As I demonstrate throughout this paper, conceptual art does not always accomplish these things. Conceptual art need not be visually appealing, nor does it always elicit particular emotional responses in the viewer. Part of what makes conceptual art valuable, however, is that it showcases the artist and her creative process. If we accept that art’s value is not exclusively tied to the viewer’s experience, as I argue, then the reasons why conceptual art is valuable and why it should be included within a definition of art become more apparent.

As a reaction against some of the older, narrower definitions of art, Danto, LeWitt, and Davies created broader, more inclusive definitions of art that could accommodate conceptual art. However, as I demonstrated in Chapter 5, Danto’s and LeWitt’s definitions of art are not without reproach. Danto’s definition is too narrow in that it cannot accommodate what I refer to as “failed works,” or works that are never finished, never gain notoriety, or are never viewed by others. We still think of such “failed works” as works of art, but Danto’s conception of art does not seem to accommodate them. Any definition of art should be able to include these failed works.

LeWitt’s definition is overly broad, however, and equally unsatisfactory. He thinks ideas can be art, regardless of whether these ideas materialize into an actual piece. He also does not distinguish between ideas that are art and ideas that are not. Not only is his explanation circular (i.e. ideas about art are art), it is too vague to be practical. As I pointed out in Chapter 5, under his conception of art, it seems like even this paper could count as art since it is about art.
In addition, he does not acknowledge the importance of the artist in the actual production of art. Rather, after the artist has come up with the initial idea, he thinks it is relatively unimportant whether she is involved with its production. We tend to place a high value on the artistic process, and his definition minimizes, if not eliminates altogether, its importance in art.

The failure of functionalist definitions of art necessitates the adoption of a different kind of approach to the definition of art. Functionalist definitions fail because they view art as performing some kind of function, whether it be disseminating morals, expressing an idea, being beautiful or visually appealing, or eliciting emotional responses in the viewer. They are largely based on how art is at the time the definition is created and have typically failed to accommodate changes in art. If they have been able to accommodate changes in art, like Danto’s and LeWitt’s functionalist definitions, they fail in their practicality and scope. A timeless definition of art that is not overly broad or narrow is therefore needed.

I argued that Davies’ proceduralist definition provides a satisfying alternative to the functionalist definitions. To review, his definition was that “artworks [are] performances whereby one or more individuals articulate an artistic statement by working in an artistic medium when manipulating a vehicular medium” (Davies 237). Art is a kind of performance, and is art because of an underlying artistic process. The presence of this underlying artistic process is what distinguishes art from non-art objects.

There are several strengths to this theory. First, it can accommodate failed works of art because the object is art in virtue of its artistic process and need not be finished or displayed in a gallery to be art. Second, it can accommodate the diversity in art without
being too broad or too narrow, and it avoids many of the pitfalls of definitions discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Third, it is timeless because it does not limit itself to art that looks a certain way and instead defines art by something that will always be characteristic of art: its artistic process. Regardless of how future art will look or how it will be produced, there will always be an underlying artistic process. It is impossible to conceive of art that will not have an artistic process. Lastly, Davies’ definition recognizes the importance of the artistic process and gives it due credit. We tend to hold the artistic process in high esteem, actively seeking out explanations of how an artist first came up with an idea and how she created a piece. Understanding and learning about the underlying artistic process seems to be an important part of viewing and understanding a work of art. Davies’ definition, then, rightly reflects our appreciation of the process in a way that functionalist definitions have not.

Once one accepts that the value of art is in its artistic process and how it presents the artist’s motivations, her ideas, and what her experience of the world may be like, one can understand the motivation for the adoption of a definition like Davies’ that accommodates conceptual art. This is different from the prevailing view that art’s value is reducible to our experience of it and that the viewer’s experience is of the utmost importance. Even though conceptual art may not be aesthetically pleasing or beautiful or elicit certain emotional reactions in the viewer, it is still valuable because it presents the artist and her artistic process. Excluding it from the category of ‘art’ is to deny its important contribution to the artistic narrative as well as its inherent value.


