

# 11

## Artistic Character, Creativity, and the Appraisal of Conceptual Art

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### 11.1 Introduction

How should we appreciate conceptual art? Indeed, can conceptual art really be valuable as art? These are taken to be hard questions within contemporary philosophical aesthetics. If there's no artfully constructed or styled material object to appreciate, if there's no beauty or other aesthetic qualities to savour, if there's no insight to be gained in an experience with a work, how can it be artistically valuable? Indeed the worries about conceptual art articulated by philosophers tend to be shared by many ordinary art lovers. Yet if we look at contemporary artistic practice there hardly seems to be an issue here at all. Artists are happy enough to produce canvases with text only printed onto them, put together slogans lit up in neon, or enter as an exhibit for the Turner Prize an empty room with the light turning on and off. Within many circles of the art world such works are straightforwardly considered as art, admired, talked about, and evaluated as such. How can this be? Is contemporary artistic practice just confused? Or, rather, is there something fundamentally wrong with the way in which contemporary aesthetics, and indeed many ordinary art appreciators, approach conceptual art? I will suggest it is the latter. Indeed reflecting on conceptual art and the practice of art more generally will show (a) that conceptual art is not as anomalous as is commonly assumed and (b)

that something has gone awry in contemporary aesthetics concerning the ways in which we think of artistic practice and value more generally. This concerns the importance of artistic character and creativity.

## 11.2 Scepticism and Special Pleading

I am taking ‘conceptual art’ in a broad sense. Marcel Duchamp, often taken to be the father of conceptual art, famously submitted for an exhibition a French urinal turned upside down, signed R. Mutt and entitled *Fountain* (1917), (see Illustration 3) and his *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915) consisted of a snow shovel bought over the counter from an ordinary hardware store. In the 1960s and 1970s the Italian Arte Povera movement exhibited objects made from ‘worthless’ materials such as soil and leaves whilst the Anglo-American Art & Language movement often exhibited straight text. Robert Rauschenberg even went as far as erasing a pencil drawing by another artist, Willem de Kooning, and exhibiting it as *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953). Much more recently Cornelia Parker’s *The Distance: The Kiss with Added String* (2003) wrapped a mile of string round Rodin’s *The Kiss* (1886), which was cut by a protesting gallery goer and then restored by Parker. The New York artist Les Levine, most well known as a pioneer of video and media art, once bought and ran an ordinary restaurant and declared that all the bills would be works of art. The content was determined by the customers and made out by the waiters. From the 1970s until the present day, the profusion of documentation, multimedia explorations, performance works, installation art, and the presentation of ideas can all be traced through this lineage back to the readymades of Duchamp. The characteristics of these movements and phases are not all shared but there remains a cluster of features, some of which are possessed by them all to a greater or lesser extent. What makes the artistic lineage of conceptual art into a coherent story is the concern with readymade or mundane objects, the primacy of ideas, the foregrounding of language, the use of non-conventional artistic media, reflexivity, and the rejection of traditional conceptions of sensory aesthetic experience.

There are three main interrelated reasons that underwrite scepticism about conceptual art so understood. The first derives from the general orientation of contemporary philosophical aesthetics. It is primarily reception based.<sup>1</sup> Over

<sup>1</sup> See Kieran (2006) for a fuller characterization. There are, of course, exceptions. See, for example, Davies (2004) and Kieran (2004: 6–46).

the last twenty years or more, ranging over a whole host of questions from what it is for something to be fictional or the constraints governing interpretation to the nature of artistic value, philosophical aesthetics has focused primarily on the experience afforded the viewer and the criteria taken to govern an audience's reception of art works. This is especially true with respect to questions concerning the values of art. Of course within this general trend there have been and are many disputes. One such central dispute concerns whether artistic value should be seen as an aesthetic matter—focusing on a work's beauty, complex use of imagery, coherence of style and theme—or a cognitive matter—focusing on how a work may deepen our understanding through our experience with it. Such approaches are united by the assumption that what matters is the value of the experience afforded (whether it be aesthetic, emotional, or cognitive, and so on). Hence conceptual art looks problematic because, at least in many cases, the value of the experience afforded looks as if it is beside the point.

This is related to the second reason for scepticism about conceptual pieces. The dematerialization or apparent artlessness of the art object in conceptual art stands in tension with the assumption that the qualities we appreciate in artworks are conveyed to us by or manifest in our experience with the artwork. Not only is it assumed that the values of art are a function of the value of the experience afforded but those qualities we value art for should be manifest in our experience with an art object.<sup>2</sup> Conceptual art doesn't seem to emphasize qualities afforded in our experience of a work but in the recognition of a given idea. No doubt something like this thought lies behind why many people dismiss conceptual art as worthless. It is not enough to claim that conceptual art can change the way people think about things, thus affording a valuable experience of some kind, for the notion of experience here is too broad. In one sense a work of philosophy, science, or mathematics may change how we think about things. But in philosophical, scientific, or mathematical texts elements of style, rhetorical technique, and artistry are downplayed as much as possible. What distinguishes artworks from such texts is the means used to guide and shape how we look at what is represented, the artistic style, pictorial techniques, and genre conventions, which are used to cultivate certain feelings, thoughts, and responses as we engage with it. But in

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Budd (1995: 1–44) and Graham (2005).

conceptual art it looks as if, where there is an object at all, we are merely called to register the idea it points to. Where, the thought goes, is the artistry in that?

The third reason, closely intertwined with the first, concerns the outright rejection of Romanticism. The Romantics emphasized the creative role of the artist and held art to be the finest imaginative expression of the human mind. It brought in its wake a focus on the personal life of the artist, the ways in which a work expressed the inner life and attitudes of its creator and tightly tied the meaning of works to artistic intention. Taken as a view of what all art must be, or the doctrine that art should only be valued in such terms, Romanticism loses sight of much that we appreciate art for. It was heavily criticized for drawing attention away from the appreciation of the work as such, by conflating historical or biographical interest with an artistic one, failing to appreciate that the realization of artistic intention depends upon publicity criteria, since what is intended and what an artist actually does can come apart, and for excluding the role of the imaginative contribution made by the viewer in engaging with works.<sup>3</sup> Hence from the advent of formalism and new criticism in the early twentieth century up to the present day, the Romantic view that appreciating art should be bound up with understanding the qualities of mind and creative processes of the artist has been derided and left out in the cold. Thus, in approaching conceptual art, contemporary aesthetics tends not to be interested in nor ask about the imaginative and creative processes that went into the production of such work. Instead it focuses on the end product, what it might mean or how the viewer could possibly value experiencing it.

This has led contemporary aesthetics to pursue two basic strategies in response to the problem of conceptual art.<sup>4</sup> The first strategy is just to reject it outright as art (or at least as good art).<sup>5</sup> More sympathetically, it could involve a special explanation that construes conceptual work as a kind of anti-art. Consider Duchamp's *Fountain*, Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* (1953), Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965), (see Illustration 5) consisting of an actual chair, life-size photograph of it, and a definition of the term 'chair', through to the pronouncements by various artists that a particular empty room, intellectual object, found object, or even hidden object is a work of art.

<sup>3</sup> Classic works developing such anti-Romantic arguments range from Bell (1914) and Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946) to Foucault (1979).

<sup>4</sup> What follows in the rest of this section is a simplified abbreviation of arguments more fully developed in Kieran (2004: 72–75, 127–38).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Osborne (1980) and Graham (2005).

The purpose of such works is to subvert and jar with our ordinary conceptions of what constitutes art, what confers artistic status upon an object, and our assumptions concerning how we should engage with art objects. The interest of the point diminishes rapidly with repetition, unless it is made with exceptional wit or complexity, which is not usually the case. But notice that even the particularly original and witty pieces, such as *Fountain*, only have a value in contrast to the standard conception of art. In other words this kind of conceptual art is parasitic upon the standard conception of art it seeks to subvert. So, at best on this strategy, conceptual art requires the standard assumptions about artistic value to be in place in order to have any value at all. Some such works may be good. *Fountain* is both a clever and witty questioning of artistic authority and the art world. But essentially, on this view, this is to be thought of not as art proper but a kind of meta-art or a form of artistic criticism.

The second strategy involves attempting to domesticate conceptual art so that it conforms to (i.e. can be seen to be valuable in terms of) the standard picture of artistic value. There are two parts to this strategy. The first part involves examining whether or not the qualities valued in art must depend on properties perceived in our experience of the object. A matter over which there is serious disagreement. The second part involves attempting to show that, whatever the answer to the first part, we value and appreciate conceptual art in terms of the standard art value of experiences afforded through our engagement with it.<sup>6</sup>

For the first part we may think of a piece like Anya Gallacio's *Intensities and Surfaces* (1996). In an old pump station in Wapping, London, huge blocks of ice were stacked above an electric blue light to make a large rectangle. A half ton of rock salt was then placed on top. Naturally the ice began to melt, pools of water formed around the object and the luminescent refractions of colour off and through the surfaces made for an intensely sensuous aesthetic experience. Although the idea of the dematerializing art object is part of what Gallacio's work concerns, it was, as Tony Godfrey (1998: 383) put it, 'essential to see the work: the sensory experience was far more important and interesting than the concept *per se*'. Furthermore, even construed in the strictest of Kantian terms, the form of ideas may themselves be beautiful and aesthetically appealing.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The literature here is voluminous but perhaps the best place to start is Shelley (2003). It gives a clear diagnosis of the claims at issue and thorough referencing with respect to the various proponents involved.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Kieran (2004: 72–4) and Costello (this volume) for treatments of this line of thought. Shelley (2003) comes to a similar conclusion via Hutcheson rather than Kant. Whilst

After all, the simplicity of the formula  $E = MC^2$  appeals due to the rigour, complexity, and depth of the ideas involved, the economy of expression of their relations and its explanatory value. Still, in much conceptual art, either sensory or aesthetic appreciation seems to be beside the point or irrelevant. To try to engage with Duchamp's *Fountain*, Dan Graham's *Houses for America* (1966) or Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) in terms of their sensory and/or aesthetic rewards is to miss what they're up to.

Consider Bruce Nauman's *Good Boy Bad Boy* (1985). Two videos, side by side, present us with an actor, a young black man, and a middle aged woman respectively, reciting the same hundred phrases on a continuous loop. They are short, simple and initially the recitation starts off at the same pace in flat tones. Gradually the phrases slip out of synch and the tonal variations grow ever greater. The connotations of the phrases starts to vary depending on who they're spoken by, the tone, and what they seem to be a response to. For example, the black man's 'This is work' seems to imply that he has to suffer in order to survive, the white woman's 'You *have* work' seems to imply that he should be grateful for having a job. The piece forcefully reminds us that what we assume is being communicated is often refracted through assumptions about and variations in identity at a deep level. Alternatively, consider Jenny Holzer's use of slogans in public spaces from LCD displays in Times Square, New York, to stickers on parking metres or telephone booths, to posters and billboards. The slogans themselves can be thought-provoking. 'CHARISMA CAN BE FATAL' may prompt us to consider the ways in which people can become self-parodies. Where the slogans are placed may prompt us to think about how forms of advertising, entertainment, or style are fetishized and politicized. Indeed, when they are presented en masse, as in the exhibition at the Guggenheim and Venice Biennale of selections from *Truisms, Inflammatory Essays, The Living Senses, Under a Rock, Laments and New Writing* (1989/90), the point may be to foreground how the banality of stock clichés and truisms of contemporary culture threaten to collapse under the weight of their own absurdity.

Although these strategies may hope for partial success they fail to recognize why it is that much conceptual art can, at least in principle, be appreciated as art. Think about cases where experience of the object is, if possible, beside the

I am sympathetic to the idea that such an approach is useful in explaining the value of some conceptual works, as will become clear, I think such an approach cannot but be inadequate to the value of all worthwhile conceptual art.

point. This *might* be somewhat strained. The Rauschenberg seems to work by priming the spectator to try and see what is left after the act of vandalism; the Parker by seeing Rodin's romantic couple as bound by romantic passion and illusions; Duchamp's works by prompting us to see ordinary objects in terms of art appreciation. But the important point here is that value isn't wholly reducible to whatever experiences are afforded. Part of what is being drawn attention to is the underlying expressive gesture itself, via the presentation of the object, and it is the gesture itself, whether it's funny, ironic, contemptuous or commenting on society and the art world, that our meditations are drawn towards in considering their value. To draw the point out properly we need to make some reflections about art as a cultural practice more generally.

### 11.3 Inherited Value

We value artworks in many different ways and some of those are more passive or active than others. It is a notable feature of contemporary aesthetics that the variety of ways in which we care about and value artworks tends to be flattened out into matters of audience reception. Once we recognize the rich topography of artistic valuing that goes on more clearly it is easier to see the different ways in which artworks can be valuable. Amongst the many ways in which we do so are the following: we engage with them perceptually, emotionally, and intellectually; we judge, praise, and admire them; we treat them with respect, preserving and honouring them; we consider the qualities of mind, creativity, and imagination that went into them; we consider a work's artistry, what makes a work unique or its rarity; we care about them, returning to some works time and again or pointing friends and acquaintances we care about towards them. There are many such reasons, the reasons that hold for valuing one artwork need not hold for valuing another and some reasons at least will blamelessly differ across individuals. A Van Gogh may be valued for the rich blazes of colour, calligraphic contortions, and scarified landscape yet a forgery that possesses the same features may not be. Someone may appreciate a Caravaggio in part because it represents a humanized version of Roman Catholicism close to her heart and yet this may not constitute a reason for appreciation to someone for whom Roman Catholicism means nothing. At least some of the ways in which we go about valuing art aren't reducible to the value of the experiences works afford us.

Consider the following four kinds of cases. First consider Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1495–98). A traditional refectory wall painting in the Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, it portrays Christ at the last supper the moment after he has announced that one amongst the disciples will betray him. Its originality lies in part in Leonardo's dispensing with the conventional halo, using the landscape behind to give Christ the luminosity required, combined with the shadowy overcast representation of Judas that marks out his treachery. It was also painted with an experimental mixture of tempera and oil enabling him to achieve something like the effect of oils, previously unheard of for a wall painting. Unfortunately, because of the mixture, the painting rapidly deteriorated. Copies were made, including the sixteenth century one in the Da Vinci Museum, Tongerio, which is almost life-size and contains a wealth of detailing and coloration that even the presently restored original now lacks. The copy gives the viewer a richer, more complex and visually striking experience. Yet we tend to value Leonardo's original more highly. Why? The original is constitutive of Leonardo's achievement. It is the genuine expression of a singular imaginative vision of the Last Supper whereas the copy is a mere imitation.

Second, consider cases where though the value of the viewer's experience may not be particularly high nonetheless works are valued highly because of the development of or solution realized to particular artistic problems. For example, one reason why Cézanne's art is so impressive is because his abstractions of nature managed to combine the concerns of the classical tradition, in terms of compositional structure, with that of realism, which consisted in the rejection of the idealization of nature. This set him apart from his contemporaries since realism tended to go hand in hand with a rejection of classicism. Cézanne, by contrast, strove to represent what he took to be the underlying structure of nature rather than its fleeting momentary impressions. The particular solution to the problem he set himself, in terms of the use of geometric planes and rich tonal shading, was highly innovative and, indeed, paved the way for cubism. At least one of the many reasons why Cézanne is rated so highly as an artist concerns the particular artistic problem he set about resolving and the way in which he did so. If we were to compare a Cézanne with a work that was just as valuable in terms of the experience afforded, but which in no way developed or resolved any particularly difficult artistic problems, then we would have more reason to value the Cézanne more highly.

Third, consider Jackson Pollock's action painting or the work of artists like Frank Auerbach. Pollock's drip paintings treated the whole canvas in a uniform



way, abandoning traditional conceptions of structure and composition. Fixing a canvas to the wall or the floor he poured and dripped paint on, manipulating it with sticks, trowels or knives. Underlying the layered accretions of paint he often first scribbled paint marks onto the canvas to establish a sense of movement across the canvas. One of the important ways to see these paintings is in terms of the kind of actions involved in the process of painting them, seeing the marks and drips of paint as improvised responses to one another. The paintings are in one sense the record of the creative process, response, and improvisation in Pollock's actions as he superimposed one colour on top of another, one free gesture of movement counteracting another. In a different way appreciating the work of the contemporary British painter Frank Auerbach involves a grasp of the underlying creative process. Auerbach's work is almost sculptural, with thick layering of paint piled, scratched and scraped layer upon layer. His subject matter revolves around a group of people, some of whom have sat for him for over thirty years, and the cityscapes of London. The mainstay of his working process as it evolved involves the project of abstraction. Starting from more detailed sketches or painterly characterizations of his subject, Auerbach focuses on the underlying rhythms, sense of movement and definition. He proceeds, both in his sketches and paintings, from the most detailed representation to the most abstract ultimately conveyed in a few strokes and lines. Indeed with his painting after each stage of the process he wipes the same canvas down, leaving the last layer of paint encrusted on the canvas, proceeds to paint the next more abstracted version on top and so on until the most abstract version he is content with is arrived at. The accretions of paint on his canvases are often many layers thick and the paintings take months to dry. The essence of Auerbach's artistic process has much in common with many artists interested in the process of abstraction from Turner through to Matisse or Picasso. Grasping the underlying creative processes in such cases adds to and enhances our appreciation of the works ultimately produced. For part of what we may appreciate here involves the creativity itself involved in the process.

Lastly, consider the following. There are two perceptually indiscernible works. One of them was made wholly accidentally, the other wholly purposefully. It is not that one is valuable whilst the other is not, they both are. But we value the one done purposefully in a way that we don't value the one produced accidentally. Why? The intentionally produced work manifests an imaginativeness and creativity that the accidental work does not. In the accidental case there is little to say above and beyond the way in which what we're presented

with structures our experience. In the intentional case we naturally talk about why the artist did what he did, the kind of thought processes involved. We're interested in, and appreciate, the how and why of what the artist did. It could be claimed that though the works are indiscernible nonetheless the experiences afforded suitably informed and educated viewers would differ. Thus value remains a function of the value of the experience afforded. But the inference gets matters the wrong way round. The reason we value the experience in the purposeful case in a way we do not in the accidental case is in virtue of the creativity and imaginativeness that has gone into the creation of the work, not because the value of the experience afforded is greater. This explains certain kinds of changes in evaluation. You may see one work by an artist and it strikes you as realizing a subtle, eloquent understanding. Although the colours are simple and the shapes basic, you take the way in which the flatness of the surface contrasts with the sense of space and dimensionality to betoken an understated realization of the effects that the juxtaposition of particular combinations of blocks of colour have upon our perception. But then you happen to come across much of the rest of the artist's oeuvre and though some of the basic elements remain she never realizes the same kind of effect. In such a case our evaluation of the first work we saw would naturally be undermined. We would rate it less highly. For what we originally took to be a highly sophisticated understanding in the creation of the work is now revealed to be mere luck. Conversely if, like in the case of Matisse, the artist had produced other works, which achieve their effects in a similar manner, then our original evaluation remains. For we have confirmation that the artist knew, creatively speaking, what he was doing. This is part of what we appreciate.

It is also important to emphasize a side of art that is neglected by contemporary aesthetics. Art as a cultural practice is not just about art appreciation but concerns art-making, without which there would be no practice. This is bound up with a whole host of activities and processes on the part of artists. The development of technical skills is important from learning how to draw or paint, blend colours, manipulate brushwork, use foreshortening, flatten out pictorial planes, realize perspectival effects to realizing how to achieve various structural or compositional techniques. This is bound up with experimentation with the nature and limitations of various media such as the texture of certain materials, testing plasticity, colouration, tonal effects, sharpness, and luminosity. Just as important for the development of creativity is the capacity to realize the cognitive-affective encapsulation of ideas through things like

the crystallization of imagery, free association, juxtaposition, deconstruction into elements, the recombination, development, or antithesis of similes and metaphors. Furthermore, an awareness of past and present artistic styles is important, grasping how other artists developed, articulated, or solved particular artistic projects, the kind of approaches underlying distinctive artistic visions or what constitutes a live artistic issue. Just as in other areas, like philosophy say, different people are creative, or come to be genuinely creative, in different ways. Jackson Pollock proceeded for much of his artistic career to ape the styles of previous great artists, so coming to appreciate the kind of thought processes underlying them, before he was in a position to develop an artistic style that was truly his own. Picasso proceeded by remaking the previous subject matter of great artists in radically new ways. All these things, and many more besides, are bound up with the cultivation of an artist's creative character. It is perhaps not as surprising as it might be that aesthetics has tended to neglect this side of things, since most aestheticians tend to be art appreciators rather than artists. Nonetheless, it remains striking that so little attention has been paid to the importance of artistic character.

## 11.4 Artistic Character and Creativity

Artworks are typically not accidentally produced objects. They are made for a variety of purposes and are the end result of actions on the part of their makers. As such there is an internal link to the psychological states of a work's maker, their artistic character and the creative processes involved: the thoughts, emotions, beliefs, desires, and intentions in action. Hence, as with action in general, part of the nature and value of what has been done partly depends upon the agent's intentional states in relation to what it is they have created.

In the moral case we hold that the nature and value of an action partly depends upon the agent's character, motivation, and other intentional states bound up with it. If I tell a joke at someone else's expense, what is going on and how it should be evaluated in part varies according to what is true about me in my performing that action. It makes a difference if I was motivated by altruism and the belief that telling the joke would distract attention away from another's embarrassment or whether it was motivated by the desire to be superior and the belief that by undermining someone else I would look better.

It makes a difference if my action was performed out of sympathy, was merely

tinged with it, or as I happened to feel sympathetic. After all, I could tell a joke to make myself look superior and happen to feel sympathy for the person I am undermining whereas I could not act out of sympathy and intentionally undermine them. The complex intentional states involved in my action are thus a reflection of my character. Furthermore, it is not just that certain intentional states are involved which is important but the way in which they are related in leading up to and manifesting my action. I could start with the intention of telling the joke in order to make myself look better but, as I proceed, come to realize that doing so would mortify the object of my joke. Thus I could come to modify my intention in acting to merely distracting attention from his embarrassment thereby leading to a change in the developing tone and tenor of my joke. Conversely I could start with the intention of telling the joke in order to relieve their embarrassment but as I do so modify my intention in telling it to that of making myself look better. Thus the nature and evaluation of my action in the moral case partly depends upon what the right story is about the complex interrelations between my character and intentional states leading up to and in what it is I do. This is true even where my behaviour and its effects are identical. The same is true, by parity of reasoning, in the artistic case.

Imagine an artist who paints a work that replicates the style of gaudy, prurient covers from 1950s bodice-ripping pulp-fiction novels. The style is well done and represents three girls in 1950s lingerie in various states of undress with the title 'Spoiled Lives'. In one sense what's done, the end product of the artist's actions, is the way it is whatever the underlying psychological states and processes were. This is just as true in the moral case. The behaviour in and effects of telling a joke may be the same whatever the underlying motives, emotions, and character. But, as in the moral case, a full and proper understanding of the nature and value of what the artist has done nonetheless partly depends upon what was true of the artist in painting the picture. It makes a difference if he was motivated by greed and the belief that knocking out replicas of pulp-fiction covers would sell well because Fifties design is back in vogue or whether he was motivated by the desire to foreground the neglected artistry of such covers and the belief that by replicating it on canvas he would make people consider such a style seriously. It makes a difference if the intention in painting the title was ironic (so it doesn't just refer to the girls in the painting as it would in the original but refers to the original artists of such covers and/or the original readers of such novels) or doing so was merely tinged with irony or the artist merely happened to consider the irony. The

artist might not notice the potential irony of the title but nonetheless consider it ironic that he will make money out of mimicking the original artistry of others. The complex intentional states involved leading up to and manifest in the painting are thus a reflection of his artistic character. As with action generally, how the complex of states evolve and interrelate is important. The artist could start by being motivated by greed but as he proceeds come to appreciate the artistry of the original so leading to the modification of his actions in order to produce a work which foregrounds the artistry of the original style. The nature and evaluation of the work partly depends upon the right story about the complex interrelations between the artist's character and his intentional states leading up to and in what it is he does.

It is of course not enough to have the right kinds of motivations, desires, or thoughts that involve an appreciation or love of artistic values. For many of us may have the sensibility but most of us lack the talent, creativity or application. What is also required is the capacity to realize those values, at least to a degree of reasonable success, through the patterns of mental and physical activity involved in the creation of an artwork. The sensuous artist doesn't just love the beauty of colours, textures, lines, and form, but she knows how to bring them together in a way which gratifies the senses; the didactic artist doesn't just know what he wants to communicate but how to do so through the use of immediate and striking imagery; the expressive artist conceives of the creation of art in terms of giving form to emotions, attitudes, and other cognitive-affective states and knows how to do just that; and so on. And the capacity to realize those values depends upon the creativity and imaginativeness in action, in the process of creation, that the artist has.

We can bring this out by an overly simplified consideration of what is involved in creating an artwork. The artist presumably starts off with certain goals that can vary in terms of their thinness or thickness. It can be as thin as aiming to create something or other. Depending upon the character of the artist she will have particular dispositions to favour certain materials, techniques and designs. How the artist starts can vary from making a mark on a canvas to considering a certain image, or contemplating a particular idea. This constitutes the raw material from which the process of creation takes off. The artist then attends to different potential patterning aspects of the raw material, be it a mark, image, or idea as it strikes her. How does the shape, colour, and texture of the mark strike her? What associations or allusions does the image have and what are the ways in which it is striking? How clear,

inchoate, richly suggestive is the idea? In one sense this is backward-looking. What are the potential patterns suggested by what has already been done or thought of? This gives rise to consideration of how what has been done can be clarified, crystallized, or developed. Out of the host of possible ways of continuing on one is selected and this itself gives rise to the same kind of process. Thus a pattern of creative decisions builds up until the artist reaches a point where (if the creative process has been successful at least) she judges that the work is complete: in other words where what has been created through the process resonates such that any further modification would destroy or undermine the effects and interrelations amongst parts that has thus far been realized. This final creation could not have been determined by or predicted from the original raw material but the pattern of creative decisions that leads from the one to the other is what renders the final product intelligible.<sup>8</sup>

For the process of creative thought in action to occur it must do so in some form or medium. Typically in art this involves a symbiotic interaction with things done in a physical medium appreciable by the senses such as physical marks on the canvas, words or notes on the page, the sound of voices or musical instruments, and so on. But it needn't necessarily do so. A composer can play around with and devise harmonies in his head, a writer can construct a story without writing it down or verbally articulating it, and a painter can design an image in his mind's eye before ever putting paint to canvas. Of course these things usually take on a life of their own and so when the artist starts physically to realize or notate the work, given the nature of the creative process, further adjustments tend to take place as the creative pattern of activity occurs in the physical realization of the work. But this needn't be the case since the creative process may have gone on and been completed prior to any physical interaction and all that may be required is its physical realization. The point here though is that despite not requiring physical interaction in the creative process, artistic creation must involve a pattern of activity in some form or another. Even where this occurs only in the head as it were it must be in terms of the development and crystallization of form in consciousness, whether it be in terms of internal verbalization, imagery or sound. Quite how we account for such phenomena is a tricky matter but this we can leave to one side since nothing hangs on it here. All that we need is the recognition that we can and

<sup>8</sup> See Harrison (1978: 119–56) for a rich characterization of designing while making and the patterns of creative activity involved.

do give such internal form in our consciousness to thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. And even where artists don't or haven't yet gone about physically realizing their goals, they may already have gone through a creative process and patterning activity internally in giving form to something in consciousness.

## 11.5 Consequences for Appreciating Conceptual Art and Contemporary Aesthetics

The recognition that the creative process can occur internally in this way, plus the recognition that part of what we often value in art concerns the underlying creative process and character of the artist, enables us to make sense of how and why conceptual art can be valuable as art. Furthermore it does so in a way that makes sense of the initial reception, puzzlement, and evaluation of both conceptual work and much contemporary art more generally. The initial reception and puzzlement about conceptual pieces stemmed from the fact that we take the end product as evidence of the creative process. This is, historically speaking, where we were used to looking for the craft and artistry taken to manifest creativity. But if we look at Duchamp's *Fountain* and ask ourselves what has the artist done, it looks as if, if we're looking at the end product, the answer is nothing. Where is the artistry and craft of the artist if he's not actually done anything skilful to the object displayed before us? Interestingly it's not as if this question arose in the twentieth century only in relation to conceptual art. It arose in relation to photography, since people were inclined to dismiss photography as an art on the grounds that no skill or craft was required to reproduce images with a camera. How could it be art if there was no craft in the production of a photograph? Indeed, once people realize that Warhol himself did nothing to and was not involved in the actual production of many of his canvases, and that this is true of many other apparently straightforward artists ranging from Bridget Riley to Damien Hirst, some are tempted to ask the same question in relation to what initially appeared like more straightforward cases. The point is that once we recognize that the end product is not the place to look for the artist's creativity, we are diverted to other areas. Yet we do know where to look and why. We start asking ourselves questions not about the craft of the end product but about the creative processes of thought that have gone into whatever is presented before us and why. The focus of appraisal of

creativity thus lies elsewhere. We evaluate such works as good or bad in terms of, amongst other things, the patterning of thought that has gone into them, their originality, subtlety, insight, wit, or daring. Where we take the creative process underlying what we are presented with to possess those properties then we tend to rate it highly. If there appears to be no great craft or imaginativeness in the underlying creative process, if it seems to lack guile, if it is cheap and easy, if it lacks serious thought, then we will rate it poorly. What we should worry about in relation to conceptual art is not that the pieces are conceptual, nor that what is produced lacks apparent craft or artistry, but whether or not the underlying processes in thought are or were genuinely creative.

How does my general claim apply more concretely to conceptual pieces? Imagine the following. An artist wants to find a fitting way of commemorating the Jewish victims of a Nazi pogrom in WWII. She wants to convey the scale of the tragedy. Yet she also wants to convey the sense that the loss of each and every individual life was its own tragedy. Initially she starts from the idea of marking out the names of the victims on individual bricks in a courtyard that was one of the sites of the tragedy. Although that strikes her as conveying both the scale and individual nature of the tragedy it still doesn't seem quite right to her. To her mind the effect she is after is diminished since many of us are by now so familiar with seeing memorials which list the names of the deceased. It fails to convey the sense of loss or absence of lives powerfully enough. Then she hits on the idea of taking up each individual cobblestone in the courtyard, inscribing the underneath of each one with a name and then replacing them. The courtyard will look exactly as it did before her work and this is what appeals to her. The thought of each individual victim being marked on each stone strikes her as apt for it leaves an unobservable causal trace for every one and yet allows the cobblestones themselves to stand as markers for the scale and individuality of the tragedy. The victims may have left no mark upon the world, perhaps no one notices their absence, and yet the annihilation of each and every one was a tragedy to be commemorated. There is a relationship of fit between what she is trying to express and creating the piece in this way.<sup>9</sup> Now notice that, firstly, it is the idea that is creative here and, secondly, realizing the idea makes no difference to any perceptually discernible properties of the courtyard. Furthermore what would have to be done in realizing the idea wouldn't take any particular artistic skill or craft. It wouldn't matter, for example, if she

<sup>9</sup> See Kieran (2004: 135–8).



merely commissioned some builders to do it. What matters is the creative way in which she has given form in consciousness to what she was trying to express. It is something we can grasp—just reading this should give you enough of a sense of it—and evaluate as such. I am not claiming here that it makes no difference whether she carries out her idea or not. Rather the point is that even assuming she does so a large part if not all of what would be valuable about such a work concerns the creativity that has gone into giving form to the idea—rather than the skill, craft, or lack thereof involved in realizing it. It is difficult to see how this could be anything other than a good work of conceptual art.

I should add an important coda. In no way does my position amount to a denial that an artist can just have a great idea without having gone through a creative process. Composers can wake up with a great tune in their heads, painters may find that a striking image just comes to them, or writers that a story just appears to them as if from nowhere. Furthermore, there can be artistic one-hit wonders which are produced by someone who is neither a creative person nor has gone through a creative process. But this hardly counts against the importance of creativity. The claim is not that all that is valuable about art concerns the underlying creative process and character of the artist nor that they are essentially involved. The claim is just that in many cases this is what we do and properly should value along with many other things that are valued in art. Furthermore it is no accident that just having a great artistic idea come out of nowhere rarely happens to someone who isn't a creative character, since to have such an idea usually requires that someone be steeped in the artistic methods, skills, concerns, and patterns of thinking embedded within whichever art form they are working within. Of course Beethoven could have just woken up with an amazing melody in his head or Picasso could have suddenly had a revolutionary thought about reworking traditional subject matter without necessarily having gone through a creative process. But that is because they had mastered the creative processes and patterns of thought at an earlier stage. Indeed think of how and why we train people into intellectual disciplines in the way we do. For someone to even have a chance of being genuinely creative within philosophy say, they must have gone through and mastered to some degree the processes and patterns of thought involved in thinking philosophically that make for good philosophical work.

Contemporary aesthetics has neglected the role of creativity and artistic character in artistic evaluation. This is because the dominant conception of

artistic value, and the attendant questions thought important, are audience- or reception-focused. Perhaps this can be explained in terms of a too hasty, wholesale rejection of the Romantic conception of art. There was at least a partial truth buried within Romanticism that we seem to have forgotten about. Contemporary aesthetics would benefit from considering more fully the nature and role of artistic virtues and their relation to artistic values. There are some important reasons that often figure in our appreciation of artworks that are inherited values, in particular inherited from the genuinely creative processes and character of the artist. Put this together with the recognition that creative processes can occur internally and we can make sense of how and why conceptual art can be appreciated as art—and in some cases good art at that. Whether or not most work presented to us as conceptual art is or is not genuinely valuable for this reason is, however, another matter. What I have shown is that, contrary to the standard ways of approaching artistic value, genuinely conceptual pieces can be valuable as art for reasons arising from the creative processes and character of the artist. This shows us both something important about the possibilities for conceptual art and the nature of artistic value.

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