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A Phenomenology of Conceptual Art

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Declaration

I, Zöe Sutherland, hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature **Date**

University of Sussex

Doctor of Philosophy

A Phenomenology of Conceptual Art

Summary

This thesis emerges from and responds to certain recent philosophical writings on conceptual art, in particular from the British analytic tradition. Having identified a recent tendency implicit within this tradition towards an increasingly phenomenological reading of the ontology of the conceptual artwork, I aim to develop such ideas through an analysis of Heidegger's theory of art, and through a subsequent enquiry into its applicability to conceptual art. This will involve a lengthy analysis of several conceptual artworks on the basis of this theory.

The thesis consists of three substantive chapters. The first is a critical examination of certain recent philosophical texts on conceptual art. This chapter takes a series of philosophical texts representing a range of positions with regards to both the specific role and, by virtue, the significance accorded to the material in the constitution of the conceptual artwork. The second chapter looks at Heidegger's phenomenological enquiry into the ontology of the artwork, and specifically at the role of the concepts of Earth and World in this ontology. On the basis of this study of Heidegger, the third chapter engages with a range of conceptual artworks. Each artwork is shown to exemplify a general tendency of conceptual artworks to explore of the bounds of the artwork as such and its relation to its context.

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Introduction

Much of the philosophical interest of conceptual art lies in the particular manner in which it declares itself to be an ontological limit case. Avant-garde art has strived to transcend and to dissolve the limitations and boundaries of art itself, and to subsequently make forays into other cultural realms. However, never before in the history of art have ontological assumptions as to what an artwork is, can, or should be, been probed with such radical, imaginative and broad ranging scope as in conceptual art. Lucy Lippard, a theorist contemporaneous with the conceptual art movement, has described the era of conceptual art practice as ‘a real free-for-all’, a description that renders it continuous with the notion of a fully liberated ‘anything goes’ hedonism, often associated with the 1960s.¹ However, whilst it is indeed true that this ontological investigation had a wide range of motivations and took various artistic forms, it is my contention that a general locus of orientation can be identified. From the inception of conceptual art in the mid-1960s,² conceptual artists sought to overturn particular characteristics that they considered inherent within a habitually accepted understanding and experience of what artworks are. Conceptual art theory and practice exhibited an antagonism towards the centrality of the conventional art-object of painting or sculpture. In particular, conceptual art set out to question and to problematise the accepted notion that a visual artwork is essentially a discrete object with a spatial extension, with which one engages predominantly by way of a perceptual or aesthetic experience.³

Philosophical aesthetics—of the British analytic tradition in particular—has until recently paid relatively little attention to the topic of conceptual art in comparison to more traditional art forms. When we consider the extent to which conceptual art—its logic, its presentational style, its subject matter and its theoretical tendencies—has continued to dominate and to cast a looming shadow over the art world since the 1960s,

¹ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: the dematerialisation of the art object*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1973) vii

² The strictly historical periodisation of conceptual art is typically seen to be between 1965-1973.

³ Benjamin Buchloh, ‘Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions’ in *October*, Vol. 55. (Winter, 1990), P107

or, as some might even claim in retrospect, since Duchamp's urinal in 1917⁴, this relative lack of attention is striking. However, in recent years, there has been a surge of philosophical interest in conceptual art from the British analytic tradition. The 2003 AHRC-funded research project entitled 'Perception, Narrative Discourse and Conceptual Art', which culminated in a two-day international conference at King's College, London in June 2004, brought analytic philosophers together to consider and respond to conceptual art explicitly for the first time. The book of essays that resulted from this project in 2007, *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*,⁵ and the 2008 publication by the organisers of this conference, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?*⁶ were amongst the first major published philosophical efforts on the subject. This thesis is indebted to the collective energy of everybody involved in these debates, for it is this specific intellectual context which provided the initial inspiration for both my philosophical and my general interest in conceptual art.

The starting point of this thesis is a questioning of the general adequacy of the approach of philosophical aesthetics to discussing what conceptual art is. What it would mean for a philosophical approach to be adequate—to my mind at least—would be that it facilitate an interpretation of the complexities of conceptual art in a manner that would be both philosophically rigorous, yet simultaneously satisfying and convincing to those involved in art practice and in the art world more generally. It is my contention that conceptual art is most comprehensively understood as an experimental artistic investigation into the character and the conditions of its own ontology. Whilst it is the case that most philosophers do in fact seem to identify that conceptual art had set itself from the beginning such a programme of ontological investigation,⁷ philosophical discussions around this topic nevertheless typically seem to assume a very particular line of inquiry. Most recent philosophical literature on conceptual art takes as its central

⁴ As John Roberts notes, the real impact of Duchamp's gesture did not gain prominence straight away. Instead, it was specifically the conceptual art movement of the 1960s to 1970s, which provided the historically transformative moment of recovery and continuity for Duchamp, and which proved to be the context that brought to light the real disclosive and critical potentials of his work. John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*, (Verso Books Ltd, London, 2007). P22

⁵ Goldie and Schellekens (ed.), *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007)

⁶ Goldie and Schellekens, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009)

⁷ See Goldie & Schellekens, (2009) P20-21. See Schellekens, (2007) P72. See Lamarque, (2007) P4

problematic a reassessment of the relationship between the idea, concept or intention, on the one hand, and the material object or entity, on the other. What is considered to be unique about conceptual art by most philosophers is that through the process of a so-called ‘dematerialisation’ of the artwork⁸—i.e. by using forms of presentation which are minimal, lightweight, ephemeral or commonplace, so as to decentralise the material prominence of the art-object—conceptual art enforces a kind of reversal of priority between its material or perceptual components, and its ideational or conceptual components. What is unique about conceptual art, such literature implies, is predominantly that the material object or entity is marginalised, made subservient to, or even rendered arbitrary, and that the ‘idea is king’.⁹

The reason why this would present itself as the most obvious response to such art is clear. First of all, this is precisely what a small, yet very influential, group of conceptual artists claimed to be their objective in their theoretical writings. For Sol LeWitt, in the case of the artwork, “the idea or concept is the most important thing”¹⁰ and even “ideas alone can be works of art”.¹¹ For Adrian Piper, “good ideas are necessary and sufficient for good art”.¹² The artist Joseph Kosuth even declared art to be an “analytic proposition”.¹³ In addition to such notorious examples, the theoretical writings of a wide range of conceptual artists also make reference to the centrality of ideas. Whilst I do not wish to deny that these formulations are significant to an understanding of the conceptual art project, I believe that they should not be isolated from a much broader context of conceptual theory and practice. In my interpretation, the ‘art as idea’

⁸ The term ‘dematerialisation’ was first used by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler in ‘The Dematerialisation of the Art’ (1968) in (ed.) Alberro and Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, (2000)

⁹ Paul Wood, *Movements in Modern Art: Conceptual Art*, (Tate Publishing, London, 2002)

¹⁰ Sol LeWitt, ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’ *Artforum*, 5:10 (Summer 1967), reprinted in (ed.) Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 1992)

¹¹ Sol LeWitt, ‘Sentences on Conceptual Art’, first published in *0-9*, New York, 1969, and *Art-Language*, England, May 1969. Reprinted in (ed.) Alberro & Stimson, *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, (MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2000)

¹² Adrian Piper, *Idea, Form, Context*, (1969). Reprinted in (ed.) Peter Osborne *Conceptual Art*, (Phaiden, London, 2002) P222

¹³ Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy*, (1969) in (ed.) Osborne. (2002) P232

formulation represents only one moment within the wider conceptual art movement.¹⁴ What is clearly at stake in conceptual art once we look beyond the formulations of this small group of artists is a questioning of the status of the art object as such. This questioning often does not involve any positive claims whatsoever with regards to putative ideational aspects of an artwork's ontology. Rather, it seems to me, when such positive claims about the ideational *are* made by conceptual artists, they are best understood as *examples* of this more general probing of the ontology of the artwork. That 'conceptual art' is employed as a general term to identify works which are often not actually concerned with notions of the ideational in art practice testifies only to the preponderant influence of these few artists on the critical reception of such art: like many such genre-names, it is in large part the product of historical contingency.

The prominence of ontological issues in conceptual art poses an interesting problem for its philosophical interpretation. While philosophical aesthetics has traditionally been oriented around questions of beauty and the judgement of aesthetic value, in the case of conceptual art such questions have a largely marginal interest. In its fundamental exploration of questions about the status of the art object, conceptual art demands a different philosophical focus—one in which the question of the ontology of the artwork takes centre stage. Unavoidable in any philosophical treatment of conceptual art, ontological questions about the status of the conceptual artwork will appear in all the philosophical positions that we will discuss. However, it is in Heidegger's phenomenological account of the artwork that I find the most compelling approach for thinking about conceptual art, precisely because this account foregrounds the question of the ontological status of the artwork. Indeed, it may even be plausible to read conceptual art as the Heideggerian art form *par excellence* in its complex probing of its own legitimate ground.

Despite the claims of some conceptual artists, the material aspect of conceptual art was never done away with entirely, nor was it relegated to a merely passive role in relation to the ideational. In its ontological self-investigation, conceptual art has remained

¹⁴ In this sense, I position my thesis within a more inclusive notion of conceptual art, alongside thinkers such as Peter Osborne and Peter Wollen.

oriented around materialised ‘objects’ or entities presented in art galleries, even if these ‘objects’ or entities are typically of a precarious status. Whilst it would be of little philosophical interest to offer an emphasis on the materiality of conceptual art as a simple rejoinder to overblown claims about the ideational character of such art, it is important to recognise that the materiality of the art object is a constitutive aspect of conceptual art’s ontological questionings, and not only in a negative sense. When a conceptual artist uses a gallery wall to report his releasing of some inert gases into the atmosphere he does not do away with the materiality of the art object, but rather foregrounds it as what is most at stake in conceptual art practice.¹⁵

As we shall see, the question of the role of the material in the ontology of the conceptual artwork persistently rears its head in philosophical analyses of conceptual art, even when these attempt to take the strongest claims of conceptual artists about the ideality of the artwork seriously. To go further, it is actually in philosophical accounts of the ontology of the artwork that take as a central concern the very recalcitrance of its material to interpretation, that we find the most plausible approaches for the philosophical analysis of conceptual art. This is a virtue of Diarmuid Costello’s ‘corrective’ to Arthur Danto’s work,¹⁶ but it is in Heidegger’s analysis of the artwork that we find the most sophisticated elaboration of a theory of the role of the material in the ontology of the artwork. As we shall see, the centrality of the material in Heidegger’s account makes this account surprisingly appropriate for the analysis of a form of art that is often said to involve a *dematerialisation* as one of its primary aspects.

A Methodological Problem: Theoretical Writings

An obvious challenge presents itself when setting out to write any philosophical thesis on conceptual art, especially one which is phenomenological in method. This is the problem of how to relate to the self-presentation of conceptual artists by way of their theoretical writings and manifestos. There are two distinct problems here: the first has

¹⁵ This is a reference to Robert Barry’s *Inert Gas Series*, (1969)

¹⁶ Diarmuid Costello, ‘Whatever Happened to “Embodiment”? The eclipse of materiality in Danto’s ontology of art’ in *Angelaki: journal of the theoretical humanities*, Volume 12, No. 2. August 2007. The virtues of Costello’s account, together with the problems that arise from it will be discussed in part three of chapter one.

to do with the centrality that theoretical writings are often assumed to have in conceptual art; the second is to do with the content of such writings. I will now briefly examine these problems. First of all, whilst it is the case that theoretical defences of art practice have a long history,¹⁷ and that such defences played a prominent role in supplementing avant-garde art practices throughout the twentieth century, in the early 1960s there was a considerable shift in the perceived relationship between the production of such texts and art practices more broadly.¹⁸ Conceptual artists reconceived their theoretical writings, manifestos and journals as an integral part of their art practice. Some conceptual artists even consider their theory to be not simply an accompaniment to some art object, entity or event, but part of the ontology of the artwork itself.¹⁹ Even if this claim were found to be unconvincing, it is nevertheless commonly acknowledged that in the case of conceptual art, theoretical texts have a greater bearing upon the meaning of the work than in traditional forms of art. It is very easy to see why people think that this is the case. The theoretical statements of certain texts can have an emphatically programmatic tone. For example, key texts such as Sol LeWitt's *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* and *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1967)²⁰ and Joseph Kosuth's *Art after Philosophy* (1967)²¹ seem to propose with varying strength, the formulaic laws for, and the absolute definition of, conceptual art respectively.²² This has led some thinkers to relate to such texts as though they simply *describe* what the conceptual artwork actually is or to interpret them as determinant in its meaning. With conceptual art, theory is rendered prominent and declared to be the proper 'frame' of art, so to speak. Second of all is the content. Conceptual art theory often tends to use philosophical terminology to make ostensibly philosophical claims, the most notorious

¹⁷ 'Poetics' have of course existed since Ancient Greece but became considerably important during the Romantic era.

¹⁸ Peter Osborne, 'Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy' in (ed.) Michael Newman and Jon Bird, *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, (Reaktion Books Ltd, London, 1999) P49

¹⁹ Alexander Alberro, in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.) *Conceptual art: a critical anthology*, (MIT Press, Massachusetts 2000) xvii

²⁰ LeWitt, Sol, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' *Artforum*, 5:10 (Summer 1967), reprinted in (ed.) Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 1992)

²¹ Joseph Kosuth, 'Art after Philosophy' *Studio International*, 178: 915-917 (1969). Reprinted in (eds.) Alberro & Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, (MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1988). P164-177

²² See Peter Osborne, 'Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy' in (ed.) Michael Newman and Jon Bird, *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, (Reaktion Books Ltd, London, 1999)

example being when Kosuth declared conceptual art to be an “analytic proposition”. This might tempt philosophers to turn their attention disproportionately towards the claims made by such artists, rather than considering the whole relational context of art theory and practice.

Whilst I think the statements of conceptual artists should be taken seriously, it is important that they are not taken too literally. This is for three main reasons. Firstly, despite their often more directly programmatic or prescriptive forms, their centrality and their appeal to philosophical claims, I believe that it is important to retain an emphasis upon their specifically *artistic* character. It is not at all clear that the manifestos of conceptual artists should be considered to transparently state precisely what the artist intends. This might be considered true even in those cases where such manifestos do in fact appear to state an intention rather clearly. As artistic manifestos, these texts can often be inconsistent, perhaps knowingly so, as well as employing various forms of strategic artistic devices such as irony, metaphor and sarcasm, for example. Artistic texts are often performative or programmatic, rather than analytic or theoretical in character; statements of intent, gestures carried out or postures assumed for the sake of an effect.

To my mind, artistic manifestos are not simply a second order entity or the theoretical accompaniment to the artwork. However, neither are they simply exchangeable with the work, as though art has merely been collapsed into theory. One might argue then, that such texts are better understood as one element within an artistic whole, as opposed to the determinate frame of the work. Secondly, even if it were true that certain conceptual artists were in fact using their manifestos to transparently state what they intend, it is certainly not the case that artists are necessarily the best judges of their own intentions. What this means is that it would not suffice to simply isolate particular sentences or phrases from these texts and to take them as self-contained expressions of intent. Rather, an in-depth analysis would be required of the contextual whole of each manifesto, or range of manifestos, to get a more inclusive and accurate understanding of such intentions. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, it is not at all clear that the theoretical writings of conceptual artists should be assumed as literal theoretical statements about artistic *practice* and thus do not necessarily correspond either to such artistic practices, or to the actual artworks or entities that were made. In fact, it is my

contention that there exists in some cases a significant disjuncture between theory and practice in conceptual art. In my opinion, rather than simply taking certain statements of conceptual theory to define what conceptual art is, a philosophical analysis should aim to understand the relation between the claims made in such theory on the one hand, and the practical use of theory as a kind of critical artistic material, which is part of a wider, more radical and polemical artistic agenda. For the sake of completeness, an extended version of the present project would incorporate an analysis of conceptual art theory as such, but the limited space permitted for a DPhil thesis cannot accommodate such an analysis. However, these texts will not remain absent from our investigation. Rather, they will often prove relevant as we look at the works themselves.

Chapter Breakdown

This thesis is composed of three main chapters. Chapter one will be a critical analysis of some recent philosophical responses to conceptual art. Chapter two will examine the ways in which a Heideggerian account of the artwork might be useful in developing and responding to recent literature on conceptual art. Chapter three will be dedicated to an exploration of several conceptual artworks. I will now give an outline of these chapters in turn.

The central aim of chapter one is to critically analyse the distinct ways in which philosophers have characterised the ontological investigation of conceptual art, specifically by virtue of a reassessment of the relation between on the one hand, the idea, concept or intention and on the other hand, the material object or entity. Chapter one is divided into three parts which each represent a distinct position with regards to the role of the material in the ontology of the conceptual work. Whilst the chapter begins from the claim that the conceptual artwork can be understood predominantly to be constituted by an idea, it finishes with the claim that in so far as conceptual artworks are produced and exhibited, even the conceptual work might display a real material recalcitrance to the cognitive and ideational. Part one begins with an analysis of ‘The

Aesthetic Value of Ideas' by Elisabeth Schellekens.²³ Due to the fact that Schellekens attempts to take as seriously as possible the claim that in the case of conceptual works the art is an idea and any material aspect is rendered marginal, this text is given extensive critical attention. As we shall see, whilst attempting to hold on to what I consider to be an overly literal reading of certain selective and isolated statements of conceptual artists, Schellekens' argument implicitly betrays their implausibility. What Part One demonstrates is that in so far as conceptual artists continue to produce and to exhibit artworks that are materialised in some way, the material must be afforded a more significant role in the ontology of the artwork than a mere 'prompt' or point of access. Part Two examines 'On Perceiving Conceptual Art' by Peter Lamarque.²⁴ In this text Lamarque argues that whilst there is a significant role for the material in conceptual art, it is ultimately "subservient to the conceptual".²⁵ In part, what Lamarque means by this is that the title must 'inform' a perceptual encounter with the material aspect of the work.²⁶ As we shall see, whilst Lamarque's account manages to retain the significance of conceptual art as a visual and perceptual form of art which largely continues to exhibit materialised works in a gallery, his account overemphasises the capacity of the title to simply direct or 'transfigure' the material object. What we learn from Part Two is that a more adequate account is required of how those two elements interact. This requires an account of the positive role played by the material in both substantiating and providing recalcitrance to the concept or idea of the work. Part Three of this chapter examines Diarmuid Costello's article, 'Whatever Happened to "Embodiment"? The Eclipse of Materiality in Danto's Ontology of Art'.²⁷ Costello argues that to take seriously the fact that artworks exist in some materialised form requires an account of how the materiality of the work can both 'enrich' and 'constrain' the cognitive components of intention and interpretation.²⁸ On Costello's account, there is always

²³ Schellekens, Elisabeth, 'The Aesthetic Value of Ideas' in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007)

²⁴ Lamarque, Peter, 'On Perceiving Conceptual Art' in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007)

²⁵ Lamarque. (2007) P9

²⁶ Lamarque. (2007) P13

²⁷ Costello, Diarmuid, 'Whatever Happened to "Embodiment"? The eclipse of materiality in Danto's ontology of art' in *Angelaki: journal of the theoretical humanities*, Volume 12, No. 2. August 2007

²⁸ Costello. (2007) P89

material excess in the work which resists being directed by an idea, concept or intention. However, as we shall see, by associating recalcitrance too closely with ‘the sensuous, affective and intuitive’ response to the process of making itself—to how the resulting work ‘looks, sounds or reads *as it is being made*’²⁹—Costello’s approach relates somewhat awkwardly to the particular case of conceptual art.

Chapter two of this thesis examines the manner in which Heidegger’s phenomenological account of the artwork foregrounds the question of ontology in a way which can help to develop the discussion of conceptual art set out in chapter one. Particular attention will be paid to the priority that Heidegger gives to the material in the ontological determination of the artwork. Part one of this chapter will consist of a careful articulation of the key notions set out by Heidegger in *Being and Time*³⁰ in his explication of the ‘Phenomenological Method of Investigation’ and where relevant, an explanation of how such notions appear altered or developed in ‘Origin of the Work of Art’.³¹ The main objective of part one is to develop a clear account of what Heidegger means by ‘phenomenology’ and the way he delineates his unique notion of the ‘phenomenon’. This is central for understanding Heidegger’s account of material recalcitrance, or what he calls Earth in his later work. Part two will set out how Heidegger attempts to overcome what he calls the ‘symbolic’ notion of the artwork, i.e. that the artwork is a material substructure or base X, to which we add meaning, form, concept or idea Y. In the case of the artwork, Heidegger identifies the specific formulation of this notion to be the ‘hylomorphic structure’, i.e. the relation between form and matter. The main objective of part two is to explicate the problems that Heidegger identifies with the dichotomising of the artwork into its material and ideational components, in a way that prepares the ground for Heidegger’s positive account of the artwork. Part three of this chapter will discuss Heidegger’s notion of an artwork as something ontologically prior to the art-object. For Heidegger, I will argue, the artwork is a self-contained site in which the ‘double play’ of phenomenological

²⁹ Costello. (2007) P89

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, (Trans.) Macquarrie & Robinson *Being and Time*, (Blackwell Publishing, London, 1999)

³¹ Martin Heidegger, ‘Origin of the Work of Art’ in (trans) Farrell Krell, *Basic Writings*, (Routledge, London, 1978, 1994)

disclosure takes place. This ‘double play’ finds its articulation in the concepts of ‘World’ and Earth. The artwork ‘sets up’ an intelligible World and ‘sets forth’ the Earth. As we shall see, these terms provide enriched notions of the schema through which artworks are typically understood, i.e. the material and the idea. Part four of this chapter will examine further the way in which Heidegger develops the notion of artistic materiality through the introduction of the concept Earth. As we shall see, for Heidegger ‘material’ does not *simply* mean the ‘matter’ of an art-object—it is not just the canvas, pigment or stone from which artworks are made—but instead has a phenomenological significance. Heidegger’s specifically phenomenological materiality—or Earth—is that which both substantiates all aspects of the intelligible context the work sets up, yet simultaneously provides recalcitrance to the intelligible through the phenomenological process of unfolding. Through its disassociation from matter, Heidegger’s notion of material might be of use in thinking about conceptual art.

Finally, chapter three of this thesis will be dedicated to an analysis of several works of conceptual art. The aim of this chapter is explore the ontological issues at stake in various conceptual artworks. In order to move beyond a restricted notion of conceptualism as ‘art as idea’, I have chosen works from various points on the conceptual art spectrum which are nonetheless largely uncontentious as examples of conceptual art, and many of which are discussed by thinkers that we look at in chapter one. These works are Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917)—a significant precursor to conceptual art proper, and the archetypical readymade; two works by one of the major advocates of conceptual art in its 1960s ‘heroic phase’—Lawrence Weiner’s *A 36” Square Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall or Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall, 1969*, (1969) and *An Accumulation of Sufficient Abrasion to Remove Enough of an Opaque Surface to Let Light Through with More Intensity*, (1981), which have the virtue of enabling us to discuss textual works; two works by Michael Asher which exemplify a particularly ‘institutional critique’ aspect of conceptual art—*Untitled* (1973) and *Untitled* (1974); and Dennis Oppenheim’s *Oakland Wedge* (1967)—a piece which sits at the juncture between conceptual art and land art. Whilst my reading of these works will be informed by Heidegger’s account of the artwork, I have decided to use Heidegger’s categories sparingly in order to avoid an overly schematic mapping of philosophical terms onto particular artworks. Through examining the particularities of

each of these works it will become apparent that conceptual artworks are often a great deal more complex than many theories allow. What is more, it will emerge that, far from being a superfluous or marginalised aspect, the material is a key aspect of such artworks.

Chapter One: Recent Philosophical Responses to Conceptual Art

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to analyse in depth some recent philosophical responses to conceptual art. Using selected texts from the analytic tradition, this chapter will examine the attempts of philosophers both to take seriously and to make clearer philosophical sense of the theoretical claims of certain conceptual artists to have been shifting the artwork onto a “different ontological platform”¹. The general focus of the examination will be the distinct ways in which these responses characterise this ontological shift, specifically through reassessing the relation between the ideational and the material elements of the conceptual work. In the first instance, these philosophical texts attempt to take seriously the claim that in the case of the conceptual artwork, the conceptual or ideational element is heavily, if not exclusively centralised, and that any material or perceptual element is rendered marginal, if not completely arbitrary. In the second instance, they attempt to moderate such claims by arguing for a more inclusive role for the material or the perceptual element.

I have selected three main texts which I consider to offer quite distinct positions. The first text, ‘The Aesthetic Value of Ideas’² by Elisabeth Schellekens attempts to take as seriously as possible an ontological formulation whereby the artwork just *is* the idea and the material is not a significant or constitutive element of the work itself. For Schellekens, any material object or entity presented is little more than a “prompt” or a “trigger” which, after having directed us to the idea, can effectively be kicked away. Section one will be an analysis of this formulation and a demonstration of the particular problems that emerge from it. In distinction from Schellekens, the second text, ‘Perceiving Conceptual Art’³ by Peter Lamarque argues not that the conceptual artwork

¹ Elisabeth Schellekens, ‘The Aesthetic Value of Ideas’ in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007). P72

² Schellekens. (2007).

³ Peter Lamarque, ‘On Perceiving Conceptual Art’ in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007)

is the idea, but that within the ontology of the conceptual work the perceptual and material element is “subservient” to the conceptual. The specific way in which the material or perceptual element is subservient for Lamarque is that the conceptual *directs* our perceptual experience by making salient certain properties of the work. For Lamarque, whilst the conceptual is dominant and directs the perceptual, the perceptual experience in some way constitutes the goal of the art experience. However, as we shall see, such a formulation presents an account of the relation between the ideational and material, which is ultimately unilateral. Lamarque does not give an adequate enough role to the material but renders it overly passive. The third text, ‘Whatever Happened to “Embodiment”? The Eclipse of Materiality in Danto’s Ontology of Art’⁴ by Diarmuid Costello offers precisely this account of how the material, even in more cognitive forms of art, plays a more positive and active role in the constitution of the work’s ontology. However, despite bringing us closer to a convincing account, I will argue that Costello’s account is ultimately inadequate for an ontology of conceptual art specifically, as it relies too fundamentally upon the centrality of a notion of artistic labour, which Costello does not qualify sufficiently for the unique case of conceptual art.

I have chosen to present and to analyse these texts in this particular order because they demonstrate a trajectory from a philosophical position in which the material element of the conceptual artwork is strongly marginalised and rendered merely instrumental—i.e. a position often expounded, albeit inconsistently, by the artists themselves—to a position in which the material is seen to have a central and positive role in *formulating* the work’s ontology. It is my contention that following such a trajectory might help rectify or offer a corrective to what I have identified to be the disproportionate influence on philosophical thinking about conceptual art of such strong theoretical claims. It is the aim of this thesis to move away from the philosophical assumptions of such theoretical claims towards a more phenomenological understanding of the conceptual artworks themselves. As conceptual artists continued to exhibit their work through materialised modes of presentation, it is my contention that an adequate ontology of conceptual art thus needs to take seriously this material element as central and significant. Whilst

⁴ Diarmuid Costello, ‘Whatever Happened to “Embodiment”? the Eclipse of Materiality in Danto’s Ontology of Art’ in *Angelaki: journal of the theoretical humanities*, Volume 12, No. 2. August 2007

Schellekens uses the adjective “phenomenological”⁵ to describe the character of the conceptual artwork as an idea, by this she seems to mean little more than that an engagement with the idea of the work makes us “undergo”,⁶ feel and understand its conceptual message. In contrast, Lamarque and Costello both move towards what might be considered to be a more phenomenological account of the conceptual artwork, wherein the perceptual and material elements are given more centrality.

Although this chapter is composed schematically of three distinct sections, each presenting a different perspective with regards to the role of the material in the conceptual artwork, my objective is to keep the examination as open as possible. Each text will be analysed in as much detail as possible for both the logical formulations that are adhered to and the presuppositions about conceptual art that are relied upon. Through engaging in a critique of both the distinct revelations and problems that emerge from the various responses, I hope to establish which aspects of the ontological formulations we should keep and which we should dispose of, in order that we might move towards the construction of a more convincing account of conceptual art, i.e. an account which does not remain buried under the weight of the self-understanding of certain individual conceptual artists.

Part One: Art as Aesthetic Idea

‘The Aesthetic Value of Ideas’ is an attempt to reconcile the conceptual art theory of a small group of artists with philosophical aesthetics by bringing together three claims. Firstly, Schellekens attempts to take seriously what she considers to be the *central* claim of conceptual art theory, i.e. that the work of conceptual art just *is* the idea. Secondly, Schellekens argues that despite the insistence of conceptual artists to the contrary, conceptual art can still be characterised as aesthetic. These first two claims would seem to reconcile conceptual art with aesthetics because they propose that it is specifically that aspect typically thought to bring about and secure the radical, revisionary non-aesthetic dimension of the conceptual project—i.e. the emphasis upon art as idea—which turns out to be the very site of aesthetic value in the conceptual work. In what

⁵ Schellekens. (2007) P83

⁶ Schellekens. (2007) P86

might be considered a corrective to any too *narrowly* cognitivist readings of conceptual art, Schellekens characterises an engagement with a conceptual work (as idea) as a “phenomenological” experience: to experience conceptual art is to “undergo” its idea, which for Schellekens means simply to have a more “experiential”—as opposed to merely propositional—engagement with its ramifications. The third claim, which is announced a little later in the text, is that despite the fact that an engagement with conceptual art can be said to have an aesthetic and “phenomenological” dimension to its experience after all, the material object or instantiation—and by virtue, it seems, the role of perception—does not have a *significant* operation in the work. Conceptual art is—just as theorists such as Lippard and John Chandler claim—“dematerialised”,⁷ in that its material is not properly constitutive of the work.

In this section I will argue that in taking this rather strong claim of conceptual art theory too literally—i.e. the claim that the artwork just is the idea—to seemingly justify a (albeit, more ‘experiential’) cognitivist theory of conceptual art,⁸ Schellekens renders herself incapable of giving an adequate account of the role of materiality in the ontology of those conceptual works, which continue to be constituted in significant ways by their material mode of presentation. Schellekens wants to hold that no material object, entity or event, is to be considered as constitutive of the work itself, but rather, is there as a mere “prompt”, or “trigger”,⁹ which is utilised and then discarded in the process of accessing the work. If it is part of the definition of the artwork that it distinguishes itself on some level from its material base or object, in the unique case of conceptual art, for Schellekens, this separation is ultimate. Marginalising and instrumentalising the material element in this manner, I will argue, results ultimately in an ontology of the conceptual work that remains inadequate, both in terms of a description of what it is to experience such artworks—thus resulting in a disjuncture between theory and phenomenological experience, in a similar manner to that assumed by the artists

⁷ This term was first coined by Lippard and Chandler in ‘The Dematerialisation of the Art Object’, which first appeared in *Art International: 12:2, February 1968*; reprinted in Lucy Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, (Dutton, New York, 1971)

⁸ It seems clear that despite the lack of references in this direction, Schellekens’ cognitivist theory is very much indebted to Arthur Danto. In particular, it appears to be an attempt to reconcile a Danto-style cognitivism with aesthetics—thus bridging the gap that Danto himself delineated—and, in addition, an elaboration of what a more experiential account of this cognitive-aesthetic theory might amount to.

⁹ Schellekens. (2007) P83

themselves¹⁰—and in terms of the overall coherence and logic of Schellekens’ own specific argument. I will demonstrate that by attempting to hold on to these positions simultaneously, Schellekens’ argument renders itself increasingly unstable, especially with regards to the marginality of the material. What is more, in failing to take seriously the question of precisely why conceptual artists would continue to exhibit materialised objects, entities and events, and instead positing them as mere points of access to the work, Schellekens fails to formulate an adequate and convincing account of conceptual art.

1. Orienting Conceptual Art in an Aesthetic Framework

Before I begin with the central analysis, I would like to briefly comment upon the broader framework through which Schellekens is responding to conceptual art: the framework of philosophical aesthetics. At the opening of her text ‘The Aesthetic Value of Ideas’, Schellekens points to the radical and revisionary agenda of the conceptual art project as to questions of ontology. “Conceptual art”, she notes, “set itself from its very beginning an analytic agenda by setting out to qualify what kind of thing an artwork can be, to qualify as such.”¹¹ This recognition of the ostensible radicalism of conceptual art is echoed in her later, co-written publication, *Who’s Afraid of Conceptual Art?*¹² in which Schellekens and Goldie describe the attempt of conceptual art to provide a genuine ontological challenge to the boundaries of what art could be, by way of investigating “where a conceptual artwork begins and ends”.¹³ With the conceptual art movement, claim Schellekens and Goldie, comes the end of any reliable, morphological definition of art, in which the “physical bounds of the work were obvious for all to see.”¹⁴ However, on the second page of ‘The Aesthetic Value of Ideas’, Schellekens reduces this radical ontological investigation to ‘anti-aestheticism’: conceptual art,

¹⁰ James Collins sums up this disjuncture the most succinctly when he claims that “Conceptual artists in their enthusiasm to reinvigorate the flagging intellectual bases of visual arts, to give precedence to concept over object, have merely confused theory with practice. The enthusiasm climaxed recently in the stance of artists who not only declared visual practices like painting to be redundant, but also claim theory as its meaningful replacement.” Collins, ‘Things and Theories’ *Artforum*, May 1973. P32

¹¹ Schellekens. (2007) P72

¹² Elisabeth Schellekens and Peter Goldie, *Who’s Afraid of Conceptual Art?* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007)

¹³ Schellekens and Goldie. (2009) P20-21

¹⁴ Schellekens and Goldie. (2009) P21

Schellekens states, backed up by a quote from Joseph Kosuth, announces aesthetics to be “conceptually irrelevant to art”.¹⁵ This almost immediate reduction of the ontological project of conceptual to ‘anti-aestheticism’ is surprising. It becomes clear that what is most centrally at stake for Schellekens in this text is not a truly open investigation into the manner in which conceptual art radicalised the “bounds” of what art could be *per se*. Instead, this text is primarily an investigation into philosophical aesthetics, and only secondarily an investigation into conceptual art itself. Or, as Schellekens herself explains, it is a “philosophical examination of the challenge posed *by* conceptual art *to* the notion of the aesthetic”.¹⁶

There is, of course, much at stake for traditional philosophical aesthetics in the claim of certain conceptual artists to be making non-aesthetic art. If conceptual art has managed to entirely sever itself from aesthetics then it would imply, firstly, that aesthetics has been rendered redundant by conceptual art,¹⁷ at the very least in its application to conceptual works, but also secondly, that the capacity of aesthetics to tell us anything universal about art as a category would be substantially thrown into question. It would seem at first glance that the discipline of aesthetics would then have two main options of response open to it, if it were to maintain its position. Firstly, it could claim that conceptual art is not in fact art at all,¹⁸ thus securing traditional aesthetics against the ostensible challenges posed to it by the case of conceptual art, by way of its basic exclusion. To hold this position would be, effectively, for philosophers to claim that it is *they* who hold the capacity to formulate the true definition of art, over and against the definitional inadequacy of what is actually produced and proclaimed art by artists and the art world more generally. Secondly, it could attempt to argue that, despite the philosophically naïve ambitions of the conceptual artists to produce non-aesthetic art, conceptual art *is* in fact aesthetic after all and thus philosophical aesthetics, whilst potentially altered in its focus, can still be considered relevant as a discipline.

¹⁵ Schellekens. (2007) P72.

¹⁶ My italics.

¹⁷ See Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1981).

¹⁸ A surprising range of philosophers have seriously considered this possibility. See Nick Zangwill, ‘Are There Counter-examples to Aesthetic Theories of Art?’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 60, no. 2, Spring 2002, pp.111-118; Monroe Beardsley, ‘An Aesthetic Definition of Art’ in Curler, Hugh (ed). *What is Art?* (Haven Publications, New York, 1983).

Schellekens opts for the more plausible second claim by arguing that despite its philosophically misguided non-aesthetic desires and pretensions, conceptual art can in fact be said to have “non-trivial” aesthetic value—aesthetic value that is central and significant (as opposed to contingent) to a “proper” experience of a conceptual artwork qua conceptual artwork—and it is this aesthetic value that rescues conceptual art from the redundancy with which its theory endangers it.

However, the aesthetic framework is in fact assumed from the beginning. At the very opening of the text, Schellekens takes the specifically philosophical category of the ‘aesthetic’ as a viable presupposition, against which the conceptual artists project can, at large, be said to have set itself. The attempt to render aesthetics conceptually irrelevant to art,¹⁹ Schellekens claims, is the “least controversial aspect”²⁰ of conceptual art. Despite this—or perhaps facilitated and secured by it—Schellekens fails to identify and to distinguish between both the range of motivations, and the varying ways in which this seemingly ubiquitous aspect is understood and played out in different conceptual artworks. Schellekens focuses purely upon a narrow notion of what it meant for conceptual art to be anti-aesthetic—i.e. to be against the “aesthetic value” of a traditional philosophical aesthetics. However, this rather questionably assumes that conceptual artists in general had a grasp of and were responding directly to this philosophical notion. In fact, Schellekens makes clear that what she understands to be the sole motivation behind the anti-aesthetic ambitions of conceptual art is a particular ambition against what theorists often refer to as the “purely optical” character of High Modernism.²¹ In doing so, Schellekens flattens out what appear, to my mind, to be a range of rich and varied—as well as often inconsistent and confused—responses to aesthetic considerations in conceptual art. For example, it could just as easily be argued that the anti-aesthetic ambitions of some conceptual art are in fact relatively oblivious to philosophical aesthetics and instead derive from an array of other aims: the desire not to

¹⁹ Schellekens. (2007) P72

²⁰ Schellekens refers to this specifically as the “wholesale rejection of the modernist paradigm”, i.e., a rejection of “beauty”, “aesthetic sensation” and “pleasing form”. (2007) P71-72

²¹ Schellekens. (2007) P72

embellish space with more objects,²² or the desire not to produce anything that people would want to buy, thus achieving a (perhaps merely symbolic) challenge to the commodification of art.²³

Despite this initial assumption, later in the text Schellekens clarifies that she does not in fact consider the anti-aesthetic aspect of conceptual art to have actually constituted a fundamental component of the conceptual project. Instead, she claims, conceptual art theory uses anti-aestheticism as a strategy, which it mistakenly thinks will aid it in achieving its main objective—“cognitive value”.²⁴ Schellekens’ central aim in this text is to argue against what she identifies to be the main, yet misguided assumption of conceptual art: the assumption that prioritising the cognitive element of conceptual art *requires* downgrading the aesthetic.²⁵ To exhibit the philosophical naivety of conceptual art theory in making this assumption, Schellekens refers us to what she calls the ‘traditional model of value’.²⁶ Traditional art offers examples of how aesthetic and cognitive value can not merely co-exist, but sometimes interact, strengthen or “benefit” from one another.²⁷ Despite the protests of more extreme conceptual art theory to the contrary, Schellekens thinks that this model can also apply to conceptual art. Schellekens has two main points in relation to what she has identified as the ‘anti-aestheticism’ of conceptual art. The first is that, whilst we may have to suspend

²² Dennis Oppenheim describes objects as “embellishment of external space”, in ‘Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson—Discussion, (1968-69)’ *Avalanche Magazine*, no.1. Michael Heizer claimed, “The museums and collections are stuffed, the floors are sagging”. Cited in (ed.) Selz. (1996) P502. Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, thought the result of conceptual art in the late 60s was to “clear the air of objects” in ‘Notes on Analysis’ 1970. Reprinted in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: the dematerialisation of the art object*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1973). P136. Douglas Huebler stated in a catalogue: “the world is full of objects more or less interesting. I do not wish to add any more.” Reprinted in Lippard, (1973) P74

²³ In 1969, Lucy Lippard told Ursula Meyer “Some artists now think it’s absurd to fill up their studios with objects that won’t be sold.” Lippard. (1973) xvii. Lawrence Weiner stated, “Once you know about a work of mine you own it.” Interview with the artist, *Avalanche Magazine*, Spring 1972, P72. Oppenheim claimed, “This work cannot be sold”. Selz. (1996) P24. It is generally accepted however, that conceptual art was ultimately very profitable. For example, Isabelle Graw notes that “the symbolic capital accumulated over the course of years by conceptual art” at some point became “transformed into cultural and economic capital.” See ‘Conceptual Expression: On Conceptual Gestures in Allegedly Expressive Painting, Traces of Expression in Prot-Conceptual Works, and the Significance of Artistic Procedures’ in *Art after Conceptual Art*, (MIT, Massachusetts, 2006)

²⁴ Schellekens. (2007) P72

²⁵ Schellekens. (2007) P73

²⁶ Schellekens. (2007) P73

²⁷ Schellekens. (2007) P74

judgement on whether art could ever alienate the aesthetic entirely, conceptual art does not succeed in doing so.²⁸ The second is that, contrary to its beliefs, conceptual art does not need to alienate its aesthetic element to achieve its true aim of emphasising cognitive value. Both of these presuppose that the conceptual project is best understood as a rejection of traditional philosophical aesthetics, which, as I have pointed out, is questionable. Starting from a traditional model of value however, permits Schellekens to focus upon a specific understanding of the character and role of ideas in conceptual art: as the facilitators of cognitive value.

2. Art as Idea

Schellekens claims that the *central* objective of the conceptual art project—that “which leads it to alienate the aesthetic in the first place”²⁹—is the insistence upon the definition of art as idea. The construction of this relation is curious. Firstly, if a broadly detected antagonism towards the aesthetic is the most basic and “least controversial” aspect of conceptual art, why must we posit a second, presumably more controversial or complicated element as its reason or motivation? Schellekens does not explain this and provides no argument for her ordering of this relation. Even if we provisionally accept this ordering, it must be established what exactly is meant by the statement that conceptual art has as its central and governing objective the ambition to define art as idea. Schellekens refers to three main quotes by conceptual artists. The first is by the early conceptual artist, later turned philosopher, Adrian Piper, who claims that an idea “is necessary and sufficient for art”,³⁰ the second is by Sol LeWitt, who claims, “ideas alone can be works of art”,³¹ and the third is by the art historian Paul Wood, who claims that in conceptual art “the idea is king”.³² Now, these statements—taken in isolation as simple assertions—are of noticeably varying strength. The first two quotes display what

²⁸ Schellekens. (2007) P74. She says: “although I do not hereby wish to suggest that such an effective separation between the aesthetic and the cognitive could not be drawn in art, I shall hold that such a principled division is not realised in conceptual art.” Schellekens. (2007) P74

²⁹ Schellekens. (2007) P72

³⁰ Adrian Piper, ‘Idea, Form, Context’ 1969. Quoted in Schellekens. (2007) P72

³¹ LeWitt, ‘Sentences on Conceptual Art’ 1969. Quoted in Schellekens. (2007) P74

³² Paul Wood, 2002, P33. Quoted in Schellekens. (2007) P72

I will call a ‘strong’ or ‘exclusive’ conceptualism,³³ suggesting not merely that ideas are a required component of art, but that they are in fact fully *adequate* for art: that there be an idea, is sufficient for a conceptual artwork to exist. This is an extreme claim, which, it must be noted, is made by only the theories of a small group of conceptual artists working in Manhattan during a short period in the late 60s.³⁴ If conceptual art in general had adhered strictly to this principle *in artistic practice*, then it probably would not have produced any material objects or artefacts at all, or, if it did still decide to produce such things, they would not count as part of the artwork, but would instead merely stand as additional supports to the work. The third quote, on the other hand, is quite unclear, but seems to be suggesting that the ideational aspect of conceptual artworks rules over their other aspects, such that it has central importance or authority, perhaps. This claim seems potentially plausible as a definition of conceptual art and I will call this the claim of a ‘weak’ or ‘inclusive’ conceptualism.

Whilst Schellekens does not register the fact that these claims are of varying strength, it is significant. This is because it becomes increasingly apparent that they correspond to the existence of two distinct positions as to the ontological character of conceptual art at work in Schellekens’ text. The first position is a strong claim: (1) the idea just *is* the artwork. This ontology corresponds to the quotes that Schellekens gives by Adrian Piper and Sol LeWitt, i.e., that a conceptual work can be an idea and thus an idea is both necessary and sufficient for an artwork to exist. The logical consequence of this position is that any material element or object presented cannot be said to be *constitutive* of the work, but can instead only be a kind of excess, which has no positive role in the artwork’s working. For philosophical aesthetics, the strong claim is potentially frightening. It would mean the “loss of any crucial aspect of appreciation that is immediately tangible or perceptible”³⁵, the loss of a recognisable “focus of

³³ I take the terms ‘strong’ or ‘exclusive’ conceptualism and ‘weak’ or ‘inclusive’ conceptualism to describe the role of the ideational in the ontology of the conceptual work from Peter Osborne. See ‘Conceptual Art and / as Philosophy’ in (ed.) Michael Newman and Jon Bird, *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, (Reaktion Books Ltd, London, 1999)

³⁴ For an interesting historical account of the disproportionate effect of the theoretical proclamations of this small group of conceptual artists on subsequent readings of conceptual art, see Peter Wollen, ‘Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art’ in *Paris Manhattan*, (Verso Books Ltd, London, 2004)

³⁵ Schellekens. (2007) P76

appreciation” to which we could attach “aesthetic value”.³⁶ The second position is a weak claim: (2) the idea is central to the artwork, but is only one aspect of it. This could be seen to refer to the quote that Schellekens gives by Paul Wood, i.e., that the “idea is king”. This claim leaves room for the possibility that any material element or object *can* be included as a constitutive aspect of the artwork, but also allows that the idea is more prominent or central. Whilst Schellekens tries to keep hold of the first claim to a stronger conceptualism—that the artwork just *is* the idea—and to simultaneously say that the idea itself can be considered the new ‘focus of appreciation’ and thus of aesthetic value, her inability as the argument unfolds to maintain that the material element is not constitutive of the work renders this claim increasingly unstable and forces her to lapse into the second, weaker claim.

What is striking is that none of these three quotes taken in isolation in this way provide an instructive account of what precisely we are to understand by the claim that the work character of a conceptual artwork is an idea. None offer any illumination as to what conceptual artists understand an “idea” to be, nor how it operates in an artwork. It is curious then that Schellekens interprets them, without discussion, using the terminology of analytic aesthetics. The new objective of conceptual art, she concludes from the above quotes, is “the representation of ideas and the bearing of *cognitive value*”.³⁷ Cognitive value conveyed by ideas, claims Schellekens, is the *raison d’être* of most conceptual art.³⁸ In fact, she goes even further than this, to claim that “of all the kinds of value that art in general seems capable of affording (including historical, financial and sentimental), cognitive value is the *only*³⁹ one that conceptual art directly aspires to possess. That is to say, for most conceptual artists, artistic value is only to be gained from the knowledge, insights, or understanding that the artworks generate.”⁴⁰ By locating conceptual art within the framework of philosophical aesthetics, Schellekens is able to interpret the emphasis upon ideas prevalent in conceptual art theory as the opposite pole to the aesthetic, i.e. the cognitive. However, contrary to what conceptual

³⁶ Schellekens. (2007) P76

³⁷ Schellekens. (2007) P72

³⁸ Schellekens. (2007) P79

³⁹ My italics.

⁴⁰ Schellekens. (2007) P80

art theory wants to claim, Schellekens suggests, the artistic value of the work cannot be entirely *exhausted* by cognitive value, otherwise conceptual art renders itself redundant: there would be no distinction between an artwork and a statement, for example.

A number of points should be made here. Firstly, by isolating the theoretical statements of a few conceptual artists and then taking the strongest claims at their most literal face value—i.e. that an idea is necessary and sufficient for an artwork—Schellekens fails to acknowledge both the striking ambiguities within individual theoretical texts and the wide range of attitudes towards the role of the idea amongst conceptual artists. For example, in their text ‘Notes on Analysis’, Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden see the outcome of conceptual art in the late 60s to have been, not merely to “clear the air of objects”, but a lack of pressure to replace them with ideas.⁴¹ In doing so, Schellekens’ account gives no consideration to the *character* of such proclamations and to the way in which they function, either in relation to the overall ontology of the actual artworks that they are supposed to represent, or within the conceptual project as a whole. Within *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, for example, LeWitt can in no way be seen to hold the strong position that Schellekens seems to associate him with but instead displays an explicit ambiguity towards the role of the material in the artwork. For LeWitt, in addition to “conception”, it is also the process of “realisation” with which the artist is concerned⁴² and, as a result, “all intervening steps”—by which LeWitt means the specifically *materialised* working out of ideas in the form of notes and sketches—are often of central importance.⁴³ As Peter Osborne has pointed out, “despite his gestures in the direction of a purely ideational interpretation of the artwork”, LeWitt’s statements actually express an internal ambivalence towards the work’s physical reality, at times denouncing it and at times treating it as a condition of the artwork’s existence.⁴⁴ The fact that even those artists who consistently promoted an idea of ‘strong’ conceptualism

⁴¹ Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, ‘Notes on Analysis’, 1970. Reprinted in L. Lippard. (1973) P136

⁴² Sol LeWitt, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* (1967), in (ed.) Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, (Phaidon Press, London, 2002). P214

⁴³ LeWitt. (1967) P214

⁴⁴ In Osborne’s interpretation, “what looks like an exclusively *ideational* redefinition of the object, in conflict with the recognition that it requires some physical presence, is actually, more restrictively (and also, perhaps, more materialistically), a *psychological* one.” This, for Osborne ends up forbidding the ‘art as idea’ claim that *Paragraphs* tries to present. Peter Osborne, ‘Philosophy and/as Conceptual Art’ in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, (Reaktion Books Ltd, London, 1999), P53-P54

in their theory, particularly Joseph Kosuth,⁴⁵ continued nevertheless to produce and exhibit materialised artworks of some form or another suggests that such proclamations were meant to be themselves artistic, provocative and, I think, rather ironic thought experiments with regards to the potential vanishing point of visual art.⁴⁶ By taking the claim of an ideational redefinition of art at face value, Schellekens sidesteps the possibility that conceptual art theory might be better related to as a strategic artistic doctrine and not simply a literal theoretical statement of an artistic *practice*. Whilst the stronger claims of conceptual art theories should be taken seriously and are, of course, significant to an understanding of the conceptual project as a whole, they should not be taken in isolation and too literally.⁴⁷

However, it is this particular claim which appears to provide Schellekens with the foundation upon which her ability to keep the aesthetic and the cognitive in relation to one other, whilst declaring—at least ostensibly—the material aspect of the work to be almost irrelevant rests. It is directly because of this claim that Schellekens concludes that if we are to discover an aesthetic dimension to the conceptual artwork, that dimension must be located purely within the idea.⁴⁸ The idea alone can constitute the proper focus of aesthetic appreciation of the work. Whilst I recognise that at certain times, Schellekens is in fact assuming the position of the artists, only to demonstrate that it is in fact inflated or misguided—an example being, as already discussed, the claim to anti-aesthetic intentions—she does not seem to be doing so in this case. What is artistic about a conceptual work *can*, thinks Schellekens, be purely attributable to its idea. In her aim to correct what she considers to be the philosophically naïve theory of

⁴⁵ Joseph Kosuth made various strong statements such as, “art only exists conceptually” and “works of art are analytic propositions.” See Joseph Kosuth ‘Art after Philosophy, 1968 in (ed.) Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, (Phaidon Press, London, 2002). P214

⁴⁶ As Luis Camnitzer has noted, the target against which manifesto’s set themselves are very often “straw men”, through which an identity can be affirmed “at the expense of the target”. *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation*, (University of Texas Press, China, 2007). P30

⁴⁷ Nick Zangwill argues “people take too seriously artist’s “manifestos”, which should be taken no more seriously than any other piece of advertising” in ‘Are There Counterexamples to Aesthetic Theories of Art’ in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 2002. Eric Hobsbawm has said of the avant-garde after 1950, “almost any of the numerous manifestos by means of which avant-garde artists have announced their intentions in the course of the past hundred years demonstrate the lack of coherence between means and ends, the object and the methods of achieving it.” P518

⁴⁸ Schellekens says, “if conceptual artworks can have some kind of aesthetic value, there is only one element that can be the bearer of such value, and that is the idea at the heart of the artwork.” (2007) P75

some conceptual artists then, Schellekens demonstrates a naïve understanding of the artistic intentions within the statements of conceptual artists and is instead concerned entirely with what would need to be true philosophically, were we to take them literally. There is of course some sense in which this method could be justified, in that it acts to deflate the overstated claims of conceptual artists, by revealing them to be philosophically flawed. However, ultimately, it seems to me that relying upon such an approach creates the danger of rendering the investigation into the ontology of conceptual art detached from the actual artworks, assuming that what we aim for in pursuing such an investigation is an account that somehow rings true of our actual experience of such artworks, and not merely an analysis of theory.

Secondly, this strict adherence to a literal reading of the stronger claim concerning the adequacy of the idea also strikes one as curious in the face of Schellekens' ostensible flippancy with regards to the intentionality in the other "least controversial" aspect of conceptual art, i.e., its anti-aestheticism. Schellekens offers no justification for why she questions one and not the other, merely stating that one is fundamental whilst the other is not. Thirdly, Schellekens *interprets* the claim that art is idea to mean that the conceptual project is solely concerned with the "value" gained through the "knowledge, insight and understanding" that the work can "yield". This surely requires further evidence—further quotes, a contextual analysis of a more substantial chunk of the quote used, an analysis of the artworks even—yet there is none offered. Finally, even if we grant Schellekens this interpretation, we might argue that it is difficult to see how even this description in any adequate way distinguishes conceptual art definitively from many other forms of art. It would be possible to say of almost any artwork that it "represents" ideas or "bears" some form of cognitive value, if that is what one wanted to claim. More analysis would be needed therefore to draw out what precisely is distinct about the role of ideas in the ontology of the conceptual artwork.

Schellekens tells us that the cognitive intentions of conceptual art are given a “focus” and a “context” by its anti-aesthetic ambitions.⁴⁹ What this presumably means is that conceptual art is unique in its manner of “bearing” in that it attempts to arrive at the sufficiency of the idea through its anti-aesthetic tendencies and practices: its ‘dematerialisation’. Before I move on to analyse the technicalities of precisely how this ontology is supposed to operate, we need to look a little closer at the specific characterisation of the “idea” in conceptual art that Schellekens puts forward and to see how it might be possible that an idea—for Schellekens, cognitive value—can be considered sufficient, through a dematerialised ontology. Schellekens identifies, non-exhaustively, three main kinds of ideas prevalent in conceptual art: self-reflexive ideas, socio-political ideas and philosophical ideas. She then gives six examples of conceptual artworks and the ideas that are supposed to lie at their heart, five of which are clearly propositions and one that is oddly and without explanation a notion (transubstantiation). For example, Robert Barry’s *Inert Gas Series* (1969)—a text on a wall telling us that inert gas has been released into the Californian desert, accompanied by a photograph of a canister in the desert—tells us that art does not need a perceivable object or event.⁵⁰ *Q: And Babies? A: And Babies* (1970), by the Art Workers Coalition—a media photograph of dead bodies in South East Asia with the title text printed across it—tells us that United States’ policy on Vietnam was indefensible.⁵¹ Whilst Michael Craig-Martin’s *Oak Tree* (1973)—a glass of water on a clear glass shelf, accompanied by a substantial text convincing us that the artist has in fact turned the glass of water into an oak tree—is about transubstantiation.⁵² To single out one main idea in this way, which the artwork is supposed to encapsulate, seems reductive. Even Adrian Piper, the artist whom Schellekens cites as a strong conceptualist has stated: “if we have to be concerned with one particular concept to be a conceptualist, something’s gone badly wrong.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Schellekens. (2007) P72

⁵⁰ Schellekens. (2007) P78

⁵¹ Schellekens. (2007) P78

⁵² Schellekens. (2007) P79

⁵³ Adrian Piper, in interview with Peter Osborne, March 1998, New York. Cited in Osborne, ‘Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy’, (1999) P56

In what feels like a response to a potential charge of the banality and redundancy of conceptual art, Schellekens claims that the cognitive potential of such art is not reducible to its capacity to give us an “orderly proposition,”⁵⁴ otherwise there would be nothing to distinguish art from ordinary statements or propositions.⁵⁵ It is difficult to see exactly whom Schellekens might have in mind in offering this ostensible corrective. Nevertheless, it feels right that the claim that the conceptual artwork is an idea should not be understood reductively to mean that its operation as an artwork is to present a proposition. Instead, what distinguishes art for Schellekens is that it can afford a more complex and *experiential* kind of cognitive yield, which we access, not merely through ‘getting’ the proposition, but by undergoing it and thus experiencing a more personal engagement with it.⁵⁶ But what precisely does it mean to have a more “experiential” engagement with an idea for Schellekens? This appears to be the most vague part of the text. To undergo an idea is, says Schellekens, to experience its “true ramifications” and to “experience” ramifications is to gain some kind of knowledge about ‘what it [the ramification] is like’.⁵⁷ According to Schellekens, *Q: And Babies, A: And Babies* invites “a significant degree of contemplation of the horror of political injustice”.⁵⁸ The work thus, “brings the idea of injustice to us” to the extent that we are able to “appreciate the situation’s true callousness and horror”⁵⁹. The claim that a photograph, particularly one accompanied with a provocative message, might give us a deeper grasp of the specific character of the idea it presents seems plausible. The claim that it can make us undergo the extent of its “true ramifications” does not.

However, even the claim that the work can provoke a deeper understanding of an idea becomes less tenable with the other examples of “ideas” that Schellekens selects.

⁵⁴ Schellekens. (2007) P81

⁵⁵ Schellekens. (2007) P80

⁵⁶ Schellekens has various formulations of this point. In the space of a single page she claims conceptual art invites us to engage with ideas “in a seemingly more involved fashion”, “enter into a thought-provoking relationship with ideas” and “engage in an emphatic and imaginative manner with the idea”. These all feel like distinct articulations of the broad point that “the cognitive value conceptual art is rather more *experiential* than propositional.” (2007) P83

⁵⁷ In footnote ten of the text, Schellekens tells us that she has chosen the word “experiential” as a less subjective or perspectival version of ‘what it is like’ knowledge. However, the general meaning remains: ‘experiential’ knowledge for Schellekens means to gain some understanding into the ramifications of something. (2007) P83

⁵⁸ Schellekens. (2007) P83

⁵⁹ Schellekens. (2007) P82

Following Schellekens' logic, an experience of *Oak Tree* would result in our coming to truly understand and appreciate the ramifications of the theological concept of transubstantiation. However, it seems to me that such a concept is, by definition, inherently resistant to such phenomenological grasping. I would like to look at the technicalities of these claims in more detail in the following section, but what becomes immediately clear is that it is at this precise point that Schellekens finds it necessary to give some account of the role of the material element of the conceptual artwork. If the material aspect of the artwork allows us to “experience” and “grasp” “phenomenologically” an idea that would otherwise remain a banal proposition, thus constituting the specifically artistic character of the idea, then Schellekens must admit that the material is in fact *central* and *constitutive*. In fact, Schellekens' position with regards to the material element is not clear and is subject to oscillations. She will ultimately claim that material has some importance—it must, after all, be chosen carefully and be “fitting” for the idea—and so will conclude that it is not quite as contingent after all. However, what Schellekens seems to want to have as her most central and consistent argument is that whilst the material object, entity or event might be important as a “prompt” or “trigger” to that experience, it cannot be said to be properly constitutive of it. The material acts as a kind of bridge to the experience with the idea and is cut away as soon as we cross it. As I will now demonstrate, this idea displays itself to be increasingly tenuous.

3. The Fate of the Material

Schellekens, by insisting upon holding on to both the notion of the aesthetic and the cognitive, and, through her commitment to locating the proper “focus of appreciation”, which, she tells us, philosophical aesthetics needs to alleviate its anxieties, ends up constructing a kind of new ideational art object for conceptual art. There are two main consequences, which I identify as emerging from this position. Firstly, it produces, to my mind, a too conventional account of what conceptual art is—one that fails to recognise the more radical tendency in the ontological investigation of such art, by way

of its attempt to disallow a single, easily identifiable site of value⁶⁰. Secondly, it results in the emergence of a philosophical problem with regards to the materialised object or medium of the work in that Schellekens is forced to disallow it any significant or centralised role in the value-producing aspect of the work's operation. In response to this latter charge, Schellekens might claim that this is precisely what makes conceptual art ontologically distinct—i.e. its unique form can be said to reside in the fact that the idea alone is the work and that the material is arbitrary and instrumental. However, the necessity with which she is forced to extricate the material aspect of the work becomes increasingly unconvincing and strained as the argument unfolds. I would now like to trace more closely what happens to the material through the unfolding of the logic of Schellekens' essay, in order to demonstrate the extent to which it reveals itself to be the weakest aspect of her argument.

I identify discussions of two distinct kinds of materiality in Schellekens' essay; the first is a kind of materiality of the idea and the second is the material object or thing, the medium, which “represents” or “instantiates” the idea. Whilst the former seems to be implicitly smuggled into the ‘focus of appreciation’ of the work at certain points, it is not really ever taken up and extended explicitly as a point of argumentation by Schellekens, being mentioned once or twice at the beginning and then being allowed to drop away. The latter—the material object—is dealt with more explicitly. The unsatisfactory treatment of both forms results in an overall lack of adequate attention to the role of the material in the conceptual artwork, one which results in the account as a whole feeling increasingly tenuous.

(i) The Materiality of the Idea

There are at least two points in the text at which Schellekens refers to the idea as the “material” of conceptual art.⁶¹ Whilst she doesn't explain precisely what she means by this, or in what tone or manner she is using the reference, we can get a sense by analysing the relevant passages. First of all, Schellekens quotes Lucy Lippard's

⁶⁰ For a similar argument see David Davies, in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007)

⁶¹ Schellekens says, “not only is the representation of ideas taken to be central to art-making, but these ideas are themselves the proper ‘material’ of conceptual pieces.” (2007) P74

statement that in conceptual art, the art occurs “prior to materialisation”.⁶² This is, it seems, a distinct way of expressing the point that we have already identified as central to Schellekens’ argument, i.e. that it is the idea and not its materialised form of presentation, that is the artwork. However, Schellekens then declares that in fact, “ideas are themselves the proper ‘material’ of art.”⁶³ This seems to instantly contradict what appeared for Lippard to be a much stronger claim, i.e., that in the case of the conceptual work, the art occurs *prior to* materialisation. If the art occurs prior to materialisation, and if one wants to insist, as Schellekens clearly does, that the artwork is to be equated solely with the idea, then the idea cannot be the ‘material’ of conceptual art. If, on the other hand, one wants to both hold on to the claim that the idea is the artwork and that the idea is the material, one must give up any *literal* stating of Lippard’s claim that art is prior to materialisation. What would emerge in this case then would be the claim to there being two distinct *kinds* of materiality; the first, ideational or the materiality of ideas and the second, materiality more traditionally conceived—the material object. This could well turn out to be a very interesting direction for a philosophical account of conceptual art, yet, unfortunately, Schellekens does not develop it any further.

However, what is interesting is that by virtue of this contradiction, Schellekens ends up reasserting the necessity of the inclusion of a notion of materiality within an understanding of the ontology of the artwork. A page later, Schellekens suggests the necessity of a material aspect within the definition of an artwork even more explicitly. She claims “the view that the idea is the material *and thereby* the artwork itself”,⁶⁴ is unsettling for philosophical aesthetics, which requires a firmly delineated focus of appreciation. This quote basically equates the artwork *with* the notion of artistic material, whether this is ideational or otherwise, and through suggesting that an artwork is such *by virtue of* its material, seems, I think, to stumble across the irony implicit within the theoretical proclamations that she herself chooses to pass over in any explicit terms. What these statements imply is not that the idea can just simply *be* the artwork, but that we can come to think of or relate to it as the artwork, either by allowing it to

⁶² Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialisation of the Art Object”, 1968. Quoted in Schellekens. (2007) P74

⁶³ Schellekens. (2007) P74

⁶⁴ Schellekens. (2007) P75

stand in as the material, or by virtue of our coming to relate to or engage with it, as we would typically relate to the material. If even the most extreme statements that art is idea must be interpreted and understood through recourse to a more traditional relation of ideational and material in the ontology of the artwork, this at least opens the possibility of there existing a real barrier to conceiving of an artwork in the sense that Lippard meant it, i.e. purely as an idea, which is perceived as wholly prior to materialisation.

So, it seems to me that either the claim that the idea is the true material of conceptual art must be a mere metaphor or analogy—made either strategically, or else out of an anxious clinging to what is recognisable in the face of conceptual art’s truly radical and disorientating new ontological platform—or that the idea *does* come to take on the character of material, i.e. becomes somehow more heavily materialised, through a shift within the relational totality of this new ontology. If it is the latter, then this of course needs a serious amount of explanation and justification. What would it mean exactly to claim that an idea becomes the most prominent material of an artwork? Whilst there might be a neat philosophical theory here, if making the idea the ‘material’ of the artwork simply means that the traditional art object is swapped for a new materialised idea-object—as though the mere absence of the art object phenomenologically requires its replacement with a new ideal, yet materialised object—we would surely be in danger of losing any coherent definition of conceptual art. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the conceptual art project was not in fact motivated by the objective of constructing for itself a new precise focus of appreciation, by way of an ideal art-object, but instead that it specifically didn’t want a replacement object at all. Instead, we might argue that conceptual art sought to decentralise from its artistic investigation any traditional notions of object-hood *per se*, in a radical investigation into the various and more peripheral phenomena that *constitute* the particularity and the significance of specific objecthood. Such motivations of this more radical kind can be found in the theoretical statements of artists such as Lawrence Weiner,⁶⁵ and Dennis Oppenheim.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ “I do not mind objects but I do not care to make them. The object—by virtue of being a unique commodity—becomes something that might make it impossible for people to see the art for the forest.”

Nevertheless, if Schellekens is to argue convincingly that the idea is the proper “material” of conceptual art, then the question essentially becomes what precisely makes it so? What is it that facilitates the conditions under which an idea can become “material” in the way Schellekens seems to suggest, and thus, opens up the possibility of it being an *artistic* idea? Schellekens’ gesture towards an answer to this question seems to be implied within her account of the way in which an abstract idea can become more “concrete” through its being engaged with in a certain way. An idea becomes substantial in Schellekens’ account when we experience or “undergo”⁶⁷ its true “ramifications”⁶⁸, as opposed to merely thinking it. This experience of ramifications then comes to speak to what is distinct about the art experience. Let us now consider a quote by Schellekens, which I believe throws light onto the particular character of her position, as well as on its particular difficulties. “By turning art theory into art practice”, Schellekens claims, “conceptual artists dealing with philosophical notions and distinctions, also turn the abstract into something concrete. They do so not by virtue of the perceivable thing or event that illustrates the idea, but *by transforming the idea itself*⁶⁹ into something with a firm grounding in our ordinary lives (such as a glass of water on a shelf or a foldable chair)”.⁷⁰ This is a perplexing claim. Schellekens seems to suggest that the conceptual artwork—to take one of her own examples, Craig-Martin’s *Oak Tree*—takes an abstract idea or proposition such as “transubstantiation” and turns it into a more concrete idea. However, the capacity for the abstract idea to become concrete, Schellekens insists, is specifically *not* attributable to the fact that Craig-Martin chooses to represent the notion of transubstantiation with the glass on a shelf, together with its corresponding text: the material can ultimately have no positive or fundamental role in the work’s *working*. Instead, claims Schellekens, that the abstract idea becomes concrete is attributable to the fact that Craig-Martin has transformed the idea of

Lawrence Weiner, ‘Statements’ (1969), in Meyer (ed.), *Conceptual Art*, (Dutton, New York, 1972) PP 217-18.

⁶⁶ Dennis Oppenheim has described his work as “an attempt to get away from the ‘preciousness of objects’ and the kind of thinking that’s controlled by an object-oriented idea”, see Dennis Oppenheim interview with Patricia Norvell, March 29, 1969 in (ed.) Norvell, *Recording Conceptual Art*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2001). P22

⁶⁷ Schellekens. (2007) P86

⁶⁸ Schellekens. (2007) P81

⁶⁹ My italics.

⁷⁰ Schellekens. (2007) P82

transubstantiation itself into something with a “firm grounding in our ordinary lives”—a glass of water on a shelf.

This curious claim appears to me to be an inversion of the arguments made by Arthur Danto in his ontologically based investigation into conceptual artworks, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.⁷¹ Rather than commonplace objects being perceptually ‘transfigured’ into artworks—i.e., into entities of a more exalted or ontologically privileged status—in Schellekens’ account, the abstract theological notion of ‘transubstantiation’ transforms itself into a commonplace, everyday object, and thus into a more concrete idea. But how exactly does an idea transform itself into a glass of water on a shelf? And how would such a potential transformation render the *idea* more concrete? Now, it seems that Schellekens could only be saying two possible things here, either (1) that the idea is transformed into a glass of water by virtue of the decision to represent the idea with a glass of water, in which case the claim would be relatively banal, or (2) that transubstantiation is a particularly apt concept in that it somehow encapsulates something about the operation of conceptual art. As Schellekens wants to argue that the object does not represent the idea, she must be arguing for the latter. This might explain why the Craig-Martin artwork appears to feature so centrally in her essay and perhaps why it is also the sole concept or notion, whilst the other ‘ideas’ that Schellekens identifies in the other works she refers to are all propositions.⁷² It does seem that Schellekens thinks that this notion captures something about or even encapsulates the peculiarities of the ontological workings of conceptual art.

What would it mean for conceptual art to be, in some manner, analogous to transubstantiation? What would be at stake in the shifting of concepts from ‘transfiguration’ to ‘transubstantiation’ in thinking about conceptual art? The term ‘transubstantiation’ refers to the theological doctrine that the substance of the elements bread and wine transform into the substance of the body and blood of Christ when consecrated by the Eucharist. Whilst theological controversy exists as to the extent to

⁷¹ Arthur Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*, (Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1981)

⁷² The other ‘ideas’ Schellekens refers to are all propositions. For example, “that art need not be something unique” or “that gross injustices are being carried out in the name of democracy.” (2007) P77-78

which this idea is to be considered as metaphorical or literally true, it is generally accepted by Catholicism that this change occurs without any perceptible alteration of the elements. The bread and wine change ‘substance’—they transform into the body and blood of Christ—yet they retain their ‘accidents’, i.e. their appearance as bread and wine. Although Craig-Martin does not explicitly use the term ‘transubstantiation’ himself, on the surface at least, this might seem relevant to an interpretation of *Oak Tree*. When Craig-Martin declares in his text that he has transformed a glass of water into an oak tree, he claims to mean it substantially, whilst simultaneously holding fast to the ostensible contradiction that it still looks like a glass of water. This can be seen in the following extract:

Q. Do you mean that the glass of water is a symbol of an oak tree?

A. No. It's not a symbol. I've changed the physical substance of the glass of water into that of an oak tree.

Q. It looks like a glass of water.

A. Of course it does. I didn't change its appearance. But it's not a glass of water; it's an oak tree.⁷³

However, if Craig-Martin is invoking the notion of transubstantiation, to my mind, it is not because he considers it to genuinely encapsulate the ontological workings of conceptual art—such that conceptual art can achieve a transformation of X (the abstract) into Y (the concrete), whilst at the same time circumventing the *constitutive* necessity of the material. The point of *Oak Tree* is not to endorse transubstantiation but to criticise it as a viable concept, that is, to sarcastically draw to attention the pretensions implicit within the consistent presentation of any commonplace object as art.

This aspect of Schellekens' theory reveals the untenable exclusion of the material in her account. Schellekens wants to claim that the abstract idea can become a concrete idea, *because* the artist transforms an idea into a banal, commonplace material object, yet simultaneously wants to hold that the material object itself—the glass of water on the

⁷³ Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, (Phaidon Press, London, 1998) P248

shelf and the corresponding text (which Schellekens seems to forget about, following her initial description of the work)—in no way participates significantly in the idea becoming concrete. It seems clear that Schellekens' earlier claim that the idea is necessary and sufficient for conceptual art has led her to an untenable argument with regards to the material object in that she is forced to hold fast to the statement that the material object cannot in any way be important to a proper appreciation of the work, whilst her theory unconsciously testifies to the fact that it in fact must be. This problem repeats itself throughout the text. For example, Schellekens claims that her aim is to demonstrate the applicability of aesthetics to conceptual art whilst not betraying its two-fold commitment to both "cognitive value" and "dematerialisation".⁷⁴ As we have already seen through the quote that Schellekens herself handpicks, "dematerialisation" here means that the 'arthood' can exist in the idea alone, prior to all materialisation. If the idea is (literally and not metaphorically) the material however, then there is no (literal) "dematerialisation", a point already made quite convincingly by *Art & Language* as early as 1968.⁷⁵ It seems at this point that Schellekens has temporarily abandoned her discussion of the materiality of the idea and is now referring simply to the more traditionally conceived material object, or means of representation.

(ii) Material Object, Entity, Event

If "material" now means the material object, how can Schellekens work back into the picture any significance for the material? Whilst it is only the idea which can be said to be the proper 'focus of aesthetic appreciation' of the work and thus the seat of aesthetic value, Schellekens concedes that the material object that 'bears' that idea might just turn out to have considerably more *artistic* value than first thought.⁷⁶ This sudden concession that there might be a role for the material, made specifically through the introduction of the notion of "artistic value", goes unexplained and Schellekens fails to ever provide a working definition, either of "aesthetic value" or "artistic value", despite

⁷⁴ Schellekens. (2007) P76

⁷⁵ Terry Atkinson, 'Concerning the Article "The Dematerialization of Art"', (letter to Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, 2nd November, 1968). This is part of an extract taken from (ed.) Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, (Phaidon Press, London, 2002). P220-221

⁷⁶ Schellekens. (2007) P76

the fact that she sets them against each other hierarchically.⁷⁷ Such an ordered and hierarchical construction of the different kinds of value and the various aspects of the work they are able to correspond to, is not merely left unjustified, but seems like an unconvincing account of how we actually experience artworks. Such an overly compartmentalised image of the artwork just does not, to my mind, ring true of an experience of art. When I am looking at Michael Craig-Martin's *Oak Tree*, to take one of Schellekens' own examples, I do not match up which aspect of the work has strictly aesthetic and which artistic value, to check if my experience is valid. To claim that the only value proper to an engagement with the material in a conceptual work is to experience it as an artistic means to an end, and hence a less central and more 'trivial' component of experience is to completely over-theorise and over-instrumentalise what actually happens in an experience with such a work.

In her discussion of various conceptual artworks, Schellekens describes the role of the material more explicitly. She claims that the material 'triggers' or 'prompts' the imaginative exercise that leads to a kind of enriched 'experiential knowledge' of what would otherwise simply be a banal proposition. Effectively, the material operates as a medium between the idea in its banal and propositional form and the idea in its enriched, 'undergone' and 'experiential' form. Of course, this requires much explaining. First of all, *how* precisely does the material operate as that aspect which effectively facilitates this enriched experiential engagement with the idea, but then subsequently manages to dissolve itself from this experience, so that it might avoid any centrality within the work's "proper" "focus of appreciation"?

Discussing the process through which the various conceptual artworks operate, Schellekens says this of the material aspect of the work: by "instantiating" the idea they turn "what in the form of a proposition seems to be a rather prosaic comment into something more experiential".⁷⁸ Put another way, they "turn the abstract into the

⁷⁷ For Schellekens, whilst the material can have artistic value, in that a fitting choice of material can prompt an engagement with the work—an aesthetic and cognitive engagement—it seems that identify such artistic value is not equivalent with an engagement with the work. Instead it is a means to an end.

⁷⁸ Schellekens. (2007) P81

concrete”.⁷⁹ What constitutes the experiential object of focus, Schellekens clarifies, is still nevertheless “the idea”. The role of the material has now been given more centrality, said to “instantiate” a proposition, so that through our experience of its ramifications, it might become something more than propositional. The material is thus now credited as being a medium, which somehow has the capacity to *transform* what is “prosaic” into something more enriched. As an example of this, Schellekens cites the conceptual work *Q: And Babies, A: And Babies* by the Art Workers Coalition. In her description of the work she claims, “The contextualised photograph of human corpses strewn over a small road in South-East Asia brings the idea of injustice to us in a way that a mere statement cannot.”⁸⁰ The photograph is a “vehicle”, one that delivers the idea of injustice in a special manner so that it can be experienced as something more than propositional. Attempting to substantiate this claim Schellekens adds, “the image of the massacred women and children, together with the burning question and shocking answer painted over it enables us to appreciate the situation’s true callousness and horror.”⁸¹

Now, aside from the fact that this appears as an inflated account of what this and perhaps even any artwork does or can do, the implicit account of how the material operates within this process is problematic for various reasons. First of all, the example of *Q: And Babies, A: And Babies* by the Art Workers Coalition is clearly chosen by Schellekens to ensure the optimal result for her claim that the proper engagement with a conceptual work is a deep undergoing of the ramifications of its central idea. It is an emotive and political piece of agitprop, which parades—on its surface at least—a clear message. When we try to apply this theory to other works however, such as *Oak Tree*, it immediately feels less convincing. To say that we undergo the true ramifications of transubstantiation when we experience this work is unlikely. In addition to the fact that every moment of the process described by Schellekens is unclear and elusive, we have learnt little about how *Q: And Babies, A: And Babies* works, either in its specificity, or in its entirety as an *artwork*. If it is just the image plus “burning question” plus

⁷⁹ Schellekens. (2007) P82

⁸⁰ Schellekens. (2007) P82

⁸¹ Schellekens. (2007) P82

“shocking answer”⁸² that results in the “experiential knowledge” that affords aesthetic value—i.e., in the work—nothing is to distinguish this piece from a tabloid newspaper article, for example. If the material aspect of the work is taken to be the mere combination of material components, such as paper, image and written text, then it is impossible to explain exactly how the artwork could be distinct from the tabloid paper.

It is the reflection upon this question which ultimately points us in the direction we need to be heading with regards to understanding the role of artistic materiality in conceptual art. If we decided to go along with Schellekens’ basic claim for now, the question that needs to be interrogated—one that Schellekens’ argument seems unable to answer adequately—is why exactly an *artistically* materialised “instantiation” might call for either a particular or an increased sensitivity towards an idea. To be able to answer this question adequately requires more than a nod towards a crudely emotive piece such as *Q: And Babies? A: And Babies*, whose rather simplistic emotive character, it must be added, is not at all characteristic of conceptual art more generally. It seems to me that the answer might be that an instantiation, by definition, relies upon a complex of pre-existing significations and a set of conditions—both in terms of the relative and historical significance of the materials used, and in terms of the context in which it is shown. These significances and conditions are in part material. For some form of material to effectively represent certain ideas, there must be a shared understanding as to both the historical and current significance *of* that material and its representational capacities. This shared understanding need not only constitute something fully conscious and thought-out, but could be simply a subconscious awareness of the role that certain materials have played in particular contexts. Failing to adequately contextualise the artworks she discusses, Schellekens doesn’t engage with the question of precisely *how* these specific materials operate differently when contextualised within a tabloid newspaper and within an art gallery and how this artistic contextualisation affords its own specific historical significations to *materials*. It is my contention that whilst all art operates in such a way, conceptual art in particular—as an art form which,

⁸² Schellekens. (2007) P84

as Schellekens rightly points out, centralises a self-reflexive investigation as to the ontology of the artwork—requires such an understanding.

I would like to now test this idea out on Michael Craig-Martin's *Oak Tree*. Schellekens takes this work to have a philosophical content by virtue of its seeming to intend a reference to the theological concept of transubstantiation,⁸³ as if merely invoking a theological notion, and doing so through a sparse presentation of material, were enough to make something a conceptual artwork. This seems to me to be a weak reading of the work and one that, were it true, would show conceptual art to be a rather banal type of art. The reference to transubstantiation is itself merely one aspect of the work, and its character as a 'conceptual' artwork is not reducible to its 'bearing' this content. In this piece, as I interpret it, Craig-Martin plays very specifically upon what had become by this point a recognisable Duchampian act: a glass of water is turned into a work of art by being placed in a gallery by an artist, creating a kind of 'readymade'. If it stopped at this, the work would just be a rather boring repetition of Duchamp's original gestures. However, Craig-Martin adds some innovations to the Duchampian formula. Somewhat akin to Duchamp's calling a urinal *Fountain*, Craig-Martin calls the glass of water an *Oak Tree*. Duchamp's title, while obviously absurd, is surely meant to be a playful inversion of the real function of the object, corresponding perhaps to the fact that the object is to be exhibited flat, rather than on a wall. It seems reasonable to imagine a corresponding reversal of the flow of liquid from out of the urinal and straight up into the air—the fountain as a kind of backwards *pissoir*, which we can then imagine spraying urine into the art gallery. This is clearly meant as an irreverent gesture. Craig-Martin's 'readymade' here does no such thing; he chooses practically the blandest of conceivable objects,⁸⁴ something utterly inoffensive, and places it in an art gallery. This has none of the obvious 'punk' of Duchamp's gesture. In its complete banality what is conspicuous about this object is that it cannot have been chosen to signify anything specific in itself other than total neutrality. In taking *Oak Tree* as its title, Craig-Martin does not, like Duchamp, choose some provocative inversion, but rather another bland,

⁸³ Schellekens. (2007) P79

⁸⁴ It is the swallowing of water that Hegel invokes to emphasise the banality of the French terror. See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977) P360

but apparently arbitrary object. This seems to be a distilling of a certain aspect of the readymade, or at least how it has been interpreted retrospectively: an arbitrary object is nominated arbitrarily by an artist and thereby becomes an artwork—the nominalist or institutional critique of the artwork embodied in a conceptual artwork. There are two parallel, related nominations: that of a glass of water as an oak tree, and that of the named object as a work of art. But a further departure from Duchamp comes in the form of the typed text exhibited next to the glass, which explains that it has literally been turned into an oak tree, not just nominated as one. The implication, if we follow the analogy between the naming of the object and the declaration of this as an artwork, would seem to be that an object in such a case is not just nominated as an artwork, but really becomes one. But it is significant that it needs a piece of absurdist art criticism to do the work for it. Since the glass of water can of course not really be an oak tree—conceptual art is not transubstantiation—and since the piece of supporting text is so blatantly fatuous, we fall back on questioning the validity of anything about the claim of the whole thing to be a work of art.

What becomes clear through an engagement with the work is that there are various contradictory interpretive movements summoned by the piece here, and in the process of these movements it implicates both art criticism and theory, and the gallery which has enabled such an object to be presented in the first place, in addition to a familiarity with the kinds of material, both of historical and current art. It appears to carry a critical element despite its blandness: it points to the absurdities of art institutions and the reception of contemporary art. To claim that conceptual art is idea and that a proper engagement with a conceptual work requires us to merely undergo an idea—as though a single idea could be isolated to encompass the work as a whole—and to then kick away the material feels like a reductive account of what is in fact a rich and complex process of engagements.

Concluding Remarks

Through her commitment to an overly literal reading of the writings of a small selection of extreme conceptual artists, Schellekens fails to question the apparent ontological assumption of such artists, i.e. that art can be essentially ideational. This text presents a picture of the ontology of the conceptual artwork in which it is overly epistemological

and materially instrumentalised, i.e. in which the idea becomes a new object of focus and appreciation, and which does so by first utilising as a “prompt” and then kicking away as arbitrary the material aspect of the work. However, this account does not work. Schellekens cannot have her cake and eat it too, so to speak. The logic of her argument indicates that she cannot both claim that the artwork just *is* the idea, whilst also awkwardly holding onto a role for the material, as her argument implicitly does. On the other hand, Schellekens cannot insist that the idea is the new focus of appreciation with which we engage experientially, without holding onto a role for the material. Her attempt to solve this problem through the casually made qualification that the material can have *artistic* value is inadequate. It becomes clear that in conceptual artworks which use some form of material presentation, the material must have a more central and sustained role in the ontology of the work, and thus any ideational aspect attributable to the work cannot be construed to be an isolatable ‘focus of appreciation’, which we can detach from the material object and engage with on its own terms. What emerges through attending more to the process of the engagement and the manner in which the artwork leads us through a complex range of associations, is a sense that, rather than being understood as an art form that merely inverts traditional art in swapping the material object for the idea as the proper focus of appreciation in the ontology of the artwork, the conceptual project might be better comprehended as being more fundamentally ontological, in that it breaks apart and disallows any easily identifiable central focus and instead explores the periphery of phenomena which constitutes the work as a whole. As I have attempted to demonstrate, this does not entail a shifting of the ontology of the conceptual work onto an ideal platform, but requires a more attentive analysis of the role of the material in the ontology of the artwork; one which is capable of identifying the manner in which conceptual art, through its self-reflexive tendencies, relies upon the historical meaning of its material.

Part Two: The Subservience of the Perceptual

In ‘On Perceiving Conceptual Art’,⁸⁵ Lamarque presents an alternative to accounts, such as that of Schellekens, which attempt to construct for conceptual art a unique ontology through denying that the material—and importantly for Lamarque, by association the perceptual—has a *necessary* role within the operation of the artwork proper. Whilst Lamarque identifies that some conceptual art both *aspires* to be and is understood as non-perceptual, due both to a general emphasis upon ideas and to assigning a “low priority to material, to what is perceptible”,⁸⁶ he thinks that such aspirations render conceptual art diminished. Since conceptual artists predominantly produce material objects or present their ideas in a materialised form of presentation, “rather than trying to make conceptual art non-perceptual, it might be better to admit a perceptual level, but make it subservient to the conceptual.”⁸⁷ Lamarque achieves this by arguing that, whilst it is the idea—for Lamarque, the title—that directs the experience of the work, there occurs through such direction, a corresponding perceptual change in the object. The conceptual must, Lamarque tells us, “*inform* the perception of the objects and performances.”⁸⁸ In opposition to the instrumentalism of Schellekens’ position, in which the material object is a mere perceptual “prompt” or point of access to the work, which is utilised and then kicked away, for Lamarque, whilst it is part of the definition of the successful artwork that it distinguishes itself from its material base or object, this object does not merely give way to the work. Rather, our perceptual encounter with the material object is governed by the intentional direction of the title, resulting in the subsequent *perceptual* ‘transfiguration’ of the object. The material is thus a constitutive part *of* the work, as such a perceptual transfiguration of the material element is

⁸⁵ Peter Lamarque, ‘On Perceiving Conceptual Art’ in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007)

⁸⁶ He offers three quotes at this point: (i) “the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, cheap, unpretentious, and/or ‘dematerialized’”. Lippard, *Six Years*: vii. (ii) “What the work of art looks like doesn’t matter ... it must begin with an idea. It is the process of conceptualisation and realisation with which the artist is concerned.” LeWitt, *Paragraphs*. (iii) “A doctrinaire conceptualist viewpoint would say that the two relevant features of the ‘ideal conceptual work’ would be that it had an exact linguistic correlative, that is, it could be described and experienced in its description, and that it be infinitely repeatable. It must have absolutely no ‘aura’, no uniqueness to it whatsoever.” Mel Bochner, on Malevich, an interview.

⁸⁷ Lamarque. (2007) P9

⁸⁸ Lamarque. (2007) P13. My italics.

constitutive of the artistic experience. For Lamarque, without this perceptual transfiguration, we have failed to experience the work.

In this section I will attempt to establish the particular manner and extent to which Lamarque's insistence on a greater and more significant role for the material and perceptual aspects in the ontology of the conceptual artwork can offer any correctives to the problems which emerged from Schellekens' account, and can thus bring us a little closer to a more coherent and convincing theory of such art.⁸⁹ My line of argumentation will be the following: Lamarque's account can act as a corrective to Schellekens' in his insistence upon the recognition that—in so far as conceptual art is a practice that continues to produce materialised art objects, regardless of its pretensions to the contrary—an account of the perceptual experience as partly constitutive of such art is required. However, I consider Lamarque's account to be problematic on two central and related points. First of all, by basing his entire argument about conceptual art upon a very simplistic formulation of what constitutes a Readymade—i.e. a commonplace object with one title, containing a single idea or concept—Lamarque fails to attend to the manner in which such art specifically disallows such a reductive reading and instead brings to light the complex network of contextual relations which are its conditions of coming into being as such a work. Second of all, within his analysis of the way in which an idea or a title can direct a perceptual transfiguration of a material object, Lamarque fails to give an explicit and adequate account of the role of the particular material properties of the object. Without such an explicit explanation, Lamarque's argument stands in danger of positing the material object as a rather passive substrate, upon which any free play of ideas can merely be imposed.

⁸⁹ Simultaneous to Lamarque's more central analysis concerning perception is, perhaps predictably, another examination of the role of the aesthetic in conceptual art. Lamarque not only asks whether art can be non-perceptual, but in addition asks whether art can be non-aesthetic, as well as whether something can be aesthetic but not perceptual. I am not going to concern myself with this aspect of Lamarque's inquiry for two main reasons. Firstly, the latter two questions are not directly relevant to my own investigation and, secondly, unlike in the case of Schellekens' text, the notion of the aesthetic for Lamarque does not seem to frame or to direct the logic of his argument in any significant manner, but feels almost entirely external to it.

1. Comparing Conceptual Art to Literature

It must first be noted that Lamarque's entire justification for thinking that conceptual art is best understood as perceptual is derived from a comparison he undertakes between conceptual art and literature, i.e., an art form commonly considered to be *non-perceptual*. Ontologically speaking—in terms of where the 'work' is to be properly located—literature, thinks Lamarque, is an interesting case. This is because Lamarque considers literature to be characterised by the existence of a separation between the text and the work. Though Lamarque does not make this clear, it must be noted at this point that his use of the term "text" refers exclusively to the perceptual object, in distinction from any notion of an ideal object, whose perceptual existence would be located in its multiple, concrete instantiations. With the possible exception of concrete poetry, the specificities of the physical text—by way of the particularities of actual words on the page—whilst granting initial perceptual access to the work, are not an essential aspect of, or constitutive of the work itself. They are, as Lamarque puts it, contingent to the identity conditions of the actual literary work. This means that our perceptual access to works through texts "is not sufficient to determine what works the texts give us access to."⁹⁰ In short, the text *underdetermines* the work. If no particular perceptual qualities or features are important in the case of literature, if such features underdetermine the work, then it follows that perception itself cannot be said to be constitutive of the work's identity conditions. Lamarque's description of literature here is interesting, as it resonates with the general formula of Schellekens' ontology of the conceptual artwork: the physical and perceptual aspect of the conceptual artwork, whilst it might be necessary to *access* the artwork, cannot be considered to be *constitutive* of that work. However, Lamarque will ultimately challenge this analogy of conceptual art and literature. The implication of Lamarque's position is that, whilst they might both present an analogous ontological separation between the material base, or object, and work, in the case of conceptual art this separation is both experienced and bridged through perception.

⁹⁰ Lamarque. (2007) P6

Despite this basic analogy, it feels surprising that Lamarque begins his text with a substantial diversion through a comparison of conceptual art and literature, when such a conspicuous distinction exists between them: whilst literature is not ‘visual art’, for all its claims to imperceptibility, conceptual art still largely continues to be so. However, Lamarque thinks that conceptual art might be considered similar to literature on two main counts. Firstly, due to the diminished role of the perceptual in the overall ontology of the work, secondly, because of a similarity in the specific role ideas can play and how ideas are used more generally. Lamarque quickly drops any potential exploration of how this ontology might compare to the case of conceptual art and makes a curious detour. “More interesting” than such ontological questions and comparisons, says Lamarque, “is the role of ideas in literary art and conceptual art”.⁹¹ Lamarque then follows this up by claiming that although it might seem that it is in relation to the role of ideas that the two art forms are most similar, “to anticipate, I don’t think the analogy is very strong”.⁹²

Here Lamarque explores a few possible analogies between literature and conceptual art, through specific reference to the use of ideas. The most promising analogy of what the idea is in literature, says Lamarque, is to think of it as a theme. “A theme is an idea or a conception, which gives coherence or interest to a work’s ostensible subject”. If the theme of *Animal Farm*, for example, could be said (rather crudely) to be communism, then this would, presumably, have gained its thematic character through our having engaged with its subject, i.e., the shift in the relations between the animals on the farm, after they have overthrown their human enslavers and expropriated from them the means of production. What seems significant about this account of how ideas—understood as “themes”—operate in literature, is that, as opposed to being clearly posited beforehand as propositions, they instead develop out of—acquire thematisation through—the very specific details of the work. In short, there is a “close integration” of theme and subject in literature.⁹³ In opposition to this, thinks Lamarque, in conceptual art, where there is an informing thematic idea, “it is only loosely, perhaps

⁹¹ Lamarque. (2007) P6

⁹² Lamarque. (2007) P7

⁹³ Lamarque. (2007) P7

metaphorically, connected to the specific item displayed, be it a performance, a sequence of numbers, a disparate collection of objects, an empty frame, lights turned on and off, a beach hut, a pile of clothes, or [...] a provocative sentence”.⁹⁴ Whilst the ideas and conceptions of conceptual art might “prompt reflective thinking of a thematic kind”, the close integration of subject and theme in the literary case—i.e., “the way the subject matter both enhances and defines thematic content”—is missing”.⁹⁵ If we are to compare literature to conceptual art along the lines of thematic coherence then, we would have to admit that any such complexity that is realised in conceptual art is, as we might say, “external not internal to the work”.⁹⁶ Lamarque will want to argue for the possibility of a more internal connection between the ideas and material of conceptual art, yet one which will not compromise the emphasis upon the idea.

Lamarque then attempts to find another literary device, which might be said to be more analogous to the operation of ideas in conceptual art. This device is “poetic conceit”—i.e. when two things that are ostensibly different come to be woven ultimately together by working out in details. Here, Lamarque uses the example of John Donne’s absent lovers, as being like legs of a compass or the sexual connotations he weaves out of a fleabite.⁹⁷ In poetic conceit, a potentially mundane idea is weaved into a metaphor of endless elaboration, the details of which emerge through the literary technique and skill of precision of expression, image and description. Conceptual art can use snippets of language to aspire to something like poetic conceit. However, claims Lamarque, it is ultimately incapable of working out and articulating its ideas—the only conditions under which they would become interesting, claims Lamarque⁹⁸—through such analogous elaboration. The central distinction that Lamarque seems to make between the use of ideas in literature and in conceptual art then, is that conceptual art lacks the resources⁹⁹ to tightly develop or to “follow through” on the ideas that it posits, merely having the basic capacity to “suggest”. This account, it should be recognised, sits

⁹⁴ Lamarque. (2007) P7

⁹⁵ Lamarque. (2007) P8

⁹⁶ Lamarque. (2007) P7

⁹⁷ Lamarque. (2007) P8

⁹⁸ Lamarque. (2007) P8

⁹⁹ Lamarque. (2007) P8

comfortably with the tendency in conceptual art to place an emphasis upon spectator participation.

What Lamarque takes from this diversion through the case of ideas in literature is that if it were true that conceptual art were trying to do something akin to literature with regards to the construction of its ontology, then we would have to say that it falls flat. Lamarque then directly concludes from this that, due to this potential inadequacy, we should resist thinking about the kind of separation between the perceived material “access” and the “work” that are common to theories about the ontology of literature. Instead, Lamarque claims that “to understand what is unusual and of interest in conceptual art it is best to hang onto something like the notion of appreciative experience and to recover at least some role for the visual aspects of conceptual art, thus returning us inevitably to perception.”¹⁰⁰ Whilst I wholly agree with the essential point that Lamarque is making, the particular manner in which he arrives at it is unconvincing.

Two points should be made here. Firstly, the investigation by way of a comparison with literature feels largely tangential. Lamarque shifts the issue at hand from the original investigation of comparing conceptual art to literature specifically *on the grounds that* literature is said to be non-perceptual, to a general comparison of different ways in which conceptual art can be considered analogous to literature, such as in the role played by ideas. It might well be the case that Lamarque thinks these are connected, i.e., that conceptual art attempts to be non-perceptual through emphasising ideas. If this were the case then the appeal to ideas and the subsequent suggestion that conceptual art might be perceptual would make more sense, but he doesn’t make this clear at any point. Secondly, the two reasons Lamarque gives for why conceptual art should stress perception at all—if, as some conceptual theory claims, the idea is paramount and what the object looks like is unimportant—are both normative in character. The first reason is (1) an idea *per se* is not sufficient to be art unless something is done with it—it is either

¹⁰⁰ Lamarque. (2007) P8. Another example of a thinker from this anthology who stresses the visual aspect of conceptual art is Gregory Currie, ‘Visual Conceptual Art’ P33-50

worked out or elaborated in an interesting manner.¹⁰¹ The second reason is (2) if conceptual art aligns itself too closely with non-perceptual art such as literature, then it appears an impoverished art form.¹⁰² Whilst I agree with the first point and with the implications that arise from it with regards to the necessity of factoring in perception, the second point is weak. First of all, it is not enough to say that conceptual art must be perceptual otherwise it would appear a diminished art form in relation to literature. An all too easy response to this would simply be to suggest that it in fact *is* a diminished art form and *does* in fact fall flat. More importantly however, it is not clear at all that conceptual art has pretensions to be akin to, or to align itself with, other non-perceptual art forms such as literature. Lamarque seems to make this analogy based purely upon the fact that conceptual art often uses text and thus trades upon a distinction between the material object and the work. However, whilst these features or tendencies might correspond somewhat to aspects characteristic of literature, one major distinction between the two seems prominent: conceptual art remains quite firmly a visual art, whereas literature is not. It seems to me that Lamarque could have made his point about the perceptual character of conceptual art much clearer and stronger by focusing his argument upon the way in which conceptual art, unlike literature, still largely deals in the production of discrete, often particularised, visual objects. This to me seems like a more obvious basis upon which to argue for an account of conceptual art that gives more consideration and centrality to the perception of material. I would like to go along with the direction of Lamarque's argument for the time being, i.e., that conceptual art might be best understood as necessarily perceptual, and to try to draw out the implications of his specific theory on the character and role of the material.

2. Experiencing Art as Art

One factor that appears consistently *of all art*, says Lamarque, is that we “experience” it *as art*.¹⁰³ Implicit within this claim is the idea that experience is essentially experience of a certain *kind* of thing. Experience is informed or directed by knowledge of the *kinds*

¹⁰¹ Lamarque. (2007) P8

¹⁰² Lamarque. (2007) P8

¹⁰³ Lamarque. (2007) P11

of objects we are experiencing.¹⁰⁴ Here Lamarque appears to be offering an example of how the wider notion of the ‘experiential’ aspect of art is rendered subservient to the ideational: our experience is directed by what we know about the *type* of thing we are encountering. As Lamarque has claimed that such an ontological distinction is common to *all art* however, a further qualification is required to articulate what is particular about works of varying kinds. An example is seen in relation to literature. Thinking about literature “highlights the distinctiveness between works and texts and concerns the idea of a distinctive attention to or interest directed at a text (or an object more generally).”¹⁰⁵ If the text is distinct from and underdetermines the work, then there must be a distinctive kind of attention we can have to that text, which bridges our access to the work. For Lamarque, in the case of literature, this constitutes a particular “kind of reading”.¹⁰⁶ It appears that what Lamarque takes to be unique about conceptual art is that this experience of distinctive attention emerges from a knowledge, not of the kind of work an artwork is—a literary work or a conceptual work— but rather, of whether something is an artwork or not in the first place. Conceptual art trades upon this distinction between artworks and mere things, precisely by presenting objects for visual attention which raise the question of whether or not they are art. Such commonplace, everyday objects are generally referred to as Readymades. For Lamarque, the distinction raised by such examples is “pivotal” for conceptual art and one of its “greatest contributions”.¹⁰⁷

Though his ultimate objective is to show that perception is necessary to an experience of conceptual art *as* conceptual art, Lamarque prepares the path by initially trying to demonstrate a much weaker claim, i.e., that ‘experience’ is constitutive of the distinction between a work of art and a mere real thing. This claim is weaker specifically because the category of “experience” is a much broader and inclusive category than “perception”. Whilst perception seems to be defined in relation to its specifically material object, experience, as Lamarque explains, encompasses both phenomenological and intentional content. Lamarque puts forward two principles,

¹⁰⁴ Lamarque. (2007) P11

¹⁰⁵ Lamarque. (2007) P11

¹⁰⁶ Lamarque. (2007) P10

¹⁰⁷ Lamarque. (2007) P11

which he calls the *empiricist principle* and the *distinctness principle*.¹⁰⁸ The empiricist principle states that “if there is a difference between a work and a ‘mere real thing’ or object (including a text) then that difference must yield, or be realizable in, a difference in experience.”¹⁰⁹ The distinctness principle, which is apparently a “corollary” to the empiricist principle, states that “if a and b are distinct works then there is an experiential difference between them, when experienced correctly”. Whilst it is difficult to see how the second principle is supposed to follow from the first, appearing more as a *parallel* than a corollary, Lamarque seems to drop the distinctiveness principle anyway, making no significant further reference to it. Let’s focus upon the empiricist principle for a moment then. Such a difference in experience, claims Lamarque, can either take the form of (1) phenomenological differences, which simply seems to designate broadly experiential or aesthetic seeming qualities like “pleasant, disturbing, vivid” (2) intentional content, or (3) both. Whilst Lamarque presupposes the necessity of (2), his aim is to ultimately argue for (3). Lamarque wants to suggest that in the case of the artwork, such a difference in experience predominantly requires an experience that is both intentional and phenomenological. If we take John Cage, to use Lamarque’s own example, merely listening to ambient sounds for 4’ 33’’ does not constitute an artwork. I generally agree with this point. Whilst it might be argued that the tendency for contemporary art to try to dissolve the boundaries between art and real life—through the introduction of commonplace objects into galleries and the phenomenon of site-specific performances and non-gallery based artworks, for example—might have rendered more acute the capacity to have experiences of everyday situations, events and objects which feel specifically *artistic*, there still remains, I think, a distinct attentiveness to intention, which occurs through the actual framing of a work. Lamarque also wants to claim that merely proposing the idea of the piece is not an experience of the work.¹¹⁰ To be capable of experiencing the work as a whole, we must instead experience the sounds through the intentional direction or framework Cage sets up.

¹⁰⁸ Lamarque. (2007) P12

¹⁰⁹ Lamarque. (2007) P12

¹¹⁰ He says, “there is no ‘work’ if Cage’s instruction collapses into a mere hypothesis or supposition, such as: suppose a performer sat in silence at a piano for 4’33’’. That might be an idea that underpins the work but it is not yet the work.” Lamarque. (2007) P13

As Arthur Danto famously states in his essay ‘The Artworld’, “to see anything as art requires something that the eye cannot descry.”¹¹¹ This idea is fleshed out in *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Here, Danto demonstrates how a group of perceptually indiscernible items could become distinct works of art that yield distinct experiences by way of the manner in which their titles act as an intentional direction for interpretation. “There is nothing particular about the kind of object that the artwork is”, states Danto, “which can determine it *as art*.”¹¹² For Danto then, a central characteristic of conceptual art is that the kind of material base, object or thing used, whilst perhaps a necessary component of the work, always “underdetermines”¹¹³ its work character. Lamarque wants to both agree with this point yet also move beyond it. For Lamarque, not only can the intentional direction of the title lead one to distinct experiences of indiscernible items—whether commonplace or artwork—but “quite possibly a different phenomenology”.¹¹⁴ These two positions are compatible for Lamarque: to experience art *as art* can both require “something that the eye cannot descry”, as well as potentially something that it *can*. Knowledge that what is perceived is a work of art and not a mere thing, as it were, can, according to Lamarque, alter the phenomenology of that object.

The implication seems to be that, in the case of the Readymade, the general principle, which Lamarque takes to be constitutive of all art, i.e., the experience of the work of art *as art*, is centralised and rendered perceptual. What this seems to imply is that for conceptual art, the issue of the ontology of the artwork becomes the prominent content of the artistic experience, whilst what characterises conceptual art as visual art is that such ontological issues must present themselves perceptually. In the case of the conceptual artwork, the “*as art*” experience—the very process or operation of artworks that necessitates a transfiguration of the material base into a work—is revealed or brought to light. This *requires* the perception of material base *as* mere material base, otherwise the experience of the work *as art* could not be presented for questioning. The distinctive mode of attention of conceptual art is, at least partially, a perceptual attention

¹¹¹ Arthur Danto, ‘The Artworld’ in (eds.) Lamarque and Olsen, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition: An Anthology*, (Blackwell Oxford, 2003) P32

¹¹² Danto. (1981) P19

¹¹³ Danto. (1981) P5

¹¹⁴ Lamarque. (2007) P13

directed towards the material object. This to me makes sense of the fundamental difference between literature and conceptual art previously mentioned, i.e., the latter is specifically *visual* art, whilst the former is not. Lamarque's central objective is to analyse the manner in which knowing that a material object—one which is perceptually indiscernible from an everyday object—is an artwork can affect our *perception* of that material object. This seems to pose the very interesting question of how ontology and perception interrelate within the distinct experience of the conceptual artwork.

However, it must be noted that even if the empiricist principle is true, at this point in the text, Lamarque has demonstrated only that there must be a proper 'experience' of conceptual art *as* conceptual art, wherein 'experiencing', Lamarque admits, is a vague¹¹⁵ and inclusive category, which might involve (but is not exhausted by and does not require) the sub-category of perception.¹¹⁶ Lamarque nevertheless asserts that, "there must be something that counts as perceiving (or experiencing) conceptual art *as conceptual art*."¹¹⁷ At this point, Lamarque is unjustified in introducing the concept of 'perceiving'. Lamarque seems to merely swap 'experience' for 'perception', as though they were interchangeable. If perception is a sub-category of experience, then arguing that X is the case for experience is not sufficient to show that X is the case for perception. By simply inverting the order of priority, such that perception is now made the subject of the sentence, supported by the parenthetically placed notion of experience, Lamarque manages to smuggle perception back into the picture without having argued for it. . For a convincing argument, Lamarque must either give a direct account of how intentional direction can affect *perception*, or he must offer some account of how his claim regarding experience relates to perception. It must be noted that Lamarque does not provide an adequate argument for this claim at any point in the text. Regardless of this, to assess whether the claim of perceptual necessity is plausible, it seems to me that everything rests upon what Lamarque means when he claims that the

¹¹⁵ Lamarque claims that literature and conceptual art "can be brought together by the admittedly vague term 'experience'." Lamarque. (2007) P11

¹¹⁶ "Note that 'experience' here includes but is not restricted to perceptual experience—it also covers the appreciative experience of reading literature as literature." Lamarque. (2007) P12

¹¹⁷ Lamarque. (2007) P12

intentional direction constitutive in transfiguring a mere real thing into an artwork can result in a different phenomenology.

3. *Perceptual* Transfiguration of the Commonplace

“My concern”, claims Lamarque, “is how perceptions are affected at a more *fundamental* level, the level at which a work is distinguished from a mere object.”¹¹⁸

The question, then, is how knowing, for example, that *Brillo Box*¹¹⁹ is an artwork and not a brillo box, can affect our perception of the material object in front of us. Lamarque seems to be suggesting that the process of ontological categorising affects perception in a more “fundamental” way than other kinds of distinctions. In the case of conceptual art, the generalised formula through which we experience X *as* a work of art is itself made prominent. For Lamarque, this results in a perceptual experience. If this is correct then an interesting picture of conceptual art begins to emerge in which it is precisely in the manner in which such art affects perception at the more fundamental level of ontology that it is distinguished from other art. Conceptual art then would not merely be a perceptual art form, but an art form for which perception were a fundamental and constitutive component.

But how precisely might we characterise Lamarque’s understanding of perceptual transfiguration? This rather crucial development in Lamarque’s text is not given any explicit elaboration. However, Lamarque states that when we experience what are otherwise everyday material objects as works of art, the objects literally *seem* in appearance to be “different from what they are”.¹²⁰ This claim taken on its own sounds slightly mystical. Lamarque appears to be implying that what is in actual fact an everyday object appears as something distinct from what it is. However, Lamarque then qualifies this position. What it is to perceive conceptual art as conceptual art, he tells us, is at least partially a perception of “saliencies and significance”.¹²¹ That is to say, artworks must invite a kind of perception which “*makes salient particular aspects and*

¹¹⁸ Lamarque. (2007) P12

¹¹⁹ Andy Warhol, *Brillo Boxes*, 1964

¹²⁰ Lamarque. (2007) P14

¹²¹ Lamarque. (2007) P13

suggests significance for them".¹²² If they do not do this then they have failed as artworks, "precisely because they have failed to distinguish themselves from the things that are their constitutive base."¹²³ Though Lamarque never clarifies through empirical examples precisely what he means by this, he appears to be saying merely that the intentional direction of the title can bring to light and make prominent or conspicuous certain features of the object which might have gone unnoticed in our everyday perceptions of them.

4. The Character and Role of Materiality

If it is correct that perception plays a constitutive role in an experience of the conceptual artwork, then it follows that the material element or objects of conceptual art must necessarily be central to the work. It cannot be the case that the material element merely provides a perceptual access *to* the work, as Schellekens seems to think, even if this role is given more importance through the necessity of the artwork's being a certain *kind* of object or thing. This is because the way in which that material element or object is "transfigured" perceptually must also be included as a constitutive part of the work. In fact, this perceptual attention to the transfigured object in Lamarque's account seems to constitute something like a 'focus of appreciation', as it is posited as the result or end to which the conceptual or the intentional directs us. For an artwork to establish itself *as* an artwork requires that it distinguish itself from its constitutive base, i.e. from the material object presented. In the first instance then, the material is significant insofar as it constitutes an everyday object, that is, an object, which comes already formed from matter and has a certain use in a non-art context, i.e. a Readymade. In the second instance, the title must pick out or bring to light certain inherent features of that object: it must give it, as Duchamp once stated, "a new thought".¹²⁴ Finally, this thought must be recognised *perceptually* through a visual encounter with the work. However, there are two related problems with Lamarque's theory. The first is that his analysis of conceptual art is based entirely upon an overly simplistic reduction of what a Readymade is and how it functions as art. The second is, despite the centrality he

¹²² Lamarque. (2007) P14

¹²³ Lamarque. (2007) P14.

¹²⁴ *The Blind Man*, Vol. 2, P5.

affords the material, his account fails to draw out with adequate complexity the character of the phenomenal change it assumes and this is at least partly due to the underspecified notion of materiality in Lamarque's account. I would now like to take these points in turn.

As he makes clear, Lamarque's analysis of conceptual art relies entirely upon what he calls the most "fundamental" ontological distinction, i.e., the distinction between an artwork and a mere real thing, which Danto brought to critical light in his investigation of the Readymade in *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.¹²⁵ It could then be argued that Lamarque's account is flawed specifically because it appears to reduce conceptual art *per se* to the case of the Readymade, which, one might claim, is nothing more than a sub-category of conceptual art. However, whilst I recognise that not all conceptual artworks are Readymades, I generally agree with Lamarque's point that the Readymade—and its artistic investigation into the ontological distinction—is "pivotal" for conceptual art, in that it was of crucial importance in the development of its logic. The logic of the Readymade has had a strong presence in contemporary art since the 1960s—brought to light and popularised even further by philosophers like Danto who extracted from it pressing ontological questions. However, to my mind, what is significant about this logic, and that which carries over into conceptual art practice is entirely missing from Lamarque's account.

Lamarque characterises the significance of the Readymade through a reductive formulation of its character as an artwork, i.e., as a relation between one discrete commonplace object and one concept or idea contained within the title. By virtue of this reduction, a central tendency of the Readymade and, I think, of conceptual art in general is marginalised. This tendency is how the Readymade operates to *effect* a separation between the material base and the work, in order to provoke a perceptual encounter of ontological categorising, yet to do so specifically through the bringing to light of the full complexity of the surrounding art-historical and contextual relations that condition

¹²⁵ As mentioned earlier *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* was inspired almost entirely by the Pop Art exhibition of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* at the Stable Gallery in 1964. For confirmation of Danto's distance from the slightly later conceptual art movement in New York art world of the late 1960s and early 1970s, see his interview 'Art and Analysis', in *Radical Philosophy*, 90 (July/August 1998), pp. 33–41

and enfranchise something as art. This was a point made in its full complexity by Danto himself, albeit in a manner that rendered the entire process overly cognitive, at the expense of an account of how materiality itself participated in this process. Yet in Lamarque's account, this complexity of the prominence of the ontological in Conceptual art gets reduced down into a simplistic formulation that such art attempted to overcome. A more sophisticated account of conceptual art needs to move beyond the simple formula just described and consider the ontological challenge of conceptual art in deeper terms. Conceptual art is not best considered as a tight relation between an object and an idea: it is not reducible to the mere inversion of the traditional relation between conceptual and perceptual. Instead—as the logic of the Readymade demonstrates—it is a more fundamentally ontological investigation into the conditions under which X is an artwork and an examination into where the artwork begins and where it ends.

The second problem with Lamarque's account concerns the way in which he characterises the role of material in the case of the Readymade. As we have seen, Lamarque's account formulates the relation between the title and the material object as one in which the idea or concept in the title directs a perceptual transfiguration of the object by suggesting certain "salience and significations", i.e., by suggesting a new way of seeing it. Lamarque does not provide an explicit statement of whether the material has a positive or resistant role to play in this account, or alternatively is a merely passive substrate which yields to whatever cognitive direction it is given. However, at one point in the text he seems to suggest that the material qualities of the objects *are* significant because they must first "invite a kind of perception, which makes salient particular aspects and suggests significance for them".¹²⁶ It seems from this quote that Lamarque is gesturing towards the idea that the process is not *exclusively* unidirectional: in addition to the title directing perception, the material object must be capable of inviting the necessary kind of perception for conceptual significations to be rendered salient. However, if the role of the material, when functioning well, is to "invite" the significations of the title this would seem to suggest that the relation

¹²⁶ Lamarque. (2007) P13.

between the two is a complementary and positive interaction. It does not seem to be part of the definition of the artwork for Lamarque that the material offers any recalcitrance which would secure it a role in the positive constitution of the work.

If we take the most famous example of a Readymade, Duchamp's *Fountain*, one might try to make sense of this idea by claiming that the material, in this case a common urinal, invites a perception that brings into phenomenological relief certain material qualities that the urinal already inherently possesses, but which typically go unnoticed unless pointed out. But what are these qualities? One might argue that a common urinal possesses qualities that can be identified as somehow reminiscent of a fountain and that it is these qualities that are drawn out by its title. One might then argue that an experience occurs in which the urinal is perceived, on some level, as a new, strange kind of object, a commonplace urinal with certain features reminiscent of a fountain. However, this does not seem to offer a convincing or very rich reading of *Fountain* and how it operates as an artwork.

Concluding Remarks

The significance of Lamarque's overall account is its insistence that a perceptual encounter with the material presentation of the work remains constitutive of that work. This account thus manages to retain a recognition of the significance of conceptual art's being a specifically *visual* form of art which predominantly involves objects produced for artistic presentation in a gallery. This account thus has the advantage of avoiding the overly strict marginalisation and instrumentalisation of the material object seen in Schellekens' account, which has been demonstrated to be at a disjuncture with an account of how conceptual art is actually experienced. However, Lamarque's account is problematic, precisely because it places too much emphasis upon the capacity of the cognitive processes to transfigure the material object, without an adequate account either of the manner in which those two elements interact, or of the positive role played by the material object with its particular material properties, in both formulating and providing recalcitrance to the concept or idea of the work. On Lamarque's account, the material object appears as a rather passive substrate which can be transformed merely by juxtaposing it with different concepts. Such a transformation seems to consist in the bringing to light of certain features already inherent within the material object, which

typically go unnoticed. However, it is difficult to see how this unnoticed aspect for Lamarque is anything more than the fact that it has certain perceptual similarities to another more exalted object. For Lamarque, the perceptual transfiguration through which we experience the coming into being of the urinal, for example, as art is constituted by a perceptual experience in which we perceive how it is possible to see a urinal as a fountain.

Part Three: Embodiment

Introduction

In his article, ‘Whatever Happened to “Embodiment”? The Eclipse of Materiality in Danto’s Ontology of Art,’¹²⁷ Diarmuid Costello suggests that, in so far as art practice remains a domain within which *particular* material objects, entities, or events are produced or presented, materiality must be afforded a more positive and constitutive role in the ontology of the artwork. As the title suggests, this text is a response to Arthur Danto’s ontology of art, as set out in *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Costello’s main argument is that, despite his description of works of art as “embodied meanings”, Danto’s ontology of art fails to take the *fact of embodiment* seriously,¹²⁸ because it gives insufficient attention to how materiality can rebound and impact upon intention and interpretation.¹²⁹ Costello effectively identifies Danto’s ontology as unidirectional: it places too much emphasis upon the power of cognitive processes—i.e., in this case, intention and interpretation—to simply “transfigure” the material object into an artwork. As a result, thinks Costello, “works of art tend to be rendered diaphanous by Danto’s actual analyses of them”, in that their semantic content is “extracted from its material host in such a way as to make whatever meaning they are held to embody amenable to paraphrase”. If works of art could be reduced to the “meaning-intentions” of the artist,

¹²⁷ Diarmuid Costello, ‘Whatever Happened to “Embodiment”? the eclipse of materiality in Danto’s ontology of art’ in *Angelaki: journal of the theoretical humanities*, Volume 12, No. 2. August 2007.

¹²⁸ Costello. (2007) P88

¹²⁹ Costello. (2007) P83

they would amount to little more than a “peculiarly indirect, encumbered and obscure form of utterance” as opposed to “works of art, properly so-called.”¹³⁰

However, a distinguishing feature of art, thinks Costello, is that its meaning exceeds any determinate intention that might have motivated it. For Costello, even in the case of more “cognitive” kinds of art, or art that is “governed at a higher level by intentional, and hence necessarily cognitive considerations (e.g to communicate x or represent y),”¹³¹ something must distinguish those works from mere statements of intent. Whilst a common question that emerges when faced with a work of contemporary art is “what might have moved someone to produce that? Or, what could something like this mean—as art?”, it is not the case that an adequate or desirable response to such art would be to merely answer this question.¹³² An experience of art does not simply exhaust itself in deriving an accurate interpretation of the artistic intention but, crucially for Costello, there persists a dimension that “engages and sustains our interpretive interest.”¹³³ To take the *fact of embodiment* seriously, claims Costello, requires an account of how material particularities of the work can both “enrich” and “constrain” the cognitive components of intention and interpretation. As we have seen, a problem with Lamarque’s theory was his failure to give an account of the manner in which the specificities of the material properties of the object might be capable of setting certain limits for the cognitive or intentional aspect of the work. It is my contention that Costello’s argument takes us one step beyond that of Lamarque’s, since it proposes that materiality both grounds cognitive processes—i.e., intention and interpretation—but also resists or is recalcitrant to them.

Such an account is potentially beneficial, as it disallows the construal of the material as a mere “prompt” through which we access the work—as Schellekens would have it. Instead, materiality is that which engages our interpretation and then *sustains* that engagement, through its being in excess of any easily identifiable or ultimate intention. Neither then, can the material be a mere “vehicle”, i.e., that which merely carries or

¹³⁰ Costello. (2007) P88

¹³¹ Costello. (2007) P87

¹³² Costello. (2007) P89

¹³³ Costello. (2007) P89

transmits the intended meaning. Instead, the material element of the work has a positive and active role in the constitution of the work: it “renders meaning sufficiently opaque to engage, and then sustain, our interpretative interest in the first place.”¹³⁴ For Costello, implicit within the definition of art is the idea that it generally involves non-cognitive excess. “There is always something in works that cannot be rationally accounted for”, claims Costello, “that, so to speak, is there, though not because the artist put it there”.¹³⁵ Despite this claim, Costello’s specific formulation of the positive and significant role of the material hinges upon his centralisation of the process of artistic labour. It is for Costello the process through which artworks are made which can come to constrain how they function semantically.¹³⁶

My line of analysis will be the following. Due to the problems which emerged from Schellekens’ attempt to render the material marginal in the case of conceptual art, I would like to take seriously Costello’s central claim. The claim is that, in most cases, when artists continue to produce and exhibit materialised artworks—even those of an explicitly intellectual kind, such as conceptual art—the meaning of the work cannot be identical with an intention implanted in it by an individual artist. Instead, a consequence of embodiment is that there emerges a certain material recalcitrance which prevents the work from being reducible to the simple communication of an artistic idea, concept or intention. However, I identify a problem with the specific manner in which Costello characterises this material recalcitrance, i.e., as the result of the “sedimentation” of the “affective responses” of the artist to the labour process.

By centralising the labour process of the artist, and by associating recalcitrance with “the sensuous, affective or intuitive responses” of the artist to the way in which their materials “look, sound or read” as they are being made, Costello’s account is rendered inadequate to an analysis of the “non-cognitive” recalcitrance of the material in the case of conceptual art more specifically. As a result of this emphasis, I will argue, the “corrective” element of Costello’s ontology ends up seeming somewhat expressionist.

¹³⁴ Costello. (2007) P88

¹³⁵ Costello. (2007) P89

¹³⁶ Costello. (2007) P87

Whilst I will note that “expressionism” and “conceptualism” are not opposed *per se*, Costello’s focus upon the “affective” dimension, which occurs through the “manipulation of materials” seems too close to the kind of “expressionism” that conceptual art attempted to eradicate: the expression of the inner feelings of the artist-subject. Such focus distorts conceptual art and is unable to provide a convincing account of for how material might be recalcitrant in such work. I would like to analyse the distinct problems that emerge and to see whether there might, nevertheless, be a way of holding onto the claim of the significance and recalcitrance of the material.

1. The Question of Conceptual Art

Before we look closer at Costello’s argument it is important to note that, unlike the texts by Schellekens and Lamarque, this article is not explicitly about conceptual art. Instead, as Danto’s before him, Costello is concerned with what he considers to be the “general conditions”¹³⁷ of art *per se*. Costello chooses to focus upon one specific condition of art, on account of its ostensible absence from Danto’s ontology: that artworks are “*generally* made from, and so inhere in, a material substrate invested with artistic significance through a distinctive kind of activity.”¹³⁸ Thus Costello views his article as offering a “corrective”¹³⁹ to Danto’s *general* ontology of art. However, whether conceptual art is supposed to be fully implied by, or is instead exceptional to this corrective as to the general conditions of art is not entirely clear. It in fact seems to occupy an ambiguous position within Costello’s theory.

Prior to setting out the main body of his theory, Costello makes reference to Richard Wollheim’s critique of Danto.¹⁴⁰ Wollheim finds Danto’s ontology of art problematic because it attempts to extrapolate what Wollheim considers to be exceptional cases, e.g. Danto’s hypothetical gallery of indiscernibles and the Readymade, into a general theory of art. For Wollheim, to generalise exceptional cases of artworks, and thus reconcile them with the general assumptions of art, is to falsify the concept of art. This is because

¹³⁷ Costello. (2007) P86

¹³⁸ Costello. (2007) P86

¹³⁹ Costello. (2007) P83

¹⁴⁰ See Richard Wollheim, in (ed.) Mark Rollins, *Danto and His Critics*, (Blackwell Publishing, New York, 1993), pp. 28-38.

exceptional cases in fact have a place within the concept of art *as exceptional* specifically because “art”, characteristically, has “indeterminate grounds for its applicability” and only “broad assumptions” can be made of it.¹⁴¹ Wollheim thinks there are two main assumptions that must hold for something to be art: that a work of art can be distinguished from a thing, and that two works can be distinguished from each other.¹⁴² However, as Costello points out, the fact that artworks exist, which do not adhere to either one or both of these assumptions—i.e., Duchamp’s *Bottle Rack*, (1914) or Sherrie Levine’s *After Walker Evans* (1981)—does not destabilise the assumptions.¹⁴³ To generalise exceptional cases is to deprive those cases of what is distinct about them—i.e., that their artistic identity often relies on their being *understood* as test cases for, or the vanishing point of, general assumptions—as much as it is to deprive the general assumptions of any sense.¹⁴⁴ For Wollheim, what is possible in the individual case may only be so because it is *not* possible in general.¹⁴⁵

Costello’s relatively lengthy reference to Wollheim’s argument, together with his use of what could be considered broadly conceptual works to exemplify it—*Bottle Rack* and *After Walker Evans*—implies that Costello thinks certain conceptual artworks might constitute exceptional cases. This need not be a problem. However, if conceptual art *as a whole* or even *for the most part* proved marginal to Costello’s general conditions of art, then Costello would not have produced the “adequate” ontology he was seeking, but a rather limited and conservative one. And, since the contemporary art world as a whole has little problem recognising conceptual artworks as art, and that such works—broadly conceived—have constituted a significant part of art practices for the last 40-50 years, the burden of proof would surely be on any philosophy that held conceptual art, at this point in history, to represent an exception to a general definition of art. For Costello’s “corrective” to be a sufficient responsive to Danto’s ontology of art, it must be capable of engaging with and encompassing at least a large amount of conceptual art, broadly conceived, such as the Readymade. This is because Danto’s ontology, though indeed

¹⁴¹ Wollheim. (1993) P32

¹⁴² Wollheim. (1993) P33

¹⁴³ Costello. (2007) P86

¹⁴⁴ Costello. (2007) P87

¹⁴⁵ Costello. (2007) P87

general, was nevertheless derived specifically from a study of the unique considerations brought to light by Pop art and the Readymade in particular.¹⁴⁶ If Costello's account could not engage with these kinds of works adequately, then it would not in fact be a corrective in any significant sense, but a mere add-on or perhaps even a counter-example. Whilst Costello does not make his position clear on this issue, it seems that he at least wishes to leave open as a possibility that his "corrective" element—that art generally inheres in and is an artistically manipulated material—*can* in fact apply to conceptual works, and even to those cases such as the Readymade. This seems apparent by the way that Costello's examples include works by Marcel Duchamp and Lawrence Weiner to suggest that they too might involve a form of "opacity" to meaning, which is perhaps explicable in the same manner as more traditional art.¹⁴⁷

2. The Centralisation of Artistic Labour

Costello chooses to focus on one particular element, which he feels is "underplayed" in Danto's ontology of art: artistic labour.¹⁴⁸ Costello's aim is to demonstrate that it is specifically through the process in which an artwork is made from a certain material that artworks resist being merely a form of cognitive communication, such as the communication of an intention. There are three discrete yet related points which I consider central to Costello's argument concerning the centralisation of artistic labour. (1) An artwork "(generally) comes into being" by being made.¹⁴⁹ (2) In the case of an artwork, "being made" generally means the "manipulation of some set of materials". (3) *Through* this process of manipulating materials, the artist has a "non-cognitive" and "non-goal oriented", that is to say a "sensuous, affective and intuitive", response to the process of making itself—to how the resulting work "looks, sounds or reads *as it is being made*"—which becomes "sedimented" in the work. I would like to now analyse

¹⁴⁶ See Zoe Sutherland, 'Interview with Arthur Danto' in *Naked Punch Review*, January 2009.

¹⁴⁷ Costello says this with reference to *Fountain*. (2007) P88

¹⁴⁸ Costello. (2007) P87

¹⁴⁹ This is a point that Costello considers to be missing from Danto's ontology of art. Costello thinks that by virtue of Danto's central metaphor of "transfiguration", i.e., the idea that mere real things are transfigured into artworks through interpretation, he underplays the labour involved in the making and interpreting of artworks. Costello. (2007) P87

these points one at a time in relation to the specific case of conceptual art in order to see what particular problems might arise.

a. Artworks are made

Costello's first claim is that works "(generally) come into being" by being made. Whilst this might seem at first glance to be a rather banal truism, it is not an entirely superfluous assertion to make about conceptual art. This is because a small number of artists have stated in their manifestos that with conceptual art, the work is the idea, and as such, it does not necessitate realisation.¹⁵⁰ In short, some conceptual artists claim that artworks in fact do not come into being by being "made", in any conventional sense of the word. Artists such as Sol LeWitt have claimed to have actually created, i.e., conceived of works, which need not and will not ever be materialised.¹⁵¹ Robert Barry has stated that he is unsure whether or not his piece *Electromagnetic Energy Field* (1968) actually exists, as its "intensity" is so "low".¹⁵² There are two responses one could make to such statements. It could be permitted that such hypothetical, i.e., non-realised works somehow exist, but that such works constitute an example of the kind of exceptional case that Wollheim identified. This would, however, imply the assumption that works could be mere ideas, or electromagnetic energy fields, for example. Alternatively, it could be argued that they do not exist, except at the level of theory.¹⁵³ One might then point to the ostensible disjuncture between conceptual art theory and practice and acknowledge that, despite their provocative claims to the contrary, those same artists, for the most part, continue to produce and exhibit in some materialised mode of presentation as part of their art practice. In this way, the claim that artworks generally come into being by being made, i.e., realised or materialised, could be said to be inclusive of conceptual art and does not necessitate the latter being rendered exceptional.

¹⁵⁰ See Sol LeWitt, *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, (1969)

¹⁵¹ Such artists include Sol LeWitt, Robert Barry and Lawrence Weiner.

¹⁵² Robert Barry, (ed.) Norvell, *Recording Conceptual Art*, 1969. P91

¹⁵³ Robert Barry makes this suggestion concerning *Electromagnetic Energy Field*. (ed.) Norvell. (2001) P91

However, for this claim to be adequate to the specific case of conceptual art, it would require a broad and inclusive notion of what it is for an artwork to “be made”. Even if one wishes to deny that artworks can be mere ideas, it is a fact that conceptual art emerged within of a context comprised of the “deskilling” of art education and the (so-called) “dematerialisation” of art practice.¹⁵⁴ Such tendencies can be identified as present as early as the 1910s with Dadaism and in Duchamp’s investigation into “social codes and values” inherent in attitudes towards labour and creativity.¹⁵⁵ The individual artist-subject was being decentralised from the process of “making” the artwork in any conventional sense, and conceptual artists employed various techniques in pursuing investigations into what this could entail and what the artistic implications were. These techniques include, but are not exhausted by, the following tendencies. The first tendency is the marginalisation or even elimination of the hand of the artist by relying on the skills of other productive labourers such as craftsmen to make the work.¹⁵⁶ Such a division of labour is ubiquitous within conceptual art. For example, in *Untitled* (1973) Michael Asher employed a team to sandblast the ceiling and walls of a private Milan gallery, to expose the underlying plaster. However, such a division of labour was not only present when specialist workforces were needed: conceptual artists merely producing objects for the gallery also employed others to perform their execution. Sol LeWitt, for example, typically sent his sculptural works to be fabricated by professionals.¹⁵⁷ The second tendency is the exhibition of found objects, often of an industrially produced and typically functional character. The first found object presented as art was, of course, Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* (1913).¹⁵⁸ However, this strategy carried over into conceptual art practice. An example would be Joseph Kosuth’s *A Two Metre Square Sheet of Glass to Lean Against the Wall*, (1965), which

¹⁵⁴See Michael Petry, *The Art of Not Making: The New Artist/Artisan Relationship*, (Thames & Hudson, London, 2011). P7

¹⁵⁵ Petry. (2011) P7. Petry contextualises this investigation as a reaction against the old hierarchical distinctions between the artist and the productive labourer, which had become acute between the 16th century, with the rise of the artist to the intellectual class, and the 18th century, with the standardisation of state-sponsored academies. The productive distinction hinged around the concept of usage and function, with the craftsman producing functional objects and the artist producing beautiful objects with no social or didactic purpose.

¹⁵⁶ This practice occurs as early as the 1910s with artists such as Duchamp but become ubiquitous in the artworld from the 1960s onwards.

¹⁵⁷ Lucy Lippard, ‘Sol LeWitt: Non-Visual Structures’ in *Artforum*, April 1967

¹⁵⁸ *Bicycle Wheel* was retrospectively named a “Readymade” in 1915.

consists of an industrial, two-metre sheet of glass, leant against the wall. The third tendency is the appropriation of the artworks of others. Robert Rauschenberg famously employed this technique in his work *Erased de Kooning*, (1953)—a precursor to conceptual art—when de Kooning deliberately gave Rauschenberg a heavily marked drawing to laboriously erase. Peter Osborne has interpreted this in part as a specific “refusal” on the part of Rauschenberg of the connotations of expressionism.¹⁵⁹ Certain conceptualists took up this technique of appropriation. For example, Marcel Broodthaers’s work *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hazard*, (1969), is comprised of a book of Mallarmé’s poems in which certain words are replaced with thick black lines, such that the meaning of words is reconfigured through their spatial and typographic relations on the page.¹⁶⁰ This exemplifies a destabilisation of conventional artistic skills as grounding any definition of artistic authorship and demonstrates the idea of art as a kind of art-historical palimpsest.

What such tendencies exemplify is that conceptual art practice constitutes an investigation, not merely into what can and cannot be permitted as art,¹⁶¹ but also into *how* something can become art. To construe an account that emphasises the individual artist’s process of making as central to the “coming into being” of the conceptual artwork thus necessitates an expansive notion of what it is for the artist to “make” a work of art, such that it is able to incorporate a whole range of practices such as nomination, conception and performance. In addition to this it would require the recognition that the process of “making”, more traditionally conceived, was no longer primarily carried out by the artists themselves.

b. Artistic Labour as the Manipulation of Materials

With this in mind, Costello’s second point—i.e. that for an artwork to “be made” generally means the “manipulation of some set of materials”—looks like it is going to

¹⁵⁹ See Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, (2002) P57. I think it is important to qualify this by saying that it is more accurately the “refusal” of a particular understanding of expressionism, i.e., the ex-pression outwards of something internal, which specifically confesses something personal and subjective.

¹⁶⁰ See Peter Osborne, (2002) P167

¹⁶¹ Whilst Lucy Lippard is correct in identifying conceptual art practice as having the tendency of a kind of “free-for-all”. See Lippard. (1973). vii

be problematic. At first glance, this appears to be a rather conventional definition of artistic making, which instantly brings to mind the process of sculpting, i.e. shaping and *transforming* material with the hands, more particularly. To be capable of encompassing conceptual art it would need to be clarified how either the less conventional materials of such art, and/or the decentralisation of the artist as maker, could be accommodated by this definition. Whilst Costello does not explicitly elaborate on this, various points of the article indicate that he at least wants to leave room for the possibility of a more inclusive notion of the process of making. Firstly, qualifying that the making of art requires “*some set of*” materials, implies the category of “materials” is open and is thus capable of incorporating a range of distinct kinds. Secondly, Costello informs us that he has selected the term “artistically worked material” to avoid the “conservative assumptions” triggered by the word “medium”.¹⁶² A bit later, Costello appears to offer an example of what such “conservative” assumptions might involve, when he notes that Duchamp’s *Fountain* has not been worked upon “*in any traditional sense*, i.e. it has not been ‘worked by hand’”.¹⁶³ This would then suggest that the category of “artistically worked materials” is in fact *not* limited merely to the manipulation of a material with the artists’—or anybody else’s—hands.

The possibility is left open, by virtue of these qualifications, that Costello’s identification of the process of making with the manipulation of materials could in fact be applied to conceptual artworks, which, as we have seen, often decentralise conventional forms of artistic labour, or at least distance them from the role of the artist. However, in this case, Costello would need a nuanced account of what can count as a “material” and what it is for an artist to “manipulate” them, both of which are largely missing from his article. In the face of such an absence of elaboration, there are certain works of conceptual art that would clearly seem to problematise this emphasis. For example, it would be difficult to identify precisely what constitutes the material in a work such as Robert Barry’s *Inert Gas Series* (1969), such that artist could be said to

¹⁶² Costello. (2007) P86. This preference of “artistically worked material” over “medium”, specifically in order to avoid conservative assumptions strikes one as surprising after David Davies’ significant expansion of the term medium three years prior to this in *Art as Performance*, (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004)

¹⁶³ Costello. (2007) P88

have “manipulated” them. In this work—if we emphasise the artistic process of making—Barry released 2 cubic feet of helium into the Californian desert and, keen to get away with as minimal presentation as he could,¹⁶⁴ presented to the gallery a short textual description of his action. As Barry has explained, the gallery often insisted upon, and went as far as to supply themselves, a photograph to accompany his texts, as a means of rendering the work more exhibit friendly.¹⁶⁵ Again, we see here the distribution of artistic labour. As it is implausible to try to argue that the text—literally a single sentence description—constitutes the “manipulation of a set of materials” in any significant sense, it might lead one to the conclusion that the artist’s materials are something other than the text. If we were to take the artist at his word, we would say that the work’s material is neither the text, nor the photograph, but is instead the inert gas itself, which he released into the atmosphere of the Californian Desert.¹⁶⁶ However, I think that to take such a claim seriously is to miss the strategic component of the artist’s claims and to subsequently miss the irony of the work. As I have already suggested, there exists a tendency in conceptual art to decentralise the artist from any interaction with conventional forms of making and conventional materials. By performing a refusal to engage with any material, other than of a completely minimal and impersonal nature, Barry investigates the bare minimum ontological conditions that an artwork needs to exist. In doing so, he forces particular conditions to come forward: in this case, the requirements for comfortable institutional viewing.

However, even if we went along with Barry, and took him at his word that the inert gas was indeed the material element of the work, it would still need to be established in what sense could we say that Barry had *manipulated* his materials. It is clearly not by feeling or shaping the gas, or rendering it malleable by use of the hands. As we have already seen though, this is not a problem for Costello, as his account does not tie itself to such a definition. We might then claim that Barry has “manipulated” the gas by

¹⁶⁴ “I sort of start first of all with the idea of *no* presentation...And then I say, well, the next step, what is the *least* amount of presentation I can get away with?” Robert Barry. (ed.) Norvell. (2001) P90

¹⁶⁵ Barry. (ed.) Norvell. (2001) P91

¹⁶⁶ “I did a show for Seth [Siegelaub] where the material was inert gas, which is odourless and colourless and imperceptible.” (ed.) Norvell. (2001) P89. In the same interview, Barry also refers to “mental energy” as a “medium”. P90

skilfully controlling it, through releasing it into an environment with which he knew it would not mix. However, this doesn't seem right either. Since it is the very *nature* of the gas not to be reactive, neither Barry's intention, nor his act of releasing the gas could be considered to be a "manipulation". In a sense, Barry's relation to his materials—if we believe those materials to be gas—can be considered the opposite of manipulative. As Barry himself explains, he works with materials "without imposing my will, or, as much as possible, imposing some preconceived system on them. I guess I'm sort of a phenomenologist in the sense that 'being', sort of reveals itself."¹⁶⁷

c. The Affective Response to Materials in the Artistic Process

Costello's third point is, I think, considerably more problematic in the case of conceptual art. Costello claims that "*through* the process of manipulating materials, the artist's sensuous, affective and intuitive responses to the process of making itself—to how the resulting work looks, sounds or reads *as it is being made*—impacts upon, or becomes "sedimented" in the work".¹⁶⁸ This is true, thinks Costello, "whether the material is a sanctioned medium such as paint on canvas, novel juxtapositions of old bicycle parts, pixels in a computer-manipulated photograph, the creation of large-scale environments, the arrangement of shop-bought items of display shelves, or the bare nomination of objects as art."¹⁶⁹ It is difficult to clarify precisely what Costello means by the artist's "sensuous, affective and intuitive responses", but broadly this seems to designate that which is in excess of the strictly cognitive and intentional or "goal-oriented" relations that the artist has to the material. Bearing in mind what we have already discovered about the artist's process of making in conceptual art, this creates various difficulties.

If we take the example of Duchamp's *50cc of Paris Air* (1920), the problem of artistic authorship in conceptual art re-emerges. Duchamp asked a pharmacist to empty a bottle containing 'physiological serum' and took the bottle to a glassblower to be blown into a shape. Duchamp then sent the bottle to Walter Arsenberg, the major collector of

¹⁶⁷ Barry. (ed.) Norvell. (2001) P91

¹⁶⁸ Costello. (2007) P87

¹⁶⁹ Costello. (2007) P88

Duchamp's work,¹⁷⁰ claiming that he had sent him something that his money could not buy: the Parisian air. Whilst Duchamp might very well have had an "affective" response to the process of making this work, any attempts to make Costello's claim work for this example feel rather strained. First of all, it is difficult to see what precisely the material might be, such that one could claim that Duchamp's responses were to the way in which such material 'looked, sounded or read' whilst he was making the work. We might claim that Duchamp had "affective" responses to watching the pharmacist or the glassblower's interaction with the making process, but this does not seem to be what Costello has in mind, as he insists that the artist responds specifically to his own process of manipulation of such materials. More significantly, it is difficult to see how *Duchamp's* non-cognitive responses to the making of this work could possibly "impact" upon it in any significant manner, or become "sedimented" in the work, as is suggested by Costello. It is not entirely clear to me precisely what Costello means when he says that such responses become "sedimented" in the material form of the artwork, yet it does seem that Costello believes that, once "sedimented", these responses *appear* in some manner, i.e., that sedimentation of the affective and intuitive response of the artist become visible or can be perceived. Of Lawrence Weiner's *A 36" Square Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall or Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall, 1969*, (1969), Costello claims that it is the "the specific perceptible qualities of the materials in which [the work's] meaning is embodied, and how those materials affect us",¹⁷¹ which constitute and complicate that part of a work's identity which is in tension with its cognitive or intentional content. This, for Costello, "mirrors" the affective response of the artist. If the affective response of the artist must become perceptible, it is difficult to see what "sedimentation" might mean in the case of Duchamp's *50cc of Paris Air*.

In a further attempt to make Costello's argument work, we might instead claim that the bottle displays certain patterns—in fact, distinctly cartographic patterns, rather reminiscent of an old map—due to traces of 'physiological serum' that were left in the

¹⁷⁰ Walter Arsenberg collected 40 works of Duchamp's between 1915-1950. See Ecke Bonk, (Trans.) David Britt, *Duchamp: the portable museum: the making of the Bête-en-Valise* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1989). P18

¹⁷¹ Costello. (2007) P89

bottle by the pharmacist. This might be the result of the pharmacist's "non-cognitive" response to their part of the process of making the work, i.e., the act of emptying the bottle. It is quite plausible that the glassblower might be responsible for admitting into the work his or her "affective" responses. One might then argue that those conceptual works made specifically through a collective division of distinct kinds of labour might bear affective traces in their material which the artist did not put there. This would create an account on which the artist might be cast as operating the controlled or intentional dimension, whose rational calculations are simultaneously "enriched" or "restricted" by the craftsman and his relation to the materials. The meaning of *50cc of Paris Air* could not then be reducible to Duchamp's intention to have this work made and to send it to Walter Arsenberg, or to send a bourgeois art collector one thing that his money could not buy. Instead, the meaning of the work is necessarily "enriched" and "restricted" through the non-cognitive impact of the craftsman. Such an idea, as it happens, might even chime with an artist like Duchamp, who was, after all, notoriously interested in inserting "chance" and contingency into more precise and controlled systems of production.¹⁷² However, to read Costello's account in this manner, I think, would be to go beyond the remit of this particular text, which insists that the artwork "comes into being" through a kind of tension between the cognitive and non-cognitive processes *of the artist with their materials* specifically. The "sensuous, affective, and intuitive" response which Costello thinks operates in resistance to the cognitive, goal-oriented intentions of the artist, is, for Costello, the response *of* that artist. Whatever the artist tries to communicate emerges in part through their relation to their materials. In the absence of an elaboration as to what the "manipulation of materials" might mean for conceptual artworks more specifically, and through focusing upon the "the sensuous, affective or intuitive responses" of the artist to the way in which their materials "look, sound or read" as they are being made, Costello's account seems slightly too anchored within a conventional understanding of art making to be able to accommodate most conceptual art.

¹⁷² For a more detailed account of this, see Michael Sanouillet, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, (Da Capo Press, New York, 1973). See John Roberts, *The Intangibility of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*, (Verso, London, 2008).

IV: Expressionism and Conceptual Art

Costello's attempt to re-emphasise the "the sensuous, affective or intuitive responses" of the artist to the way in which their materials "look, sound or read" as they are being made—his "corrective"—could, to a large extent, be construed as the reinstatement of an element of "expressionism" in the ontology of art.¹⁷³ Costello's is, as we have seen, responding to Arthur Danto's ontology of art, as laid out in *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. In a separate text entitled, 'Danto and Kant, Together at Last?'¹⁷⁴ Costello refers to Danto, (and to Kant), as a "proponent of expressionism in the philosophy of art."¹⁷⁵ Now, of course, Danto's ontology of art in *Transfiguration* is not about art as "expressionism" in any conventional sense of the term, i.e., as the gestural expression of an inner *feeling*, typically associated with German Romanticism and with Abstract Expressionism.¹⁷⁶ Instead, Danto is a proponent of expressionism, thinks Costello, in the sense that he considers works of art to "embody, and thereby express, the mental states (broadly construed to encompass beliefs, attitudes and feelings) of those that created them and, if successful, to dispose their viewers to a similar state."¹⁷⁷ It might be argued, therefore, that in re-emphasising the affective dimension of the manipulation of materials, Costello is reinstating a role for a more sensuous and materially-located expressionism within what have come to be considered predominantly cognitive forms of art.

One might think that any appeal whatsoever to expressionism in the formulation of an account of conceptual art would be misguided, due to the fact that many conceptual

¹⁷³ An analogy might be made at this point between Costello's "corrective" element and R.G. Collingwood's theory of art as expression. In distinction from craft, whereby the craftsman crucially must have a very precise idea of what he wants to make before he makes it, the artist becomes conscious of and individuates or substantiates to the point of clarity, what it is that he is trying to express, *through* the process of making it. See R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1938)

¹⁷⁴ Diarmuid Costello, 'Danto and Kant, Together at Last?' In (ed.) Stock, K & Thompson-Jones, K, *New Waves in Aesthetics*, (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2008)

¹⁷⁵ Costello. (2008) P245

¹⁷⁶ Incidentally, Arthur Danto is *personally* a proponent of Abstract Expressionism. Before he began his career as a philosopher and art critic he was an artist, making Expressionist style wood block prints. He gave up making art upon encountering Pop Art and realising that art was no longer about expression. See Zoe Sutherland, 'Interview with Arthur Danto' in *Naked Punch Review*, January 2009.

¹⁷⁷ Costello. (2008) P245

artists set out to evacuate all traces of the emotional, the affective and the subjective from their work. Sol LeWitt has claimed how, “to work with a plan that is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity,”¹⁷⁸ and suggested that conceptual artists usually want their work to be “emotionally dry”.¹⁷⁹ However, as the *October* writer Isabelle Graw has pointed out, “conceptualism” and “expressionism” need not be entirely polarised terms.¹⁸⁰ Whilst it is the case that most conceptual artists sought to erase a specific *form* of “expression”—i.e., the *ex*-pression of an internal and inchoate emotion or feeling of the artist¹⁸¹—in order to curb the importance of subjective authorship, this does not entail that such art is not expressive.¹⁸² In fact, even the most ostensibly inexpressive conceptual works, claims Graw, are not entirely devoid of expression.¹⁸³ Works such as *Wall Drawings* by Sol LeWitt, which employ conceptual forms of planning—i.e., the imposition of a “system”, which then apparently makes the artistic decisions—can exhibit what Graw calls a “residual expression”.¹⁸⁴ But what precisely does Graw mean

¹⁷⁸ Sol LeWitt, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, (1967) in (ed.) Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, (2002) P214

¹⁷⁹ Sol LeWitt. (ed.) Osborne. (2002) P214

¹⁸⁰ See Isabelle Graw, ‘Conceptual Expression: On Conceptual Gestures in Allegedly Expressive Painting, Traces of Expression in Proto-Conceptual Works, and the Significance of Artistic Procedures’ in *Art After Conceptual Art*, (MIT, Massachusetts, 2006). In this text, Graw attempts to overcome the dichotomy, which she considers to have been constructed between the conceptualism of the 1960s and neo-expressionist painting of the 1980s. The motivation for this text seems to be to show that assuming one notion over the other is insufficient for assuming a critical artistic stance.

¹⁸¹ As Graw explains, “while ‘Expression’ is a central category of idealist aesthetics, reactivated at first by German Romanticism and later by Expressionism and ‘neo-expressionism’ and it always remains tied to the subject, the importance of this subject was to be curbed in ‘conceptual art’. Ideas, concepts, or systems were to ensure that, ideally the subject would play virtually no role. The artistic subject thus submitted to an external specification, and it was held that subjectivity would, in this way, cease to play any role in artistic production.” (2006) P127. Conceptual artists found expressionism based on the internal feelings of the subject as “hopelessly contaminated”, because they were linked to processes of value-formation and relations to the market.

¹⁸² This decentralisation of the artist-subject has been endlessly played out as an artistic *theme* through the 1980s and 1990s and even up to the current period. As Julian Stallabrass has claimed of the Young British Artists, while the means by which art is pursued are “steadily less expressive of the artists personality, more reliant on conventional ideas than feelings, more the assemblage of ready-made elements than the creation of organic compositions, the personality of the artist, far from shrinking, has greatly expanded, sometimes overshadowing the work. Furthermore, the very fact that artists do very little to their material but nevertheless garner huge rewards leads to a fascination with the artist as an individual.” See Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, (Verso Books, London, 1999).

¹⁸³ Isabelle Graw. (2006) P130

¹⁸⁴ Isabelle Graw. (2006) P121. Sol LeWitt is an example of an artist who notoriously favoured such “system-based” conceptual procedures, as a way of avoiding the expression of his artistic subjectivity. See *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*. (1969)

by the term “residual expression” and how does this relate to Costello’s notion of “sedimentation”?

There appear to be two distinct kinds of “residual expression” which Graw thinks can occur in conceptual works. The first kind of “residual expression” is an unavoidable, minimal level of aesthetic or formal preference, inherent within the selection of all presentational modes, artistic practices or processes. Through merely choosing an artistic procedure, even if that procedure is a “system”, the artist simply cannot avoid expressing *some* personal predilection or enthusiasm for a specific form or style.¹⁸⁵ This is a familiar argument, one that is often used as a corrective to Duchamp’s claim that the basis upon which he chose the urinal for his work *Fountain*, was that it was aesthetically indifferent. In this case, “expression” is not the externalisation of a deep emotional state or feeling of the subject, but ostensibly a rather accidental confession of a preference for certain styles. The distinction between, for example, Abstract Expressionism and conceptual art on the issue of this first notion of expression then, might be related to intention. Whilst a central objective of Abstract Expressionism might be to express the emotional, intuitive and psychological state of the artist, any such expression that occurs in conceptual art is truly “residual” to the artistic process, and not a fundamental component of the process itself.

The second kind of “residual expression” Graw identifies is not concerned with the artist-subject at all, and Graw seems to refer to it as a means of demonstrating that “expressionism” does not require the centrality of an expressive subject: even the most seemingly objective processes can have expressive possibilities. To take an example of an artwork used by Graw herself, in *Variations Piece No. 34* (1970), Douglas Huebler photographed a variety of people’s faces immediately after telling them that they were “pretty”. Each facial expression that was captured stood as a confession as to what effect compliments of this sort had on people. In Graw’s eyes, this artwork examined “a sort of phenomenology of expression under the conditions of a celebrity culture characterised by a generalisation of the Culture Industry in which vacuous compliments

¹⁸⁵ Isabelle Graw. (2006) P124

are liberally dispensed.”¹⁸⁶ For Graw, what is expressed is in no significant or fundamental way anything about the artist, but instead, constitutes an expression of the “circumstances” that the work sets up, and the manner in which those circumstances frame or allow the “expression” of wider social conditions.¹⁸⁷ Another example Graw draws upon is John Baldessari’s *The Back of all Trucks Passed While Driving From Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, California, Sunday 20 January, 1963*. (1963). Baldessari photographed a range of trucks from the back, but at slightly different angles. Each one, in some way, resembled a face.

The fact that Graw uses multiple examples wherein the “expressionist” content of the work is designated by the fact that the work represents or gestures towards facial expressions is, I think, quite problematic and misleading, as it implies that her theory can be reduced down into a crude notion of expressionism in conceptual art.¹⁸⁸ If all it means for conceptual art to be capable of containing expressionist tendencies is that some works contain or allude to human facial gestures, it would seem that the dichotomy between “expressionism” and “conceptualism” had not really been challenged in the manner initially claimed in Graw’s text. In the place of an expression of the inner feelings of the artist-subject, expressionism on this account would be reducible to either the literal facial expression of someone other than the artist, as in the case of Huebler’s *Variations Piece No. 34*, or the rather gestural examples of the expression of human faces, which can be found to be contained within inanimate objects, such as the trucks in Baldessari’s piece, *The Back of all Trucks Passed While Driving From Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, California, Sunday 20 January, 1963*. To my mind, by choosing mostly examples such as these, Graw is in danger of obscuring what is interesting about her argument, i.e., the claim that “expressionism” does not require a subject and that even the most seemingly dry and objective processes can have

¹⁸⁶ Isabelle Graw. (2006) P130

¹⁸⁷ Isabelle Graw. (2006) P130

¹⁸⁸ Another example that Graw uses is of Adrian Piper’s *Catalysis* (1970), where Piper walked the streets wearing a T-shirt with “Wet Paint” written with wet paint. In Graw’s eyes, this is “expressionist” specifically because “any bodily movement is thus transmuted into a painterly gesture, provoking reactions from passers-by. This work engages, so to speak, in “expressology” by calling upon bystanders’ radically motivated fears of contact, translating them into the code of painting, and thus rendering them visible.” (2006) P122

expressive possibilities. This particular idea would perhaps be more capable of encapsulating what would need to be distinct about “expressionism” in its relation to “conceptualism”.

The most central and significant point that Graw is making is, I believe, that if conceptual art can be said to display a “residual expression”, then such residue is more accurately to be understood as an expression of more objective “circumstances” and of non-subject-centred processes of artistic making. Expression in conceptual art could not be predominantly expression of the internal emotions or intuitions of the artist-subject, but, crucially, neither is it the response of the artist *to* the process or procedure, even of more conceptual forms of making. For Costello’s account to be capable of accommodating this idea, it would need to abandon its commitment to understanding the “sedimentation” of “non-cognitive” and “non-goal oriented” responses to material as the result of the response of the artist to the way such materials “look, sound or read” during the process of making. This is because, whilst Costello’s account of the “manipulation of some set of materials” might be capable of referring to more conceptually-controlled processes of making, such as the imposition of “systems”, it is misleading for a theory that wishes to accommodate the distinct case of conceptual art to claim that it is the *artist’s* affective responses to such systems, which become, in any way, a *significant* residue in the work.

The Material Revisited

As I have demonstrated, adhering to an account which centralises the “manipulation of materials” by the artist-subject raises problems for and is, I think, ultimately inadequate to conceptual art. This does not necessarily mean that conceptual works are entirely devoid of affective dimensions. However, if such dimensions can still be said to be present in the conceptual work, it might be the case that they are better understood—along the lines of Graw’s thesis—as the “residual expression” of the context or circumstances that the work sets up. What is clear however, is that to posit the “affective response” of the artist to how the materials “look, sound or read” as they are being manipulated is not convincing. The question then is whether Costello’s original

point—that the artwork is not reducible to the transmission of an intended meaning,¹⁸⁹ because the materiality of the work not only grounds and sustains, but offers resistance to both intention and interpretation—might still apply to such art generally. For this to be possible would require a notion of material “resistance” which is different from that of the “sedimentation” of the “affective response” of the artist to the materials through the process of making the work. Costello’s claim that “there is always something in works that cannot be rationally accounted for—that, so to speak, is there, though not because the artist *puts* it there,”¹⁹⁰ must perhaps be taken in its strongest formulation, i.e., that which cannot be accounted for is not best understood as the response of an artist-subject at all, either a “cognitive” or an “affective” response.

Towards the end of his text, Costello turns his attention away from intention and the process of making and more towards the issue of interpretation. Costello’s main point is this: just as an artist’s intention is necessary but not sufficient to make what he or she produces art, so, correspondingly, interpretation is necessary but not sufficient to treat what he or she has produced as art.” The material form *itself*, in which meaning or intention is embedded, occasions an “affective dimension” and it is due to this fact that the work can “elicit” and “sustain” interpretation in the first place. Significantly for Costello, such an “affective dimension” occasioned by the material form itself is capable, not merely of embodying meaning, but of resisting it by rendering it opaque,¹⁹¹ hence, I presume, the interpretive sustenance: the implication is that we retain an interpretive interest in the work precisely because we cannot render its interpretation transparent.¹⁹²

To illustrate this point, Costello takes as his example Lawrence Weiner’s *A 36” Square Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall or Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall*, (1969). He selects this work specifically because he feels that it consists, in many respects, of exactly what the title describes,¹⁹³ i.e., it is ostensibly identical to its concept or intention. The question, then, becomes what it is precisely about the work which

¹⁸⁹ Costello. (2007) P89

¹⁹⁰ Costello. (2007) P88-89

¹⁹¹ Costello. (2007) P89

¹⁹² Costello. (2007) P89

¹⁹³ Costello. (2007) P89

disallows a simple identification between interpretation and meaning. For Costello, there seem to be two central drives in the work. Firstly, there is the process of interpretation, which attempts to arrive at a work's meaning. Costello describes this by reference to what Danto calls an 'enfranchising theory', which positions and legitimates an artwork historically in its relation to other works and to the historical trajectory of art more generally. Such interpretation secures the work a certain *historical* particularity. Secondly, there is the grounding of and resistance to such interpretation. The material qualities of the work must not only invite such a historically specific "enfranchising theory", but must also secure the work "as the *specific* work that it is".¹⁹⁴ It appears to be this specificity that Costello thinks is capable of resisting such simple interpretation. As Costello notes of the work, "the rough texture of the wall exposed by the removal invokes the history of reductive monochrome painting". However, it can do so because "the texture of the wall revealed, and the way the rough edges of the removal operate like a kind of negative after-image of the paint-encrusted edges of the canvas that was once there, if only virtually, that is, before painting was historically superseded on the reductive, essentialist and teleological theory of art history, that this work invokes." It seems that for Costello it is the particularity, secured to the work specifically by its material element, which constitutes the recalcitrance of the work. For Costello the "affective dimension", which is occasioned by the work's material form, e.g., in this case, the "rough texture of the wall" affected by the removal, somehow "mirrors"¹⁹⁵, or is a reflection of the "affective responses" of the artist to the materials as they are being manipulated. However, to my mind, it does not seem necessary that this be the case.

Concluding Remarks

After analysing a variety of works, it seems that the centralisation of artistic labour—as the "affective responses" of an individual artist to how the work looks, sounds or reads as it is being made—is ultimately misleading and inaccurate as an account of conceptual works more particularly. The fact that this account manages to render marginal a significant amount of conceptual works results, I think, in its applicability as a

¹⁹⁴ Costello. (2007) P89

¹⁹⁵ Costello. (2007) P88

meaningful “corrective” to Danto being questionable. However, this does not necessarily mean that we must abandon Costello’s main point altogether, i.e., that works of art resist being reducible to any straightforward notion of the communication of intention or meaning, by virtue of the recalcitrance that emerges through their being embodied in a material form. If such recalcitrance is not to be explained through recourse to notions of the subjective, then we must seek an explanation which is capable of construing it in more objective terms. As we have seen, much conceptual art emphatically decentralised the specific labour of the artist, conventionally understood, in a variety of ways. One of the central effects that this had was to demonstrate, as Kosuth explains, that things are art “in their use (relation) not through the aesthetic choice, composition, craftsmanship”.¹⁹⁶ On this account, art functions or comes to life through its active relations to its surroundings. We might then seek an understanding of the positive role of materiality through this specific form of objective lens: to take the artwork in its own relations.

Summary of Chapter One

The theoretical claims of a small group of conceptual artists have come to heavily mediate an intellectually focused understanding of, and engagement with, conceptual art. It is my contention that it is necessary to return more explicitly to the actual works themselves which, regardless of the theoretical claims of certain artists, continued to be produced and thus which, with the passing of time, have come to stand as art objects in the gallery, alongside other works from the history of art. An ontology such as the one constructed by Schellekens is successful in offering a philosophical account that attempts to take the stronger theoretical claims of conceptual artists as seriously as possible, an account which, perhaps, some such artists might actually endorse. However, what Schellekens’ attempt at constructing such an account testifies to and brings into focus is the disjuncture between conceptual theory and conceptual practice. Marginalising and instrumentalising the material element of the work to the extent that she does, such that the material is a mere “prompt” and the idea becomes the only proper site of value, creates an ontology that proves awkward, inadequate and

¹⁹⁶ Joseph Kosuth, ‘1979’, Symposium über Fotografie (ex. cat.) Graz, 1979, P 37-44

ultimately unstable, both in terms of the logic of its own argument, and in terms of its misrepresentation of what it is to actually experience a conceptual work. An adequate ontology of conceptual art needs to give attention to the artworks presented, and not merely to the theory.

Lamarque's ontology critically moderates the claims of the conceptual artists in a manner that takes seriously the fact that they still largely produced and exhibited art objects. Whilst admitting the dominance of the conceptual or ideational aspect of conceptual art, it assigns to such aspects the ultimate function of directing our perceptual encounter with the materialised work. What is unique about the artwork in distinction from other entities is that it directs us to encounter the *material* element presented in a specific, unusual manner, i.e., as something beyond what it may be as a *mere* object or set of materials. However, Lamarque posits the relation between the ideational and the material as unilateral and reductive, in that it involves one idea or concept directing our perception of material in a specific manner. A perceptual encounter with the material, though the ostensibly defining characteristic for Lamarque, yields entirely to the cognitive, intentional direction. What Lamarque's theory is missing is a developed account of how the material can be seen as active or resistant within the process of a phenomenal change. It thus implies that any idea can be tagged onto any object, without an analysis of the complex manner in which the material element can itself either bring to the fore or restrict various meanings or significations.

Costello offers a more specified account of how the material can be seen as active within the process of the phenomenal change, which underpins the constitution of an artwork. For Costello, the material element does not merely yield to the cognitive through being perceptually transfigured by an intentional direction. Instead, materiality provides the condition upon which the cognitive can find its grounding in something substantial, whilst also offering recalcitrance to the cognitive. On this account then, the material qualities of the artwork are assigned greater significance in their capacity to shape meaning, yet also resist being rendered fully intelligible. This not only contributes towards an explanation of why conceptual artists might continue to invest their time and their artistic efforts in the presentation of materialised artworks, but also—due to the fact that the material itself is involved within the shaping of meaning—permits that the material itself is a source of significance. Despite all of this, through his centralisation

of the artistic labour of the artist-subject, Costello presents an overly conservative and expressionist account that cannot ultimately accommodate conceptual art in its unique character.

What is required is an account of the ontology of the conceptual work that will draw out more explicitly the character of its phenomenological operations. To emphasise the existence of such phenomenological operations requires a more substantial *thematization* of the relation between the elements of ideality or conceptuality and the materiality within such works. This requires an ontological account in which, following Costello, the material qualities of the artwork are assigned greater powers of ontological determination and greater significance in their capacity to shape meaning, both through substantiating it and through offering recalcitrance to intelligibility. However, it must be an account that de-emphasises the role of the “sensuous, affective or intuitive” responses of the subject to the way the materials “look, sound, read” as they are being made. It must be an account that offers a novel analysis of the coming into being of the artwork and thus a novel analysis of the manner in which the material element of the work can come to substantiate and be resistant to meaning. Decentralising the responsibility of the artist-subject for the coming into being of the artwork, and for the precise character of the relation between the ideational and the material, might require us to consider the artwork as fundamentally ontological in itself, i.e., that through the work, new configurations of the relation between the ideational and material elements are formed in a manner that is, to an extent, beyond the intentional direction of the subject. This brings ontology and ontological determination to the fore as an active process in itself and at the same time thematises the relation between phenomenology and ontology. Such an account might very well turn out to be capable of telling us something unique about conceptual art—which, as we have seen, decentralised the artist-subject—as a means of revealing the operations and relations at play within the work.

Chapter Two: Heidegger's Artwork

Introduction

This chapter will investigate whether or not and the extent to which Martin Heidegger's ontology of the artwork can contribute to an account of conceptual art in a way that develops the ideas examined so far, whilst avoiding their various problems. In his 1936 text, 'Origin of the Work of Art',¹ Heidegger provides an explicit and lengthy thematisation of the relation between what have broadly been conceived so far as the ideational and the material elements of the artwork. Heidegger's central objective in this text is to challenge a very particular formulation of this relation, one which Heidegger identifies to have dominated the history of philosophical aesthetics since Aristotle, i.e., the relation of 'form' and 'matter', or, in Aristotelian terms the 'hylomorphic structure'. To conceptualise the artwork by way of the hylomorphic structure is, for Heidegger, to understand its most essential character as an equipmental product of human production,² which appears as a mere art-*object* amongst other 'objects' or 'things'. One of Heidegger's central aims will be to distinguish the artwork from these two types of entities, i.e., from 'objects', which are 'present-at-hand' [*vorhanden*],³ and from pieces of equipment, which are 'ready-to-hand' [*zuhanden*].

Significantly for Heidegger, the ontological character of the artwork cannot be exhausted by categorial conceptions of 'objecthood' or 'entity-ness'. The artwork is not simply a material 'substructure', to which we can assign or attribute an idea, a concept or an intention. The question of the ontology of the artwork therefore is not *fundamentally* a question as to the character of the relation, or the balance of priority between a static material entity or object and an isolatable ideational component, as presented by some of the accounts analysed in Chapter One. Instead, for Heidegger, the

¹ Martin Heidegger, 'Origin of the Work of Art' (1936) in (trans) Farrell Krell, *Basic Writings*, (Routledge, London, 1978, 1994)

² Joseph Kockelmans, *On the Truth of Beings reflections of Heidegger's later philosophy*, (Indiana University Press, Indiana, 1984). P177

³ As Graham Harman explains, Heidegger uses the term *vorhandenheit* to refer to three separate instances: (1) phenomena present in consciousness, (2) broken equipment, which then becomes obtrusive, (3) natural physical objects. See Harman, 'Technology, Objects and Things' in *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, May 2009. P4

artwork is itself ontologically fundamental. It is a ‘site’ in which the *process* of ontological determination shows itself to be “at work”. Thus, as Miguel de Beistegui claims, with the artwork for Heidegger, “something takes *place*, something happens. As work, the work is nothing outside this *taking place* or this happening.”⁴ What takes place is a *demonstration* of the specific way in which entities appear, as themselves and as meaningful, from out of a specific context of relations or an environment. The artwork for Heidegger sets up and sustains meaning, and it does so in a manner which prevents such meaning from being rendered fully transparent and intelligible. This is partly because for Heidegger, the ontological determination that unfolds through the artwork is a *particularising* and a *historical* process of phenomenological unfolding.⁵ As such, it extends beyond and cannot be fully attributed to, or mastered by the intentions—either cognitive or non-cognitive/affective—of the artist-subject.

Whilst there continues to be much debate on this issue, I am convinced by Joseph Kockelmans’ argument that, despite Heidegger’s so-called *Kehre* or turn, ontological account of the artwork can still be considered as intrinsically phenomenological.⁶ It is my contention that to theorise precisely how the artwork can still be ontologically determining in such a way that it can emerge from and reconstitute its environment—whilst simultaneously insisting upon the decentralisation of the artist-subject—Heidegger requires a process of some sort to be inherently operating *within* the artwork. For this, Heidegger re-conceptualises the hylomorphic structure—the relation of form and matter—as a relation of “intimate strife”⁷ between what he calls the ‘World’ [*die Welt*] and the Earth [*die Erde*]. The relation between World and Earth operate to explain how the artwork can both set up an historically specific context of meaning, beliefs and attitudes, yet can simultaneously disallow the locus, or centre of this context to be rendered fully transparent or intelligible.

⁴ Miguel de Beistegui, ‘The Saving Power of Art’, in *The New Heidegger*, (Continuum, London, 2005). P139

⁵ As Mike Lewis points out, the attention to history is “a crucial part of Heidegger’s innovation in phenomenology”. Mike Lewis & Tanja Staehler, *Phenomenology: an introduction*, (Continuum, London, 2010). P67

⁶ This is argued at length in Joseph Kockelmans, *Heidegger on Art and Artworks*, (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, The Hague, 1985).

Despite what I anticipate to be limitations in its applicability, it is my contention that Heidegger's specifically phenomenological analysis of the ontology of the artwork in 'Origin of the Work of Art' is capable of developing some of the ideas that emerged in the previous chapter whilst also avoiding their pitfalls. Firstly, it follows on from

Costello's "corrective" to Danto's ontology of art by virtue of the fact that Heidegger posits the material element, not as subservient to the ideational or conceptual, but as holding a position of *priority* in the ontological determination of the artwork. In a similar manner to the role played by the material for Costello, Earth for Heidegger is that which substantiates and gives the intelligible grounding, but it is also that which resists ever becoming fully intelligible. What definitively *comes to the fore* in the artwork is a certain hidden element, that aspect of materiality that is resistant to being rendered wholly cognitive. Secondly, it can develop this idea of material recalcitrance much further, due to the fact that the relation between World and Earth is so explicitly thematised by Heidegger. Thirdly, it can avoid the over-emphasis in Costello's text upon the "sensuous, affective and intuitive" responses of the artist-subject, as a central element of recalcitrance and delineation in the artwork.⁸ As became the tendency of Heidegger's later philosophy, 'Origin of the Work of Art' can be seen to decentralise what had been a prominent emphasis of his early thought, i.e., the human *logos*, or 'discourse' as the central lever from which meaning is brought to light and secured. Instead, the phenomenological relations of the artwork in this later text are posited as being governed by a more objective and specifically historical ontological determination, rather than being presented merely as the consequence of the cognitive or non-cognitive intentions of the artist-subject.

In addition to taking up and developing these issues more deeply, I believe that 'Origin of the Work of Art' might also be able to offer a unique way of thinking, not merely about how the material operates in its relation to the intelligible within the ontology of the artwork, but what artistic materiality *is* in the first place. Through the introduction of Earth Heidegger attempts to describe the positive and more strictly phenomenological role of the material in the ontological determination of the artwork. As will be

⁸ Costello. (2007) P87

demonstrated, with the dissociation of artistic materiality from ‘objecthood’—what Heidegger calls ‘presence-at-hand’ [*Vorhandenheit*]—comes the capacity for the expansion of the concept of the ‘material’, both in terms of the wideness of its application and in terms of its significance. The task of this chapter will be to draw out the specific characteristics of the concept of Earth that can help open up a way of discussing a tendency of many conceptual artworks of an expanded material practice. By expanded materiality, I do not mean the tendency of the conceptual artist to simply *use* a wider range of less conventional materials, but more accurately, the way in which such art facilitates the capacity for a wider range of phenomena to appear through the work and thus to count *as* artistic materials.

This chapter will be divided into four parts and will take the following structure. Part One will consist of a careful articulation of the key notions set out by Heidegger in *Being and Time* in his explication of the ‘Phenomenological Method of Investigation’ and where relevant, an explanation of how such notions appear altered or developed in ‘Origin of the Work of Art’. Particular attention will be given to understanding Heidegger’s method of *destructive retrieve*, his etymological recovery of the terms ‘phenomenon’ and ‘logos’, his unique delineation of the method of ‘phenomenology’ and the manner in which this is inextricably linked to a notion of *aletheia*, i.e., Heidegger’s concept of truth. Part two will explain the ‘symbolic’ notion of the artwork against which Heidegger positions his account. The ‘symbolic’ notion is that an artwork is essentially a material substrate to which we attach a symbolic or allegorical meaning. Part Three will consist of an in-depth critical analysis of the applicability of Heidegger’s main conceptual construction of the relation between World and Earth to an account of conceptual art. Due to the sheer complexity of these notions—in particular World, which is a concept of central importance throughout Heidegger’s philosophical career—Part Three will be divided into two sections. The first section will be an exposition of the terms World and Earth and their development through Heidegger’s work. The second section will be an analysis of how these terms operate together in Heidegger’s phenomenological account of ‘truth’ as *aletheia*. Part Four will take a focused look at the privileged role of materiality in the ontological determination of the artwork, and will investigate whether or not and in what particular ways this relation might offer a more complex and expanded concept of what artistic materiality is, or can be. Due to

the fact that Chapter Three of this thesis is reserved for a more explicit and concrete exploration and development of this ontology, through examining how it might be applied to a range of conceptual artworks, this chapter is primarily a theoretical grappling with Heidegger's ideas.

A Note on Heidegger's Relation to Contemporary Art

Before I begin with the central analysis, it seems important to pre-empt a potential criticism of invoking Heidegger at this stage. One might contest that, due to the fact that 'Origin of the Work of Art' was written around thirty years prior to the conceptual art movement, it cannot be said to be concerned with conceptual art in any direct way. In fact, certain thinkers such as Otto Pöggeler contest that Heidegger never developed a genuine philosophy of art at all.⁹ What is more, one might also point out that, whilst still producing texts and giving lectures on the topic of art until as late as 1967¹⁰—coincidentally, an intensely productive and truly formative year for the conceptual art movement and conceptual art theory¹¹—Heidegger in fact remained relatively resistant to engaging with artistic production of a contemporaneous nature. However, certain thinkers such as Gianni Vattimo have suggested that Heidegger's ontological approach to art in fact exhibits the same spirit as the tendencies of its contemporaneous avant-garde practices. This is because Vattimo considers Heidegger's specifically ontological approach to art to be fundamentally questioning the *fact* of art itself and to be defending the significance of art to human existence.¹² However, such sentiments are uncommon. Most scholars emphasise instead that whilst Heidegger's career coincided with the artistic movements of Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, he appeared to remain largely resistant to contemporary art. I find Vattimo's thesis compelling, and will, to a certain extent be pursuing this line of thought, though rather implicitly throughout this chapter. However, despite this, it also does seem true to say

⁹ Otto Pöggeler, *Der Denkweg Martin Heideggers* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1963), P207.

¹⁰ The last lecture given by Heidegger was 'The Provenance of Art and the Destitution of Thought', in 1967.

¹¹ In 1967 alone, *Artforum* published many key texts of conceptual art theory including amongst others: Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood', Sol LeWitt's 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' and Barbara Rose's 'The Value of Didactic Art'.

¹² Gianni Vattimo, 'The Ontological Vocation of Twentieth Century Poetics' in *Art's Claim to Truth*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1985). P45-46

that Heidegger's actual feelings about contemporary art appear to have been rather antagonistic, and his philosophical engagement with art being produced and exhibited in the artworld at that time was relatively sparse. Whilst it is noted that Heidegger was in fact quite fond of the works of Paul Klee, Cezanne and Rilke,¹³ the examples of artworks that Heidegger draws upon to demonstrate and develop his ontology of art in 'Origin of the Work of Art' specifically, are limited to such works as a Van Gogh painting, a Meyer poem and a Greek Temple. Such works seem more akin to museum pieces, as opposed to active components in an 'artworld', or radical avant-garde provocations. This had led thinkers such as Joseph Kockelman to doubt where Heidegger's reflections leave us in relation to contemporary art.¹⁴

The attempt to make Heidegger's ideas work for contemporary art is, as Daniel Dahlstrom has said, the attempt "to think what is unthought in his thinking."¹⁵ Despite this obstacle, at a glance, there are clear parallels that exist between the inherent *objectives* of conceptual art and Heidegger's re-conceptualisation of the artwork along ontological lines, respectively. These include the following. (1) The rejection of the artwork as entirely reducible to a material object exhibited, whilst still taking the question of 'thinghood' seriously.¹⁶ (2) The rejection of the artwork as an entity to be engaged with primarily by way of a theoretical and perceptual *gaze*.¹⁷ (3) The rejection of 'representation'—i.e. the *re*-presentation of reality—as constituting the primary function of the artwork. (3) The significant downplaying, and often rejection, of a certain notion of aesthetic experience, i.e. a subjective experience associated with feelings of the beautiful, as the *raison d'être* of art. (4) The decentralisation of the affective traces of the individual subject-artist as constituting the cause of the work and

¹³ As Julian Young describes, Heidegger seemed to hold esteem for Cezanne, Rilke and Braque, as well as discovering Klee in the 1950s. See *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001). P65. Miguel de Beistegui adds Picasso to this list. See de Beistegui. (2005). P146

¹⁴ Joseph Kockelmans, (1985). P.87

¹⁵ Daniel Dahlstrom, 'Heidegger's Artworld' in (ed.) Harries & Jamme, *Martin Heidegger: Politics, Art, Technology*, (Holmes & Meier Publishers, New York, 1995) P125

¹⁶ As I have argued throughout this thesis, conceptual artists continued to take seriously the role of the material object in their work, even when they were questioning that role through artistically experimenting with its removal.

¹⁷ For Heidegger, the theoretical gaze would constitute something akin to the way that scientists examine things. Even conceptual artists that consider their work "theoretical" in character would have rejected an account of art as an object of gaze.

its meaning. (5) The concern with a specifically ontological *investigation* of the artwork, and with the relation between art and broader questions of ontology *per se*. Most of these central objectives of conceptual art emerged at some point in the previous chapter as being neglected to varying extents by recent philosophical literature on the topic. At first glance then, Heidegger's theory of art—at the very least in terms of its general orientation and direction—seems to be able to offer a new platform for thinking about conceptual art, one that can incorporate each of these factors.

Various recent texts and conference papers have attempted to actually address the question of the applicability of Heidegger's theory of the ontology of the artwork to more contemporary art forms such as conceptual art.¹⁸ Most of these attempts end up being little more than suggestive: whilst flagging up the *possibility* for the accommodation of more contemporary or conceptual artworks, they often stop short of undertaking the actual detailed philosophical analysis needed to fully demonstrate this point. An example of this can be seen in the work of Michael Haar,¹⁹ Raj Singh²⁰ and, to a lesser extent, Miguel de Beistegui.²¹ Simultaneous to this, there is a further tendency for some thinkers publishing on this topic to misrepresent the Heideggerian notions of World and Earth, i.e. to either conflate them too heavily with those concepts they are attempting to overcome—'form' and 'matter'—or to interpret them too *literally*, when it comes to actually applying them to a discussion of contemporary artworks. An example of this latter tendency occurred in a recent paper delivered at the

¹⁸ See, for example, Miguel de Beistegui's 'The Saving Power of Art', Daniel Dahlstrom's 'Heidegger's Artworld'. In addition to this, Cameron Tonkinwise and Mark Titmarsh delivered a paper at the *21st Century Heidegger Conference* at University College Dublin, 2010, entitled, 'Art Vs Design: Saving Power vs. Enframing, or, A Thing of the Past vs. World-Making.' References to the possibility that Heidegger's theory might be able to accommodate certain contemporary artworks are also given in a range of other secondary texts. See for example, Haar, Michael, *Song of the Earth: Heidegger and the Grounds of the History of Being*, (Indiana University Press, Indiana, 1993).

¹⁹ Whilst Haar invokes Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup* piece at one point in his text to exemplify his claim that all works need an "earthly" substance, he does not in any way explore the character or implications of this idea. Haar. (1993). P109

²⁰ Whilst Raj Singh claims that, "even a piece of abstract art can be viewed as dealing (however abstractly) with entities and the world" See 'Heidegger and the World in an Artwork' in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (48:3, Summer, 1990). P221

²¹ De Beistegui suggests that contemporary artworks that use video, concrete or steel might count just as equally as art in the Heideggerian sense as those sculpted from stone or wood. However, he does not develop a detailed articulation or analysis of how such contemporary works might be conceptualised through a Heideggerian lens. De Beistegui. (2007). P146

conference *21st Century Heidegger* at University College Dublin in September 2010. The authors of the paper, Mark Titmarsh and Cameron Tonkinwise, were extremely careful and conscientious in presenting the notions of World and Earth, insisting that they should be understood in their “extended phenomenological sense”.²² However, in applying them to the contemporary artworks they selected, the World is described by recourse to a wheelbarrow—a formerly useful tool, now a Readymade—whilst the Earth is described by recourse to a spillage of flowers across the floor.²³ In applying these concepts to an actual work of contemporary art, Titmarsh and Tonkinwise end up taking them too literally—in particular, the concept Earth it seems—and in doing so, reduce their significance from the deeper phenomenological sense to a literal correspondence. To have genuinely examined the applicability of Heidegger’s phenomenological notion of World and Earth to conceptual art, it is important to this investigation that such tendencies be avoided. To avoid such tendencies we must first of all attend, not to the question of what World and Earth *are*—as though they are a particular content to be discovered—but of what art is, of how it operates in distinction from other things. The question of this chapter is whether or not and the extent to which it is possible to think through the concepts of World and Earth, in a way that allows them to specifically *retain* their true phenomenological sense. What is required first and foremost to set up this investigation then, is a clear understanding of what this truly phenomenological sense might mean. For this we need a detailed and concise account of phenomenology, as constituted in its Heideggerian formulation.

Part One: Heideggerian Phenomenology and the Phenomenological Method

To adequately comprehend Heidegger’s account of the artwork as set out in ‘Origin of the Work of Art’ we need to examine the central components and concepts at work in the Heideggerian phenomenological method more generally, as well as how they relate to each other. These are the following. (1) Heidegger’s method of *destructive retrieve*.

²² Mark Titmarsh & Cameron Tonkinwise, ‘Art Vs Design: Saving Power vs. Enframing, or, A Thing of the Past vs. World-Making’, (unpublished manuscript), *21st Century Heidegger Conference* at University College Dublin, Sept 2010.

²³ The artwork referenced is one of Titmarsh’s own works, entitled, ‘Moraine’ (2006)

(2) Heidegger's unique conception of hermeneutic 'phenomenology', which itself must be broken down into an analysis of its two components, (a) *phainomenon*, or 'phenomenon', and (b) *logos* or 'discourse'. (3) Heidegger's notion of *aletheia*, or truth, and how it relates to the two components 'phenomenon' and 'logos'. For a thorough and precise exposition of these concepts we will need to return for a moment to Heidegger's main work of 1927, *Being and Time*.²⁴

To rely upon Heidegger's presentation of his central concepts in *Being and Time* might initially strike one as misleading. After all, 'Origin of the Work of Art' approximately corresponds to what Heidegger himself has referred to as a "Kehre" or 'turn' in his thinking, which Heidegger scholars typically understand to mark the beginning of what is referred to as the late period of Heidegger's work.²⁵ Central to this transition is a move away from what in *Being and Time* Heidegger terms his 'existential analytic of Dasein'—focused on an analysis of the 'Being-in-the world' of an individual Dasein—towards an analysis of the history of Being, i.e. an analysis of how different histories of Being emerge and are sustained. 'Dasein' is Heidegger's term for the human being in his early works of philosophy.²⁶ We will look more closely at the term 'Being' shortly, but for now we can define it roughly as the 'conditions of possibility' of the 'phenomenon'. However, it is my contention that—whilst there are significant ways in which these preliminary concepts become altered, developed or given greater centrality in Heidegger's later work—the definition and understanding of the full implications of these concepts, persists as the central concern that run continuously throughout Heidegger's intellectual career. As Mark Wrathall makes clear in his recent publication *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language and History*,²⁷ Heidegger's formulation of phenomenology and description of *aletheia* or 'truth' in *Being and Time*, is fundamentally bound to his later work principally through his ongoing investigation into the ontology of what he more generally terms 'unconcealment'. I will now look at

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, (Trans.) Macquarrie & Robinson *Being and Time*, 1927 (Blackwell Publishing, London, 1999)

²⁵ W.J. Richardson, *Through Phenomenology to Thought*, (Fordham University Press, New York, 2003).

²⁶ Lewis & Staehler periodise Heidegger's focus on the concept of 'Dasein' as roughly between 1919 and 1931 to refer to the way in which humans are ontologically specific in the fact that they understand Being. (2010). P73

²⁷ Mark Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language and History*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011)

the key concepts in turn and attempt to briefly trace their development in Heidegger's thought.

1. Heidegger's Methodology of *Destructive Retrieve*

Heidegger's methodology consists of a relation between two operations; namely, his *destructive retrieve* and his hermeneutic phenomenology. I will now look at these operations in turn. To understand what Heidegger means by *destructive retrieve*, it is beneficial to turn to the opening sections of *Being and Time*, in which he explicitly sets out and clarifies the methodologies he will use in his investigation into ontology, or the question of the meaning of Being. "If the question of Being is to have its own history made transparent"—claims Heidegger—"then this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealments that it has brought about must be dissolved."²⁸ The notion of 'loosening up' is central to understanding Heidegger's philosophical methodology. Significantly, for our analysis of the artwork, the first half of 'Origin of the Work of Art' takes the form of an overturning of the concept of the traditional 'thing-concepts' that have dominated the history of ontology, in an attempt to demonstrate that the artwork is not merely a material substrate X to which we can simply attach meaning or intention Y. The *destructive retrieve* of the ontological tradition is not at all a crude rejection or *dismissal* of that tradition, but is rather a process of shedding any arbitrary conceptual excesses which, despite expressing a particular historical mode of human relation to the world, have become hardened into objective truths, that dominate experience. The *destructive retrieve* first shows, as Mike Lewis explains, that the traditional content of ontological thinking in fact has a definite history.²⁹ In Heidegger's own words, ontological thinking first displays its "birth certificate"³⁰ and then proceeds to "destroy" whatever is philosophically unjustifiable in that content.³¹

²⁸ Heidegger. (1927) §6, P44, 22

²⁹ Lewis & Staehler. (2010). P68

³⁰ Heidegger. (1927) §6 P44, 22

³¹ Such a method of conceptual unearthing appeared extremely radical to thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse, who initially read Heidegger's philosophy to be an "ontologically veiled *critique of reification*" an attempt to surmount the fetishization of appearances that characterised the shadow-world of bourgeois immediacy, the conceptual apparatus of which was the deterministic world-view of bourgeois science. See Richard Wolin (ed.) *Heideggerian Marxism*, (University of Nebraska Press, Nebraska, 2005), xv

However, crucially, for Heidegger, such destruction has an inherently positive moment in that it simultaneously ‘retrieves’ or ‘appropriates’³² what Kockelmans refers to as the “primordial experience”, and what Lewis refers to as the “core of truth”.³³ What is retrieved is that which is always already implied within what Heidegger describes as our “pre-ontological” understanding,³⁴ and which is necessarily presupposed in any account of ‘objective truth’. The retrieval of such primordial operations is that from which genuine philosophical insights are capable of flowing.³⁵ As Stephen Mulhall clarifies, such enquiry is not ‘destruction’ typically conceived, neither is it ‘reconstruction’; Heidegger’s project is rather “de-constructive”.³⁶ Destruction in this sense is thus neither a “shaking off the ontological tradition”, nor a “vicious revitalising of ontological standpoints”.³⁷ Instead, the aim of the *destructive retrieve* is to discover the “positive possibilities” of a tradition, and this—Heidegger tells us—always means “keeping it within its *limits*.”³⁸ What I interpret to be at stake for Heidegger in proclaiming the necessity of ‘limits’ is a need to avoid, or to at least keep in check, the tendency of particulars to become subsumed under more abstract forms of conceptualising. What seems to function as the fundamental limitation in Heidegger’s methodology, a limitation that acts as a protective against such an omnipotent conceptual machinery, is that which simultaneously provides the ‘bounds’ and allows the positive possibilities of an ontological tradition to be come forth—is an appeal to “the things themselves”.³⁹ For Heidegger, the philosophical task of preventing the domination of pre-judgements by mere arbitrary conceptions is coupled with an aim to make their themes secure *scientifically* by a working out of our anticipatory conceptions in terms of “the things themselves”. Heidegger’s “destructive retrieve”, Kockelmans

³² Heidegger says: “In proposing our ‘definition’ of “truth” we have not *shaken off* the tradition, but we have *appropriated* it primordially.”(1927). §44, P262, 220

³³ Lewis & Staehler. (2010) P68

³⁴ Kockelmans. (1985) P90

³⁵ Kockelmans. (1985) P92

³⁶ Stephen Mulhall, *Heidegger’s Being and Time*, (Routledge, London, 1996). P22. As Mulhall notes at this point, ‘deconstruction’ as we typically understand it in its Derridean formulation has its point of origin in Heidegger’s method of *destructive retrieve*. Whilst “deconstruction” has the explicit advantage of avoiding the negative connotations of the word “*destructive*”, I will continue to use the Heideggerian term to avoid any potential confusion.

³⁷ Heidegger. (1927) §6, P44, 22

³⁸ Heidegger. (1927) §6, P44, 22

³⁹ This is a reference to the famous phenomenological maxim, coined originally by Edmund Husserl.

continues, is thus “driven through and guided by his use of a hermeneutical phenomenology”—a philosophical investigative process that compares, in each case, the claims made by thinkers of the past with the ‘things’ to be reflected upon”.⁴⁰

2. Heideggerian Phenomenology

To better grasp Heidegger’s unique attempt to radicalise phenomenology, we need to return to §7 of *Being and Time*, where he sets out his ‘Phenomenological Method of Investigation’. In 1959, Heidegger retrospectively described the objective of his major work, *Being and Time*, as an attempt to think phenomenology in a more “originary” manner.⁴¹ For Heidegger, the “originary” and radical notion of phenomenology is to be found, not within the texts of Husserl or even Brentano,⁴² but in the philosophy of the Ancient Greeks, in particular Aristotle.⁴³ When Heidegger thus lays out his ‘Preliminary Conception of Phenomenology’ in §7 of *Being and Time*, it is not so much an explanation or exposition of the meaning, which ‘phenomenology’ has come to accumulate or take on through the phenomenological tradition, but is rather a *definition* of what phenomenology is, and, importantly, should be, i.e., it is a definition of phenomenology in its unique Heideggerian formulation.

The central point that Heidegger wants to make in §7, is to sharply distinguish his own unique method of phenomenology from what he calls the purely “formal”⁴⁴ conception, under which banner Heidegger seems to categorise, not merely the entire tradition of phenomenology up until this point, but the whole history of ontology. For Heidegger, the history of ontology constitutes a *science of the phenomena*,⁴⁵ which indiscriminately takes as its object a plethora of different phenomena, and thus levels all phenomena

⁴⁰ Kockelmans. (1985). P40

⁴¹ In 1959, Heidegger explained: “I was trying to think the nature of phenomenology in a more originary manner.” See Martin Heidegger, (trans.) Peter. D. Hertz, *On the Way to Language*, (Harper & Row, New York, 1982). P9

⁴² It is widely noted that any clear acknowledgement of his indebtedness to Husserl is a deliberate omission from Heidegger’s work. Despite this, there are several points at which it seems that Heidegger’s appeal to Greek thinking in his de-construction of the history of ontology is pointedly an attempt to overcome Husserlian phenomenology. As Stephen Mulhall points out, the deliberate omission of Husserlian reference appears puzzling, considering Heidegger’s emphasis upon understanding the circumstances of the generation of particular theories. Mulhall, (1996) P22-23

⁴³ Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, (Routledge, New York, 2000). P228

⁴⁴ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P54-58

⁴⁵ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P50, 28

down into a homogenous notion of ‘presence’. What Heidegger proposes is a “deformalisation”⁴⁶ of phenomenology, into its truly “phenomenological”⁴⁷ conception, which entails ascribing a more exclusive delineation to the boundaries of the ‘phenomenon’. This concern for the delineation of the phenomenon, which is explicated in *Being and Time*, can be seen as a central issue in Heidegger’s philosophy and becomes increasingly thematic in his later work. To comprehend the character of this ‘deformalisation’ requires an engagement with the manner in which Heidegger pursues an etymological retrieval of the word ‘phenomenology’, through first characterising its two components, *phainomenon* and *logos*, and then “establishing the meaning of the name in which these are *put together*.”⁴⁸ As Mulhall argues, the extent to which the precise details of Heidegger’s etymological retrievals are entirely accurate should be considered of less importance than the question of what Heidegger manages to derive from them, philosophically speaking.⁴⁹ I will now look at these two concepts in turn.

3. *Phainomenon*

The Greek term φαινόμενον, or *phainomenon*, means, “that which shows itself”, i.e., the manifest.⁵⁰ *Phainomenon* derives from the middle-voiced verb φαίνεσθαι, or *Phainesthai*, which means, “to show itself”.⁵¹ This derives from φαίνω, or *Phaino*, which means “to bring to the light of day” or “to put into the light”,⁵² i.e., into clarity, which, in turn comes from the same stem as -φα, like φώς, or “that which is bright” or “that wherein something can become visible or manifest in itself,” i.e., the light. This means that phenomenology’s object of study, the ‘phenomenon’, is “that which shows itself in (and from)⁵³ itself”⁵⁴, or ‘appears’ as that which is self-manifesting. Phenomenology, in its ‘formal’ conception, is thus defined as λέγειν τὰ φαινόμενα “to

⁴⁶ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P59, 35

⁴⁷ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P59, 35

⁴⁸ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P50, 29

⁴⁹ Mulhall. (1996). P24

⁵⁰ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P51, 28

⁵¹ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P51, 28

⁵² Heidegger. (1927) §7, P51, 28

⁵³ The presence of *from* in this construction is used variably in the English translation, but it seems central to Heidegger’s notion of self-manifestation.

⁵⁴ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P51, 28

let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself.”⁵⁵ However, as Heidegger points out, such a simple conception can and has admitted a “bewildering multiplicity of phenomena”⁵⁶ in the history of philosophy. Heidegger thinks that a more precise qualification is needed in order to arrive at the ‘phenomenon’ proper. If in taking the ‘phenomenon’ simply as “that which shows itself” we at the same time “leave indefinite which entities we consider as “phenomena”, and leave it open whether what shows itself is an entity or rather some characteristic which an entity might have in its Being, then we have merely arrived at the *formal* conception of ‘phenomenon’.⁵⁷ To ‘deformalise’ this conception and to grasp it in its true phenomenological sense, thinks Heidegger, it is essential that we understand what the ‘phenomenon’ is, and we can arrive at such an understanding through analysing its distinctions from, and its relations to, two other main concepts. First of all, we must understand the specific way in which the notion of ‘phenomenon’ is distinct from, yet “structurally interconnected” with, the notion of ‘semblance’ [Schein].⁵⁸ Second of all, we must understand the manner in which ‘phenomenon’ stands in firm distinction from, yet coincides with ‘appearance’ [Erscheinung, literally, “shining forth”].⁵⁹ I will now look at these distinctions and relations in turn.

As we have seen, the ‘phenomenon’ is “that which shows itself”, i.e., the self-manifesting. However, an entity can show itself in a manner of different ways. For example, it might show itself as something that it is *not*. This form of self-showing is called ‘semblance’ [Schein],⁶⁰ and it designates a kind of error or even a notion of illusion. In the case of ‘semblance’, says Heidegger, the manifest it is not “what it gives itself out to be”.⁶¹ In Greek, the concept of the ‘phenomenon’ also incorporates that which is manifest as ‘semblance’.⁶² Following the Greek, Heidegger thinks these are distinct, yet not entirely separate concepts: they have a structural interconnection. This is because, “only when the meaning of something is such that it makes a pretension of

⁵⁵ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P58, 34

⁵⁶ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P54, 31

⁵⁷ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P54, 31

⁵⁸ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P51, 29

⁵⁹ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P51, 29

⁶⁰ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P51, 29

⁶¹ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P51, 29

⁶² Heidegger. (1927) §7, P51, 29

showing itself—that is, of being a phenomenon—*can* it show itself *as* something which it is not; only then *can* it ‘merely look so-and-so.’⁶³ It seems to me that by virtue of this distinction, Heidegger wants to bring to light two central and interconnected points: (1) ‘semblance’ too should be defined positively as a mode of self-showing, or a signification. However, (2) such signification by way of ‘semblance’ is a “privative modification”, which is founded upon a more “positive and primordial signification”, i.e., the ‘phenomenon’.⁶⁴ ‘Semblance’ thus presupposes a more primordial mode of appearance, and it is specifically this unique primordial mode that Heidegger wishes to secure as an attribute of the ‘phenomenon’ proper.

The ‘phenomenon’ must also be understood in its distinction from ‘appearance’. Heidegger begins by taking ‘appearance’ in this case as what one talks about when referring, for example, to the “symptoms of a disease.”⁶⁵ As symptoms manifest through the human body they simultaneously “indicate” or “announce” that which does not show-itself, i.e., the disease. However, importantly for Heidegger, the true sense of ‘appearance’ is not ascribable to that which shows-itself, “it means rather the announcing-itself by [von] something which does not show itself.”⁶⁶ ‘Appearance’ is a “*not-showing-itself*”,⁶⁷ insists Heidegger, and refers to the basic formal structure of all “indications, presentations, symptoms and symbols”.⁶⁸ Here, Heidegger can be seen to be ascribing an emphasis to that which does *not* show itself. Though ‘appearing’ is never a showing-itself, in the sense of the ‘phenomenon’, ‘appearance’ is dependent upon ‘phenomenon’ and presupposes it because to announce itself as that which does not show itself, it necessarily must do so through that which does show-itself.⁶⁹

Despite the fact that the ‘appearance’ is that which does not show itself, Heidegger wants to distinguish it from the Kantian sense of phenomena, which stands in opposition to the noumena.⁷⁰ Kant uses the notion of ‘appearance’ in a two-fold manner,

⁶³ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P51, 29

⁶⁴ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P51, 29

⁶⁵ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P52, 29

⁶⁶ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P52, 29

⁶⁷ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P52, 29

⁶⁸ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P52, 29

⁶⁹ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P53, 29

⁷⁰ Mulhall. (1996) P25

claims Heidegger.⁷¹ It is used to designate both that which shows-itself—for Kant, the “objects of empirical intuition”⁷²—but also to designate what Heidegger describes as “an emanation of something which hides itself in that appearance, an emanation which announces”.⁷³ On this view, that which does the announcing, emerges in what is itself non-manifest, and emanates from it in such a way that the non-manifest comes to be thought as something that is essentially *never* manifest, i.e., the thing-in-itself.⁷⁴ As such it constitutes something ‘brought-forth’, yet this something does not make up the real Being of what brings it forth. What we end up with, thinks Heidegger, is “mere appearance”.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, I interpret the reference to the Kantian construction of ‘appearing’ to be extremely important because from it, Heidegger seems to derive his notion of what the ‘phenomenon’, and thus the object of true phenomenology, should be. What the Kantian formulation of ‘appearance’ demonstrates, is that when something appears and thus shows itself to be a phenomenon, there is always already something prior to it, which accompanies it in every case, and in so doing, shows itself “unthematically”.⁷⁶ For example, Stephen Mulhall has claimed that the Heideggerian ‘phenomenon’ can be understood by analogy with the Kantian notion of knowledge, wherein time and space are conceived of as forms of sensible intuition.⁷⁷ For Kant, time and space are not entities, nor are they properties of entities, such that we could “discover” them as part of the “content” of sensible intuition. Rather, time and space are *forms* of sensible intuition, which must be assumed as the ‘horizon’ within which any object can possibly be encountered. They are the conditions of possibility for the experience of entities. As such, time and space constitute that which must necessarily accompany every entity, yet are not themselves encounterable as objects of experience.⁷⁸ However, claims Mulhall, what Kant had demonstrated is that a nuanced philosophical investigation, “can make them an object of theoretical study, and thus it is possible to thematise that which is

⁷¹ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P53-54, 30

⁷² Heidegger. (1927) §7, P54, 30

⁷³ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P53, 30

⁷⁴ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P53, 30

⁷⁵ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P53, 30

⁷⁶ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P55, 31

⁷⁷ Mulhall. (1996) P25

⁷⁸ Mulhall. (1996) P25

present and foundational but which typically goes unthematized in everyday experience.”⁷⁹ In an analogous fashion, ‘phenomenology’ for the early Heidegger, will be the method through which the ‘pre-ontological’ and primordial ground or foundation of the manifest can be brought to thematically show itself. Early Heidegger calls this ground or foundation, the *Being of beings*.

4. The ‘Phenomenon’ as the Demand of Being

Through these comparisons we have established what the true ‘phenomenon’ is not, i.e., it is not simply ‘semblance’, ‘appearance’ or ‘mere appearance’. We have also moved towards an account of what it is like, i.e., the ‘phenomenon’ is that which accompanies, and which is thus *necessarily* the theme whenever we exhibit something *explicitly*.⁸⁰ It is that which “proximally and for the most part does *not* show itself at all: it is that which lies hidden”,⁸¹ or remains concealed in an exceptional way yet, at the same time, belongs to that which shows itself so essentially that it constitutes its “meaning” and its “ground”.⁸² Due to the fact that Heidegger considers there to be a tendency towards “covered-up-ness” or concealment, the thematic object of phenomenology must be “that which *demand*s⁸³ that it become a phenomenon, and which demands this in a distinctive sense and in terms of its ownmost content as a thing.”⁸⁴ Heidegger’s theory thus attributes what was a purely “formal” and relatively indiscriminate phenomenology with a precise thematic object. Rather than characterising the ‘phenomenon’ broadly as that “which shows itself”, Heidegger reveals it to be that which does *not* show itself, yet has the greatest urgency to be brought to light, to be named and rendered manifest. There is therefore a “double-play” at work in the Heideggerian notion of phenomenology between self-showing and self-concealing: the “distinctive” phenomenon is *both* formal, i.e., it both shows itself in itself *and* phenomenological, i.e., it is that which lies hidden, yet has the greatest demand to be brought to light. This ‘double-play’ is something that, as we shall see, reoccurs in Heidegger’s later work in

⁷⁹ Mulhall. (1996) P25

⁸⁰ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P59, 35

⁸¹ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P59, 36

⁸² Heidegger. (1927) §7, P59, 35

⁸³ My italics.

⁸⁴ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P59, 35

relation to his emphasis upon *aletheia*, or ‘truth’ as the *dis-closive* operations of the struggle between the World and the Earth in the artwork. On my interpretation, the artwork for Heidegger will constitute the logical fulfillment of the deformalisation of phenomenology, in that it will constitute the specifically *self-contained* site in which this ‘double-play’ of disclosure takes place. The artwork is, as Lewis claims, “an exemplary phenomenon”.⁸⁵

However, Heidegger also gives the ‘phenomenon’ a more positive characterisation. In his ‘Preliminary Conception of Phenomenology’ in sub-section C of §7, Heidegger claims that that which “remains *concealed* in an exceptional way or what falls back and is *covered up* again, or shows itself only in a *distorted* way, it is not this or that being but rather, as we have shown in our foregoing observations, is the “*Being* of entities.”⁸⁶ This is what allows Heidegger to thematise the relationship between phenomenology and ontology. He claims that, “phenomenology is our way of access to what is to be the theme of ontology, and it is our way of giving it demonstrative precision. *Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible.* In the phenomenological conception of “phenomenon” what one has in mind as that which shows itself is the very Being of entities, its meaning, its modifications and derivatives.”⁸⁷

In working through these various distinctions, as Dermot Moran points out, Heidegger distinguishes phenomenology proper from all other forms of phenomenism.⁸⁸ However, due to the fact that things do not always manifest themselves as they truly are, the phenomenological method cannot be mere description⁸⁹ but must instead be the seeking after a meaning that is perhaps hidden by the specific mode of appearing of entities.⁹⁰ In addition to this, because the true ‘phenomenon’ is that which “lies hidden” by virtue of an entity’s mode of appearance, yet demands to be brought into thematic

⁸⁵ Lewis & Staehler. (2010). P104

⁸⁶ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P59, 35

⁸⁷ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P60, 35

⁸⁸ Hence, the distinction between “phenomena” and “phenomenality” is, for Heidegger specifically the distinction, which characterises the “phenomenological deformalisation of the phenomenon”. Moran. (2000) P229

⁸⁹ This seems to be a reference to Brentano’s notion of phenomenology as a “descriptive psychology”.

⁹⁰ Moran. (2000) P229

light, a hermeneutic dimension is required.⁹¹ This seeking after meaning is what links *phainomenon* to the *logos*.

5. Logos

Phenomenology is the *λόγος*, or *logos*, of the phenomenon. *Logos* provides the necessary intervention, which lifts the phenomenon out of concealment and renders it manifest, not merely as this or that phenomena, but such that it might become a proper thematic object of phenomenology. Although the Greek notion of *logos*, “is always getting interpreted” as ‘reason’, ‘judgement’, ‘concept’, ‘definition’, ‘ground’ or ‘relationship’, Heidegger makes it clear that it does not designate any of these terms but is instead a mode of making manifest which is prior to and more primordial than these terms. Heidegger defines the basic signification of *logos* as “discourse” [Rede].⁹² However, discourse should not be understood in the common sense of “communication”.⁹³ Instead, Heidegger defines discourse as, “to make manifest what one is ‘talking about’ in one’s discourse.”⁹⁴ Discourse, “lets something be seen” (*phainesthai*) or “lets us see something from the very thing which the discourse is about.”⁹⁵ Importantly for Heidegger, there is an emphasis upon the fact that what is said is “drawn *from* (*apo-*) what the talk is about.”⁹⁶ Discourse thus corresponds to the Greek sense of *ἀπόφανσις* or *apophansis*: “letting an entity be seen from itself”.⁹⁷ As Lewis explains, Heidegger’s account of the role of the *logos* is not akin to a Husserlian notion of a consciousness, which is considered to be actively *constitutive* of the world. For Heidegger, things are “*presented* to us, we do not *make* them present.”⁹⁸

⁹¹ Moran. (2000) P229

⁹² Heidegger. (1927) §7, P55, 32

⁹³ Mulhall. (1996) P24

⁹⁴ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P56, 32

⁹⁵ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P56, 32

⁹⁶ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P56, 32

⁹⁷ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P56, 32

⁹⁸ Lewis & Staehler. (2010) P74-76

6. Truth as *Aletheia*

Heidegger claims that because *logos* means “letting-something-be-seen, it can *therefore* be true or false.”⁹⁹ As Dermot Moran explains, this means that *logos*, is a central notion in the concept of truth as *aletheia*, which thus creates an important link between phenomenology and truth.¹⁰⁰ By ‘truth’, Heidegger does not mean any “philosophical”¹⁰¹ conception, whereby the ‘locus’ of truth is an ‘assertion’—understood specifically to mean ‘judgement’—and the ‘essence’ of truth lies in that judgement being in ‘agreement’ or ‘correspondence’ with an object.¹⁰² Such a conception renders truth to be a mere “relation”¹⁰³ of ‘agreement’ between a subject and object, an *adequatio* or ‘correspondence’. Heidegger thinks that for such a correspondence between a judgement and an entity to be at all possible, an entity must first show itself. For Heidegger assertion is not locus of truth; on the contrary, the assertion is grounded in and already *dependent upon* a prior operation of disclosedness.¹⁰⁴ This means that the traditional conception of truth is ontologically “derivative” upon a more “*primordial* conception”,¹⁰⁵ wherein truth comes closer to ‘disclosure’. This notion is *aletheia*. If we return to Heidegger’s notion of the ‘distinctive’ sense of the phenomenon, it seems to me that *aletheia* describes the ‘double-play’ through which the phenomenon operates both ‘formally’—as that which shows itself—and ‘phenomenologically’—as that which is self-concealing.

A more precise definition of what Heidegger means by truth can be arrived at by looking at his etymological analysis of the Ancient Greek word. *Aletheia* means ‘truth’, ‘sincerity’, ‘frankness’, or ‘truthfulness’. Etymologically, it derives from an older root form, *lethein*, which means to be ‘hidden’ ‘unseen’ or ‘unnoticed’, which in turn is related to *lethe*, which means ‘forgetting’, ‘forgetfulness’.¹⁰⁶ *Aletheia* thus implies

⁹⁹ Heidegger. (1927) §7, P56

¹⁰⁰ Moran. (2000) P299

¹⁰¹ Heidegger describes truth as *aletheia* in the Aristotelian sense as “pre-philosophical”. (1927) §44, P262, 219

¹⁰² Heidegger. (1927) §44, P257, 214

¹⁰³ Heidegger. (1927) §44, P259, 217

¹⁰⁴ Heidegger. (1927) §44, P269, 226

¹⁰⁵ Heidegger. (1927) §44, P257, 214

¹⁰⁶ Michael Inwood, *Heidegger Dictionary*, (Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1999). P13

something ‘hidden’ in the particular sense of ‘forgotten’. For Heidegger, the composition of the word *aletheia* is crucial. *Aletheia* is commonly accepted as *a-letheia*, where the *a-* is privative prefix. What this means is that truth as *aletheia* is that which is un-concealed. By placing the emphasis upon the privative operation of the prefix, Heidegger consolidates a form of phenomenology underpinned by the premise of the logical and ontological primordial character of the ‘concealed’. As we will see later in this chapter, Heidegger’s concept for explaining this ontologically primordial character of concealedness, as it appears specifically within the artwork, will be Earth. The ‘concealed’ element is central to ‘truth’ for Heidegger, because without the uncovering of that which is hidden but demands to come to light, truth does not occur. This will position the artwork as the significant site in which truth as *aletheia* happens.

Because truth as *aletheia* is understood as the *dis*-closing or the *un*-concealment of the Being of entities, truth is the central drive of phenomenology. However, for the early Heidegger, the uncovering of the Being of a particular entity is a kind of secondary level of truth disclosing itself. In *Being and Time* Heidegger claims that, “what makes this uncovering possible must necessarily be called ‘true’ in a still more primordial sense. *The most primordial phenomenon of truth is first shown by the existential-ontological foundations of uncovering.*”¹⁰⁷ The highest or most primordial notion of truth is the process of disclosure or uncovering itself. This leads us back to the concept of the true ‘phenomenon’, as disclosure itself is that which does not typically show itself, yet stands as the grounds of possibility for all other individual disclosures.

Heidegger’s concept of *aletheia* becomes increasingly central in his later work, in particular, ‘Origin of the Work of Art’. This is because, as we shall see, through his specifically ontological account of the artwork Heidegger wishes to stress that the central function of the work is *not* representational, i.e., the role of the artwork is not most essentially to correspond to or to depict reality, but to instead reconstitute reality, by setting up a new world of meaningful references. On my understanding, the *aletheia* at work in the artwork is characterised precisely as a kind of struggle between the formal and phenomenological aspects of the phenomenon, reformulated as World and

¹⁰⁷ Heidegger. (1927) §44, P263, 220

Earth. Due to Heidegger's decentralisation of the individual human *logos* as the lever of discourse in his later work, *aletheia* is explicitly thematised as the 'happening' of truth, i.e., the 'double play' or struggle between the 'self-showing' and 'self-concealing', which constitutes a specifically historical delineation of the intelligible. World and Earth thus can, I believe, be understood as the historical dimensions or versions of the elements of the 'double-play' of unconcealment, which emerge specifically through the artwork.

Part Two: 'Thingliness' in the Symbolic Notion of the Artwork

In Chapter One, several distinct formulations of the ontology of the artwork were considered in turn, in order to assess whether they might be capable of capturing what is unique about conceptual art. Whilst each account presented an entirely distinct theory, there is also a way in which all three could be considered as analogous to each other, i.e., that central to each account was the attempt to describe the specific relation of priority between the ideational and the material elements of the artwork. Each account predominantly analysed their proposed ontology within the framework of what Heidegger calls the 'symbolic' notion of artwork. By 'symbolic'—and Heidegger here refers to the Greek *συμβάλλειν*, or *symballein*¹⁰⁸—Heidegger means a formulation whereby the artwork is understood to be most essentially composed of two main elements: a material 'object' or 'thing' and a meaning. On this account, the artwork is a relation between 'thingness', in the sense of a physical, effected 'object' of some kind, and a non-physical realm, a "something other" alongside it.¹⁰⁹ Philosophers of art often notate this relation thus: an artwork is a material object X + Y.¹¹⁰ The philosophical project is then conceived, firstly, as the discovery of what precisely this enigmatic 'Y' is, and secondly, as the explanation of how it impacts upon or transforms the material object X.¹¹¹ Due to the fact that it is this "something other", which is perceived as that

¹⁰⁸ Martin Heidegger 'Origin of the Work of Art' in (trans) Farrell Krell, *Basic Writings*, (Routledge, London, 1978, 1994) P146

¹⁰⁹ Heidegger. (1936) P145

¹¹⁰ See Arthur Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. (1981) P5

¹¹¹ Whilst this formulation does not really occur in Schellekens' account, due to the fact that she does not attribute any intimate form of interaction between the idea and the material, her ontology is very focused upon describing this "something other". Lamarque is very squarely concerned with accounting for the way in which the idea or concept can transform the passive material element.

which distinguishes the artwork from any other commonplace object, it is the realm of the symbolic, the allegorical, the signified, which constitutes the “proper element” of art in most traditional aesthetic theories.¹¹²

The result of this is that the ‘thingly’ or material element is often reduced to a “substructure into and upon which the proper element is built.”¹¹³ Through such a dichotomy, the ‘thingly’ element is conceived as an underlying material base or support whose role is to function as the mere vehicle or container for its worldly, symbolic or allegorical meaning. As we have seen, in their theoretical writings, some conceptual artists themselves emphasise this perceived dichotomy between a material ‘thing’ and ‘something other’—which, in the case of conceptual art, is most typically thought to be an idea or a concept, or else an intention, which is easily identifiable and can be paraphrased. Such theoretical declarations stress the sheer passivity and, often as a result, the arbitrariness of the material ‘substructure’. If we take certain conceptual artists at their word, then conceptual art might be seen as the attempt to demonstrate that it is in fact only ‘Y’ which constitutes the work proper; the material ‘substructure’ being a mere remnant or leftover of the real art.¹¹⁴ The first half of ‘Origin of the Work of Art’ challenges the very foundation of this symbolic notion of art upon which such a valorisation of the ideational component is possible and it does so through critically analysing its inherent presuppositions. Whilst initially assuming this dichotomy, Heidegger takes the ‘symbolic’ notion of the artwork—with its implications of rendering the material a passive ‘substructure’—as his most critical point of departure. Heidegger’s investigation will not concern itself straightforwardly with what ‘Y’ is or how it can impact upon or transform the material object X. Instead, the artwork is the indivisible phenomenological relation between these elements—which Heidegger will rename World and Earth—which is constituted by the dominant formative power of the material element to delineate the intelligible.

¹¹² Heidegger. (1936). P146. The distinction of the artwork from the commonplace object is the central concern in Arthur Danto’s theory about Pop Art and the ‘Readymade’. However, for Danto, the “something other” is an extremely complex set of factors including theory and art-history. See Danto. (1981).

¹¹³ Heidegger. (1936) P146

¹¹⁴ See Sol LeWitt, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, (*Artforum*, 5:10 (Summer 1967), reprinted in (ed.) Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 1992)

For Heidegger, the material entity or object of the artwork—which Heidegger calls its ‘thingliness’—is *by definition* to some extent, and in some manner, “irremovably present in the artwork”¹¹⁵ and constitutes that which cannot be circumvented in any philosophical analysis. It is thus with the ‘thingliness’ that he begins his investigation. However, the problem of trying to *think* the ‘thingly’—either in itself, or in the manner in which it belongs to or constitutes an artwork—hits a constant blockage in Heidegger’s hermeneutic logic. With the ‘thing’, claims Heidegger, thought meets with its “greatest resistance” in trying to think it,¹¹⁶ a resistance that turns out to be resistance to a certain *kind* of thinking. ‘Thingliness’ is a kind of *impasse*, the presence of which can neither be rendered immediately intelligible nor simply ‘got around’, in order to reach the so-called “proper element” exclusively.¹¹⁷ Rather than try to positively define what ‘thingliness’ is, Heidegger pursues a *destructive retrieve* of three ‘thing-concepts’, which he considers to have gained dominance at different moments and in distinct disciplines throughout the history of ontology.¹¹⁸ I consider it beyond the focus of this chapter to engage explicitly with this part of Heidegger’s analysis. However, I understand Heidegger’s implicit objective to be a demonstration of how each concept, though seemingly distinct, in fact reduces the ‘thing’, either to something ‘present-at-hand’ or to something ‘ready-at-hand’. In doing so, Heidegger reveals the inadequacy of each concept to an articulation of the unique manner in which materiality is present in the artwork specifically as a phenomenological element. As a consequence of this, he demonstrates that to focus an inquiry exclusively on the nature of the thingly element of the work as an isolatable unit of analysis is in fact superfluous:¹¹⁹ the material element of the artwork is not in fact a material ‘substructure’ or ‘object’, but must be grasped in its phenomenological character through its active *relations* within the work itself. The ‘work’ is thus ontologically prior to the art-object.

¹¹⁵ Heidegger. (1936) P145

¹¹⁶ Heidegger. (1936) P157

¹¹⁷ In relation to his identification of the tendency of theories of aesthetic experience to conflate art with the *Lebensgefühl*, Heidegger in fact remarks: “But even the much-vaunted aesthetic experience cannot get around the thingly aspect of the work.” Heidegger. (1936) P145

¹¹⁸ See Heidegger. (1936). PP146-156

¹¹⁹ Heidegger. (1936). P145

Part Three: The Relation of World and Earth in Heidegger's Artwork

The aim of this section is to give a close analysis of Heidegger's alternative conceptual schema of World and Earth, to draw out the specific ontology of the artwork that it establishes and to critically assess whether such an ontology might be relevant to thinking about conceptual art in a manner which overcomes some of the problems of the texts presented in Chapter One. Whilst it is my contention that the two terms World [*die Welt*] and Earth [*die Erde*] cannot be fully understood when taken individually and in isolation from their mutual *relation*, it is nevertheless necessary to clarify these terms to a certain extent before embarking upon the central analysis of how they operate together. This seems especially true for the term World because it constitutes a central concept that runs throughout Heidegger's philosophy, beginning with its initial exposition in *Being and Time*. To fully understand what Heidegger means by the World of the artwork requires an account of the way in which the significance of this term develops from *Being and Time* to 'Origin of the Work of Art'. Whilst Heidegger dedicates the whole of Part Three of *Being and Time* to a lengthy exposition of the World and whilst a vast amount of literature exists on the topic, my specific focus will be the manner in which the concept of World develops in two distinct yet related ways. (1) The development of the World specifically from a referential totality or system of rather generic, useful things, to a more historical and thus particularised context of meaning and significance. (2) The implicit shift from the World as something revealed to the World in its most ontological character as constitutive of revelation. I anticipate that to take the concept of World in the full extension of its meaning—i.e., the way in which Heidegger describes the power of the Greek Temple to provide the openness of a World that can deliver an historical people to the "fulfilment of its vocation"¹²⁰—would be problematic for conceptual art, and perhaps any contemporary art form for that matter. However, it is my contention that despite this, an understanding of the intelligible aspect set up by the conceptual artwork based, which is based around Heidegger's conception of an open relational context of the World—as opposed to

¹²⁰ Heidegger. (1936) P167

merely an intention, idea or concept—can still be helpful for thinking about such art. Conceptual art might not be ‘world founding’ in the fundamental sense of the Greek Temple, but it might still be capable of setting up a World in the way that the Van Gogh painting or the Meyer poem are. However, first we need to understand what World is.

1. The World in *Being and Time*

It is important to emphasise that in *Being and Time*, Heidegger’s investigation takes place specifically “within the horizon of average everydayness”.¹²¹ He is concerned with revealing that ‘pre-ontological’ structure of relations “closest” to us on an everyday level and which we take for granted. He calls this structure the “environment” [*Umwelt*].¹²² In §14 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger claims that whilst the Greeks had captured something significant about the term ‘thing’ through their concept *πρᾶξις*—i.e., ‘praxis’ or “that which one has to do with in their concerned dealings”¹²³—ontologically speaking, they obscured its specifically ‘pragmatic’ character,¹²⁴ taking ‘things’ to be ‘mere things’ or ‘presence-at-hand’.¹²⁵ For Heidegger as we have already seen, when entities appear ‘present-at-hand’, they appear as abstractions of the theoretical or perceptual gaze. Such relations necessarily presuppose an ontologically prior mode of relation: the ‘ready-to-hand’.¹²⁶ When immersed in everyday activities, our primary engagement with ‘things’ is not as the mere ‘objects’ of our theoretical or perceptual “interpretive tendencies”,¹²⁷ but as equipmental items of use.¹²⁸ In *Being and Time* Heidegger thus defines ‘concern’ [*besorgen*] as the manipulation and putting to use of things,¹²⁹ a practical immersion in the world through a fluid engagement with our surroundings. To treat ‘things’ as ‘present-at-hand’ is thus to conceal both what those ‘things’ really are in our everyday relation to them and to simultaneously conceal the

¹²¹ Heidegger. (1927) §14, P94, 66

¹²² Heidegger. (1927) §14, P94, 66

¹²³ Heidegger. (1927) §14, P96, 68

¹²⁴ Heidegger. (1927) §14, P97, 68

¹²⁵ Heidegger. (1927) §14, P97, 68

¹²⁶ As Stephen Mulhall explains, “certain features of theoretical, purely *cognitive* relations to objects tend to conceal this worldly background.” So, “to get the phenomenon of the world properly into view, we must locate a type of human interaction with entities that casts light on its own environment.” (1996) P47

¹²⁷ Heidegger. (1927) §15, P95, 67

¹²⁸ Heidegger. (1927) §14, P97, 68

¹²⁹ Heidegger. (1936) P96

very structure of ‘concern’ itself.¹³⁰ The World of *Being and Time* therefore, constitutes the *structure* of the relational context—what Heidegger calls the “*wherein*”¹³¹—within which such primary concerned dealings occur. In Heideggerian terminology, the “*wherein*” constitutes a “pre-ontologico-existential signification,”¹³² which means that it describes the ‘concern’ of the individual self, as to its selfhood, whilst immersed within practical relations with the world.¹³³ To emphasise the pragmatic and engaged character of this World, Heidegger uses the term ‘work-world’ [*Werk-welt*].¹³⁴

For Heidegger, it is only by virtue of this relational context that we can understand *what* entities truly are and can thus find them meaningful. The very essence of the ‘ready-to-hand’ is that it necessarily exists and finds its meaning within a relational totality of intelligibility because equipment can only *be* equipmental in relation to other equipment. As Heidegger explains, it does not make sense to speak of equipment in the singular. For example, Heidegger lays out four basic ways¹³⁵ in which equipment refers to or ‘turns away from itself’ and ‘points’ [*deuten*] towards something else. Firstly, equipment is *used*, it is what Heidegger calls a “something-in-order-to” [*um-zu*].¹³⁶ This constitutes the action of purposeful using. Secondly, equipment has a “towards-which” [*Wozu*], the work is to ‘produce’ something.¹³⁷ Thirdly, equipment has a “whereof” [*Woraus*], material or that from which it is constituted.¹³⁸ Finally, equipment has a “for-the-sake-of-which” [*Worumwillen*], or ‘final purpose’.¹³⁹ The World is thus what

¹³⁰ Heidegger. (1927) §15, P95, 67

¹³¹ Heidegger. (1927) §14, P93, 65

¹³² Heidegger. (1927) §14, P93, 65

¹³³ As Michael Inwood explains, the term “existential” stands in distinction from “existential”, which designates the selfhood of man in so far as it is related, not to his individuated self, but to being and in his relationship to being. See *A Heidegger Dictionary*, (Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1999). P61

¹³⁴ Heidegger. (1927). P216

¹³⁵ Lewis suggests that these four kinds of references may correspond to the ‘four causes’, which Aristotle expounds in *Metaphysics* and *Physics*. By ‘cause’, Aristotle does not mean a mechanical cause in the modern sense, but *aita*, or everything that is responsible for how something appears phenomenally. Lewis & Staehler.(2010) P79

¹³⁶ Heidegger. (1927) §15, P97, 68

¹³⁷ Heidegger. (1927) §15, P99, 70

¹³⁸ Heidegger. (1927) §15, P100, 70

¹³⁹ Collingwood provides an interesting parallel to this appropriation of the Aristotelian four causes inherent within the Greek notion of *techne*. Collingwood however, restricts in his discussion of *techne* to the act of productive making, or “the power to produce a preconceived result by means of consciously controlled and directed action.” See R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, (Oxford University Press, London, 1938) P15-20

Stulburg describes as the “unified fabric of relationships”,¹⁴⁰ which individuate entities as meaningful within their relations. It is only through this referential context that ‘things’ in our everyday mode of relation can be meaningful. In *Being and Time*, World thus constitutes the condition of possibility of the appearance of ‘things’ as individuated and meaningful. As such, Lewis explains, the World of *Being and Time* is effectively synonymous with Being¹⁴¹ because, as we have seen, Being for Heidegger at this point constitutes that which always shows up alongside entities: its condition of possibility. Whilst Heidegger’s central metaphor here seems to be that of the craft industry, I agree with Graham Harman that this should not be taken too literally as a theory of ‘tools’ *per se*.¹⁴² Heidegger’s ‘work-world’ describes not only the “domestic world of the workshop” but encompasses also the “public world”.¹⁴³ The World of *Being and Time* describes ‘pre-ontological’ *relations*. It designates, first and foremost, the mode of relation which can be described as a concerned, ‘pragmatic’ absorption in the world. Thus ‘tools’ could designate any entity that we relate to in an instrumental manner. It *could* then—in theory at least—designate an artwork.

Heidegger thinks that on a certain implicit or ‘pre-ontological’¹⁴⁴ level, we are always already aware of the World. When we walk into a room, we do not merely encounter individual pieces of equipment, but a total environment.¹⁴⁵ Heidegger calls this “circumspection” [*Umsicht*].¹⁴⁶ The World of *Being and Time*—i.e., the referential context of the ‘ready-to-hand’—is that structure which ‘shows up alongside’ equipment, which is “lit up for it, *along with* those entities themselves.”¹⁴⁷ However, due to the fact that our everyday mode of engagement in the World is to be immersed within it, its structure cannot be grasped *thematically*, neither whilst immersed, nor through detached theoretical observation. As Dahlstrom explains, “the world does not announce itself,

¹⁴⁰ Robert Stulberg, ‘Heidegger and the Origin of the Work of Art: An Explication’ in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 32, No. 2, (Winter 1973). P261

¹⁴¹ Lewis. (2010) P87

¹⁴² Graham Harman, ‘Technology, Objects and Things’ in *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, May 2009.

¹⁴³ Heidegger. (1927) §15 P100, 71

¹⁴⁴ Lewis & Staehler. (2010) P79

¹⁴⁵ Heidegger. (1927) §15, P98, 68

¹⁴⁶ Heidegger. (1927) §15, P98, 69

¹⁴⁷ Heidegger. (1927) §16, P102, 72

holding itself back,'¹⁴⁸ and this 'holding back' cannot appear. The fact that we are immersed within a context of interdependent relations can present itself to us only when an element of that context breaks down.

What I consider to be crucial in Heidegger's theory is that it is specifically the phenomenological state of presence of materiality that seems to differentiate the ontological character of an artwork from that of equipment, and is thus the marker for instrumentalisation. The fact that equipment has a logic of reliability, which we experience as "usefulness", is made palpable to us—Heidegger implies—through the specific manner in which it facilitates the coming into presence of its materiality. In simultaneity with the subordination of the material to utility in the production of equipment, it has the character of being phenomenologically invisible, so to speak, when in use. For a hammer to function fluidly and efficiently, it must become an extension of the arm that is doing the hammering *action*. This entails, for Heidegger, that the sheer fact of its materiality must drop out of immediate phenomenological presence and cease to be an issue for us. Material is "used up" in the use of equipment and only appears when the equipment breaks down and ceases to be useful, i.e., when its reliability is no longer actively propelled towards its contextual surroundings. However, even in this situation, what comes forth as material, is the equipment's having sunk into being "mere stuff". Judged in relation to its former reliability, when equipment breaks, it is reduced to a detraction of its former self; matter denuded of its teleological vibrancy and thus of its practical use for the subject. On my interpretation, what this suggests is that *nowhere* in the piece of equipment lay the potential for any degree of phenomenological encounter with materiality in its positive ontological determination: in the first instance because, when working, materiality is *of necessity* invisible, in the second because, when not working, materiality sinks into "mere stuff".

So we can see that this problem with the World relates very closely to Heidegger's observations about the fate of materiality in equipmental beings, i.e., that it can never truly show itself *as* itself. The materiality of equipment can never truly 'appear' *as* that which holds itself back. This is because what we encounter when equipment doesn't

¹⁴⁸ Dahlstrom. (1995) P127

work, is not the recalcitrance or withdrawal unique to equipment. Rather, it is the “conspicuousness, obtrusiveness and obstinacy”¹⁴⁹ of such equipment when it has sunk into being mere stuff, i.e., a characteristic of the ‘present-at-hand’ that shows itself through the ‘ready-to-hand’. As Lewis explains, it is as though the fact of ‘readiness-to-hand’ makes itself ‘present-at-hand’¹⁵⁰ and thus brings itself into the light as a possible object of thematic study. Presumably, in simultaneity to this, our structure of ‘concern’ with which we relate to the World also appears in some manner.

It might be tempting to claim at this point that an analogy can be made between Heidegger’s account of the World in *Being and Time*, as appearing through the rupture in equipmental everydayness, and the operations of conceptual art. After all, conceptual art often takes entities or pieces of equipment, which already exist within the referential totality of the ‘work-world’¹⁵¹ and places them into the gallery. In this case, perhaps conceptual art is best understood, not with recourse to Heidegger’s ontology of the artwork, but to Heidegger’s ontology of equipment. The most obvious example would be one of Duchamp’s Readymades, such as *Fountain*, but this applies equally, as we saw in Chapter One, to a whole range of other, more precisely periodised conceptual works such as Joseph Kosuth’s *A Two Metre Square Sheet of Glass to Lean Against the Wall*.

However, I will now demonstrate why this analogy is inadequate and why we instead require a specific definition of how *Fountain* operates as an artwork, and why such a definition benefits from the presence of a phenomenological mechanism, such as World and Earth. In support of this analogy, one might argue that through the de-contextualisation of the urinal from its typical worldly relations, the ‘Readymade’ as an artwork is encountered as a piece of equipment which is ‘unusable’ and that within this ‘unusability’ we come up against the “conspicuousness, obtrusiveness and

¹⁴⁹ Heidegger. (1927) §16, P104, 74

¹⁵⁰ Lewis & Staehler. (2010) P94

¹⁵¹ In most cases, the objects used in conceptual art—such as Duchamp’s urinal or Kosuth’s sheet of glass—were newly produced and thus had not strictly been wrenched from their full immersion within this totality. However, their very ontological character *as* products still places them within this totality. For Heidegger, even the ‘product’ carries the trace of these references.

obstinacy,”¹⁵² of the equipmental entity within its quality of appearing as merely ‘present-at-hand’. However, already this explanation feels rather inaccurate. When we encounter *Fountain* in a gallery we are not already immersed in a practical, relational context wherein we project the expectation to *use* the urinal.¹⁵³ Without this prior immersion within a context of specifically pragmatic relations, we cannot encounter that *de*-contextualisation or ‘rupture’, which characterises for the early Heidegger, the World appearing. Such a rupture must necessarily result from the equipment breaking down when we are taking it for granted in its functioning *as* equipment. Does this then mean that *Fountain* is more accurately understood as an *art-object*, or the presentation of a mere thing? One might argue that first and foremost, *Fountain* is the presentation of a formerly functional entity, *already* decontextualised from its relational context and thus ‘reduced’ to an object, specifically *for* our theoretical or perceptual “interpretive tendencies.”¹⁵⁴ If this were the case then *Fountain*, of course, would still not be *simply* a ‘mere thing’, entirely devoid of its equipmental character. Instead, as an object, it would necessarily ‘turn away’ from itself and ‘point’ towards the contextual relational totality of the equipmental World to which it typically belongs.¹⁵⁵

If either of these descriptions could be said to constitute a convincing account of the ontology of *Fountain*, then two central, yet related consequences would emerge. Firstly, we could not say that the phenomenon of the World as the specifically “pre-ontological” context of references was capable of appearing to us through an encounter with it. Secondly, we could have no encounter with materiality as itself. The artwork would either yield entirely to a precise and fluid instrumental project, or it would simply lay there, as mere stuff. If we are not formerly immersed within the contextual relations that we think are revealed, then we cannot encounter the “rupture” but instead can only experience the urinal predominantly through the theoretical and perceptual gaze. *Fountain*, though in some sense, both a piece of equipment and an object ‘present-at-

¹⁵² Heidegger. (1927) §16, P104, 74

¹⁵³ There have been many cases of artists or members of the public actually urinating into *Fountain* as a way of interacting with the equipmental nature of the work and reversing the expectation of ‘circumspection’.

¹⁵⁴ Heidegger. (1927) §15, P95, 67

¹⁵⁵ As Lewis suggests, it might in fact be the case that for Heidegger, such thing as an entirely *pure* ‘presence-at-hand’ utterly independent from the ‘ready-to-hand’ can be said to ‘be’ at all. (2010) P94

hand', specifically by virtue of its displacement from the equipmental totality, is not denoted adequately by either of these ontological descriptions. This is because *Fountain* is primarily an artwork: it is an artwork before it is anything else. Uniquely as an artwork, *Fountain* sets itself up in a relational space of 'concern', which neither reduces it to mere object, nor allows it to stand in an equipmental relation to us, though it, in some sense, gives us access to the 'truth' of both of these possible phenomenological structures of entities and an awareness of the manner in which they operate, not as utterly discrete kinds of beings, but as varying ways in which things can appear.

It seems to me that the 'environment' within which we engage with artworks—the 'art-world'¹⁵⁶—would have to have its own distinct mode of 'circumspection', which carried with it a particular structure of 'concern'. This structure would presumably be considerably different from that mode of 'circumspection' we have when immersed, 'pre-ontologically', within what Heidegger refers to broadly as the 'work-world' of the 'ready-to-hand'. Instead, the 'circumspection' would need to be ontological, in the sense that it would involve a certain kind of attentiveness or alertness to the constitution of what is or, in Heidegger's terminology, to Being. As we do not typically enter into an art gallery with the expectation or purpose of *using* the artworks for a specific 'practical' task—at least not in the way that we might walk into a workshop full of tools, which we expect to use to build a table, for example—we cannot experience the 'rupture' that Heidegger describes when our fluid engagement in the 'work-world' breaks down. Whilst an everyday, commonplace urinal might present itself to some as 'obstinate' or irritating within a gallery setting, it is not because we are unable to *use* the urinal to urinate in whilst in the gallery.

However, another line of argument might be pursued at this point. One might claim that what is ruptured through an encounter with *Fountain* is that mode of 'circumspection' typical to the environment specific to the art gallery or artworld more generally. After all, to a large degree conceptual art did attempt to quite fundamentally rupture what

¹⁵⁶ Due to the fact that Heidegger makes clear that the 'world' of the 'ready-to-hand' is not *only* to be thought of as the "domestic world of the workshop", but instead describes an ontological structure or mode of relation, it seems, in theory at least, that it can accommodate other constructions of 'world', such as 'art-world'. However, the question will be whether or not the 'art-world' is constituted with relations of 'concern' that are primarily 'pragmatic'.

some of its protagonists felt to have become habitual within that ‘circumspection’, i.e., a predominantly visual encounter of entities whose status as artworks were thought to be too based upon their morphological continuity with the totality of entities in the history of art.¹⁵⁷ In this sense, the motivating objectives of the conceptual art movement might be seen as the attempt to challenge a mode of relation to artworks as ‘present-at-hand’, as objects of contemplation. One could argue that conceptual art does this partly by developing an environment of the art World from a space constituted by what Heidegger would refer to as the mere collection of countable and familiar entities at hand,¹⁵⁸ into a more phenomenological site in which we gain some sense of the manner in which entities come to individuate themselves. The ‘phenomenon’ that is brought to light by artworks more accurately on this account would be the ‘art-world’, with all of the specificities of its implicitly understood ‘circumspection’. If this were an adequate interpretation of what is at stake with works of a conceptual nature such as *Fountain*, what would have been revealed is that, despite the tendency which runs through the history of a Romantic style aesthetic theory to valorise the artwork above such functional pieces of equipment, that the artwork was, after all, equipmental, in the extended Heideggerian sense of having an ontological structure founded upon relations that are essentially instrumental. The artwork, one might say, has come to be fully expected to perform a certain function within a particular World of circumspection, in this case, the function of providing an object for the contemplative gaze. If this were an adequate reading of conceptual art, what we would encounter with *Fountain* would not be the obstinacy of the urinal *as equipment*, but the obstinacy of the urinal *as art*.

However, there is one central problem with this account. Even if the artworld and the gallery system can be identified as generally having its own form of ‘circumspection’, and even if this can become rather habitual—as it seems almost definitive of more avant-garde art to assume and to fear that it has—it does not seem convincing that this can be akin to the ‘immersion’ that we experience in our daily equipmental dealings. It

¹⁵⁷ Charles Harrison has described conceptual art as a challenge to Modernism. In particular he defines conceptual art against “a disinterested response to the work of art in its phenomenological and morphological aspects, which is to say that the experience is cast in the self-image of the sensitive, empiricistic, and responsible (bourgeois) beholder.” See Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language*, (MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2001) P41

¹⁵⁸ Heidegger, (1936). P170

seems to me that the central point of the art gallery is that it is a place within which each particular artwork is presented such that it might potentially both open up a unique perspective, and help constitute the relational totality of the gallery environment. To be attentive to the *particularity* of each work is central to the structure of art's 'circumspection'. To me this seems true not merely of discrete traditional art-objects, such as sculptures and paintings—wherein the particularity is literally *inscribed* within the work's internal detail, or within the signature of the artist-subject—but also, and more fundamentally, for Heidegger's thought, I believe, works such as Readymades.

I interpret the most essential characteristic of the artwork for Heidegger to be this: that the work is not an entity amongst entities, it is not simply a piece of equipment or an object of theoretical or perceptual gaze, but a place, which facilitates the achievement of a distinct kind of proximity to other entities. The artwork is the site in which we can encounter the true nature of entities, but without anything breaking down, as it were. For Heidegger, the artwork is unique in that it is able to create a certain contemplative distance without reducing the work to the perceptual or theoretical object of gaze. Through the artwork then, Heidegger is able to retain the emphasis upon 'concern', whilst decentralising the pragmatic or practical character of everyday involvement in things. The artwork is not something everyday, yet it is that which allows us to both see the 'truth' of the everyday and also, we shall see, to set it up or construct it.

2. World and Earth in 'Origin of the Work of Art'

In footnote 55 of *The Essence of Reasons*, Heidegger states that his characterisation of the World in *Being and Time* as a "system of useful things" is a mere preliminary sketch.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, the World that appears in 'Origin of the Work of Art' has been rather significantly developed. This development can be attributed to the fact that Heidegger posits a counterpole to his concept World: the Earth. The artwork, for Heidegger, simultaneously "sets up" [Aufstellen] the World and "sets forth" [Herstellen] the Earth, setting them into "intimate strife"¹⁶⁰ with one another. They are in 'strife' because they constitute opposing tendencies: 'the World tends towards and strives for intelligibility,

¹⁵⁹ Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons*, (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1969) P80.

¹⁶⁰ Heidegger. (1936) P175

whilst the Earth is the self-secluding element, which resists ever being brought into full intelligibility. However, their ‘strife’ is ‘intimate’ precisely because their respective characters—as the drive for intelligibility and as the self-secluding—are constituted only in their relation of opposition to one another. Neither pole can be thought individually, but are instead, mutually constitutive. The World needs the Earth precisely because it needs to ground itself in something substantial, and the Earth needs the World to bring it into the light *as* the self-secluding. However, the ‘strife’ or struggle is not to be understood as a visual or aesthetic dimension of the work itself. Instead, as Michael Haar points out, it remains “latent, intimate, *preliminary* to the appearance of the work and thus invisible in it.”¹⁶¹ It seems that this is in part what Heidegger implies when he claims that, “the repose of the work that rests in itself thus has its essence in the intimacy of strife.”¹⁶² This seems important because if it were the case that only those artworks that somehow *visually encapsulated* strife could be relevant to Heidegger’s theory, one might argue that it ruled out a considerable amount of conceptual art, which some might identify as having a rather cool or calm aesthetic. Instead, the relation between these poles describes the process of disclosure through which the artwork phenomenologically and ontologically reconfigures and reconstitutes the delineation of that which is brought to light as the intelligible at any historical moment. It is thus the logical extension of Heidegger’s phenomenological project. The artwork is, for Heidegger, the most proper site of the ‘phenomenon’.

To understand both the transition of Heideggerian phenomenology from *Being and Time* to ‘Origin of the Work of Art’, and the central significance of the concept Earth within this transition is, I think, to grasp the logical extension of Heidegger’s deformalisation of phenomenology. As we saw, Heidegger sought to delineate the *distinctive* ‘phenomenon’ of phenomenology as that which proximally and for the most part does not show itself, yet nevertheless demands to be brought to light. This distinctive phenomenon is thus involved in a ‘double-play’: it is *both* formal, i.e., it both shows itself in itself *and* phenomenological, i.e., it is that which lies hidden and has the greatest demand to be brought to light. For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, the

¹⁶¹ Michael Haar. (1993) P109

¹⁶² Heidegger. (1936) P175

‘phenomenon’ in this distinctive sense just *is* what Heidegger calls the World, i.e., the pre-ontological context of references, which gives entities their meaning. Due to the fact that the World is Being at this point in Heidegger’s thinking, as discussed previously, then the ‘phenomenon’ *is* ‘Being’, i.e., it is the implicit condition of possibility, which can be brought thematically to light. The self-concealing aspect of *Being and Time* constituted the tendency of the world to *not* show itself as “obstinate” when we are immersed within it through our practical relation to tools, but to instead withdraw into invisibility.

Robert Stulberg is an example of a scholar who interprets World and Earth as concepts that predominantly emerge from, and are a development of, Heidegger’s basic framework of the ‘ontological difference’. World and Earth, says Stulberg, “clearly reflect” the way in which, in *Being and Time*, Dasein exists on two distinct levels of reality, “existing reality” [*das Seiende*]*—i.e., entities in the real world—and “the being of existing reality”* [*das Sein des Seienden*]*—i.e., the unified fabric of the relationships which gives meaning to the world.*¹⁶³ As we saw, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger thinks that to arrive at an understanding of what “existing reality” *is*, Dasein must transcend reality and relate to it within a context, within a realm of ‘being’. This leads Stulberg to draw a parallel between the Dasein of *Being and Time* and the artwork, in that the artwork also “exists on two levels.” These levels are World and Earth. The Earth, or the material aspect of the work corresponds to the “existing reality” in *Being and Time*, whilst the World is the “being of existing reality”, the “context of higher relationships which gives meaning to the artwork.” Just like entities in *Being and Time*, the Earth of the artwork, claims Stulberg, is ‘self-concealing’ and withdrawn. To describe the tendency of withdrawal, Heidegger takes an example of a boulder. Even if we try to smash the boulder into parts, in order to examine its contents and measure its mass, we can never lay hold of its true character. For Stulberg then, whilst we can never fully ‘reveal’ the Earth by way of rendering it intelligible, the artwork operates as that unique site within which Earth can *appear* or come to light.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Stulberg. (1973) P260-261

¹⁶⁴ Stulberg. (1973) P261

I identify the introduction of Earth, as the counterpole to World to significantly develop Heideggerian phenomenology in three main ways. Firstly, the World is no longer synonymous with the *whole* ‘phenomenon’, but constitutes only its intelligible side. Heidegger posits Earth to designate the self-concealing aspect of the ‘phenomenon’. As the self-concealing aspect, Earth—and more specifically, materiality—is now synonymous to Being, and thus Being is no longer that which cannot appear whilst things are functioning. Rather, Being *can* appear and can do so without anything breaking down. However, Being must appear specifically as that which cannot be rendered fully intelligible, i.e., that which cannot be fully *exhausted*. In this sense, it seems to me that the concept of Earth functions for Heidegger to describe how there can be a continuum from Being to beings, thus bridging, without entirely eradicating, the ontological difference, i.e., the difference between Being and beings. Secondly, due to the fact that Earth or materiality is the concealed aspect, materiality is ontologically primordial. Indeed, for Heidegger, Earth as the self-concealing tendency of materiality constitutes that *from* which the ‘worldly’ or intelligible arises, that which grounds and substantiates the intelligible and that which demonstrates resistance and recalcitrance to being rendered fully intelligible. Thirdly, because Heidegger posits the mechanism of the World and the Earth as the disclosive logic of the artwork itself, phenomenology is specifically less dependent upon the individual *logos*¹⁶⁵ and thus Heidegger can explain how different *particularised* or *historical* ‘worlds’ emerge. World is no longer a system of generic¹⁶⁶ and practical relations, but instead, takes on a particular and historical dimension. Through the artwork it is not that an everyday, yet typically concealed World can ‘unconceal’ itself through a rupture in the generic and pragmatic relations between man and tools. Rather, the artwork “sets up” a space in which the disclosure of a specific and particularised World is fought out between the struggle of World as the intelligible face of the phenomenon, and Earth, as the unintelligible aspect. This is why, I think, Lewis claims that ‘Being’ for Heidegger at this stage of his writing refers to the ‘particular’. Fourthly, in the most ontological sense, World also comes to mean, not merely the intelligible, but the *ontological striving towards* intelligibility and likewise,

¹⁶⁵ Dahlstrom. (1995) P129

¹⁶⁶ Lewis & Staehler. (2010) P83

Earth comes to mean the striving *against* intelligibility. In ‘Origin of the Work of Art’ then, Heidegger’s delineation of phenomenology reaches its logical extension.

To my mind, these distinct developments within Heidegger’s phenomenology help to explain the distinct levels on which the artwork can operate. It is useful, I think, to turn to the recent work of Iain Thompson on this topic,¹⁶⁷ as I consider it to provide a very clear account of these distinct levels of operation. Thompson claims that for Heidegger, the artwork is an “ontological paradigm”,¹⁶⁸ in that it provides a model of, and indeed sometimes *for*, reality. This ontological functioning, claims Thompson, operates on at least three different levels: as “micro-paradigmatic”, “paradigmatic” and “macro-paradigmatic”.¹⁶⁹ The Van Gogh painting that Heidegger discusses functions in at least the first two ways. Firstly, it reveals to us what a pair of shoes *are* ‘in truth’,¹⁷⁰ i.e., how shoes function within a referential totality with which we have ‘concernful dealings’. However, the painting reveals this specifically through opening a unique space in which an imaginative encounter with the representation of the shoes can occur. What this artistic space allows, claims Heidegger—distinct from either real shoes, lying in the hallway, or the representation of shoes simply in the imagination—is an understanding of their equipmental character, and their relation to a specific human context. We encounter their true character *for* the peasant woman, who in turn is defined through her ‘concernful’ dealings with their character of reliability. It seems to me that the example of the Van Gogh painting is primarily supposed to demonstrate that the artwork facilitates a unique kind of proximity, wherein the World can appear, without the necessity of either a former immersion or a rupture. As a consequence of this, both the World and the structure of ‘concern’ itself can appear without either withdrawing or sinking into mere stuff. This revelation is what Thompson terms “micro-paradigmatic”: what it reveals is the “thing thinging”,¹⁷¹ i.e., it shows entities emerging as what they are with their own significant meaning. However, this stands in immediate distinction

¹⁶⁷ Ian. D. Thompson, *Heidegger, Art and Postmodernity*, (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2011). The bulk of this text also appears on the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy page for Heidegger’s Aesthetics. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/>

¹⁶⁸ Thompson. (2011) P44

¹⁶⁹ Thompson. (2011) P44

¹⁷⁰ Heidegger. (1936). P161

¹⁷¹ Thompson. (2011) P44

from a non-artistic encounter with an object. Through an encounter with the dependencies of the peasant woman with the shoes, the painting also reveals the character of things to be truly constituted within a context in which things *matter* to us, within a context of ‘concern’. Secondly, by way of this “micro-paradigmatic” process of disclosure, it has been revealed to us—“unwittingly”, Heidegger rather disingenuously claims¹⁷²—the manner in which art itself works: art just *is* this rather unique process of disclosure, through which it is revealed to us what entities ‘in truth’ *are*. What the artwork discloses is how art itself works, and art itself works by disclosing. This disclosure is what Thompson called “paradigmatic”.¹⁷³ This constitutes a kind of meta-level or a certain notable self-reflexivity.¹⁷⁴ Finally, in its most “macro-paradigmatic” functioning, the artwork not only reveals a familiar, yet typically hidden World of meaning or reveals itself to be a site of revelation, but rather “sets up” or establishes a new World or context of significance.

Whilst this is not identified in Thompson’s categorisation, it is my contention that the third “macro-paradigmatic” operation can again be divided into two instances. First of all, we might say that an artwork can “set up” a new World of significance around it—an ‘art-world’¹⁷⁵ perhaps—or could even operate as a blueprint for a new realm of relations or a new configuration of relations that we might take on with regards to aspects of the wider world surrounding us. However, there is yet another, even more fundamental sense in which Heidegger thinks that the truly *great* artwork should be capable of “setting up” a World, and that is by “governing” the basic self-understanding of an historical community. On my interpretation, the strong or extended sense of this “macro-paradigmatic” functioning of the artwork seems to be reserved by Heidegger for the Greek Temple only. Whilst the Van Gogh painting seems to operate as a bridge from representation, to World revelation, to World constitution, it does not in any clear sense seem to designate fundamental and historical World *foundation*. It is my

¹⁷² Heidegger. (1936) P161

¹⁷³ Thompson. (2011) P44

¹⁷⁴ This self-reflexivity might very well be akin to Vattimo’s claim that Heidegger’s ontological approach to art in fact parallels in many ways the avant-garde tendency to question the fact of art itself.

¹⁷⁵ Whilst I am aware that this term ‘artworld’ carries a very particular significance after Arthur Danto’s identification of a surrounding context of *enfranchising theories*, I am using “art-world” here to signify more a mode of relation or ‘circumspection’, which is proper to the art experience.

contention that to attempt to attribute the “macro-paradigmatic” functioning, in its strongest and most extended sense to artworks such as conceptual art is quite implausible. Whilst conceptual artworks might very well be capable of setting up and re-organising the self-understanding of a particular *art* community, or art-world, or even, as Santiago Zabalar has suggested, to reorganise the system of meanings of the world of entities or equipment,¹⁷⁶ it does not seem convincing to claim that art still holds the power and capability of reorganising the historical understanding of man, on this deeper and more fundamental level. We will have to forego this strongest sense of Heidegger’s conceptualisation if we want to talk about conceptual artworks in a convincing manner. However, this need not necessarily be a major problem. Through this extended “macro-paradigmatic” notion of World foundation, Heidegger is obviously appealing to a quasi-Hegelian notion of the artwork as constituting the highest significance and fulfilment of human existence. Whilst Hegel had proclaimed the end of art, to point to the fact that art no longer *has* this significance, Heidegger poses it as an open question.¹⁷⁷ It is my contention that it is possible to relate to such a questioning of the significance of art, which Heidegger significantly reserves for the *Epilogue*, as a kind of ideal, yet one that functions specifically to open up a way of thinking about and relating to the art of our times, to find resonances of the significance of art, which are more particular to our age. In this sense, it is about finding what Heidegger had previously called the “positive possibilities” of contemporary art.

Through its development into ‘Origin of the Work of Art’, the World comes to constitute, not the whole ‘phenomenon’, which demands to be brought to light, but only its intelligible aspect or face. Heidegger introduces the counterpole Earth, to operate as that through which the “double play” of phenomenology can occur. In ‘Origin of the Work of Art’, the World constitutes the formal drive or tendency of the phenomenon, whilst Earth is reserved for the self-concealing and recalcitrant element, i.e., the truly ‘phenomenological’ drive of the ‘phenomenon’. Earth is that which *resists* and can

¹⁷⁶ Santiago Zabalar, in Vattimo. (1985). Xv

¹⁷⁷ In the *Epilogue* of ‘Origin of the Work of Art’, Heidegger claims, “The truth of Hegel’s judgement has not yet been decided”. The exact date of the *Epilogue* is unknown, dating anywhere between 1936-56, when the Addendum was attached. The extent to which Heidegger is still fully endorsing the details of this essay at this point is thus ambiguous. Heidegger. (1936) P205

never be fully rendered intelligible by the World. As such, the Earth, explains Dahlstrom, seems to replace the aspect of concealment and withdrawal characteristic of all the various senses of what it means “to be”, which are elaborated in *Being and Time*.¹⁷⁸ In my interpretation, positing the Earth as the ‘self-concealing’ aspect or face of the phenomenon, has two main functions: (1) it operates as a ‘mechanism’ for how the world can reveal itself through phenomenological presencing *without* anything breaking down, and (ii) it explains how a new world of meaning can be “set up”, by way of the self-disclosive capacities of the artwork itself. As a result of these two things, the artwork constructs a reflective, meditative distance in which Earth, as the self-concealing aspect of the phenomenon can, for the first time in Heidegger’s phenomenology, ‘appear’ as the self-concealing, i.e., it can *announce* itself as that which does not appear.

Part Four: A Phenomenological Rethinking of Materiality

We have given considerable attention to Heidegger’s concept of the World, and how it develops through Heidegger’s work, a more deeply phenomenological and ontological sense. To understand better precisely how Heidegger thinks that materiality can have a primordial role in the ontological determination of the artwork and, as a result, cannot be reduced merely to the material object or substructure of the artwork, a more detailed analysis of Heidegger’s conception of Earth is required. Through introducing the concept of *physis*, Heidegger’s terminology and imagery conjure up a sense of the natural or the organic—to both compliment his particular discussion of the Greek Temple, but also, I think, to emphasise the ‘self-contained’ recalcitrance to the cognitive and calculative—which initially feels inappropriate to a discussion of a lot of artworks, in particular conceptual works. However, I will attempt to focus upon and to draw out the phenomenological implications, which I feel to be central to Heidegger’s thought.

¹⁷⁸ Dahlstrom. (1995) P129

1. Earth and *Physis*

Heidegger's introduction of the notion of φύσις or *physis* in his discussion of the Greek Temple, provides an interesting way into understanding the operations of "earth" in its wider and more ontological sense, and, as a result, Heidegger's re-thinking of the "thingly" or "ontically" material character of the artwork, as the "earthly." I will therefore be focusing mostly upon the Greek Temple as an example. *Physis* is derived from the root, φύω, which means, "I grow". Heidegger defines *physis* as "the emerging and rising *in itself and in all things*".¹⁷⁹ In 'The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics', Heidegger articulates what he considers to be the inherent ambiguity of *physis*: it designates both that which "prevails" and "holds sway" [*das Waltende*], and the holding sway or "prevailing as such" [*das Walten*]¹⁸⁰, i.e., like the notion of Earth, *physis* also operates as both an ontological and an ontic category. However, as we shall see, the ontic character of both *physis* and Earth, do not, for Heidegger, describe "states" of being, separable from their ontological character: the ontic is not the frozen, static remnant of the ontological. They are instead moments in a continuum. I interpret this continuum to designate, what I have referred to before as the bridging, without wholly eradicating, of the ontological difference. Both aspects of *physis* are fundamentally 'active' characterisations and thus in distinct opposition to the notion of *vorhandenheit*.

It is my contention that "earth" can be rendered more comprehensive through its relation to *physis*. But what is *physis*, more specifically in relation to the artwork? If we look at Heidegger's description of the Greek Temple: "Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the obscurity of the rock's bulky yet spontaneous support."¹⁸¹ He continues: the stone, "though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, first brings to radiance the light of day"¹⁸² and "the temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air."¹⁸³ *Physis* describes the reciprocal manner in which distinct things bring each other into

¹⁷⁹ Heidegger. (1936) P168

¹⁸⁰ Martin Heidegger, 'The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics', (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2001) P28-31

¹⁸¹ Heidegger. (1936) P167

¹⁸² Heidegger. (1936) P168

¹⁸³ Heidegger. (1936) P168

appearance within a relational totality or ‘environment’. It is specifically through and within this totality or World opened up by the artwork that all things “enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are”.¹⁸⁴ For Heidegger then, the disclosive logic of the artwork is thoroughly co-dependent with, and operates in a continual relation to, its specific, surrounding context and environment. The artwork, it seems, both draws from and “sets up” a unique ‘circumspection’.

It is the fact that this disclosive logic is fully relational which secures for the artwork a significance that is self-contained and somewhat independent of the intentions of the subject-artist: since the artwork’s essential character must arise somewhat spontaneously out of the context it opens up, its significance can never be fully *prescribed* beforehand. The artwork, Heidegger tells us, is not an object or an entity merely added to an existing environment, neither is it something that reflects or represents that environment. Both of these characterisations designate a mere supplementation to what already is. Rather, as an ‘originary’ event, the artwork *opens up* what “is”, by setting up an entire phenomenological context in which, through a holistic set of relations, a multiplicity of elements are responsible for bringing each other into appearance. The artwork thus has a positive and primordial role in that it literally facilitates a phenomenologically radical space in which a new set of relations can be configured. The Temple, Heidegger claims, “first gives to things their looks, and to men their outlook on themselves.”¹⁸⁵ It seems to me that *physis* is invoked by Heidegger mainly to posit a capacity for contextually specific phenomenological reconstitution, which is prior to the concrete artwork and which runs through the entire process of concretisation or, in a more specifically Heideggerian formulation, the delineation of what is.

2. Earth as Support and Shelter

In relation to *physis*, the necessity of the “thingly” or material aspect of the artwork lay in the fact that for such emerging and rising to prevail and hold sway at all, a world must not merely be “set up” by the work, but must crucially be “kept abidingly in

¹⁸⁴ Heidegger. (1936) P168

¹⁸⁵ Heidegger. (1936) P168

force”.¹⁸⁶ This requires an “earthly” substance of some sort, a form of support and substantiation, which can provide enough grounding for the emergent elements. “Earth”, Heidegger claims, constitutes “that whence the arising brings back and shelters all that arises as such”.¹⁸⁷ He continues: “in the things that arise, Earth occurs essentially as the sheltering agent.”¹⁸⁸ If *physis* is the “emerging and rising in itself and in all things”, then earth is both the (negative) source from which emergence and phenomenality as such is possible, but simultaneously, it is the substantiating process through which whatever comes into appearance is supported and sheltered and thus made “actual”, i.e., given the bounds within which it can be “kept abidingly in force”. As that which “shelters all that arises as such”, Earth—on this ontological level—is operative prior to the artwork and is, in a sense, its condition of possibility: it is Being. Ontologically, Earth expands the concept of “material” out beyond its ontic sense, in terms of the sheer presence of an object, or the matter of a substructure, to encompass that which enables and supports and shelters every aspect of the context that the artwork will open up, and which will ultimately come to stand as resonant and meaningful.

The artwork, as a bringing into prominence of the ontological operations by which what arises can come to appear and to resonate as meaningful, is thus always already within a materialising logic. This is why Michael Haar argues: “there is no purely ‘worldly’ work, that is, one wholly detached from the earth”.¹⁸⁹ Whilst Haar is referring more particularly here to the Pop Art of Andy Warhol, this logic can be extended to conceptual artworks. Even those conceptual artworks, which insist upon minimum material presentation, are, in their ‘work-being’ material because ‘material’ no longer simply means substructure or object, but a kind of gathering or coalescence, through which a world of meaning is constituted. Beginning from the widest domain of *physis*, we can see that the “earthly” character of the artwork is not reducible to something substructural. If we were to take the more organic example of a plant, as Foltz suggests, the “earthly” is not merely “the soil from which the plant emerges and into which it

¹⁸⁶ Heidegger. (1936) P169

¹⁸⁷ Heidegger. (1936) P168

¹⁸⁸ Heidegger. (1936) P168

¹⁸⁹ Michael Haar, (1993) P109

fixes its roots,”¹⁹⁰ but is also “that which shelters and supports the *appearing*¹⁹¹ of the plant within the open – the resistant, fibrousness of the stalk and the moist suppleness of the smooth petals”.¹⁹² Earth is very much at work *within* every aspect of the plant’s specific logic, and thus every aspect of the plant is *of* Earth. In opposition to “matter” then, the “earthly” aspect of the artwork does not describe the artwork in its material *state*—e.g., as a material artistic object—but designates the continual support of the unfolding and the substantiation, i.e., Being.

To move away from examples of nature, for which such descriptions seem effortlessly apt, but for which a discussion of conceptual art feels less convincing, “even in speaking”, Foltz suggests, the earth is the “integral self-containment that allows sound to carry a meaning.”¹⁹³ This would indicate that the “earthly” aspect of speech is not reducible merely to sound itself, nor to sonority, as it might, under a more substructural definition: sound is not the *seat* of, or the *vehicle* for, meaning. Instead, the “earthly” aspect would somehow incorporate the entire substantiating process of language, which supports it to come forth and hold sway as language that is resonant and *meaningful*. For Foltz, the material elements involved in this can include not merely the sounds made or the words used but also “the mouth and body themselves, by which we speak.”¹⁹⁴ The resonance or meaning of language, i.e., that which defines it in its *working*, is not supported merely by sound, but also by that which makes sound possible, such as the body and its auditory and gestural capabilities. By introducing *physis* into his discussion of the Greek temple then, Heidegger suggests that Earth is necessarily existent as a support in all aspects of emergence.

By beginning from the operation of Earth on the widest and most expansive, ontological scale, in its relation of support to *physis*, we get a better sense of what Heidegger calls the ‘earthly’ element, understood as that which comes forth specifically *through* and *in* the artwork. The ‘earthly’ aspect of the work is not reducible to the material vehicle or

¹⁹⁰ Bruce V. Foltz, *Inhabiting the Earth: Heidegger, Environmental Ethics and the Metaphysics of Nature*, (Humanities Press, Michigan, 1995). P136

¹⁹¹ My italics.

¹⁹² Foltz, (1995). P136

¹⁹³ Foltz, (1995). P137

¹⁹⁴ Foltz, (1995). P137

art-object, which contains the idea, concept, emotion or gesture. The ‘earthly’ aspect of a work is that which facilitates, substantiates, supports and shelters the emergence of those things, within the logic of the artwork’s unitary being. Earth, as that which substantiates “all that arises as such”, thus unfolds, immanently within the totality of the meaningful phenomenal realm, i.e., not merely the “environment”, but also the world; that entire context of relations, meanings and beliefs that the artwork opens up. This suggests to me that earth is not to be understood as a category with a definite meaning, which can then simply be applied to this or that artwork. The earth unfolds as the supportive capacity of the work, within its particular *working*, not in the actuality or concretion of its *objecthood*. Earth in the artwork, Heidegger states clearly, is not “a mass of matter deposited here or there.”¹⁹⁵ For Heidegger, this “support” or “substantiation” is specifically not synonymous with the conventional aesthetic concepts of the artistic object, vehicle or material substructure. Indeed, it is part *of* its working, part of its inner logic. What shows itself, and can come to count as the “earthly” within each individual artwork, is dependent upon the logic of that particular work, and its development through and within its relational entirety. It is this reasoning, which permits Heidegger to claim that there is something necessarily “unpredictable” and “irreducibly spontaneous”¹⁹⁶ about the earth. Earth does not ‘appear’ outside of the relational context that the work sets up. The artwork “moves the earth into the open region of a world and keeps it there. *The work lets the earth be an earth.*”¹⁹⁷ The artwork creates the earth, in the Heideggerian sense: it sets up the “actual” bounds within which it can achieve “self-assertion” of its essence. The “earthly”, one might argue then, is always necessarily particular to each artwork’s unfolding and thus “site-specific”.

Another notable consequence of the expanded notion of materiality, put forward by the concept of earth as the support “of all that arises”, is that Heidegger posits a mode of “bringing-forth” [*Her-vor-bringen*], which is ontologically prior to, and independent of, the decisive shaping and production of the artist-subject, and of which the latter always

¹⁹⁵ Heidegger. (1936) P168

¹⁹⁶ Heidegger. (1936) P170-171

¹⁹⁷ Heidegger. (1936) P171

responds to and speaks. In short, Being itself has a specific logic, despite the fact that it requires man to bring it forth into concrete “actuality”. The artist-subject cannot simply “decide” the specific configurations of her artwork *ex nihilo*. Rather, she is simultaneously informed and restricted by whatever brings itself forth as meaningful in any given historical and cultural context. Even before the artistic procedure of concretisation, there appears to exist, for Heidegger, a more natural drive towards substantiation into the perceptible and the meaningful. In ‘Origin of the Work of Art’, he refers to this as *Dichtung*, or the “poetic project of truth”. *Dichtung* describes how, ontologically prior to the artist’s actualisation, a thickening process occurs, through which meaning gathers, condenses and pre-discloses itself in specific ways, within particular historical and contextual circumstances. The *Dichter*, though indeed a composer in the true sense, can compose only “what of itself gathers together and composes itself”.¹⁹⁸ As Mozart claimed “I find notes that love one another”.¹⁹⁹ The role of the artist is to recognise the gathering of this natural configuration or teleology, to work alongside it and to give it definite shape. For Heidegger, to “actualise”, is not to “produce” or to “make”, but to provide the bounds necessary for something to be capable of becoming what it will be: a work that is vibrant and resonant within its specific phenomenological and historical environment. To “actualise” is another mode of bringing forth. As Heidegger definitely does not equate the “actual” with “object”, his account of the “earthly” material element of the work must be applicable to artworks, which lack conventionally materialised art “objects”.

3. Earth as the Self-concealing

As Heidegger attributes a self-disclosive capacity to the artwork, which he claims is independent of human “decision”, and as he also emphasises—so crucially, I think, for the uniqueness of his theory—that the “earthly”, as a new way of talking about materiality, is in fact operative in this self-disclosive capacity, he must explain more precisely earth’s mechanistic operations. How does the self-disclosive drive of the

¹⁹⁸ Haar. (1993) P98

¹⁹⁹ Haar. (1993) P98

“man-made” artwork remain grounded in “something decisive”²⁰⁰, and thus resist becoming the entirely accidental distributor, as in the concept of the “mere” thing? Without the capacity to resist such a fate, the conventional dichotomy of the “natural” and the “man-made” would merely be reproduced within the logic of the artwork itself, a dichotomy that Heidegger has already claimed to ultimately hinge upon, and thus imply, the centralisation of instrumental utility for the human subject. As Heidegger posits the artwork as that which has the capacity to escape such instrumentalisation, the question must be answered as to how earth can truly operate, “decisively” within the artwork’s logic?

The answer to this lay in Heidegger’s characterisation of the Earth as that which is essentially “self-secluding”. “The earth”, Heidegger states, “is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding *and to that extent* sheltering and concealing.”²⁰¹ This quote demonstrates very clearly that for Heidegger, the capacity for earth to shelter, support and substantiate, is a direct result of its being essentially “self-secluding”. But what precisely does this mean? Heidegger tells us that the work-being of an artwork can be characterised as that which “sets up” a world and “sets forth” the earth. This is not to be understood as a single event, following which the relation withers away into “the empty unit of opposites unconcerned with one another”²⁰², but describes an ongoing relation of “intimate strife”. The specific character of the relation is that the World—as designating the dimension of phenomenality, transparency and meaning—“wants nothing closed” and strives to surmount and open the earth, whilst the earth acts both as a support and as a recalcitrance, simultaneously grounding and delineating the possibilities of the World at any given time. The two are necessarily related, not merely as distinct competing opposites, but because they are essentially two inseparable dimensions of a unity. Through the relation, the opponents raise each other, not merely “into the self-assertion of their natural essences”, but also “beyond themselves”.²⁰³ Thus “self-assertion” is never a “rigid insistence upon some contingent

²⁰⁰ Heidegger. (1936) P179

²⁰¹ Heidegger. (1936) P174 My italics

²⁰² Heidegger. (1936) P174

²⁰³ Heidegger. (1936) P178

state”. Earth is not the passive substructure, but is actively engaged in ensuring corporeality to World, which facilitates its substantiation.

Rejecting what he considered to be the optimism of a Hegelian style notion of a dialectical synthesis, Heidegger has to posit a further operation, which facilitates the continual interaction of the two elements, in a manner that ensures the level of decisiveness, independent of the subject, which he wishes to posit. This is the earth’s “self-concealing” drive. Through its self-secluding drive—its drive to withdrawal back into itself—the earth, which is always already in constant relation to the world, “tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there.”²⁰⁴ In ‘Origin of the Work of Art’ however, Heidegger goes further with this idea, focusing upon this mechanism of withdrawal almost as though it were an independent mechanism, oblivious to its role as the substantiation of World. Earth is the *essentially* undisclosable, that which “shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up.”²⁰⁵ “A stone”, Heidegger explains, “presses downward and manifests its heaviness. But while this heaviness exerts an opposing pressure on us it denies us any penetration into it. If we attempt such a penetration by breaking open the rock, it still does not display in its fragments anything inward that has been opened up. The stone has instantly withdrawn again into the dull pressure of its fragments.”²⁰⁶ Whilst we can encounter a certain dull pressure about the rock, this pressure has the character of evading analysis. There is a certain asymmetry, it seems, in our relation to earth, one, which cannot be ironed out through our attempts at techno-scientific mastery, but is instead exacerbated by it. The self-seclusion of the “earthly” element then—in this case the “dull pressure”—is essentially its resistance or recalcitrance to calculative thought or analysis, i.e., instrumentalism. The fact that nothing “inward”, like an essence, can be opened up when the rock is approached in this scientific manner is that the “dull pressure” is not a property of the rock to be positively identified and defined, but an elusive and specifically relational characteristic. Heidegger wants to insist that the impenetrable character of the earth, is not reducible to some kind of error or incapacity of the intellect

²⁰⁴ Heidegger. (1936) P174

²⁰⁵ Heidegger. (1936) P159

²⁰⁶ Heidegger. (1936) P172

itself, but instead, is part of the earth's very logic and character. "Colour shines and wants only to shine",²⁰⁷ he claims and it is only through the artwork, Heidegger thinks, that an encounter with this positive ontological determination of materiality is a possibility.

4. The Earth as Ontic Materiality

An understanding of the unique character of the "earthly" element, as it appears in the artwork, requires an understanding of two central ideas: that earth is a continuum from the ontological to the ontic, and that earth is that which *appears* as the self-secluding. Unlike "matter", which has come to describe a material state of something present-at-hand, Earth is, essentially, both an ontological and an ontic category. Despite the fact that Heidegger posits a prior ontological dimension to the Earth, it is the artwork, which first, "moves the earth itself into the open region of a world and keeps it there"; the work "*lets the earth be an earth,*"²⁰⁸ rather than instrumentalising it. In fact, we do not encounter "earth" whatsoever outside of the workings of the artwork. If, however, as we have shown, the "work-being" of the artwork can be defined as a kind of relational teleological vibrancy, then this means that even in its ontic character, the "earthly" aspect of the artwork remains connected, through the inner logic of the work's working, to its ontological character. The fact that the ontic and the ontological, Heidegger tells us: "flow into reciprocal accord" means that in the artwork, the ontic "earthly" aspect, ceases to be a separate state, and instead must be seen as a moment of the ontological—and vice versa.

Materiality, or the "earthly", then, operates as a continuum from its ontological to its ontic character. In opposition to "matter"—which refers to the passive, material state of an effected artistic substructure—the "earthly" aspect of the artwork is a moment of the ontological operation of Earth, in its capacity to bring forth. What is unique about an encounter with an artwork, as opposed to equipment, is that somehow the fact of this capacity is contained within, and resonates from, its ontic presence. The Being of the particular artwork—the unitary phenomenon composed of a totality of co-dependent

²⁰⁷ Heidegger. (1936) P172

²⁰⁸ Heidegger. (1936) P171

ontological determinants—emanates within and through that work. The artwork thus contains, within that moment of “shine”, the totality of the movement from the ontological to the ontic. The “earthly” element of the artwork is thus not to be understood as a “work material,” but as its “shine”: it is not the paint used, for example, or the colour chosen, but the coming forth, the “arising”, “emerging” or “shine” of the colour into its essential self-assertion and prominence. As Heidegger describes, “The temple-work, in setting-up a world, does not cause it to disappear, but to come forth for the first time and to come into the open region of the work’s world. The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colours to glow, tones to sing, the word to say. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of wood, into the hardness and luster of metal, into the brightening and darkening of colour, into the clang of tone and into the naming power of the word.”²⁰⁹ What is captured within the “shine” of the colour is not the intention or the decision of the artist-subject, as in the case of “matter”, but the peculiar directedness of the work itself.

However, as the earth is not merely the supporting and the sheltering agent, but the essentially “self-secluding”, to encounter earth in its prominence and “shine”, is to encounter it specifically *as* the self-secluding. Earth appears as itself “only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is essentially undisclosable”²¹⁰ and is “brought into the open region *as* the self-secluding.”²¹¹ Sticking to the idea of an inner logic, as Jameson explains, paraphrasing Heidegger, “The absent is also present, and, qua absent, absencing itself from the realm of the unfolding, it is present in that very unfolding or deconcealment.”²¹² What this means is that Earth appears, not as an identifiable unit or deposit of tightly bound up matter, but as that which is secluding itself through the unfolding of the work. This insistence upon a form of presence for that which cannot show itself, could potentially constitute one of the most distinctive, yet controversial aspects of Heidegger’s theory. The “earthly” ontic character of the artwork is that which lets earth appear for the first time, yet, in doing so, *announces* a dimension to earth,

²⁰⁹ Heidegger. (1936) P179

²¹⁰ Heidegger. (1936) P159

²¹¹ Heidegger. (1936) P173

²¹² Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, (Verso Books, London, 2009). P148

which can never be brought into or appear fully in the actual: its ontological role of self-seclusion and the resistance of penetration. This ‘excess’ is a moment of the actual, which announces potentiality. The actual is not a sign however, it does not symbolise the potential, the two belong together and are nothing without each other, i.e., material must be in this special state of “shine” for the potential to be recognised. Potentiality appears as nothing but a positive moment of the actual. This tension, in which actualisation appears, yet is denied an object-type status, might perhaps correspond to what Heidegger describes as the “agitation” of the artwork in its repose.

Julian Young has argued that through his description of the “shine” of the “earthly” element of the artwork, Heidegger lapses back into aesthetics and metaphysics. Young argues that the attention to the “earthly” aspect of the artwork, as a necessary marker of its being a work, appears in ‘Origin of the Work of Art’ as a “disinterested” awe and wonder at its “sensuous”, “tactile” and “formal” qualities. For Young, as the announcement of what cannot show itself must necessarily appear through the “shine” of the artwork’s “earthly” element, what is prominent and characteristic of Heidegger’s art encounter is not the “conceptual inscrutability” of the earth, but its distinctly “aesthetic” qualities.²¹³ If this were true, then the application of Heidegger’s phenomenological account to conceptual art would turn out to be very limited, if not non-existent. However, as I have attempted to show, the concept “Earth”, demonstrates Heidegger’s attempt to radicalise “matter”, in a way that is physical, yet not metaphysical, i.e., not an abstraction away from physicality, as in the case of the first two thing-concepts. For Heidegger, the radicalisation takes the form of a reconnection of the ontic to the ontological. By describing the categories of World and Earth, as they operate *aletheiacally* on an ontological level, he is trying to catch a glimpse of *physis* in its moment of inception and substantiation prior to the bifurcation into the reflective and reified categories of matter and form.

²¹³ Julian Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001) P49

Concluding Remarks

The “relations” that the work sets up and holds together are not reducible to anything that could be considered *crudely* phenomenological—as too often understood by certain art theorists or critics, for example. The kinds of relations brought forth in Heidegger’s example of the Greek temple, are not only the way in which, for example, light brings out the colour of the stone, or the temple’s specifically *physical* towering makes us *feel* small in our own bodies. Heidegger’s theory is not one of a purely sensuous aesthetic contemplation. Instead, Heidegger’s “relations”—very crucially, I think—encompass the belief systems, ideas and understanding of a community, which the Temple gathers together and actualises. “The temple”, says Heidegger, “first gives things their looks, *and*²¹⁴ to men their outlook on themselves”. The Temple, understood in a non-reductive manner, is not the stone-based object of architecture, but the entirety of the relations, which give the temple its meaning and thus allow it to resonate. What is distinct about the artwork for Heidegger, is that the condition of its being kept “kept abidingly in force”, within the self-contained “bounds”, which the work itself sets up, is the coming forth into prominence of, not only its material *quality*—understood reductively as mere sensuous appearance—but of a more ideational and conceptual component too. Indeed, due to the way in which Heidegger emphatically foregrounds the significance of the relation between “earth” and “world”, it is *simultaneous* [Or, not merely simultaneous, but is a *condition of*] to the earth being able to appear for the first time, that the “God” is also present in the Temple, i.e., that the relations set up by the work are held together as meaningful. The concept of the “earthly” element of the artwork then, as Heidegger’s new mechanism for discussing the role of material specifically as operative *within* the totality of these relations, constitutes that which, on the ontological level, grounds and sustains these relations, physical *and* ideational or conceptual, as a self-contained whole, within their relation to each other and, on the ontic level, appears, through its “shine” to designate the vibrancy and resonance of such relations. It is in this sense that “earth”, in its ontological capacity, by both grounding and binding together ideas and materials, specifically in a manner which disallows the mere caprice of the subject’s

²¹⁴ My italics.

“decisions” to stand accredited as fully responsible for how things appear, works as a kind of historicising operation in Heidegger’s phenomenology. Earth is that which clears the way for new phenomena to come forth in new configurations, and which substantiates and supports it as meaningful in a spatial and temporal specificity. This is beyond man, so to speak, or perhaps more accurately, is prior to man: it occurs through and within the very logic of the artwork, which “sets up” and brings forth a new actuality, *only* in so far as a possibility pre-exists for its potential meaningfulness.

Chapter 3: A Phenomenological-Ontological Rethinking of Conceptual Art

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that Heidegger's account of the artwork has certain advantages for the particular interpretation of conceptual art that I wish to put forward. Through its 'thematization' of the relation between phenomenology and ontology, it can offer a detailed account of *how* distinct artworks operate to set up and to delineate a unique context of intelligibility and phenomenological vibrancy, through and within which things gain individuation and meaning in their relation to the environment as a whole. This account can help us to make sense of a tendency that I identify to be central to conceptual art, i.e. the tendency to disallow the primacy of a conventional art-object, and to instead open up an investigation into what might be included within the physical 'bounds' of the artwork.¹ By 'bounds' I do not simply mean the visible outline of an artwork; the line of the frame or the canvas for example. Rather, as John Sallis explains, "the boundary or limit is not a line where something stops but rather is that by which something is gathered into its propriety in order from there to appear in its fullness."² For Sallis, as for Heidegger, it is this boundary or limit "which we must look to bring forth into the work."³ One of the main forms that this ontological investigation takes is conceptual art is the examination of the relationship between the work and its immediate surroundings, i.e. the gallery space. As Mike Sperlinger argues, if anything connects the often seemingly heterogeneous practices of the 1960s and 1970s, it is "the desire to put under pressure the distinction between work and context."⁴ It is this "pressure" or tension in particular which interest me. Whilst in a few rare cases, the particular investigation that I am identifying has led some artists—the best example might be the Situationist International—to attempt to dissolve the 'bounds' of the artwork

¹ As Schellekens and Goldie point out, conceptual art was a challenge to a definition of art in which the "physical bounds of the work were obvious for all to see." See Schellekens & Goldie. (2009). P21

² John Sallis, *Stone*, (Indiana University Press, Indiana, 1994), P97

³ Sallis. *Stone*, P97

⁴ Mike Sperlinger, *Afterthought: New Writing on Conceptual Art*, (Rachmaninoff's, London, 2005). P3

entirely and thus to collapse ‘art into life’, so to speak, most forms of conceptual art practice, especially in Europe and North America, remained tied to the gallery in some way.⁵ In my opinion, what is in fact particularly interesting about conceptual art is precisely the various ways in which it explores what I consider to be an antagonism or friction between art and its material ‘ground’ or foundation. For this, art had to remain close to the gallery, for antagonism and friction imply proximity or intimacy, as well as resistance.

By way of concrete analysis of artworks, this chapter will develop my contention that the ontology of the conceptual artwork, contrary to the proposal of some recent literature, is not best understood as consisting of a largely passive material substrate that either simply prompts an engagement with an idea, as Schellekens suggests or gains its semantic and perceptual particularity through its being directed by an idea, concept or intention, as Lamarque argued. Rather, conceptual art is the setting up of a specifically ontological investigation or proposal within a material context, through which that context is not simply reconfigured, but has a central role in such reconfiguration. In the attempt to bring to light its own context of ontological and phenomenological support or ‘ground’, such that it might delineate its true ‘bounds’, what the conceptual artwork reveals is that an antagonism exists between the modes of presentation proper to the gallery and the attempt of the artwork to render apparent certain things. Through an examination of several distinct conceptual artworks, I will explore the manner in which such art experimented with the self-externalisation of the artwork into the World, in an attempt to open up an exploration as to how far the true ‘ground’ of art could be delineated. However, as I will demonstrate, this exploration should not be considered in any straightforward sense as an attempt to eradicate or reject materiality *per se*, but rather as an attempt to shake off the limitations of conventional object-based art practice and in doing so, to bring to light the more fundamental relations between the intelligible and the material.

⁵ In Latin America, conceptual art was considerably less tied to the gallery space and involved more interventionist practices. For an insightful account of this distinction, see Camnitzer. (2007)

If we are to avoid an account of conceptual art that renders the *particularity* of each individual artwork merely subservient to an idea, a concept or an intention, then there must be some conceptual schema through which we are able to think this recalcitrance to intelligibility.⁶ As we saw, to this end, Heidegger introduces the relation between World and Earth. Due to the fact that the recalcitrance of Earth to intelligibility is for Heidegger a particularising movement of ontological determination, avoids the problem of Costello's account, i.e. the characterisation of recalcitrance as a kind of 'expression' of the artist-subject. In addition to this, by introducing the phenomenological concept of the 'earthly' element of the artwork, Heidegger provides an alternative account of materiality, which extends the concept beyond any notion of substrate or objecthood to all stages in the process of the consolidation of meaning.

A Note on Methodology

So far, the investigation of this thesis has taken a rather theoretical form. To take this idea of an ontological investigation—specifically as a practical *artistic* project—seriously, requires a careful attention to the materialised artworks exhibited. The aim of Chapter Three will be to flesh out in more concrete detail—and as a result, to confront—the ideas raised in Chapter Two. There is of course an obvious and inherent methodological difficulty in attempting to discuss actual and particular artworks through the framework of an already expounded philosophical theory. To approach the work already armed with a set of criteria that one wishes it to fulfil, is to relate to the work as the mere empirical correspondence to, or else concrete fulfilment of, such theory. As Heidegger might say, such an approach is not to ask the artwork 'what it is', but instead to tell it what you require it to be. Of course, this is not a concern attributable only to phenomenology, but rather constitutes the most significant problematic for any theoretician who wishes to be properly attentive to artworks. However, the fact that phenomenology specifically claims to be concerned with the 'things themselves' would appear to render this problematic particularly

⁶As discussed in Chapter Two, as recalcitrance to the intelligible, 'earth' cannot be thought directly. Thus 'earth' is not to be related to as a 'content' that we must try to discover or to think, but as a conceptual schema through which to unconceal that content, which is unique and specific to each work.

prominent for the phenomenological project. The invariable yielding to a preconceived conceptual framework is precisely that against which phenomenological theory can be seen to struggle. In the face of this initial ostensible problem, it is my contention that phenomenology should not be considered first and foremost as a theory, but as an ongoing method. To reach the *particularity* of such works, the relationship between philosophical theory and empirical analysis of the artworks should not be one of correspondence or fulfilment, but of mutual engagement, tension and ultimately, of mutual delineation.

In line with this idea, I identify in Heidegger's work a potential answer to this problem. As I described in Chapter Two, Heidegger's aim is to 'deformalise' phenomenology through a more precise delineation of the 'phenomenon' as that aspect typically 'concealed'. In 'Origin of the Work of Art' this is the Earth. However, whilst positing the Earth as that hidden ground which must be brought to light, and whilst suggesting a conceptual *structure* through which to think this operation, Heidegger's theory does not, I believe, prescribe a definite *content*. World and Earth operate as a conceptual schema for and thus constitute relatively open categories. However, we must not *use* them to achieve a precise pre-conceived goal by way of a too consciously controlled argumentation,⁷ but must instead engage with them actively and critically throughout all stages of the analysis.

To avoid, as much as is possible, having a too clear account of what we wish to discover and thus assigning meaning to the works in advance, I will not begin with a list of precise questions. Rather, my only anchor will be to remain within the central and most phenomenological aspect of Heidegger's thought. What we seek—in the most general Heideggerian sense—is what each distinct work reveals, i.e., that which is typically concealed through the manner in which the work is presented. Whilst there may exist certain tendencies within the art of a specific historical period, the particularity of what each work reveals will be rendered unique through the precise way in which it reveals it. Through the process of relating to the works in this way,

⁷ This notion of "instrumental" is influenced by Collingwood's conception of craft. He describes it as "the power to produce a preconceived result by means of consciously controlled and directed action." See R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1938, 1958). P15

we shall meet various resistances to thinking them. However, as we continue it will be revealed in each case how through such delineation, we gain a sense of what conceptual art *is*.

Chapter Breakdown

In Part One of this chapter, I will give a detailed analysis of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917). It is my contention that through the manner in which conceptual artists rediscovered and claimed Duchamp's work in the 1960s,⁸ *Fountain*, can retrospectively be considered to mark the beginning of the distinct ontological investigation into art, of which I consider conceptual art to be a continuation and development. In my interpretation, conceptual art is most comprehensively understood as an ongoing response to the way in which the work of Marcel Duchamp, in particular *Fountain*, brought into phenomenological light the conditions and grounds of art in a specific historical period. Following this, conceptual practice becomes the attempt to further delineate its true material 'grounds'. In Part Two, I will revisit Lawrence Weiner's *A 36" Square Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall or Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall, 1969*, (1969). First of all, I will discuss a significant factor that Costello appears to leave out of his account, i.e. that the specific material artwork he describes is for Weiner but one potential instantiation of a work, which may or may not ever be materialised. However, I will argue that even such text-based works evoke materiality and cannot be isolated from the material investigation being made in conceptual art more generally. I will then attempt to develop Costello's reading of the work, which focuses upon the particular material element of the work, understood as the "sensuous, affective and intuitive response"⁹ of the artist as providing recalcitrance to the cognitive. In particular, I will examine this work through the manner in which I consider it to be a development of *Fountain*, to the extent that it is engaged within a more Heideggerian notion of a fundamental ontological struggle with the delineation of the artwork, through the attempt to bring

⁸ As discussed in Chapter One, it is well documented that Duchamp's *Fountain* became a central point of reference for conceptual art, the various responses of which to an extent framed the conceptual art project of the 1960s and 1970s. See Peter Osborne. (2002). P42

⁹ Costello. (2007). P87

to light its ‘ground’. To develop this line of argumentation even further, I will also look at two similar works by Michael Asher, *Untitled*, (1973) and *Untitled*, (1974). On my interpretation, what each of these works demonstrates is the precise manner in which this investigation into the supporting ground of art became increasingly delineated with conceptual art practice. Finally, in Part Three, I will consider a work that seems to be rarely discussed in literature on conceptual art: Dennis Oppenheim’s *Oakland Wedge*, (1969). Whilst such so-called ‘Earthworks’ are typically discussed in quite different terms to conceptual art and are not usually included in most definitions of such art,¹⁰ it is my belief that *Oakland Wedge* is in interesting continuity with the particular tendencies and concerns of conceptual art that I wish to focus on. What is more, appealing to such works can, I think, help to develop an account of conceptual art along the lines pursued by this thesis. I will now look at these artworks in turn.

Part One: Marcel Duchamp

In Part Two of Chapter One, I critically examined Peter Lamarque’s account of conceptual art, which we can now see in some ways and to some extent parallels Heidegger’s notion of the ontological role of the artwork. For both thinkers, inherent within an encounter with art is a certain awareness of the *kind* of thing being encountered;¹¹ encountering artworks requires a distinctly ontological differentiation. At the same time, for both thinkers, through such a process we encounter not just what things are, but what art itself is. The self-establishment of an artwork *as an* artwork necessitates that a process of differentiation occurs from a constitutive material base or ‘thing’ and that such differentiation results in a reconfigured material. What is unique about *conceptual* art for Lamarque is that it “trades upon” and brings to the fore the fundamental ontological distinction between artworks and mere things,¹² conceptual art renders this distinction explicit. It seems that the central result of this is not simply that we learn what mere things are, but that we learn what art is.

¹⁰ The exception to this is Patricia Norvell’s interview with Oppenheim in *Recording Conceptual Art*, (2001). PP21-30

¹¹ See Lamarque. (2007) P11

¹² Lamarque. (2007). P11

In this sense, conceptual art might also prove to exemplify what Thompson calls a ‘paradigmatic’ notion of the Heideggerian artwork.

However, the question which was not unanswered satisfactorily by Lamarque, was precisely *how* the conceptual artwork establishes itself as ontologically distinguished and thus what its operations are specifically *as* an artwork. In Chapter One, I suggested that the reason for this is that Lamarque characterises the Readymade through a reductive formulation of its character and its significance as an artwork, i.e. he conceptualises it merely as the relation between a ‘commonplace’ object of perception and a concept or idea that is directed towards the object by way of the title. Lamarque characterises *Fountain* by simply reversing the priority of what is essentially a rather and conventional conceptual schema. What is unique about the conceptual work, claims Lamarque, is that its perceptual aspects are rendered “subservient to the conceptual.”¹³ On Lamarque’s account, in the first instance, we encounter an everyday object already pre-formed and having a certain use in a non-art context, i.e. a urinal. In the second instance, the title must pick out or bring to light certain “salience and significances”¹⁴ of that object: it must give it “a new thought”.¹⁵ For Lamarque, unlike Danto, there is a third instance in that this thought must be somehow recognised *perceptually*. However, as I argued in Chapter One, despite Lamarque’s insistence upon there being a necessary perceptual and thus material aspect to this so-called “transfiguration”, his account fails to draw out with adequate complexity the role of materiality within the relational totality of the work. On Lamarque’s account the material “invites”¹⁶ the directive power of the title and allows such “salience and significations” to be picked out. The material for Lamarque is a rather passive substrate, subservient to the direction of the conceptual.

¹³ Lamarque. (2007) P9

¹⁴ Lamarque. (2007) P13

¹⁵ This was the claim made by the anonymous writer of the defence of *Fountain*, which occurred in the magazine, *The Blind Man*. Vol. 2. P5.

¹⁶ Lamarque. (2007) P14

Whilst it is my contention that *Fountain* is an incredibly significant artwork for the conceptual art movement, I feel that Lamarque's overly simplistic definition fails to capture precisely *why* it was so significant. It was and it continues to be significant primarily because through the gesture of presenting a urinal as an art-object, Duchamp revealed the very foundations of support of the contemporary art world itself. He did so not merely by forcing an "enfranchising theory"¹⁷ or discourse to justify the legitimacy of his rather simple gesture as art, but also through opening up a unique phenomenological environment wherein the relational whole of the gallery context was brought to light *as though* for the first time. The ontological significance of *Fountain* is not that a 'commonplace' object is exalted to the status of art, but that through this process the entire phenomenological environment of the gallery is significantly reconstituted. As a result, in a manner potentially more explicit than the artworld had ever witnessed before, an investigation was opened up into art's function, in terms of both how art is or should be received within the environment of the artworld or the gallery. *Fountain* achieved this objective specifically through setting up a proposal through which the question of its own ontological status—and by extension, the ontological truth of art *per se*—could reveal itself. In his introduction to Gianni Vattimo's book *Art's Claim to Truth*—which seems to imply that an actual homology exists between Heidegger's ontological account of art, and the theoretical and practical tendencies of artistic avant-gardism to question the very *fact* of art—Santiago Zabalar expresses this point directly. He claims that Duchamp's *Fountain* proposed that the function of art is not to "fulfil, perform or entertain the public", but to "require from the public an interpretation that allows the work's ontological truth to come out."¹⁸ I will attempt to give an interpretation of *Fountain* according to this contention, specifically by way of an analysis of the phenomenological disclosure through which this ontological truth of art is disclosed.

In describing the operations of the Van Gogh painting in 'Origin of the Work of Art' Heidegger claims that, "as long as we only imagine the pair of shoes *in general*,"¹⁹ or

¹⁷ This is a reference to Arthur Danto. (1981)

¹⁸ Zabalar, in Vattimo. (1985). xiii

¹⁹ My italics.

simply look at the empty, unused shoes as they merely stand there in the picture, we shall never discover what the equipmental being of the equipment in truth is”.²⁰ What Heidegger means by this is that a certain ‘meditative’ distance or space is required for art to function as ontologically dis-closive, i.e. to be able to ‘set up’ a World and ‘set forth’ the Earth. It is in fact the artwork itself that opens up that unique space and which keeps it open. In the case of the Van Gogh painting, Heidegger chooses not to point to those conventional aspects that might rather instantly and habitually put us in the mind to look at a painting—e.g. its hanging on the wall inside a frame—and instead appeals to the “undefined space”²¹ surrounding the ostensibly suspended shoes to signify this ‘meditative’ distance. It might be tempting at this point to argue that *Fountain* cannot be accurately considered through the lens of a Heideggerian artwork precisely because it does not have such a space—it is not a representation through which we imagine another world, nor is it an historical monument around which we constitute an historical world, it simply *is* a common piece of familiar and generic equipment presented as an artwork in the gallery. There certainly appears to be very little to imagine in terms of the World of the person who typically uses this kind of equipment; we all do—well, most Western men at least. The question then emerges as to how an actual piece of everyday equipment can achieve the meditative space necessary for the dis-closive capacities that distinguish the artwork from entities that have an equipmental being.

However, there is a sense in which this already seems like a false problematic. Whilst it is true that a press release was issued the day after *Fountain* was submitted to the *Salon des Independents* exhibition in 1917 stating, “the *Fountain* may be a very useful object in its place, but its place is not an art exhibition and it is, by no definition, a work of art,”²² and whilst it might also be true that *Fountain* is able to evoke similar responses or sentiments from some people even today, this work has generally come to be accepted by most people as an artwork. The fact that some philosophers still insist upon discussing the ontological peculiarity of *Fountain*—and

²⁰ Heidegger. (1936). P159

²¹ Heidegger. (1936). P159

²² Quoted in Francis Nauman, “The Big Show, The First Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, Part I,” *Artforum*, 17 (February 1979). P38.

of the Readymade more generally—as though, lacking the necessary instructional theory, we are in danger of mistaking it for an everyday commonplace urinal²³ is misleading. Whilst *Fountain* always seems to open up much *post facto* discourse as to why it is art, the work is not primarily encountered as a ‘commonplace’ object elevated to the status of an artwork; it *is* an artwork and is almost always encountered as such.²⁴ *Fountain* as an artwork, constitutes a relational whole: it is a urinal, which has been tilted, signed ‘R.Mutt’ and placed on a plinth next to its title ‘Fountain’ and positioned in a gallery alongside a whole range of other artworks.

The anonymous article in the *The Blind Man*, a publication associated with the New York Dadaists, printed a defence of *Fountain* that has become responsible for its notoriety. A claim was made—one that has become a central problematic for contemporary art: “Whether Mr Mutt made the fountain with his own hands or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object”.²⁵ This implies two main points which I consider central to the conceptual project. Firstly, it is not the ‘object-being’ that defines art, as though art could be defined by reference to the collection of countable and pre-defined entities present in the gallery—i.e. art should not be defined “morphologically”. Rather, an artwork is individuated through the manner in which it “works” in relation to a specific context. Artworks have a contextual extension, even when they are instantiated in a central object. Secondly, through presenting *Fountain* as an artwork

²³ The implication is that if we do not know that the urinal is an artwork, we can only consider it on formal grounds and such formal considerations would not be capable of distinguishing it from any other urinal. However, firstly, if we didn’t know it were a work of art, why would we even admire a urinal on formal grounds? Secondly, if we thought it were just a “graffitied urinal”, surely we would admire the graffiti, not the “gleaming white curves” or “biomorphic abstraction”. If one wanted to bring formal qualities into this example, surely the point is that with its insertion into the gallery initiates the occasion for admiring the formal qualities of a urinal. Thirdly, it seems that too much is made of this example. *Fountain* is a work in a gallery. It is not a mere urinal. Arthur Danto makes this kind of argument. See Danto, (1981). Diarmuid Costello then repeats Danto’s point. See Costello, (2007), P89.

²⁴ There are, of course, some rare cases in which artworks have failed to be recognised as artworks. In 2004 a cleaner at the Tate Gallery accidentally threw away a work by Gustav Metzger, which incorporated, as one of its elements, a bag of rubbish. Metzger has an ongoing artistic concern with producing what he called ‘Auto-Destructive Art’, i.e. art that accentuates the finite character of the artwork.

²⁵ *The Blind Man*, Vol. 2, P5.

and thus inserting it into an art-historical narrative of signification, the urinal as an “object” is altered or, as Heidegger would say, through its “work-being”—which implies the operation of the artwork within and its “setting-up” of, a distinct relational context—the artwork brings the object forth as individuated in a distinct way, to be related to in a distinct manner. Whilst some conceptual art would take this idea of a textual verification as an important material of the artwork, as far as I know, this text has never been exhibited alongside *Fountain*: this work is presented as being a standalone sculpture.

As it is not simply the object and a title, but rather the relational whole of these elements that constitute *Fountain* as the artwork that it is, even as a description of its ‘thingly’ character, it is from here that we must start. What this means is that in encountering the work in its whole, we have already presumably assumed a somewhat ‘meditative distance’; we have assumed the attentiveness which is proper to the art gallery. This starting point is, I think, crucial to explaining a work such as *Fountain* specifically because it is precisely these various forms of instantly recognisable institutional support of the artwork, together with the ‘circumspection’ typical to art, which this particular work brings forth as the object of phenomenological thematisation. Beginning from *Fountain* as an artwork then, what is it that this specific work opens up, how does it accomplish this opening and what is the significance of its being, or as Heidegger might say, ‘pointing to’, the wider system of references an everyday piece of equipment?

Through placing the urinal in the gallery, Duchamp threw light upon precisely that aspect that we typically and tacitly agree not to see,²⁶ or that which we take for granted, i.e., the relational totality of the contextual support of the institution itself. It is worth noting that the vast majority of Readymades are three-dimensional objects which, if displayed in a gallery, are most typically displayed on a plinth in a manner that invokes the history of sculpture as well as the exhibitions of historical displays in museums. Just as the Van Gogh painting had revealed the shoes in their equipmental

²⁶ Brian O’Doherty, (*Inside the White Cube: the Ideology of the Gallery Space*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1976, 1986).) P66

being, by placing the urinal on a plinth it is as though we become aware of the plinth for the first time; the plinth becomes conspicuous to us precisely *in* the fact that it is supporting the work. In a sense, it is as though it appears as supportive for the first time, in that it is being asked to work in supporting an object that would not conventionally be on display. The fact that it is a urinal that Duchamp places on a plinth is of course crucial. It is the audacity of this particular choice of object that achieves the effect of bringing to light the *fact* of its support. To this extent, the support of the plinth might seem “spontaneous” in that it might convey the sense that radical new art is possible or that new ontological potentials for art are non-exhaustive: *anything* can be supported as art might be the proposal.

Importantly, if the urinal, the plinth, the signature and the title did not appear *as* prominent specifically through their relational functioning, then *Fountain* would fail to present itself convincingly as an artwork due to the fact that the surroundings of its contextual whole had failed to support it. As a result of this, what is revealed is not merely the particular plinth that is supporting Duchamp’s ostensibly radical art-object, but the functioning of the institutional support *per se*. This leads us to examine in a whole new light the entire space of the gallery and all of the other artworks displayed within the gallery in a manner that specifically demonstrates that the art gallery is not a neutral space full of discrete entities but a fully relational context. The other artworks in the gallery do not simply constitute discrete entities that are coloured through *Fountain*’s unique logic. Rather, they operate as part of the relational context from which *Fountain* can work. Whilst Brian O’Doherty claims that Duchamp managed to bring to light an entire gallery in a single gesture, “and managed to do so while it was full of other art,”²⁷ it seems more accurate to say that it is precisely *because* the gallery was full of other art that Duchamp managed to achieve this.

One might then claim that through the introduction of such a groundbreaking artwork such as *Fountain* into a formerly rather conventional institutional setting that Duchamp reconstitutes what *is*. This might also be a convincing description of the motivations of the conceptual project. After all, to a large degree conceptual art did

²⁷ Brian O’Doherty. (1976) P69

attempt to quite fundamentally rupture what some of its protagonists felt to have become habitual within that ‘circumspection’, i.e. a predominantly visual encounter with entities whose status as artworks were thought to be based too heavily upon their morphological continuity with the totality of entities in the history of art.²⁸ In this sense, the motivating objectives of the conceptual art movement might be seen as the attempt to challenge a mode of relation to artworks as ‘present-at-hand’, i.e. as discrete objects of the theoretical or contemplative gaze. One could argue that *Fountain* does this partly by developing an environment of the art World from a space constituted by what Heidegger would refer to as the mere collection of countable and familiar entities at hand,²⁹ into a more phenomenological site in which we gain some sense of the manner in which entities come to individuate themselves. The ‘phenomenon’ that is brought to light by artworks more accurately on this account would be the ‘art-world’, with all of the specificities of its implicitly understood ‘circumspection’.

One might argue that in drawing attention to the fact that there is a relational context in which artworks are able to function *as* artworks, *Fountain* thus rejects the idea of the self-containment and particularity of the work of art and instead presents artworks as essentially equipmental. The fact that Duchamp chose to present a specifically equipmental entity to display as art could then be considered to represent this idea. If this interpretation were convincing then what would have been revealed is that, despite the tendency which runs through the history of a Romantic style aesthetic theory to valorise the artwork above such functional pieces of equipment, that the artwork was after all equipmental, in the extended Heideggerian sense of having an ontological structure founded upon relations which are essentially ‘instrumental’. We might then say that Duchamp, through presenting an actual piece of equipment, is first of all opening up a critique as to the sheer *functionality* that art has come to assume in contemporary society. The artwork, one might say, has come to be fully expected to perform a certain function and to evoke a particular mode of ‘circumspection’—in

²⁸ Charles Harrison criticised traditional art thus, “the authentic experience of art is a disinterested response to the work of art in its phenomenological and morphological aspects—a purely 'optical' response, that is, to the works appearance.” See Harrison, (2001). P41

²⁹ Heidegger, (1936). P170

this case perhaps, the manner in which the artwork has come to function as an object for the contemplative gaze or, as Heidegger himself once said, “a matter for pastry cooks”,³⁰ i.e. a cultural product of ‘taste’. Second of all, through presenting the work as an equipmental being which has been wrenched from its usual set of worldly relations, the equipment appears as *not* functioning and thus as ‘conspicuous’ and ‘obstinate’. One might then interpret this in a slightly different manner, as a comment upon the fact that art is no longer functioning and that through the presentation of its non-function it is brought to light that the artwork in fact has this character of functionality, i.e. that it is essentially equipmental. We might then say that *Fountain* acts to ‘point’ towards the equipmental, specifically with the result of showing that art no longer functions. If this were an adequate reading of conceptual art, what we would encounter with *Fountain* would not be the obstinacy of the urinal *as equipment*, but the obstinacy of the urinal *as art*.

However, even if these descriptions could be said to capture distinct and momentary ways of relating to this work, it seems to me that there is something more instinctive and more substantial that we can say about this work. Through taking an object that appears at first glance to be an unlikely candidate for the exalted status of the artwork and by transplanting it into a new set of relations—i.e. the relations of the gallery, which include the title, signature, plinth, the other artworks and every aspect of institutional framing—the central question that thrusts itself to the fore is the extent to which those institutional relations, and thus the system as a whole, is still working. The question becomes whether or not the system can incorporate these other forms of art. It turns out in fact that it can incorporate them, but that it becomes a different place in doing so. However, this does not necessarily imply that the gallery system is a relentlessly functioning machine, which can incorporate anything and everything into its relational totality: one does not need to take flight into an overly *crude* version of an institutional theory. It is still up to each discrete and particular artwork to constitute itself as more than a mere object amongst objects, to set itself up *as* constitutive within that totality.

³⁰ Heidegger. *Introduction to Metaphysics* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000) P132

To my mind, *Fountain* fulfils, albeit it in a distinct manner, two of the paradigmatic operations of Heidegger's ontologically determinative artwork identified by Iain Thompson and discussed in Chapter Two. It is first and foremost "paradigmatic" because in presenting an actual urinal as an artwork it both illuminates the relational context of the gallery space and creates an instantaneous reflection back upon its own ontology *as* an artwork. It does so specifically in a manner which demands a renewed interpretation as to what art *is*. However, it is my contention that in doing so Duchamp's *Fountain* is also "macro-paradigmatic" in that it 'sets up' and 'sets forth' a unique reconstitution of the art 'environment' *per se*, through delineating the intelligible and the meaningful.³¹ What is brought to light, as the intelligible and the meaningful context of relations through such an artwork are the very conditions for art itself. However, one might argue that what we might have learnt about conceptual works *per se* through this analysis of *Fountain* is that the questioning of art's function, which appears as a central tendency in such art, is achieved through the bypassing of the necessity for any kind of conventionally *representational* space in which we encounter 'concern' for what non-art 'things' are in their distinct being, or through which we encounter what particular imaginary non-art worlds are like. In short, *Fountain* does not seem to function "micro-paradigmatically" as an artwork in any clear sense. Whilst using an equipmental Readymade object to pose—or at least to 'point' or refer to—questions of the systems of relations which *appear* to constitute the ontological foundations of our human engagements in the wider world, the only system of relations that it seems to be genuinely concerned with, that which it brings forth in the emphatic sense, is the relational context of the art-world. In the process of doing so, it poses the very question of the *fact* of art itself, its function and its meaning, in a way that is still acting to stimulate a lot of interpretation. However, to by-pass this "micro-paradigmatic" or representational function of the artwork and to do so in a way which renders this explicit or apparent, does not place the work at odds

³¹ Whilst it might even be the case—though perhaps only as a specifically historical attribution—that *Fountain*, through reconstituting so significantly what art is, could be said to have been "macro-paradigmatic" in the even stronger sense, *to the extent that* through opening up the question as to the wider, social significance of art, it acts to effectively reconfigure our relations to other related 'worlds', I will not be concerning my investigation with this question. Rather, I shall adhere to my own argument made in Chapter Two, as to the *general* inapplicability of this idea, specifically in the strong sense attributed it by Heidegger.

with Heidegger's theory. What we learnt through Heidegger's example of the representational Van Gogh painting was precisely that representation is not the most essential operation of the artwork at all. This means that it possible that our analysis of *Fountain* offers a way of Heidegger's theory being thought in its more essential, yet contemporary significance.

Through opening up an ontological investigation, *Fountain* demonstrated very clearly and directly that an artwork does not necessarily need to be a particular *kind* of object and neither does it need to be most centrally representational. Rather, *Fountain* demonstrated that art is a process of phenomenological and ontological delineation, the process through which things gain their distinctive shape and meaning and are constituted within a contextual whole. *Fountain* achieved this specifically by presenting an unlikely object for consideration as art and thus by throwing new light upon the various supporting elements of institutional support. Duchamp, in my opinion, was the pioneer of such a tendency, but it is my contention that this tendency gets significantly developed through the practice of many conceptual works.

Potential Objections

In opposition to my interpretation, it might be argued that *Fountain* is not ontologically rich and significant enough to resemble a Heideggerian artwork. First of all, as the presentation of a urinal as an artwork, it could be argued that *Fountain* is a declaration that art has ceased to be a unique entity with a significant role to play within contemporary social and cultural life.³² However, even if this were a correct interpretation of one of the ways in which *Fountain* functions, this need not be in contradiction with my interpretation. This is because whilst an artwork might appear to state something, there is no necessary correspondence between the artistic gesture made and the results that the artwork has. An artistic gesture as to the lack of

³² Jean Baudrillard interprets such conceptual works as a declaration as to what he calls the 'nullity' of art. However, as Sylvère Lotringer points out in his introduction to Baudrillard's book, *The Conspiracy of Art*, to declare nullity might be the first stage required in order that we are enabled to break through the habitual sense of awe we have for art and to see it for what it is. Whilst Baudrillard, in opposition to my contention, decided that what art *is*, is a mere 'conspiracy', the important point remains that through Duchamp's gesture, is the opening up of an ontological inquiry into art. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, (semiotext(e), New York, 2005)

significance of art might just as well act to open up a lively ontological inquiry into art, in a manner, which positively reinvigorates it. However, as an extension of this objection, one might appeal directly to the intentions of the artist. One might claim that Duchamp himself is in fact *explicitly* satirising any claims to the ontological significance of art. After all, in his interview with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp claims, “I don’t believe in the word “being”. The idea of being is a human invention... it’s an essential concept that doesn’t exist at all in reality.”³³ However, to take this fragment in isolation slightly obscures its meaning. This statement in fact follows on from Cabanne asking Duchamp whether he *believes* in anything. Duchamp replies: “Nothing of course. The word “belief” is an error”. Cabanne then responds: “Nevertheless, you believe in yourself?” Duchamp replies: “No, not even that.” The main emphasis of this passage for Duchamp is in fact on the fact that: “Nobody ever thinks of not believing in “I am”.”³⁴ First of all then, it seems then that the central notion that Duchamp wants to question is ‘belief’, rather than a specifically philosophical notion of ‘Being’. Now, an in-depth analysis of the philosophical problems surrounding intentionalism would be beyond the bounds of this particular discussion. However, second of all, even if it were the case that intentionalism was correct—i.e. that the optimal way of interpreting an artwork is to somehow ‘discover’ the intentions of the artist—there might be many cases wherein the artist is not necessarily the best judge, not merely of what they have created, but of what they intended. This to me seems particularly true of an artist such as Duchamp, who notoriously based his entire career on being a provocative and interventionist wordsmith and trickster.

A second objection might question whether conceptual works such as *Fountain* are most adequately understood by focusing on the encounter that the spectator has in the gallery. One might argue that *Fountain* is more precisely constituted by a simple artistic gesture, i.e. the mere fact *that* Duchamp placed a urinal in a gallery, turned it upside down and signed it pseudonymously “R.Mutt”. Certain kinds of popular

³³ See Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, (Da Capo Press, Thames and Hudson, 1971). P88-89

³⁴ Cabanne, (1971) P88-89

discourse around Duchamp often seem to reduce its significance more or less *to* this gesture,³⁵ and some have proceeded to construct a comprehensive definition of conceptual art *per se*, which emphasises this more ‘gestural’ aspect.³⁶ Whilst I have already demonstrated throughout the course of this thesis that to reduce the conceptual work in this manner is inappropriate, I do not consider the observation itself that *Fountain* was in part constituted through a simple artistic gesture to be contradictory to my ontological reading of conceptual art. In fact, it might even act to embellish it. This is because, to my mind, the sheer simplicity of the gesture, together with the minimal pragmatic artistic involvement, merely seems to simply throw more emphasis upon the rich and complex World that the work manages to set up. As Brian O’ Doherty describes, whilst Duchamp “never stays long”, after he leaves “the house is never quite the same.”³⁷

Part Two: Lawrence Weiner

As we saw in Chapter One, Diarmuid Costello offered a reading of this particular conceptual artwork, which took the form of a response to Arthur Danto. Costello’s aim was to offer a corrective to what he considered to be Danto’s overemphasis on the meaning of the artwork as accessible through an interpretation of the artist’s intention. For Costello, Danto “extracts meaning from its material host in such a way as to make whatever meaning they are held to embody amenable to paraphrase.”³⁸ Costello thinks that works of art are “rendered diaphanous”³⁹ by Danto. However, Costello thinks that *in so far as* art practice remains a domain within which *particular* material objects, entities, or events are produced or presented, then materiality must be afforded a more positive and constitutive role in the ontology of the artwork. So long as artworks display a material particularity, claims Costello, it is important to consider how such materiality can rebound and impact upon intention and interpretation.⁴⁰

³⁵ The emphasis on gesture is seemingly influenced by the anonymous letter of defence for the artwork, published in *The Blind Man*, Vol 5.

³⁶ See David Davies, *Art as Performance*, (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004)

³⁷ O’ Doherty, (1976) P66

³⁸ Costello. (2007) P88

³⁹ Costello. (2007) P88

⁴⁰ Costello. (2007) P83

Works of art are not “meaning-intentions” of the artist.⁴¹ Rather, a distinguishing feature of art is that its meaning exceeds any determinate intention that motivated it.⁴² This excess is explicable through recourse to the particular material recalcitrance of the artwork. However, for Costello, material particularity and recalcitrance are a result of the “sensuous, affective and intuitive responses of the artist *to the process of making itself – to how the resulting work looks, sounds or reads as it is being made.*”⁴³ These responses then come to “impact upon and, as a result, to come to be sedimented in, the thing made.”⁴⁴

As I argued in Chapter One, whilst I find Costello’s insistence that, in so far as particular artworks are materialised, there is likely to be recalcitrance to the cognitive, the specific description of material recalcitrance which Costello seems to be presenting, cannot provide an adequate account of conceptual art in particular. However, it is my contention that in following the trajectory which was opened up through our discussion of Duchamp’s *Fountain* in Part One of this chapter, that a more adequate reading can be given of the role of materiality in this work, one which positions itself within conceptual art’s central problematic of delineating itself in relation to its ground. As we saw, *Fountain* reconstituted our phenomenological relationship to the gallery. But what happens once this is revealed? How does art continue this development once the gallery has been made to entirely “stand on its head”,⁴⁵ as it were? These are the questions I will have in mind when re-analysing this particular work.

Before I begin with an analysis of this work as a phenomenological and ontological investigation of its surrounding contextual and institutional supports, it seems to me that there is one very significant factor that Costello appears to omit from the main body of his description of the work, despite referring to it as a potential objection

⁴¹ Costello. (2007) P88

⁴² Costello. (2007) P88

⁴³ Costello. (2007) P87

⁴⁴ Costello. (2007) P87

⁴⁵ Cited in O’Doherty. (1976). P69

elsewhere in the text through a footnote.⁴⁶ This is that this particular artwork was often presented simply as a text on the wall, i.e. the sentence, *A 36"by 36"Square Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall or Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall.*⁴⁷ Weiner in fact leaves it open as to whether the work is 'materialised' or not, by which he means whether or not the removal is actually carried out.⁴⁸ The artwork thus has various quite distinct possibilities, in terms of exhibition; either Weiner himself could materialise the work by excavating into the wall, it could be left to somebody else to do the excavating, or the mere idea for the work could simply be presented in textual form as a sentence on the gallery wall.⁴⁹ In addition to this, 'ownership' of Weiner's pieces can amount to whatever the buyer wants, i.e. Weiner can build it for them, they can build it themselves, or they can simply discuss it together.⁵⁰ Built into the very structure of Weiner's artworks is the play between the general and the specific, in which it appears that the general, in this case the title or text on the wall, has primacy.⁵¹ Whilst I do not consider this to be a problem for Costello's argument *per se*—his claim extends only *in so far as* such particular materialisations are carried out⁵²—the fact that Costello does not explore this relation could at least potentially entail that he has missed something important, even if thought with regards to only this particular materialised version of the work.

The fact that Weiner appears to present the text as primary, may lead one to argue that to focus a discussion of this work too heavily upon its specifically material qualities is misleading. One might say that conceptual art of this sort is not in fact about an ongoing ontological exploration of the 'bounds' of the artwork with particular

⁴⁶ In footnote 10 of his article, Costello suggests that the fact that one might claim that there are 'non-material artistic vehicles' need not be problematic for his re-emphasis upon the recalcitrance of materiality *per se*. This is because Costello thinks that, "one can, after all, understand the *materiality of thought itself* as an artistic vehicle in such a way that it is at least not obvious that what has been said here would not apply." Costello. (2007) P93

⁴⁷ Weiner himself considers this particular artwork to most essentially consist only in the art "idea". Weiner, in (ed.) Norvell, *Recording Conceptual Art*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2001) P102

⁴⁸ Lawrence Weiner. (ed.) Norvell. (2001) P105

⁴⁹ Weiner. (2001) P105

⁵⁰ Norvell. (2001). P102

⁵¹ Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, (MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2003) P227

⁵² Costello. (2007) P83

attention to its relation to its phenomenological context at all. Instead, one might think that Weiner's work is more accurately the attempt to completely escape the 'bounds' of not only the conventional art-'object', but to reject the significance and necessity of the material elements of the artwork *per se*, and to instead take flight in the more 'worldly' realm of ideas. If this were indeed the case then Weiner's language based conceptual works might be considered to exemplify that which Michael Haar claims is an impossibility for Heidegger, i.e., a purely 'worldly' work.⁵³ However, to my mind, even in the cases where Weiner's texts are displayed simply *as* texts on the gallery wall, this appears to be a far too simplistic reading of such linguistic forms of conceptual art.

First of all, as we saw, on Heidegger's account of the artwork, language itself can amount to what Heidegger calls a "projective saying", the "saying of world and earth".⁵⁴ To achieve this, language must not be merely communicative of a precise message or an agreement,⁵⁵ but must be capable of setting up strife between the unfamiliar and the ordinary.⁵⁶ It strikes me as interesting that Weiner's 'ideas', whilst ostensibly very simple sentence descriptions, often already display a certain degree of inherent poetic resonance. Take for example, Weiner's slightly later work, *An Accumulation of Sufficient Abrasion to Remove Enough of an Opaque Surface to Let Light Through with More Intensity*, (1981). The language used here demonstrates an ambiguous linguistic status. Whilst on one level it seems to be an almost mechanical description of an industrial type operation—alluding to the actual removal of the gallery wall—its rhythm, and the ending in particular, "to let light through with more intensity", contribute to its evoking the sense of a kind of poetic elevation. The ambiguity of this sentence, which is in part brought about by the presence of both elevated and commonplace or banal language, sets up an interesting tension. This analogy with the poetic is rendered even more emphatic if situated within the concerns of contemporary UK and US avant-garde poetry since the 1960s in particular, wherein poets quite often incorporate seemingly unlikely jargon, such as

⁵³ Haar. (1993). P109

⁵⁴ Heidegger. (1936). P198

⁵⁵ Heidegger. (1936). P198

⁵⁶ Heidegger. (1936). P198

technical or industrial language into their work.⁵⁷ This was part of an ongoing debate in poetry as to what kinds of objects or words it was appropriate to use in a poem, of what kind of material and conceptual resonances were proper to poetry.⁵⁸ One might argue that the text based work of conceptual art, should be considered as concerned with this same question, yet experiment with exploring this ambiguity at a point somewhere between painting, poetry and the ‘Readymade’ form.

Second of all, exhibiting this rather small text specifically against the ‘opaque surface’ of the white gallery wall creates a minimalist aesthetic, which seems to construct a kind of ‘meditative space’ within which we are encouraged to engage with the poetic resonance of the words. When placed in this context, it seems to me that the texts appear more akin to the concerns of a poet such as Ezra Pound, whose central objective was to explore what he termed ‘Imagism’, i.e. the capacity for minimal poetic description to evoke a discrete, instantaneous image.⁵⁹ Pound explored this idea even further through his more substantial poetic work *The Cantos*, a poem of great length, which contained within itself, distinct, minimal images. Pound’s objective, one might claim, was to explore the relationship between the minimal and the maximal, between the particular and the discrete, and the general and contextual. For this reason, Pound became obsessed with using Chinese characters in his poems, which are both often literal visual representations of their meaning and also highly contextual, in that they more often than not, gain their individuation and meaning through entering into contextual combinations with other characters.

To my mind, we might say that something similar is happening with Weiner’s text. On the one hand, they use short minimal sentences, which occupy an ambiguous position somewhere between the banal or the merely descriptive, and the poetic: the

⁵⁷ JH Prynne can be considered to be pioneering of this tendency. Prynne incorporates various forms of jargon into his poems, including industrial objects or materials. See Prynne, *Poems*, (Bloodaxe Books Ltd, London, 1982). Keston Sutherland is another example of a contemporary poet who does this. For example, Sutherland often transplants entire patents into his poems. See *Hot White Andy*, (2007) *Stress Position* (2009) and *The Stats on Infinity*, (2010).

⁵⁸ William Wordsworth and Alexander Pope are examples of poets who were particularly interested in this question.

⁵⁹ The most obvious encapsulation of this is Pound’s famous poem *In the Station of the Metro*, 1913, which reads: “The apparition of these faces in the crowd, petals on a wet, black bough.” See Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems, 1908-1969*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1975). P53.

sentence feels as though it is permanently on the verge of ‘gestalt’ between art and non-art or, more accurately, it is in a tension or strife between the two. On the other hand, being both ‘about’ the wall and being on the wall, the text very clearly refers to its immediate surrounding context, it ‘points’, both to the wall and to the possible materialisation of the work; the wall’s removal. Thirdly, through the actual words used in both of these texts—i.e. “plaster”, “wallboard”, “wall”, “opaque”, “abrasion”, “light”—the text obviously encourages an imaginative engagement with a range of typically poetic and non-poetic forms of materiality. What is more, in combination, the words seem to additionally evoke the specifically material sense out of each other, e.g. take for example, the way in which the word “plaster” acts to evoke the specifically material sense of “wall”, whose character as either ‘earthly’ or ‘worldly’ seems ambiguous. However, in addition to this, through the tension that the text sets up, both through the opposing content of these words—i.e. “light” and “opaque”—and between the distinct kinds of language this sentence is capable of appearing as, it is as though, one might argue, the ‘setting up’ of the artwork, by way of a kind of gestalt, is supposed to occur in the imagination of the spectator. To my mind, this brings to light a gap between the subjective spectator and the manner in which the gallery presents materialised artworks.

In both of these works, *A 36”by 36”Square Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall or Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall*, and *An Accumulation of Sufficient Abrasion to Remove Enough of an Opaque Surface to Let Light Through with More Intensity*, Weiner seems to be evoking works, which are in tension between being ‘present’ and being ‘possible’. On one level, the work is the sentence or, as Costello says, “The work consists of exactly what the title describes.”⁶⁰ On another level, the work exists through our being led to imagine its possible materialisation. However, one might argue that such an imaginative projection in the specific context of the art gallery involves not simply an imaginative projection of a removal per se, i.e., we do not simply imagine just any kind of removal, one which might take place in the everyday world of industrial decorating or architectural work, for example. Rather, what we

⁶⁰ Costello. (2007). P89

imagine is likely to evoke the particular objects and entities which have been presented in galleries through the history of art. As Costello points out, what the work evokes in particular is “the history of monochrome painting.”⁶¹ On yet another level, the work consists in actually being made. Additionally, and perhaps in part due to this temporal dimension to the work, there is a sense in which these sentences can be read either as descriptions or as instructions; they suggest both the description of the absence of an artwork, and an instruction for the bringing forth of a possible one. In a similar manner to the way in which *Fountain* set up what Crowther termed a “poetic reversal”⁶²—i.e. a kind of turning inside out—of the typical relations between the artwork and its surrounding context, Weiner’s work acts to bring to light the very fact of such relations. To my mind, Weiner’s text-based works can only be grasped in their full complexity and implication by considering all these dimensions of the work together.

I have attempted to demonstrate that even those ostensibly ‘dematerialised’ text-based conceptual artworks are in no way reducible to mere conceptual propositions or statements, which we can simply ‘get’ in some conceptual sense. Instead, there is recalcitrance in the process of trying to render them fully intelligible. This recalcitrance has to do with the capacity of such minimal ‘conceptual’ texts to evoke materiality, as well as their character of being rooted in the material history of art. However, in addition to this I want to argue that such works are ultimately better understood through positioning them within the ontological examination which I have attributed to conceptual art, as to the relation between art and its ‘ground’, which, I have been arguing, at this point of the conceptual art movement, was largely considered to be the institution or the gallery. In leaving it open to the gallery as to how they present the work, Weiner’s artworks in a sense force the gallery to literally enact their role as the illuminators of how we relate to art, whilst encouraging the spectator to imaginatively create their own work. This enforcement results in the rendering conspicuous of the fact of illumination, i.e. the fact that the gallery space is

⁶¹ Costello. (2007). P89

⁶² Paul Crowther, *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts (even the frame)*, (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2007) P120

not neutral. There exists a plethora of literature to suggest that this is indeed a central tendency of conceptual art, especially in the case of those artists who, it is claimed, are predominantly concerned with ‘imperceptibility’ such as Lawrence Weiner, Dennis Oppenheim and Robert Barry.⁶³ Central to Weiner’s artistic project is that he asks that we step forward and be active in constructing the significance of the artwork. In this sense, Weiner’s work could be considered to be a kind of recalling to the human *logos*.

Whilst there are numerous examples of conceptual artworks that primarily use the presentation of text in this manner, I consider it wrong to interpret them simply as being about ideas and to thus claim that conceptual art *per se* is not concerned with materiality. It is my contention that such examples are better understood as ‘gestures’ or as moments within a broader tendency which I have already identified. However, these gestures should not be interpreted as a straightforward rejection of the gallery. Rather, they are part of the tendency of conceptual art to open up, and to keep open, a fundamental investigation into how the ontology of the artwork might be properly delineated and, as part of that same investigation, what the relation between the work and the gallery might be. This investigation was predominantly focused on the relation between what is typically ‘presented’, and its proper context of support or most significant ‘ground’, i.e. perceived at this point to be the art-world, gallery and institution.

I would now like to look at the cases in which Weiner’s work *has* been materialised. I will concentrate on the piece referenced by Costello, which I presume from the date is the 1969 removal at the Kunsthalle exhibition in Bern. This work sidesteps the presentation of any object whatsoever and instead quite *literally* opens up a space, both out of and within that aspect which is supposed to support the artwork, i.e. the gallery wall. Weiner’s gallery removals emerged from out of his former art practice of making craters in a field with TNT and to this extent can be considered as an attempt

⁶³ During interviews with Patricia Norvell, each of these artists express an antagonism with the restrictive mode of presentation of the gallery, which results in them handing over ultimate authority for presentation to the institution, as a way of rendering the fact explicit. Through doing so, what is revealed is the fact of presentation as such. See Norvell. (2001).

to bring these practices back to the gallery.⁶⁴ In this sense, like *Fountain*, Weiner's piece cannot be said to be concerned with the character of a specific non-art object or entity in the World, except perhaps the artwork itself. Instead, its subtractive techniques of excavation or removal fit into a sculptural concern—a concern which is fully contemporaneous to this piece—of specifically disallowing the embellishment or ornamentation of space, by simply filling it with more objects.⁶⁵ In Heideggerian terms, the 'environment' of art was no longer to be considered metaphysically, i.e. as the collection of familiar and unchangeable objects, or as a fitting context for the introduction of new objects, but rather it was to be thought "in reverse order."⁶⁶ The site of art was to become first and foremost a phenomenological site in which the artwork was to find its proper delineation and meaning only through an examination of its contextual relations.

If we were to compare Weiner's piece to the Van Gogh painting which Heidegger discusses, we would say that Weiner bypasses the pair of shoes entirely—he neither straightforwardly represents any particular kind of entity, nor literally presents us with one—but rather presents us with only the "undefined space,"⁶⁷ which Heidegger describes as surrounding the shoes. In this sense, the work can be considered reminiscent of, and responding to, earlier pioneering works such as Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square*, (1915)⁶⁸ and Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, (1953).⁶⁹ However, in distinction from these earlier works, Weiner forgoes the most obvious and conventional forms of institutional support such as a frame or the simple act of hanging an object on the gallery wall, or placing one on a plinth. Instead Weiner opens up and interrogates what is inside the wall itself. This work, like many conceptual pieces, is highly site-specific. In fact, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that the work is inextricable from its context. As the artwork is

⁶⁴ Weiner in interview with Norvell. (2002) P101

⁶⁵ Thomas Crow, (1996). P131

⁶⁶ Heidegger. (1936) P168

⁶⁷ Heidegger, (1936). P159

⁶⁸ Malevich's *Black Square*, whilst commonly thought to have opened up the possibility for a truly abstract art, left the artwork fundamentally still tied to the associated traditions of painting, such as landscape, portraiture and still life. See Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art*, P11

⁶⁹ As Peter Osborne describes, Rauschenberg's objective with *Erased de Kooning* was to make an artwork "in reverse". See Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, (Phaiden Press London, 2002)

literally constructed from the gallery wall itself, it is ultimately inseparable from it. However, by this I do not mean to argue that there ceases to be a delineated artwork at all and that instead the work simply gives way to a context. Rather, the work is a delineated site. Again, by ‘site’, I do not mean a specific geographical or spatial location, but a phenomenological context that the work opens up.

Weiner’s wall removals designate a further abstraction away from the conventions of painting. I think that Diarmuid Costello is right to draw attention to the fact that this removal “invokes the history of monochrome painting.”⁷⁰ In fact, I think that this work invokes the history of painting *per se*. Notably, Weiner himself was formerly a painter and had turned his back on painting specifically because he disliked its physical limitations and ‘bounds’.⁷¹ However, to my mind, these removal pieces are firmly embedded within painting as an art form. It seems that specifically through the subtractive process of excavating from the wall, the work ‘sets up’ an “undefined space” which, due to the history of monochrome painting, can be encountered to a certain extent as determinate or defined. The black space is capable of appearing as though it were a canvas. It is specifically because the work, through its technique of removal, brings to light the manner in which paintings would conventionally be objects—i.e. items which are *added* to a space and which hang *on* the wall—that the work is able to open up an examination into, not only the ontology of objecthood, but also this support structure itself. Without the specifically art-historical association the work would not function as ontologically dis-closive.⁷² Whilst deliberately forgoing any actual frame or other conventional markers of the delineation of the artwork, Costello rightly emphasises, “the rough edges of the removal operate like a kind of negative after-image of the paint encrusted edges of the canvas.”⁷³ They also in a sense, act like its frame. It is as though, by way of the opening up of the “undefined space” of the removal, all conventional traces of art-hood, i.e. art’s specifically

⁷⁰ Costello, (2007). P89

⁷¹ “The painting stopped at that edge. When you are dealing with language, there is no edge that the picture drops over or off. You are dealing with something completely infinite. Language, because it is the most objective thing we have ever developed in this world, never stops.” *Art Without Space*, Reprinted in *Lawrence Weiner*, (London, Phaiden, 1998). P98

⁷² Paul Crowther describes the meaning of abstract art as “parasitic for its artistic status on expectations grounded in more traditional idioms.” Crowther. (2007) P120

⁷³ Costello. (2007). P89

material identification, have been pushed to the periphery of the work. This seems to give primacy to the ‘undefined space’, yet also presents the material elements as the visual validation of the undefined space *as* artwork. The conventional markers act to literally delineate the work, so to speak: they operate as its material frame.

One might argue that this is dis-closive of the manner in which, through a process of historical ontological unfolding, there has been a re-delineation of the ‘worldly’ and the ‘earthly’ elements of the work, i.e. between its actuality and its support. Or rather, the ‘environment’ of art has, we might say, been turned inside out, as it were. What we find through revealing the ‘inners’ of that which is perceived to be the support or the ‘ground’ of art, is in fact art itself and this is shown figuratively by Weiner’s piece through the emptying out of its specifically ontic traces. What we grasp through this work is that those aspects typically revealed by Duchamp to constitute the ground or support of the artwork have their own intelligible or perceptible face. By excavating into the supporting wall, the ‘earthly’ face of the wall is revealed, but this ‘earthly’ element is presented as always already delineated by art itself. In my interpretation, this work proposes that artworks in general *are* an ongoing relation of ‘intimate strife’ between these two elements. As a result, this work can be considered as the attempt to delineate, to an even greater extent than *Fountain* had, the supposed ground of art, so to speak. This artwork demonstrates that once something has been brought to light—in the way that Duchamp had brought to light the various supporting elements of the institution—these very aspects present themselves in turn, as the material from which new configurations of the intelligible can be delineated. This work cannot be seen in any straightforward sense to be simply bringing to light the institutional support of the gallery. Rather, it appears to be *questioning* the now ostensible simplicity of Duchamp’s former revelation that the gallery itself is the very ground of art, and simultaneously, to be questioning the distinction between art and its specifically contextual support. In a sense, it could be argued that this is precisely what art is: art is the ongoing process of the re-delineation of the phenomenon by way of the phenomenological examination of that which has been recently brought forth. This makes art history important, but it is important as material history, as well as theoretical history.

Part Three: Michael Asher

As we have seen, the question of the relation between what is presented and its true foundation or ‘ground’ is the question of presentation as such. In my interpretation, this concern—pioneered by Duchamp and revisited by Weiner—can be considered as one of the central hallmarks of conceptual art. To my mind, the trajectory set out by Weiner’s wall excavations are logically extended in the work of Michael Asher. In an untitled work of 1973, Michael Asher sandblasted the walls of Galleria Toselli in Milan until every single trace of the white painted surface—which we so tacitly identify as a trademark of the gallery space—was removed. Asher then exhibited the empty sandblasted room itself as an artwork. Asher chose not to use any typical institutional lighting, but instead allowed only natural light to fall across the room and illuminate it. This natural light created the striking effect of bringing into appearance the material depth of its rough textual surface.

Untitled 1973, follows the trajectory of both Duchamp’s *Fountain* and Weiner’s *A 36”by 36”Square Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall or Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall, 1969*, to the extent that, through avoiding any conventional or simplistic formula of object-based art, it acts to turn the gallery inside out, so to speak. In the case of *Fountain*, what was brought to light was the fact that the artwork gained its individuation and meaning through a relational totality of the gallery context and the art-world; and vice versa. In the case of *A 36”by 36”Square Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall or Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall, 1969*, Weiner had implemented a combination of text based imaginative pieces and materialised removal pieces to further reveal the conditions under which we encounter art. Asher’s work side steps the primacy of any ‘object’ or entity *per se*, there is of course a title but it is not given primacy, and instead embarks upon a direct material analysis of the whole gallery space in an attempt to interrogate more physically and inclusively the entire ‘ground’ or foundation of art.

In a similar manner to Weiner’s *A 36”by 36”Square Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall or Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall, 1969*, through a subtractive artistic practice, Asher’s *Untitled 1973*, brings to light the inner material depth of the gallery wall, through revealing the diverse textures of its layers. Through a

combination of abstracting away the reflective white surface of the wall and allowing only natural light into the room, we become aware of the fact that even the most basic and foundational elements which we have come to completely take for granted about the gallery system—i.e. the seemingly neutral white walls against which discrete artworks are typically exhibited—illuminate and present things in a very particular manner. What this work reveals is the fact of institutional illumination itself. As Asher explains, “Traditionally, the white interior of a commercial gallery presented an artist’s production within an architectural setting of false autonomy. If, through its absence, the viewer was reminded of the white paint, an interesting question was then raised: How does the white ‘partition’ of paint affect the context of art usually seen on that support surface.”⁷⁴ The particular manner of illumination proper to the art gallery is not simply a neutral backdrop against which discrete art-objects can appear autonomously as themselves. Rather, it underwrites and constitutes an entire mode of what Heidegger calls ‘circumspection’. Through the process of disclosing this fact, we are made to question the manner and the extent to which distinct modes of illumination can act as ‘partitions’ to a more primordial relation to things around us. In doing so, it reveals to us the possibility for *other* forms of illumination or modes of relation.

In fact, one might even argue that such possibilities are inscribed figuratively into the work itself, even at the level of its material mode of presentation. For example, one of the effects of the technique of sandblasting is that it makes the gallery space look a little like a derelict warehouse. An obvious interpretation of this would be to claim that the work represents the decay of the art world, the loss of its significance. Around this time many artists were beginning to form antagonisms with, and to attempt to cut ties with the conventional studio and gallery-based system. As a result, many artists moved out to alternative work and exhibition spaces. One of the main objectives in

⁷⁴ Michael Asher, *Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979*, (1983) P92. In art-historical terms one could interpret conceptual art’s interrogation of the white gallery wall as a critique of the specifically Modernist trait of presenting artworks as though they were discrete objects of contemplation. This trait, though prevalent in 1920s architectural theory of people like Courbusier, didn’t reach art museums until around 1939. Daniel Birnbaum claims that the first genuine so-called ‘white cube’ gallery did not emerge until the 1960s. See Mark Wigley, Olafur Eliasson, Daniel Birnbaum, ‘The Hegemony of TiO2: A Discussion on the Colour White’, in (ed.) Olafur Eliasson, *Olafur Eliasson: Your Engagement has Consequences; on relativity of your reality*, (Lars Muller Publishers, 2006) PP241-251

this move appears to have been the attempt to ‘free up’ the perceived constraints that the studio and gallery imposed upon their artistic thought processes and practices. As Michael Heizer put it, “the museums and collections are stuffed, the floors are sagging, but real space still exists.”⁷⁵ The aesthetic created by the sandblasting would have thus been reminiscent of those alternative warehouse spaces or exhibition sites that were beginning to be occupied in Manhattan at that time. One might then argue that Asher is ‘setting up’ a proposal for the institution: he is suggesting at least that the ground of art can no longer be revealed through the ‘bounds’ of the institution, i.e. in this case, within the four walls of the gallery, but that art has instead extended out beyond the gallery to find new forms of shelter. However, by opening this proposal up specifically *within* the institution, Asher creates a continuum from the possibilities of these new alternative spaces back into the gallery. This to me seems incredibly significant and constitutes what is particularly interesting about this kind of conceptual art. If artists had simply evacuated the institution entirely, if they had abandoned the conventional art space in favour of unique spaces modified and customised specifically for the carrying out of wholly distinct art practices, the antagonism between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, or between art and its ‘ground’ would not have been set up. To examine the radical possibilities of art requires not a fleeing away from its centre to extremities, but rather, an investigation as to its proper delineation in relation to its ground. What makes conceptual art so rich in my interpretation is precisely that it holds this antagonism in force through a series of distinct experiments, the objective of which is to delineate the phenomenon of art. In this work Asher reveals that the space of the institution, whilst typically encountered as a kind of unchanging, neutral ‘container’ for artworks, or else an insignificant backdrop to which art-objects are merely added, in fact has both a phenomenological and an institutional history of its own: its history is the history of the illumination and the presentation of entities *as* art. This phenomenological history of presentation is responsible for the way in which art ‘objects’ or entities appear. Through ‘materialising’ the ‘worldly’ exhibition wall, so to speak, Asher reveals the gallery to be a phenomenological site which has a material history of its own. The lack of any

⁷⁵ Michael Heizer, cited in (ed.) Selz *Theories and Documents in Contemporary Art*, (California Press, Berkeley, 1996). P534

conventional form of delineation, except for the capacity of the room itself, prevents the artwork from being rendered ‘present-at-hand’ in any simplistic sense, as a definite ‘object’ to be looked at. Rather, the work both sets up *and is* continuous with a phenomenological site.

The following year in 1974, Asher set up another ‘untitled’ piece at the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles, which, though similar in its logic and its specific form of revelation, brought to light a slightly different aspect of the foundation of art. As such, it can be considered as part of Asher’s ongoing attempt to delineate what Heidegger terms the World and the Earth of the artwork. Asher removed a partition that was typically used to divide the exhibition space, in which the spectators encountered artworks, from the gallery’s administration office. After he had taken down the partition, Asher placed it so that its smooth side—the side that would typically constitute one of the four walls of the gallery space—was facing the wall at the back of the room. This is a small detail that people often miss about this work, but it is important because it adds an extra level of operation to the artwork, in that the partition itself is made to show its own characteristics of structural support as an object. However, the partition does not appear as an entity that is wholly equipmental or instrumental. It instead looks like the back of a large canvas, which again—as in the case of the previous works examined—points to there being a continuum between the artwork and its context, the precise delineation of which presents itself as the ontological question of art. The association of the canvas stored against the wall might also be seen to refer to the fact that the conventional art-objects of the exhibition have become, or are on their way to becoming obsolete. The conventional artwork, one might argue, is temporarily bracketed or suspended, awaiting a verdict as to its fate.⁷⁶

The banality affected by the revelation of the administrative functioning of the gallery is emphasised by how small-scale the office is: it is composed of two people crammed

⁷⁶ A very interesting parallel to this occurs in Duchamp’s *Bûte-en-Valise*. In this work Duchamp reproduces miniature versions of every artwork he has ever made, arranges them into a miniature exhibition and places the exhibition into a suitcase. In my interpretation, this work is in part a commentary on the ambiguous position of art objects, following the introduction of photography into the gallery.

into the corner of the room with the entire office forced into a very minimal space. This acts to accentuate the manner in which the gallery attempts to present the exhibition space as dominant and all enclosing, or, as Asher himself says, an “abstract aesthetic context, creating a situation where the viewer could mystify its actual and historical meaning.”⁷⁷ In doing so, it brings to light the particular character of self-presentation of the gallery. Directly next to the office a door is open, allowing a natural ray of light to fall across the gallery floor and illuminate the office area only. Whilst there is a row of spotlights on the ceiling, each pointing in various directions against what would typically operate as the two main exhibition walls, none of them are on. Instead, like his other untitled work, Asher relies upon natural light to illuminate only that aspect of the gallery setting which would typically not be seen. In the case of this specific work, the aspect illuminated—i.e. the administrative office—is quite literally that which is typically *hidden*, in the emphatic sense of the word. Asher does not make any attempt to arrange the office artistically so as to make it more aesthetically interesting; he simply shows it as it is in its banal truth. However, this ‘truth’ is not the same as any encounter that we might have by actually walking into a normal work space of this kind. Instead, the particular character of this truth can only come to light through the work and its specific attempt to unearth the foundation of art. It is only through the particular revelation that the gallery typically conceals its administrative and financial foundation that we gain a particular sense of what the gallery is. This artwork is not simply about revealing another layer of the supporting structure of art, i.e. the administrative system. Rather, in doing so, what is brought to light is the particular manner in which galleries and institutions present themselves. The artwork brings into appearance this presentation as such and again, represents this process *figuratively* through the ray of natural light. In revealing the banal workspace of the institution, Asher not merely demonstrates that the ostensibly self-contained and often thought to be almost magical and ‘transformative’ white space of the gallery has a commercial foundation, much like any other business. Instead, through the very process of revealing this, Asher’s work manages to bring into appearance the *fact* of

⁷⁷ Michael Asher. (1983). P96

presentation itself. What is brought to light is more precisely that the gallery space is not neutral but presents both things and itself in a specific manner.

However, there is another dimension to Asher's untitled work of 1974, which distinguishes it in an interesting manner from his earlier piece. The 1974 artwork is not composed of an empty room, but actually includes within itself and as part of its content, the administrative staff working in the office answering the phones and conducting their daily business. These people immersed in their world of work literally become part of the exhibition. If we compare this to Heidegger's description of the revelation particular to the Van Gogh painting then what we encounter in Asher's work is the *literal* World of the gallery workers. We do not have to have an imaginative engagement with what that world might be like. Rather, we encounter what it *is* like because we encounter the day-to-day issues and concerns of this world. However, we of course do not encounter it by way of *experiencing* their world as they do. Instead, the meditative distance set up by the now admittedly less conventional ensemble of framing techniques of the artwork allows us to encounter this world in a particular way: we experience the world of the office staff and of the art world *per se*, as functioning and through its functioning it appears as what it truly is.

This strikes up an obvious parallel with the work of John Cage, a precursor to the specifically periodised conceptual art movement. In his notorious work of 1952 entitled 4" 33", Cage composed a musical score which specified that it was for a three movement composition to be performed by any instrument or combination of instruments. However, the instructions on the score were specifically that the musicians should not play any music whatsoever. Whilst the piece is commonly conceived as 4" 33" *of silence*, the main point of the piece is that through the withdrawal of any actual involvement on the part of the artist-subjects, the artwork is constituted by the 'accidental' or uncontrolled sounds in the environment at the moment of any given performance. Like Asher's *Untitled 1974*, through a minimal gesture of artistic framing, this work brings to light the 'truth' of the environment which is typically hidden whilst we are involved in encountering art. In doing so, both artists experiment with what brought into the 'bounds' of the artwork, in addition to revealing the very fact of that framing or illumination itself. However, whilst Cage strives to eradicate any inherent social standards that he might impose on the work

through composing it,⁷⁸ attempting to instead bring out a more natural social buzz, as it were, it could be argued that what Asher reveals is specifically those social standards and values which are hidden through the particular modes of presentation, and of self-presentation, of cultural institutions.

Part Four: Dennis Oppenheim

As we have seen, conceptual art had at its centre an antagonism with the institutional world of art, an antagonism that was often played out and explored through the relationship between the artwork and its immediate surroundings, i.e. the gallery space. This antagonism was in part due to an increasingly prominent realisation that there are specific forms of presentation and illumination inherent to that space, ones which impose seemingly artificial limits or restrictions on the ontological possibilities of art. During the 1960s and 1970s, a series of artworks were being made which involved artists leaving the familiar surroundings of their conventional studio spaces altogether—at least temporarily—and venturing outdoors into natural settings. These works are commonly referred to as ‘Earthworks’ or, ‘Land Art’ in the UK. The central character of such works is often thought to reside in two simple factors, i.e., a rejection of both the studio and the gallery system *per se*, and a preference for loose ‘earthy’ materials, such as soil or grass.⁷⁹

On this interpretation, it feels compelling and would ostensibly facilitate a neat theoretical move to draw an analogy between Heidegger’s emphasis upon the Earth as constituting the ontological role of materiality in the artwork on the one hand, and the way in which so-called Earthworks use the earth or the soil as the materials for their artworks on the other. However, as I have already argued in chapter two of this thesis, such an analogy would end up reducing the phenomenological significance of Heidegger’s conceptual schema down into something literal or representational. If

⁷⁸ Taruskin, Richard, *Oxford History of Western Music: Volume 5*. (Oxford University Press, New York, 2009) P55

⁷⁹ Dennis Oppenheim does in fact claim to understand his own work in this way. He says, “I just liked the idea of loose matter, just residue from solid form, as being part of the piece. That’s really very much a part of my work, just loosely bound matter, just raw material, pulverized, granular matter.” See Norvell. (2001) P26

what we seek is a development of the line of interpretation this thesis has been arguing for so far, an account of Earthworks must be given in which such a reduction is avoided. In my interpretation, such works can be considered as examples—albeit rather distinct and particular—of the tendency I have already identified as central to conceptual art. That is to say, they display a further experimentation with the delineation of the ontology of the artwork—of what kind of thing the artwork *is*—one which is specifically characterised through its relation to its most fundamental foundation or ‘ground’.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, something akin to this phenomenological interpretation already exists in relation to the particular case of Earthworks. An example is Ed Casey’s discussion of the Earthworks of Robert Smithson in ‘*Earth-Mapping: Artists Reshaping Landscape*’.⁸⁰ In this monograph, Casey explains how Smithson had to “get out of the studio and museum to re-establish contact with the earth”.⁸¹ However, to my mind, this should not be understood too literally as Smithson abandoning the artworld to retreat to nature and neither is it a simple valorisation of the natural landscape, a kind of return to Romantic values or to the charm of the landscape painting. Smithson, a notoriously sophisticated philosophical theoretician of his own artistic practices, devised a conceptual apparatus which he called the ‘dialectic’ between ‘site’ and ‘non-site’. By ‘site’, Smithson means, “the physical, raw reality—the earth or the ground that we are really not aware of when we are in an interior room or studio or something like that.”⁸² By ‘non-site’, Smithson means roughly the gallery, which he describes as an “an abstract container.”⁸³ It seems that Smithson’s central preoccupation was with the distinct manner in which certain environments act to ‘circumscribe’ things, to give them particular “limits”.⁸⁴ However, it seems to me that Smithson did not believe that by simply moving outdoors into a natural space he could achieve a limitless or boundless setting for art. As Smithson himself confesses,

⁸⁰ Ed Casey, *Earth-Mapping: Artists Reshaping Landscape*, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2005)

⁸¹ Casey. (2005) P6

⁸² Robert Smithson, (ed.) Jack Flam, *The Collected Writings*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1979) P178

⁸³ Smithson. (1979) P178

⁸⁴ Casey. (2005) P7

“there’s no escape from limits”.⁸⁵ Rather, as Casey puts it, Smithson was concerned with the “containment within the containment of the room”,⁸⁶ i.e. the specific manner in which the phenomenological “place” of the gallery, acted to *artificially* limit the ‘bounds’ of the artwork.⁸⁷ As Casey explains, Smithson later came to reject the neatness of the distinction between these two realms and began exploring how the two material worlds—the ‘site’ and the ‘non-site’—are “intimately correlated.”⁸⁸ Whilst much literature already exists on the work of Robert Smithson—perhaps largely due to his impressive capability of explicating the theoretical complexity of his own work—comparatively little has been written about certain other Earthwork artists such as Dennis Oppenheim. For this reason, it is to one of Oppenheim’s works that I now wish to turn.

Dennis Oppenheim’s *Oakland Wedge*, 1967 is an interesting piece because it seems to enact a more extreme “escape attempt”⁸⁹ from the gallery space than the other works examined in this chapter. This work is not concerned in any clear sense with enacting a material interrogation of the gallery space. Rather, it ostensibly takes art away from the containment of the gallery and releases it, as it were, into the open space of the outdoors. *Oakland Wedge* was made during what could be considered an intermediary period for Oppenheim between his MFA graduation from Stanford University in 1965 and his debut solo exhibition in the New York art-world in 1968. Interestingly, this was a period when the artist himself occupied a temporarily peripheral position in the artworld, much akin to how Duchamp’s more experimental gestures took place when he supposedly dropped out of the artworld and instead posed as a mere interventionist and provocateur on the sidelines.⁹⁰ In 1967, Oppenheim cut a five-foot wedge into the side of a mountain in Oakland, California and lined it with sheets of translucent plexi-

⁸⁵ Robert Smithson, (ed.) Norvell (1969) P126

⁸⁶ Casey. (2005) P7

⁸⁷ Casey. (2005) P8

⁸⁸ Smithson. (1979) P8

⁸⁹ This phrase is Lucy Lippard’s. See Lippard. (1973) Vii

⁹⁰ For Peter Osborne, Duchamp’s supposed retreat from the artworld into chess appears as a deliberate and knowing strategy, an “institutional fabrication of his artistic persona”, which sits uncomfortably alongside the fact that he nevertheless continued to promote his own work in more behind the scene ways, e.g., acting as his own collector and distributor. See Osborne. (2002) P42

glass.⁹¹ As far as I have been able to discern through my research, *Oakland Wedge* was never exhibited as such in any gallery—you had to actually visit the work in, or rather *as*, a unique and specific ‘site’ in itself—and surprisingly, neither do there seem to be any traceable photographs of the work at all, only discussions of it and references to it in interviews and articles.⁹² One might be tempted to argue at this point that *Oakland Wedge* represents an ultimate departure from or break with the specific trajectory of conceptual art that I have identified up to this point. One might argue that this work represents the ultimate opting out of the radical investigation of conceptual art in its relation to the gallery as its fundamental ground and has rather fled to find a new ground, the true ground perhaps, i.e., the Earth itself. Such an interpretation might also lend itself to a reading whereby *Oakland Wedge* is seen to designate a kind of performed reversion to what Walter Benjamin describes as the “ritualistic” artwork, i.e., an artwork whose unique value is to be found only in “the location of its original use-value.”⁹³ To this extent, Oppenheim could then be seen as severing all ties with the gallery and institution, specifically by setting up an entire context which is completely resistant to being re-appropriated or commodified by the institution. What *Oakland Wedge* sets up is in fact a whole, indivisible natural environment.⁹⁴ Due to the lack of any gallery exhibition to either promote the work or house it, Oppenheim refuses to take anything from or to give anything back, at least *directly*, to the gallery, as it were. Whilst Smithson brought heaps of rubble, rocks and gravel back to the gallery for exhibition, in the attempt to open up an awareness of “the elemental” within the containment of the gallery,⁹⁵ this work could be interpreted

⁹¹ Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*, (University of California Press, California, 2003) P122

⁹² For examples of interviews with Oppenheim in which *Oakland Wedge* is mentioned, see Norvell’s, *Recording Conceptual Art*, and *Avalanche Magazine*, no.1.

⁹³ For Walter Benjamin the prime example of this location is the church. See Benjamin. ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ in *Illuminations*, (Pimlico, Random House, London, 1999). P217

⁹⁴ During an interview with *Avalanche Magazine*, Dennis Oppenheim said, “To me a piece of sculpture inside a room is a disruption of interior space. It’s a protrusion, an unnecessary addition to what could be a sufficient space in itself.” As fellow conceptual earthwork artist Michael Heizer stated: “the position of art as a malleable barter-exchange item falters as the cumulative economic structure gluts. The museums and collections are stuffed, the floors are sagging, but real space still exists.” Both cited in Peter Selz, *Theories and Documents in Contemporary Art*, (California Press, Berkeley, 1996) P502, & P534

⁹⁵ Casey. (2005) P6

as unconcerned with this relation. However, this kind of reading would of course be overly simplistic. In my interpretation, *Oakland Wedge* can be seen to be within the same intimate tension between the World and the Earth and between art and its true ‘ground’ as the previous works discussed. However, what is particularly interesting about this work is that it is both a performance of and experimentation with a specific vanishing point within the conceptual art tradition.

As *Oakland Wedge* had to be visited in or *as* its own unique site then the primary and dominant experience in the encounter with this work would at least initially be the total relational context of the natural setting. Lacking the mode of “containment” common to the gallery space, one would have to approach the work as though it were some kind of natural landmark or monument. The work might even appear boundless at first, or else its ‘bounds’ would be ambiguous, i.e., one might not know what one is *looking* for. In a similar manner to both the Asher and the Cage pieces, the work incorporates into itself all manner of spontaneous contextual elements. This environmental context constitutes what Oppenheim calls the “origin” of those material forms of presentation that are placed on galleries walls, such as photographs or paintings, for example. Whilst it seems that *Oakland Wedge* in particular was never documented in a gallery, Oppenheim did document his subsequent works. For Oppenheim, the photograph in the gallery reduces the relational totality involved in a sculptural enactment, in a manner that delivers it back to the simple realm of the visual. The photograph does this by ‘presenting’ just one static moment of a work which within its original context exists organically as an ongoing process of movement and modification. Oppenheim says: “I think the documentation of these terrestrial pieces is the weakest part of the aesthetic. I don’t really focus on the abstracting of the idea from the *origin*.”⁹⁶ The “origin” for Oppenheim is the specifically located piece, both spatially and temporally. To “solidify” what is a holistic and relational modifying process into a “photographic abstraction”, claims Oppenheim, is “ripping a thing that’s going with a certain force out and throwing it back to the dormancy of a rigid form of communication”⁹⁷ It seems that for

⁹⁶ Norvell. (2001) P23

⁹⁷ Norvell. (2001) P23

Oppenheim, the rigidity of the communication afforded by such static and solidified art-objects, is partly due to the fact that it “cuts out an incredible amount of things that don’t qualify, that just can’t enter into these bounds.”⁹⁸ At a more representational level, what the photograph cuts out could be characterised with recourse to Heidegger’s notion of the supportive role of earth in its relation to *physis*—the way in which phenomenological modification and the establishing of what appears involves inherently within itself the act of sheltering. For Oppenheim, the visual abstraction of the photograph does not constitute a positive moment, from which one can traverse, through a kind of bridge of imagination, into a meaningful engagement with the totality. Instead it “weakens” and “reduces” the enactment of the sculptural force, merely to “extend the idea to other people”⁹⁹ It seems for Oppenheim then, that the artistic act of presenting and exhibiting a work to another person necessarily involves a reduction. The crucial point is that it is not just *any* reduction, but specifically, the necessary removal, abstraction or cutting out of a whole range of *phenomena*. It is thus the very “bounds” of the conventional art-object presented in the gallery—in this case a photograph—which comes with its already rigidly prescribed boundaries of what can and what cannot—literally what has the capacity to—come forth as phenomena. In conceptual sculpture, Oppenheim sees a form of art that engages “a larger arena or activity”.¹⁰⁰ His dislike of the photograph is that it signifies how, despite this expansion, due to the nature of “presentation”, “it has to be reduced back into symbols and such rather than be allowed to live in its own context.”¹⁰¹

However, whilst *Oakland Wedge* sets itself up as an environment or a context other than the institution, it is clearly a work that does in fact incorporate a range of sculptural tendencies and concerns that are astutely contemporaneous with the artworks of the New York art scene at this time. As Suzaan Boettger identifies, *Oakland Wedge* incorporates “minimalist geometricity, open environmental form, plastic and earthen materials, and excavation procedures”¹⁰² Much like some of the

⁹⁸ Norvell. (2001) P24

⁹⁹ Norvell. (2001) P29

¹⁰⁰ Norvell. (2001) P29

¹⁰¹ Norvell. (2001) P29

¹⁰² Suzaan Boettger. (2003) P122

other works examined in this chapter, *Oakland Wedge* is not representational or depictive in any straightforward sense. Rather, it presents a ‘negative space’ as the initial central point of focus of the work. However, this time, there is no direct contact or association with the gallery space at all. *Oakland Wedge* presents a three-dimensional excavation, as opposed to a relatively two-dimensional removal. As we have seen, a removal is a procedure that occurs mostly within a more industrial setting. It implies most centrally the removal of structural components of buildings, such as walls. As such, when used in artistic practices, it evokes the artistic form of painting, in particular. In distinction from this, an excavation is the specifically outdoor practice of digging straight into the ground. Its three-dimensionality locates it in the history, not of painting, but of sculpture. Excavation is a kind of negative sculptural procedure; it is sculpture for those who wish not to add more objects to the world.

Despite the fact that an excavation is a negative space, it carries with it various distinct connotations. First of all, it is a procedure used in archaeology. Archaeology is the study of human history through the excavation of ‘sites’, by way of bringing to the surface and subsequently analysing the remains of human artefacts. Archaeology thus uncovers those aspects of the human world and of human culture that lay buried or hidden under layers of sedimentation. By analogy, the excavated ‘site’ of *Oakland Wedge* is empty. What this brings to light is an absence of any historical human artefacts for our analysis. In my interpretation, what is brought into appearance through the negative space of the excavation is the absence of the conventional art-object. However, significantly, the negative space of this excavation is held open by the plexi-glass lining it, thus disallowing the space to collapse in on itself, as it were. In this sense, the ephemeral character that is centrally characteristic to many Earthworks—due in part to the ‘loose’ nature of the work’s materials—is disallowed within the negative space of this work. The movement of the loose material is thus rendered static. In a similar manner to the way in which the rough material edges of Weiner’s removal piece seemed to act as a kind of frame for the negative space of the removal, the plexi-glass of *Oakland Wedge* presents itself as that which is holding the space open, that which is supporting its openness. What is presented is a kind of “container”. If we were to follow Smithson’s schema, this could be considered to

represent the gallery itself, i.e. to represent the specific kind of containment that acts to “limit” the manner in which things can appear in the gallery space.

Second of all, excavation into the ground also has the connotations of a grave. In fact, the advent of specifically natural, outdoor excavations into earth and soil—a practice that became popular in the contemporary New York art scene in the late 1960s—is typically accredited to Claes Oldenburg, who dug a grave shaped hole in Central Park in 1967. Oldenburg’s excavation was in part a protest against the Vietnam War that was ensuing at that time. Following Oldenburg’s lead, other New York artists subsequently took up this technique of outdoor excavation. However, excavation became used not merely to artistically enact specifically political protests against the war, but also to refer to formal and institutional concerns of the 1960s and 1970s. In my interpretation, *Oakland Wedge* is more concerned with this latter point and its excavation represents the anticipated death of conventional gallery-based institutional art. However, the fact that the plexi-glass is holding the grave open suggests that the art-object has not yet been buried, which leaves it ambiguous as to what its final fate will be. Rather than investigating the ground of art by way of an interrogation of the material and phenomenological space of the gallery, this work can be seen to focus upon the absent art-object. Through the negative space of the excavation, the absent art-object or sculpture comes into appearance and, along with it, the associations of its entire historical institutional context, support and practices. The intelligible world of the institution is inscribed, so to speak, on the environment.

Through the excavation the work sets up an intelligible space in which the absent art-object and institution can appear. In setting up the World of the gallery within this new space, the world is thus supported, so to speak, by the surrounding context such that one might claim that it becomes inscribed within it. By posing the question of where precisely the artwork ends—i.e. the hole, the cliff or the entire world¹⁰³—the presence of the absent art-object sustains the environmental and contextual whole of the work as a specifically artistic environment; it endows it with an institutional significance and meaning. If the absent art-object can be said to be the negative figure

¹⁰³ Weiner, in (ed.) Norvell (2001) P22

into which the ideational and conceptual associations and beliefs about the ontology of art are shaped, it is only by way of the artwork that this intelligible is given what Heidegger terms “extension” and “delimitation”.¹⁰⁴ This extended and delimited space of the intelligible however, does not exist completely externally to or outside of the space which the artwork itself sets up.

Now of course, this does not set up a realm of “consecration” and “praise” or effect a straightforward endowment of the environment with positive meaning, as it does in the case of the Temple, but is something rather more akin to a phenomenological demonstration of the manner in which outside spaces can come to be coloured by and endowed with a phenomenology similar to the institution or can be inscribed with a new intelligibility.¹⁰⁵ The institution is present, not by revealing itself in full to the direct senses, but through its inscription upon the surrounding context or environment. The spectre of the absent—perhaps represented by the dead art-object—is conjured up and brought “invisibly close”,¹⁰⁶ as its absence is announced through and thus is inscribed within the negative space that we are to imagine encloses it.¹⁰⁷ What this means is that it is in fact the absent world of the institution, its entire meaning, ideas and beliefs, announced or declared by the work itself as half visible, through the use of translucent plexi-glass, but brought forth into a kind of perceptual visibility, through its colouring of and inscription in the whole natural environment, which sustains both the ‘work’ and or as its context *as* meaningful. However, the point of *Oakland Wedge* is not merely the ‘transfiguration’ of a natural setting, through the bringing of the institution into its realm. Rather, the work poses the question about the possibilities for the future of the art world.

¹⁰⁴ Heidegger. (1936) P168

¹⁰⁵ For an intriguing exploration of a similar idea, i.e., how the institutional space can endow everyday objects with a new phenomenological disposition, see Arthur Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, (Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1981)

¹⁰⁶ John Sallis, *Stone*, P93

¹⁰⁷ John Sallis, *Stone*, P92

Concluding Remarks

What I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter is that conceptual art was a radical and transformative practice which reconstituted what art is through an ontological investigation into its ground. To my mind, this argument can be seen to have a certain parallel with a point that I consider to have been made very clearly by the *October* writer Benjamin Buchloh. In his text ‘The Aesthetics of Administration’, Buchloh claims that from its very moment of inception, one of the central tendencies of conceptual art was a “critical devotion to the factual conditions of artistic production and reception without ever aspiring to overcome the mere facticity of these conditions”.¹⁰⁸ I have attempted to demonstrate that such a “critical devotion” occurred not simply at the level of actual theory, but also through the manner in which the works themselves had the specifically radical and transformative potential to reconstitute the artistic context or environment *per se*. Conceptual art was most centrally an ontological examination into how the artwork might be further delineated in relation to what Buchloh describes as the “facticity” of the conditions of art. However, in addition to this, I have argued throughout this chapter that this process of investigation specifically required that such facticity *not* be overcome; the project of such delineation requires both intimacy as well as resistance.

Through following a trajectory wherein each artwork discussed brought to light a slightly new aspect of this investigation, I have attempted to capture something of its movement or development. Whilst each work demonstrated the particularity of its own revelation, a tendency was discovered as running through each example. This was the tendency for conceptual art to function “paradigmatically”, as Thompson describes. At the centre of the workings of the conceptual artwork is the capacity for art to bring to light what art itself is. To this extent, conceptual art might be considered to be the quintessential ‘paradigmatic’ kind of artwork for Heidegger. Whether or not Gianni Vattimo’s ostensible implications are correct—i.e., that there is a real homology between Heidegger’s insistence on the ontological bearing of art

¹⁰⁸ Benjamin Buchloh, ‘Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions’ in *October*, Vol. 55. (Winter, 1990), pp. 105-143.

and the desire inherent within avant-garde practices of the 1960s to inspire people to defend the *fact* of art—is a question that would require more attention than this thesis is capable of. However, it is my contention that this question is certainly worth pursuing.

It is important to note that this exploration of ontological delineation through the conceptual artwork was not an exploration made by artists only. Rather, it developed into an ongoing and shifting relation between the institution and the artists. Through the prevalent tendency in conceptual art practices to move ‘behind’ the art-object presented, conceptual artists undertook an examination of the ‘ground’ from which objects can emerge and be sustained within a contextual whole, such that their individuated meaning can appear. As a necessary response to this, and as a way of being capable of continuing to play the role of accommodating and housing such changeable and increasingly unconventional work, galleries had to reconstitute themselves and this occurred most centrally both through a re-conceptualisation of their specifically spatial character as well as their structure. In this sense, the gallery space had to interrogate its own material character and it had to pursue its own kind of ontological project. An examination into the complexities of this relation would no doubt reveal even more about the ontological project of conceptual art.

A Possible ‘Weak Conceptualist’ Response

In chapter 1 I identified a position vis-à-vis the role of the idea in the conceptual artwork which I termed ‘weak conceptualism’; Paul Wood was cited as an representative of this position, due to his claim that in conceptual art “the idea is king”.¹⁰⁹ ‘Weak conceptualism’ involves the claim that, while the conceptual artwork may be realised in material form, what is most important about it is the ‘idea’. It may be possible for a weak conceptualist to accept the interpretation given in this chapter of conceptual art as involving an ontological probing of the artwork’s own conditions, and to also accept the necessary role played by the material within works which involve such an ontological probing. A weak conceptualist response might be to argue

¹⁰⁹ Paul Wood, 2002, P33. Quoted in Schellekens. (2007) P72

that the idea which is 'king' in conceptual art is exemplified in precisely such ontological examinations; that the 'idea' in each of these cases is exactly that which is communicated through each work's particular relational structure.

Nothing in my interpretation of conceptual art necessarily entails a dethroning of the 'idea' *per se*. To argue against reductive, 'strong conceptualist' claims that the idea is the only thing—or the only thing of any importance—in the conceptual artwork is not to deny that there is any ideational aspect in the production and experience of conceptual art. It has largely been the burden of this thesis to redress an imbalance in the philosophical interpretation of conceptual art by focusing on the role of the material in the experience of conceptual art, but this of course should not involve a simple inversion of the strong conceptualist position into one which gives the material sole importance. If we were, however, to make a positive claim about the role of the idea in such works, we would first have to specify what is meant by 'idea', something which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to offer a unique way of thinking about conceptual art which situates the more commonly conceived notions of such art within a wider context of conceptual art theory and practice. Since, with conceptual art, materialised objects or entities largely continue to be produced and exhibited in the gallery space, I have insisted that conceptual art must be examined in its specifically phenomenological operations. As we have seen, even those works that do not involve exhibition in a gallery, such as Dennis Oppenheim's *Oakland Wedge*, should be considered continuous with that gallery-based investigation. To conclude this thesis, I will offer a brief review of each of its chapters before indicating a further possible line of enquiry that has been suggested through the development of this project.

In the first chapter, I sought to critically analyse several distinct approaches to the conceptual artwork that have emerged from recent philosophical literature. The aim was that by bringing to light the various strengths and weaknesses that emerge from the attempt to hold on to certain positions as to the ontology of the conceptual work, a more stable and convincing account could be attained. I selected the three articles assessed in this chapter because I considered them to represent what I identified to be distinct positions with regards to the role of the material in the ontology of the conceptual work. In part one of this chapter, by way of a thorough critical engagement with Schellekens' model—on which the material is conceived as a 'prompt' by which we, albeit it 'experientially', access the idea—my central aim was to demonstrate the difficulty in writing about a concrete artwork whilst attempting to marginalise the significance of its material. As I identify Schellekens as attempting to take as seriously as possible the claims of a small, yet influential group of conceptual artists, my objective in part was a simultaneous critique of such claims. In an attempt to lend credence to what I termed a 'strong conceptualism', Schellekens' argument ultimately confessed its own untenable nature.

In part two of this chapter I examined Lamarque's essay 'On Perceiving Conceptual Art'. This account ostensibly sought to avoid the dichotomy of the idea and the material. By holding that the unique character of conceptual art is that it renders the perceptual 'subservient to the conceptual', yet nevertheless insisting that central to such

work is a perceptual ‘transfiguration’, Lamarque reinstated the material element of the artwork as a significant component of the work’s ontology. The virtue of Lamarque’s account is its insistence that a perceptual encounter with the material presentation of the conceptual work remains constitutive of that work. This account can thus speak to the fact that conceptual art is still mostly a visual or perceptual form of art, which predominantly continues to produce objects for artistic presentation in the gallery. Whilst this overcomes the problems that emerged for Schellekens, Lamarque’s account was also problematic in that it overemphasised the role of the cognitive in ‘transfiguring’ the material object. Lamarque offered no adequate account of the interaction of these two elements, or of particular material properties, in formulating and providing recalcitrance to the concept or idea of the work.

In the third part of this chapter I analysed Costello’s ‘corrective’ to Arthur Danto. Costello’s aim was to demonstrate that in so far as artists continue to make and exhibit material objects or entities, we must take the fact of artistic embodiment seriously. For Costello, the material element does not merely yield to the cognitive, through being perceptually ‘transfigured’ by it. Rather, the material provides substantiation for the cognitive, whilst also being recalcitrant to it. For Costello, the material qualities of the artwork are assigned greater significance in their capacity to shape meaning, yet also resist being rendered fully intelligible. This helps to explain why conceptual artists might continue to invest their time and artistic efforts in the presentation of materialised artworks, but also permits that the material itself is a source of significance. However, one problem was identified with Costello’s theory. Through his centralisation of the artistic labour of the artist-subject, Costello presents an account which cannot ultimately accommodate conceptual art in its unique character.

At the end of this first chapter it had become clear that an adequate ontology of the conceptual artwork necessitated an account of the role of the material, not simply as a ‘vehicle’ that transmits an idea, or a ‘prompt’ that leads one to an experience with an idea. Rather, Costello convincingly demonstrated that in so far as artworks are still embodied in material, there exists material recalcitrance to the artwork being rendered ‘diaphanous’ to meaning. In the second chapter I tried to develop this idea of material recalcitrance further by examining Heidegger’s phenomenological account of the artwork. My question was whether or not Heidegger might be capable of aiding a

development of the issues raised in chapter one, whilst managing to avoid their distinct problems. The particular focus of examination was the manner in which Heidegger thematised the relation between the ideational and the material through his conceptual schema of World and Earth. Such a thematisation provided a way of conceptualising the phenomenological operations of the artwork more explicitly. Through an analysis of Heidegger's notion of the artwork, ontology and ontological determination were brought to the fore as an active process in itself and at the same time the relation between phenomenology and ontology was emphasised. For Heidegger, the artwork is fundamentally ontological in that it reconstitutes what is.

In the first part of this chapter I gave a detailed exposition of Heidegger's 'deformalisation' of phenomenology and his unique delineation of the 'phenomenon' as that which typically lays hidden but has the highest demand to be brought to light. As we saw, phenomenology for Heidegger was the 'double play' at work between the 'self-showing' and the 'self-concealing'. This 'double play' becomes increasingly emphasised in Heidegger's later work, especially in relation to the ontology of the artwork. The 'concealed' aspect of Heidegger's phenomenology becomes what he later refers to as Earth. In part two of this chapter I laid out Heidegger's opposition to the conceptual schema through which artworks are typically conceived. This schema is 'symbolic' in that it formulates the artwork as a material X with a 'something other', a Y. It is this 'something other' that is usually thought to constitute the proper character of art. For Heidegger, this schema only designates the artwork in so far as it is related to as an equipmental object. The artwork for Heidegger is ontologically prior; it is a site of ontological unfolding.

In part three of this chapter I gave a detailed account of the way in which Heidegger attempts to overcome the dichotomy through which the artwork is typically conceived, i.e. the hylomorphic structure, through his introduction of the categories World and Earth. The artwork 'sets up' a World and 'sets forth' the Earth. These terms function both ontologically and ontically for Heidegger. In bringing into intelligibility a relational context of meaning and signification—something which could not be reduced to a single 'idea' as the cruder 'art as idea' formulations imply—and by insisting upon the material or Earth as having a more central role in the determination of the work, Heidegger is able to explain how the artwork is fundamentally ontological. In response

to what I anticipated to be a potential objection to discussing conceptual art along these lines, I gave a short analysis of a Readymade. My objective in doing so was to demonstrate that an artwork such as *Fountain* is not ontologically flat, so to speak. The point of such a work is not that we encounter it as a formerly functioning commonplace object transfigured into art, but that the artwork itself is constitutive of a whole phenomenological context of significance and meaning.

In part four of this chapter I gave a further examination into the concept of Earth. For Heidegger, Earth—his term for materiality—is not simply the ‘work material’ of an artwork. Whilst Earth is an appropriate notion to apply to conceptual art in the sense that it can designate all manner of materials, including language, Earth does not merely designate that out of which the artwork is made. It is not simply the stone or canvas or pigment or, in the case of conceptual art, the text or the gas or the urinal. Rather, Earth has both an ontological and an ontic mode. Earth is that which substantiates all aspects of the relational whole. It is that which holds things within their bounds. Whilst Heidegger does seem to return us ultimately to the art-object as that in which this more phenomenological significance of material can appear, it was my contention that his account might be used to discuss those conceptual works which appear less conventionally object-based insofar as the material aspect of these works is something that is fundamentally at stake in them.

I dedicated chapter three of this thesis to a lengthy examination of a range of conceptual artworks. Before I began with my analysis I drew attention to the difficulty that faces any theoretician whose aim is attentiveness to the concrete and the empirical. Artworks in particular are characteristically resistant to the application of any determinate theoretical framework. In an attempt to minimise as much as possible a too heavy framing of such works, I decided to employ Heidegger’s categories and terminology sparingly. In part one of this chapter I looked at Duchamp’s groundbreaking artwork *Fountain*. In doing so, I attempted to draw out that this work was responsible for opening up what I have argued was the tendency of conceptual art to investigate its own ontology and its ground or support. In distinction from Lamarque’s interpretation of *Fountain*—as a commonplace object that gets transfigured through a title—I interpret *Fountain* as having transfigured the entire gallery surroundings and context. Through a simple gesture of placing a urinal in a gallery, signed R.Mutt, placed on a plinth and

titled *Fountain*, Duchamp's work opened up an intelligible and phenomenological context which brought to light its ground as artwork.

In part two of this chapter I revisited Wiener's *A 36" Square Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall or Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall*, 1969, (1969), as well as looking at his later work, *An Accumulation of Sufficient Abrasion to Remove Enough of an Opaque Surface to Let Light Through with More Intensity*, (1981). Whilst pointing out firstly that these text-centred works not only use a mixture of poetic and commonplace and banal language—which sit in tension in a manner that lifts the language out of the ordinary—but that they do so in a way which fully references the specifically material conditions of their own support—i.e. the wall of the gallery and the potential artwork which may be created with this text as a title. As a work that is text, imagined work and realised work, Wiener's piece brings the relational whole of its own conditions to light.

In part three I analysed Michael Asher's two works, *Untitled* (1973) and *Untitled* (1964). Asher's work involves a direct interrogation of the gallery space, and as such is representative of the 'institutional critique' tendency within conceptual art. Asher's works are interventions into the gallery space which reveal its character as a space of presentation, which is itself a part of larger relational structures which include the institutional forms of the art world. These works involve a kind of turning inside-out of the art gallery, or what Paul Crowther might call a 'poetic reversal', in which the conventional ground of the art object itself which is tacitly understood but normally remains hidden, is brought to light. In this sense, Asher's works could be seen as paradigmatic examples of Heideggerian artworks precisely because what is brought to light in them is the fact of institutional illumination itself. Interestingly, Asher typically figures this with rays of natural light which fall across his otherwise unlit installations.

Whilst earthworks are not typically discussed as a central part of the conceptual project—perhaps due to the association of such works with such non-conceptual art themes as 'nature' or 'spirituality'—to my mind they are best understood as continuous with the conceptual project. In particular, earthworks such as Dennis Oppenheim's *Oakland Wedge*, as was brought out in our analysis of this piece, are best understood in similar terms to the other conceptual artworks we looked at, through their putting into play of the ontological limits of the artwork itself. Such earthworks, though they do not

so directly perform an interrogation of the conventional space of art viewing as the works by Asher and Weiner that we looked at, perform a radical escape attempt, and set up an experimental space beyond the containment of the gallery, thus putting at play what can legitimately be included within the bounds of the art work and, by extension, the art institution.

Whilst these artworks were all very particular in character, they demonstrated a certain tendency. This tendency was the attempt to put under pressure the distinction between the artwork and its surroundings or relational context through a material investigation into its own ontological conditions and character. At the end of this chapter I qualified my interpretations of the artworks by pointing out a potential criticism. One might argue that what we are left with is conceptual art as an idea—i.e. conceptual art *as* the idea of ontological self-investigation into its own ground. It has not been the objective of this thesis to try to claim that the ideational component is not significant to conceptual art, simply to redress an imbalance in the philosophical reception of conceptual art. This means not denying the importance of an ideational or conceptual aspect to conceptual art, but seeing this aspect as one moment in the relational whole of a wider conceptual art practice and theory.

Releasing the grip of the idea of conceptual art as mere idea, and allowing conceptual art's wider contextual relations to come into focus would be the necessary starting point for understanding the particular character of artists' writings as strategic and often ironic interventions into this context. As I indicated in the introduction, a fuller treatment would include a section on such artistic writings, but space constraints determine that such a treatment must remain beyond the bounds of the present thesis.

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