

Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens

Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?

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Although Goldie and Schellekens edited an earlier collection of philosophical essays on Conceptual art (OUP, 2007), this is the first book-length consideration of Conceptual art in the history of philosophy. Given the influence of philosophy on much of 20th century art, and the challenge to aesthetics and philosophy of art of much of 20th century art—and arguably of Conceptual art in particular—to say that such an examination is overdue is a gross understatement. One could then praise Goldie and Schellekens simply for their undertaking, even if it were not particularly successful. However, this book is successful; thoughtful, informative, and provocative, it can be recommended to artists, art critics, art historians and other members of the artworld in addition to philosophers and aestheticians. Supplemented by material appropriate to the level, it would work well in either an introductory or an advanced course in philosophy of art.

Conceptual art is a challenge both to common notions of what art is, and to the question how art is to be defined, if it can be defined. The authors recognize that these challenges are an important part of the point of Conceptual art in saying that ‘a conceptual artwork can be conceived as an enacted thought experiment, set up to challenge the accepted boundaries of the concept of art’ (15). It is implicit in that remark that Conceptual artists act with an intention that is informed not only by the history of art, but by the recognition of art’s capacity to investigate itself and to raise philosophical questions. Accordingly, ‘to be a conceptual artist you must be *knowing*’ (16); and, although Conceptual artworks are multifarious, even to be Conceptual an artwork must have a degree of self-reflectiveness about art and its practices and possibilities. Self-reflectiveness is something that Conceptual art has in common with Greenbergian Modernism, but the self-reflectiveness that is manifested in Modernism’s concern with medium-specificity and medium-purity is rejected by Conceptual art. In fact, what are media in traditional art become for the authors mere *means* in Conceptual art, where ‘the medium is the *idea*’ (24). Although Conceptual artworks can use such things as photography, film, video, actions, and language, ‘these means of production are mere means’ (24), ‘the medium of conceptual art is ideas, and any physical presence is *merely the means* by which the artist lets us gain access to his ideas’ (60). Since a medium in the traditional sense ‘is what mediates our *aesthetic* appreciation’ (75), Conceptual art is ‘anti-medium’ (75), in the sense that its means of production ‘are not the proper objects of aesthetic appreciation’ (24), and appreciation of a Conceptual artwork ‘...will draw just on the ideas as medium’ (78). Thus Robert Barry’s language *All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking, 1:36 PM, June 15, 1969*, is merely the means of

acquainting us with Barry's idea, which is the work's medium, on which its appreciation is based.

While it can be accepted that ideas can be media, it is not clear why what the authors are calling 'means' cannot just as easily be understood as media, with the idea that is central to Conceptual art being intimately related to, or a product of the media, in being the content of the work, or even the work itself; why an idea as a medium could not combine with another medium, such as language, in a mixed-media work; why a medium must be *the* means rather than *a* means of mediating aesthetic appreciation, with the 'background discourse' (33) that the authors recognize as relevant to Conceptual work (127); and why, in Conceptual art, the means of production and the idea as a medium—if these things are kept separate—cannot together be understood to be relevant to aesthetic appreciation, at least in certain works. It seems difficult, then, to make sense of the kind of general statement about the relation of means and medium in Conceptual art made by these authors.

Another problem is that it is not always clear just what the idea of a Conceptual work is, or that there is but one idea identified or associated with a work. Just what the idea of Barry's *All the things I know...* is, is debatable. If the idea is supposed to mediate appreciation (75, 78), and we're not sure what the idea is, then it is not clear how appreciation can be mediated. And if the same artwork could support more than one idea, then how would one adjudicate between appreciation of conflicting ideas? In addition, how does the idea as medium relate to artistic intention when the artistic means will support the identification of the medium with more than one idea? Finally, just what *is* a work of Conceptual art such as Barry's? Can an idea as medium and a work be identical? If a work such as Barry's is not an idea in any conventional sense of idea, and yet the idea is the medium of the work, then how does the idea as medium relate to the work? The authors suggest that 'the idea...is the medium by which the message [of the work] is communicated' (93). But now we need to know how the medium succeeds in conveying the message; how these things relate to artistic intention and audience interpretation; and how the message of the work is related to the work itself. Such considerations underline the depth and complexity of the epistemological and ontological challenges of Conceptual art emphasized by Goldie and Schellekens, and pertain too to their recognition of the challenge of Conceptual art to the traditional notion of aesthetics and art appreciation.

However the foregoing issues are to be resolved, it can be recognized that the emphasis of Conceptual art is on ideas, not objects (in the common sense); on conception, not perception; on things to be intellectually apprehended and thought about, not to be seen and felt. The authors call this 'the idea idea' (33) and it leads to the Lippard-Chandler notion of 'the dematerialization of the artwork' (59). Both the idea idea and dematerialization link naturally to language, and understanding and appreciating the self-reflective, ideational, and immaterial works of Conceptual art depend on language that informs one of things that, though independent of works, are relevant to them.

Accordingly, such works are ‘discourse dependent’ (29). The discourse on which works of Conceptual art depend may, like philosophy, occur at a very high level, even being ‘esoteric, in the sense that the required background knowledge isn’t available to a generally well-informed viewer from direct experience of the work, or even the title of the work’ (29). Indeed. This discourse dependence might be seen as part of the point of Conceptual art, or to be an unavoidable consequence of its nature. It may oppose the traditional notion of the aesthetic, or to contribute to a different notion of the aesthetic.

Goldie and Schellekens consider three possible approaches to the aesthetic in relation to Conceptual art. The first, that they call ‘contra aesthetics’ (following Timothy Binkley), maintains that Conceptual art means to avoid ‘aesthetic traditionalism’—the second approach—where aesthetic pleasure results from perception. The contra-aesthetic approach delivers artistic value that is intellectual, not affective, but that is important, and may be more valuable than traditional aesthetic experiences. Applying aesthetic traditionalism to Conceptual art will fail because aesthetic traditionalism rejects Conceptual art. This contrasts with the informed opinion of the artworld, which is that Conceptual art is indeed art (95). Aesthetic traditionalism will also fail by using a notion of the aesthetic that is either irrelevant, as in contra aesthetics, or too parochial in excluding the ideas of ‘aesthetic idealism’—the third approach. Since ideas may have aesthetic value, works of Conceptual art may be aesthetic in virtue of their ideas. Accordingly, the dematerialization of a Conceptual artwork does not prevent its being aesthetic, if its idea(s) is (or are) intellectually appreciated (104-106).

These are complicated and contentious issues; and as the notion of the aesthetic is widened to include the intellectual, it might be broadened further to include any non-traditional artistic property in virtue of which a work is thought to be art-historically important. Thus, it may be thought, as Strawson might maintain, that because of a conceptual linkage between an artistic property and the art-historical recognition and appreciation of that property, the contra-aesthetic becomes aesthetic. A ‘contra-aesthetic aesthetic’ could collapse into aesthetic idealism, though, if a non-traditional property in virtue of which an artwork is thought to be historically important is ideational rather than perceptual, i.e. intellectual and not emotional.

After pointing out matters of deep philosophical interest about Conceptual art, and how it might be approached aesthetically, the authors claim both that the intellectual dimension of Conceptual art limits it, and that it cannot compete with masterpieces of painting and sculpture given their affective and humanistic dimensions. Nor does Conceptual art ‘have the resources to address the shared aesthetic responses and pleasures which traditional art affords’ (135). Here, in Ducassian fashion, one may wonder how, for any criterion used to place one kind of art form, aesthetic property, or experience above another, one would defend the use of that criterion, rather than simply assume its legitimacy. Moreover, one might say, as Milton Babbitt would, that Conceptual art is for the specialist, as is an abstruse proof in mathematics, and that there

is no need to apologize for that.

The highly complicated matters raised in the previous paragraphs provide fertile ground for future dialogue. It would be a very good thing were this little volume to prompt further work in the philosophy of Conceptual art and the questions it raises, and one hopes that Goldie and Schellekens—either individually or together—will contribute further to inquiry in this area.

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