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Speaking Through Silence

Conceptual Art and Conversational Implicature

I first try to identify what problem, if any, conceptual art poses for philosophical aesthetics. In Part II, I then offer an account of how conceptual artworks communicate, and attempt to use that account to illuminate some prominent features of conceptual work. At the close, I ask whether this account allows us to address the problem identified in Part I.

Part I: The Problem of Conceptual Art

Does conceptual art raise a distinctive problem for philosophical aesthetics? Many have thought so. There is thought to be a tension, if not downright contradiction, between the notion of art that seemed viable before the turn to the conceptual, and the works to which that development gave birth. My first task is to attempt to focus this tension. I will not be directly concerned with the question what defines conceptual art. No doubt the question what is distinctively problematic about that art cannot be separated entirely from the question of its nature. However, to the extent that the two can be kept apart, it is the former that will concern me.

A useful starting point is the idea that conceptual art is distinctive in not speaking to the senses. Let us, broadly following James Shelley,[1] begin to capture this idea with the following principle:

> (ECA) There exists conceptual art, that is art that can be fully appreciated (as art) without being the object of sense experience.

(We need not intend, for the purposes of what follows, that this define conceptual art; it suffices that it accurately describes one of its features.)

If (ECA) is to generate a problem, it needs to be incompatible with some apparently plausible general principle, or principles, governing art. Here is a principle that I, at least, find tempting:

> (P) Aesthetic features must figure in sense experience.[2]

If this is to conflict with the preceding, we need to bridge an obvious divide between the two: whereas (ECA) concerns appreciation, (P) places a condition on a property's being aesthetic. The bridge lies in a plausible corollary of the second principle:

> (PC) Necessarily, an aesthetic feature can be appreciated in sense experience.

All that then remains is to explain the relation between the notions of art and the aesthetic, again in the context of a claim about appreciation:

(R) To appreciate something as art is to appreciate the aesthetic properties of that thing.[3]

These three principles seem plausible, and to capture important ideas about art and the aesthetic. Suppose they also form an inconsistent set. They would then invite one of three responses. We can reject the idea that conceptual art really is art; reject the idea that aesthetic properties are appreciable in sense experience; or reject the idea that the properties we engage with in appreciating art—call them *artistic properties*—are necessarily aesthetic.[4] (The third option could be pushed farther. Given the 'fully' in (ECA), the existence of conceptual art suggests not only that some artistic properties are not aesthetic, but that it is not necessary, for something to count as art, that it possess *any* aesthetic properties.)

However, we have not yet successfully identified the problem posed by conceptual art. The three principles above are <u>not</u> inconsistent. On the face of it, the corollary of (P) merely requires that any aesthetic property *can* be appreciated in sense experience. This does not exclude such a property also being appreciated in other ways. If it is nothing more than that possibility that conceptual art exploits, then (ECA) is quite consistent with (PC) and (R) combined.

There are three obvious ways in which we might generate the inconsistency needed:

(i) We might strengthen (PC), so that it claims that an aesthetic feature can <u>only</u> be appreciated in sense experience. But why think that (P) has that consequence, or that such a claim is independently plausible?

(ii) We might strengthen (ECA):

> (ECA^{Strong}) There exists art the appreciation of which (as art) cannot be through sense experience.

There are works of conceptual art for which this stronger claim is correct. Consider, for instance, Walter De Maria's *Vertical Kilometer*.[5] This consists of a one kilometre deep hole in Germany, drilled with the aid of an oil rig, into which a one kilometre long brass rod has been inserted. The whole is capped with a metal plate. This work is not, it seems, available to sense experience. Its parts—the rod, the (top of) the hole—can be seen or felt. But they can be only by dismantling the piece. When assembled, only a tiny part of it, the plate, can be experienced. True, the fact that the work cannot be experienced does not *entail* that those properties that are the source of its artistic interest cannot be. For perhaps another work could exhibit the very same artistic properties, only in a form open to sense experience. But although logic does not close down this possibility, serious reflection does. Artistic properties may not be as context sensitive as aesthetic properties have traditionally been taken to be, but they are surely not sufficiently insensitive to context to survive this transition. To suppose otherwise is to suppose that it is an unimportant, or at least detachable, fact about *Vertical Kilometre* that it cannot be felt or seen.[6]

Vertical Kilometre may not be alone in providing an instance of (ECA) in its strengthened form. Nonetheless, at least many works of conceptual art do not exhibit the feature it describes. Duchamp's readymades, for instance, hardly elude sense

experience; and nor, for that matter, does Cage's *4' 33"*. Its auditory properties are all (in some sense) negative, but auditory perception is not limited to sound—we can also hear silence. Thus, while this second move may indeed provide us with a serious philosophical difficulty, and while conceptual art is the source of that problem, it seems it cannot provide us with what is distinctively problematic about conceptual art. Too much of what has been taken to fall under that banner is simply not problematic in the way described.

(iii) Anyone sympathetic to this line of criticism will want to find a problem that is thrown up as readily by such works as *Fountain* as by De Maria's buried rod. The thought will be that the latter eludes sense experience completely only because it takes to the limit a way of rendering experience irrelevant that the former already embodies. For both, sense experience is dispensable as it never was for traditional art. In pursuit of this thought, we might try to distinguish between sense experience as *means of access* to the work, and sense experience as *medium of appreciation*. It is the latter that *Fountain* already jettisons, for all that it remains burdened with the former.

How might we make out the distinction between medium and means? One attempt would be to appeal to the idea that, when sense experience is the means of access to the work, one's experience could have been different without affecting one's appreciation. Any work, if it is to be appreciated by those other than its maker, has to be grasped somehow. Given our dependence on sense experience for our knowledge of contingent aspects of the world, this grasp will have to be mediated by experience. But if this is the only role sense experience plays, one might find out about the work using one of several sensory modes. One might, for instance, touch *Fountain*, rather

than seeing it. And one might find out about it without experiencing the work itself at all, as when one reads a description of it, or is told about it by someone else. No doubt this second sort of case will involve one's occupying a place in a chain, at one end of which lies sense experience of the work. But in neither this sort of case nor the first, do the details of one's sensory experiences—not even such central features as the modality they are in, or the objects they present—matter to one's appreciation. These features can change without one's appreciation doing, provided only one retains one's grasp on the nature of the work. In contrast, where sense experience is the medium of appreciation, almost any difference in experience might in principle affect the appreciation one has; and in any given case a far wider range of aspects of experience will bear on one's appreciation of the piece.

This proposal would need refining in various ways to be satisfactory. But I think it faces a serious objection that renders any such refinement pointless. Suppose there to be an art form meeting two conditions. First, it exploits symbols that do not admit of ready translation into language. Perhaps these symbols form a syntactically and semantically dense set, so that there can be no guarantee that, for every such symbol, there is a linguistic one conveying the same meaning.[7] Second, these symbols can only be taken in via a single sense modality, M. In such a case, our only means of access to works of art of that form would be via M-experience of the works themselves. The second condition precludes experiencing them in another sense modality; the first precludes grasping their content, and hence their nature, via descriptions. Thus this art form meets the conditions above for being one in which sense experience plays the role of medium of appreciation. Yet nothing in the situation as so far described secures that that is intuitively the case. It is true that the

only art form that we know to meet these two conditions, painting, is one in which sense experience does play the role of medium. But it is quite unclear that this is so only because painting meets the two conditions above. It seems that appreciation can depend closely on sense experience without experience playing the role of medium of appreciation. The proposal fails to do the work required.

A better way to make out the distinction will, I think, begin with a positive characterisation of the notion of medium. Where sense experience is the medium of our appreciation, that experience is altered by our awareness of the feature we appreciate. When, for example, I appreciate the muscularity of Caravaggio's style, my awareness of that feature is part of what constitutes my experience of his work: had I not been aware of it, my experience would have had a different phenomenology. In contrast, when sense experience merely provides a means of access to the work's nature, that nature, via my awareness of it, does not permeate the experience itself.

These ideas are a little elusive.[8] Nonetheless, they do offer a way to draw the distinction between medium and means that bears on the issue in hand. Some works of conceptual art, such as *Vertical Kilometer*, cannot be experienced by the senses at all. But even with those, such as *Fountain*, that can be, that experience is merely a means of access to their nature. It is not the medium of appreciation because the artistic features appreciated do not enter experience in the way the notion of medium requires. For, while I might appreciate, say the audacity of *Fountain* on seeing it, my experience is not altered by my awareness of that feature. The urinal looks the same, whether I am engaging with its audacity or not. And in this the Duchamp contrasts

with the Caravaggio. To see the muscularity of its style is to experience it differently, for one's sense experience to be altered by awareness of that feature.

This distinction provides one way to capture what is problematic, from the point of view of philosophical aesthetics, about conceptual art. The idea is that for other art, sense experience plays the role of medium of appreciation; whereas for conceptual art, it provides nothing more than means of access to the work. Other art is appreciated in experience; conceptual art is experienced only as a means to its appreciation. Thus conceptual art does indeed fail to speak to the senses in a way in which other art does. We seem to have found a way to make good our original idea, and a way which should apply to more than a limited range of conceptual art. For—although this would need arguing—the points just made look, *prima facie*, as if they should hold of most, perhaps of all, the works that have been considered conceptual.

However, there is a serious difficulty with the proposal. The feature described might be exhibited by much conceptual art, and by no painting, sculpture or music in the traditional mode. But it can hardly constitute a distinctive challenge posed by conceptual art to our conception of art. For this is just as much a feature of at least one of the traditional arts—literature. There too, sense experience is no more than means of access to the work. The printed page, or the heard poem, does not look or sound different when one engages with whatever features render it of artistic interest. One's sense experience is unchanged by appreciating those properties of the work. True, there may be a sense of 'experience' in which one experiences, say, *Daniel Deronda* differently, when one grasps F.R.Leavis's thought that it is in effect two novels welded awkwardly together.[9] But since it is clearly not sense experience that is in

question, that observation is of little help. To appreciate the daring quality of *Fountain* is just as much to experience it anew, in *some* sense. What reason is there to think that literature engages with experience in any sense in which conceptual art fails to?

One response might be to see conceptual art's distinctiveness as lying in its mixed nature. Like visual and musical art, its works are the kind of thing that could be experienced by the senses. Even *Vertical Kilometer* and the like fit this characterisation. Although it cannot be experienced without being taken apart, it belongs to the kind of object for which sense experience is always in principle a possibility. After all, it's a composite of several perceptible parts. It's only the way they're combined that leaves some hiding others, so placing the whole beyond experience. In this, *Vertical Kilometer*, like every piece of conceptual art, is unlike literature, since a novel or poem, whatever its precise nature, is not a material object, available to the senses. Yet, as with literature, sense experience does not form the medium through which it is appreciated. Now, this feature of conceptual art, that its objects belong to the realm of that which can be experienced, is important, and we shall return to it. But the current suggestion about the use to make of this feature faces a serious difficulty. The distinctiveness it wins conceptual art is not particularly interesting. How does the fact that conceptual art is the sort of stuff that can be seen, heard or felt, make any difference to the philosophical conclusions we should draw? We are already committed, given the existence of the literary arts, to abandoning any thought that art is tied to sense experience as medium. Given this, the fact that there can be art objects for which experience is not the medium, but which nonetheless can be experienced, looks unsurprising. There can be art for which sense experience is not

the medium of appreciation, and there can be objects perceivable by the senses. What is surprising or interesting about the claim that these two features can be combined?

A better response requires a more radical rethink. Perhaps conceptual art's specialness does not lie in its relation to the senses after all. One respect in which literary art is quite typical of art as traditionally conceived is in the importance of execution. It is not enough, to appreciate a work of literary art, that one grasp its central idea. That idea must be executed, and the details of execution will be crucial to the success or otherwise of the finished work. For a novel, for instance, knowing the mere outline of a plot, however original or intriguing, is hardly a sufficient basis for appreciating the work. With conceptual art, or so at least the suggestion goes, this is not so. The conception is the key, its execution largely irrelevant. If we wanted to work in slogans, we could say that the proposal is that conceptual art's distinctiveness is not that it fails to speak to the senses, but that its value lies entirely in the idea. Can we turn this slogan into a developed view?

A crude first attempt would be to suggest that with conceptual art it does not even matter that the work have been made. Conception is so central that execution is not even necessary. This, though, is too crude. Perhaps some conceptual art fits this bill. Douglas Huebler's proposal (1971) for his *Variable Piece # 70 (In Process) Global* was 'throughout the remainder of the artist's lifetime [to] photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species....Editions of this work will be periodically issued in a variety of topical modes: '100,000 people', '1,000,000 people,' '10,000,000 people,' etc.' This work could not, in practice, be

completed; perhaps it is unimportant that it even be started. But even if this is the right thing to say about the Huebler, it is certainly not true of all conceptual art. *Vertical Kilometer*'s interest lies partly in the fact that a gesture on this scale was really carried out; and *Fountain* would surely be far less interesting if Duchamp had merely contemplated infiltrating so ordinary an object into the world of the gallery. The point, then, needs making in more sophisticated form.

What is lacking, in the case of *Vertical Kilometer* or *Fountain*, if all we have is the conception of the work? The answer, surely, is the audaciousness of the latter, or the imposing pointlessness of the former. Ideas can be audacious, but thinking of something audacious is not itself necessarily to think audaciously. And this is true even if one has conceived of every aspect of the thing on which its audacity turns. The boldness of the gesture in *Fountain* required that Duchamp really put an ordinary urinal into a space devoted to art; merely thinking of doing so was, in contrast, timid. These points are even more plausible for the imposingness of gesture of *Vertical Kilometer*. In this respect audaciousness and imposingness contrast, perhaps, with ingenuity. Thinking of an ingenious solution to a problem is itself to have an ingenious thought—provided, that is, that everything that renders the solution ingenious is present in one's conception of the solution. (To think of a proposed solution *as* ingenious, or as a solution, hardly suffices for it to count as either.) Perhaps the difference between conceptual art that does need to be executed and that conceptual art, if any, that does not, is a matter of whether its interest lies in properties that function as audaciousness does, or properties that function as ingenuity does.

However, whichever sort of artistic property is involved, the distinctive thing about conceptual art, I suggest, is that that property is already determined in conception. In conceiving *Fountain*, Duchamp had come up with a work that *would be* audacious, were it executed. For he had conceived it as having features sufficient, on instantiation, to render it audacious. Execution mattered, in that in merely producing the idea of *Fountain*, Duchamp had not yet produced anything with the relevant property. But execution did not matter in any further respect. In particular, it did not matter how the work was executed—provided the execution was true to the conception, the resulting work would be dazzlingly bold. And this not for the trivial reason that it was *conceived as* audacious. Rather, Duchamp conceived it has having certain other properties, and these properties were such that anything having them would be audacious. And similarly, in broad outline, with Huebler. In conceiving *Variable Piece # 70*, Huebler had not only conceived of something that would be mind-boggling; perhaps the conception already was so. But whether that is so or not, the mind-boggling nature of *Variable Piece # 70* was fully determined by the properties Huebler conceived it as having. No matter how it was executed, provided it had those properties, it would be mind-boggling.

In this respect, conceptual art contrasts with other art, including literature. The conception of a novel or poem is insufficient to determine its artistic properties. It is not simply that, as with *Fountain*, those properties are absent until something has been built to fit that conception; rather, the way in which the thing is executed determines whether or not it will have those properties after all. Provided we set aside the trivializing case, in which the work is conceived as having a certain artistic property, and stick to conceptions which specify only the properties on which artistic

properties are to depend, then the gap between conception and execution will always leave room for the fatal slip. Must this be so? Can't the work be conceived in sufficient detail that there is no question that any execution true to it will have the properties aimed at? In the context of the plastic arts, we might doubt that a sufficiently detailed conception is in principle within our grasp. In the literary arts, there is no similar worry. It is only a contingency that prevents us being able to plan every word of a novel; and nothing prevents us being able to plan a poem in sufficient detail to fix its artistic properties. The point rather is that by the time conception is sufficiently determinate to secure this result, there is nothing left for execution to do. If one has conceived every word of the poem or novel, the thing is written. If one has done less than that, then execution still has its chance to affect the artistic properties of the thing. In neither case does literary art match conceptual. And if literary art does not, what does?

Let me try to put the claim more formally. A work's *artistic properties* are those we appreciate in appreciating it as art, and its *base properties* are the properties on which its artistic properties depend. Then we might try claiming that the following is distinctive of conceptual art:

> (1) The work's base properties can be conceived in sufficient detail to determine its artistic properties, without conception amounting to execution of the work.

However, this will not quite do. The problem lies in the last clause. That is intended to exclude literature. It does so, but in the wrong way. For it leaves (1) capturing a

difference between literature and conceptual art that turns on the ontology of the two artforms, and that is not the difference we are after. Works of conceptual art are material objects, works of literature are not. To execute a work is to create it. If the work in question is a material object, no act of conceiving, however specific, can constitute the work's creation. If the work is not material, there is no such obstacle to conception equalling execution. The difference between the artforms that (1) captures is just this, that in the case of conceptual art, but not literature, the material status of the work prevents conception amounting to execution. But this difference is just the one I earlier discussed under the proposal that conceptual art has a mixed nature, and which I there described as uninteresting. That is, it leaves the two artforms, in terms of their relation to central ideas in the philosophy of art, on a par: it's just that conceptual art represents the intrusion into the realm of the material of the sort of structures of evaluation (no role for sense experience as the medium of appreciation, or conception's ability fully to determine artistic properties) that literature already embodies in the non-material realm.

To avoid this difficulty, we need to rejig (1). To see how to do so, let's introduce the notion of a *fully specific conception* of a work of art. This specifies every detail of how the work is to be: the precise nature of every base property is fixed by the conception. Of course, in the case of a work of conceptual art, such a specification determines the thing's artistic properties. The point, though, is that such a work's artistic properties are also fully determined by a conception that falls far short of this ideal. In literature, in contrast, only a fully specified conception determines artistic properties. Perhaps conceiving its properties in that detail also suffices for one to have created the work. But whether this is so or not is a further matter, one precisely

introducing the ontological considerations that we are now setting aside. Thus what is true of conceptual art, but not of literature or any other traditional artform is this:

> (1*) The work's artistic properties are fully determined by a less than fully specific conception of its base properties.[10]

Part II: Conceptual Art and Conversational Implicature

So far, we have reached two main conclusions about conceptual art. First, like literature, but unlike other traditional arts, it does not have sense experience as its medium of appreciation. Second, unlike all traditional art, it allows for a particularly loose relation between base and artistic properties, so that a partial conception of the former suffices to determine the latter. These claims, and particularly the second, constitute the challenge conceptual art poses to traditional theorizing about the arts. In the rest of this essay I want to take some first steps towards meeting this challenge. I will do so by investigating the mechanism by which the audience comes to grasp the interesting features of a conceptual artwork.

This is the time to deploy an observation we have occasion to make more than once above, but on those occasions have had to set aside. Conceptual artworks belong to kinds that are essentially available to sense experience. Even if a particular work, such as *Vertical Kilometer*, is not so available, it s belongs to a kind of thing that standardly can be experienced. This feature of conceptual art establishes an expectation on the part of someone confronted with such art. The expectation is that it, like other art that

can be experienced, will be satisfying in sense experience. In other words, the expectation is that sense experience will be the medium for appreciating what is interesting about the work. But the first of our two conclusions above was precisely that that expectation will be frustrated. The viewer can find no artistically rewarding properties of the work that can enter her experience of it in the way required. Given that, she is driven to wonder what the point of the work can be. It sets up an expectation, in virtue of the sort of thing it is, and the context in which it is found (eg a gallery), which it then fails to meet. Why does it do this? It is in answering this question that the viewer engages with the point, or perhaps many points, of the work. She engages with its artistic interest by seeking to understand the point of its frustrating her legitimate expectations.

Thus far I do not take myself to have said anything particularly controversial. But we can make these homely observations do a surprising amount of work. To do so, we should begin by drawing an analogy between the situation just described and one that holds in the context of conversation. Suppose I ask you a question. You don't answer me. I am left wondering why not. Perhaps you simply don't know the answer, and are embarrassed to admit as much; or perhaps you just didn't hear me. But something more subtle might be going on. Perhaps you are trying, by refusing to answer, to tell me something. You might be seeking to let me know that my question is inappropriate. If I ask a distinguished philosopher whether the rumours about her moving university are true, she might change the topic, as a way of indicating that I should not be inquiring on such matters. A refusal might convey other things too. If I ask the philosopher at a departmental party what she found most interesting about the paper we have just heard, she might stay silent, as a way of communicating that she

found nothing worthwhile in it. Equally, she might reply 'its delivery', as a way of making much the same point. In all these cases, in various ways, my interlocutor refuses to answer what, given the context, was clearly my question. She thus explicitly frustrates an expectation we both knew me to have. Her doing so prompts me to ask why she should do this. In answering that question, I can come to grasp some point she wishes to convey.

The phenomenon thus indicated is, of course, what Paul Grice called 'conversational implicature'.[11] Grice offered a relatively precise definition of the phenomenon, and a relatively detailed explanation of how it operates. He appealed to various principles governing conversational exchanges. He explained communication in these cases via a detailed account of the nature and relative priority of those principles, and the thoughts one might reasonably work through when one's interlocutor bucks one's expectations by not following those principles in the most obvious ways. Moreover, Grice described the phenomenon so as to cover a far wider range of conversational exchanges than are suggested by my examples above. However, we can afford here to ignore many of the details of Grice's account. I want to draw only on the central analogy it offers for our understanding of conceptual art. In our confrontations with the latter, and in conversations where our questions go unanswered, communication is effected in a somewhat roundabout way. Rather than meeting our expectations, and getting a point across that way, the speaker/artist frustrates them, and gets her point across by prompting us to wonder why she has done so. It is not what she says that is the mechanism of communication, but what she fails to say, and the reasoning that prompts.

We can use this analogy to illuminate three aspects of conceptual art. To get to the first, we must begin with one disanalogy between that art and standard conversation. Normal conversation is one to one, and takes place in the presence of both parties. It involves a two-way interaction between them, with each being highly responsive to the moves made by the other. Our relation to conceptual art is quite different. We encounter it in a certain institutional context, and in the absence of its maker. The work is already finished. It is addressed, not to us personally, but to us *qua* spectator or audience. In consequence, it can only be responsive to expectations that we might reasonably be expected to have as occupants of those roles. Everything particular and unpredictable in our reactions will be irrelevant to the way the work is intended to strike us. Indeed, all this is reflected in the generality of the expectation I identified above as the one conceptual art begins by frustrating: the expectation that what is before us will prove satisfying to the senses *in some way*.

A consequence of this disanalogy between standard conversation and conceptual art is a tendency in the latter towards generality in the points it indirectly conveys. It is as if my interlocutor failed to say anything, though not in response to a specific question of mine, and the consequent expectation that she answer it; but in response to an expectation that she say *something*. Such silence might still indirectly convey some message, but the message it conveys will not be one specific to concerns of mine, or of any other particular interlocutor. Given this generality, there are few topics on which relevant points could be indirectly conveyed. Indeed, especially if we further depersonalize the situation, one might think that the range of possible topics contracts towards one. For the topic that will be the last to go is surely that of conversation itself. The points that could be conveyed in the most indeterminate such situations are

ones about the very act of conversing. Analogously, given the impersonal nature of our relation to conceptual art, and the fact that it makes its points by frustrating, not meeting, our expectations with respect to sense experience; it should be no surprise that much conceptual art takes as its topic art itself. Its interest lies in the reflections it prompts on the nature of art, art institutions, and the practices of art making, distributing and consuming. I think this tendency to reflexivity is characteristic of conceptual art. What I am suggesting is that it is a natural consequence of that art exploiting the communicative mechanisms I have described.[12]

There is a second aspect of conceptual art which the analogy with conversation illuminates. This is the feature touted above as distinctively problematic about that art, *viz.* that it allows for a particularly flexible relation between base properties and artistic ones. The central mechanism by which conceptual art communicates is, I am suggesting, the frustration of expectation. One expects, but does not find, features that can be appreciated in the medium of sense experience. But it is a general truth about expectations that there are more ways to frustrate them than to meet them. Thus, in the case of conversation, if you ask me a question and I answer it, quite what I say will affect quite what you take my answer to be. In contrast, there are many ways in which I might fail to answer. I might change the subject; I might stay silent; I might say something on the matter too elusive to prove helpful; I might say that I refuse to answer; and so on. Insofar as these are all ways of frustrating your expectation, and thus ways to trigger the chains of thought that conversational implicature exploits, they are, or at least often can be, on a par. Analogously, I suggest, there are many ways in which a given conceptual artwork can frustrate the expectation to satisfy the

senses, and it matters little quite what the details of its nature are, provided that it does indeed so frustrate.

I am not claiming, of course, that everything about the nature of a conceptual artwork is irrelevant. It matters very much whether it is a deep hole filled with a brass rod, a piece of music with no notes to play, an impossibly large collection of photographs, or a collection of boxes filled with the artist's excrement. But the precise nature of the works fitting these descriptions is irrelevant, at least beyond a certain point. And it is so because any way of filling out those descriptions will be a way that frustrates the fundamental expectation identified. Insofar as the nature of the works does matter, that is because interpreting conceptual art involves more than simply noting that the expectation of sensory satisfaction is not met. But whatever else does feed into that process, that frustration is its starting point. The need to frustrate expectation in this way imposes very slender requirements on the nature of conceptual art. And that is what liberates its artistic properties from the particularly close tie to other properties that holds for other kinds of artwork.

Third, and finally, the analogy allows us to confront the problem that conceptual art poses. The structure of that problem was revealed in our early discussion (§1). If conceptual art lacks some feature that all other art has, or has some feature that all other art lacks, and if that feature was one we took to be definitive of art, then we seem forced either to deny that conceptual art is art; or to deny that the feature is definitive of art; or to reconstrue that feature so that conceptual and other art are after all alike in that respect. I argued that there is indeed a feature in which conceptual differs from all other art, and that it is a matter of the relation between artistic and

other properties. Conceptual art is unique in that its artistic interest does not turn on the precise nature of its base properties. So the ingredients are in place for a problem with the structure described.[13] Which of the three solutions should I choose?

Rather than answer this question, I here intend to do no more than make it seem less pressing. In the light of the communicative mechanism I have described as underpinning our interpretation of conceptual art, we can place that art in relation to other, more traditional, work. Conceptual art is different from traditional art in terms of the relation of artistic to other properties. But I just explained that difference by appeal to another. Conceptual art is unique in setting up an expectation of sensory fulfilment that it goes on to frustrate. For literature sets up no such expectation, and everywhere else the expectation is met. This second difference between conceptual and traditional art is both striking and significant. But it reveals a certain kinship between the two. Conceptual art works by frustrating an expectation that traditional art either satisfies or does not raise. It is thus in an important sense parasitic on that art. Without art to raise that expectation, there could be no conceptual art to frustrate it. And just as traditional non-literary art communicates through meeting that expectation, conceptual art communicates through refusing to meet it. Thus, although conceptual works break with tradition in some radical ways, they do so precisely by exploiting features in other works that define them as traditional. To this extent, conceptual art represents a reconfiguring of the traditional art project—rather than a complete break with it. Does this prevent it from being art, or show that close dependence of artistic on base properties is not essential to art? Well, what turns on this question? Consider the analogy one last time. Communication through conversation, one might have thought, involves the use of a public language. Then

one realizes that, against the background of such linguistic practices, communication can equally be effected through silence. Does this force us to redefine communication? It is not as if the feature we appealed to, public language, plays no role, not even in the cases that prove testing for the traditional view. Perhaps all we need do here is trace the relations, between speech, silence and communication, and treat the definitional question as stipulative. And perhaps that is also the line to take with the problem of conceptual art.

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[1] 'The Problem of Non-Perceptual Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43:4 (2003), pp.363-378.

[2] *Prima facie*, (P) is incompatible with the intution that some features are aesthetic even though sense experience does not allow us to discriminate their presence. I attempt to reconcile the apparent conflict in 'Aesthetics, Experience and Discrimination' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63:2 (2005) pp.119-133

[3] Again, I follow Shelley closely. The main difference between our formulations of the problem is that he ignores the bridge closed above. For this reason, his three principles, (X), (R) and (S) (*op.cit.* p.364) do not form even a *prima facie* inconsistent set, contrary to advertisement; let alone the genuinely inconsistent set Shelley's argument requires.

[4] Again I borrow from Shelley. He opts for the second option.

[5] See Robert Hughes *The Shock of the New* British Broadcasting Corporation: London 1980, p.390.

[6] I ignore any complication introduced by the documenting, in photographs and the like, of the work. A very similar work might not have been documented. That hypothetical piece can serve as our example.

[7] For semantic and syntactic density, see Nelson Goodman *Languages of Art* Oxford University Press: Oxford 1968.

[8] For more, see my 'Aesthetics, Experience and Discrimination', where I interpret principle P in light of the idea here deployed to give an account of medium: aesthetically significant features must enter experience in the sense that awareness of them partially constitutes its phenomenology.

[9] F.R. Leavis *The Great Tradition* London: Chatto & Windus 1948.

[10] One might wonder whether we could not replace this with something that did not speak of conception at all. Why not instead characterise the distinctiveness of conceptual art by the relations holding between the base and artistic properties of the work? The idea would be that in conceptual art that dependence is much looser than in other art, so that the base properties on which the work's artistic properties depend are far less determinate than those in the case of traditional art. However, I am doubtful that we can drop talk of conception in this way. First, what does it mean for artistic properties to depend on *less determinate* base properties? Aren't all actual property instantiations fully determinate? If so, talk of less determinate properties threatens to be mere shorthand for talk of such properties *conceived* in such a way as to overlook some of their determinacy. Second, even if we can make sense of the determinable-determinate distinction within properties, rather than within conceptions of them, it is unclear to me that the distinction will capture every aspect of the intuitive difference between conceptual and other art here. At least some of the variation that leaves the artistic properties of conceptual art unaffected is not, apparently, variation within determinates of a given determinable. Thus, just as it seems unimportant to *Fountain* that it be one shade of white rather than another, it also seems unimportant that it be a rounded urinal, rather than a squared-off one. But, while being one shade of white is determinate relative to the determinable *white*, it is far from clear that being a rounded urinal is determinate relative to the determinable *being a urinal*. If not, the new proposal needs phrasing in terms loose enough to capture this sort of independence too. And what would do, short of saying simply that some of the work's properties affect its artistic properties, and others do not? Since that is as true of traditional art as it is of conceptual art, what distinction remains?

Claiming that conceptual art's artistic properties depend on *a smaller portion* of its base properties is not obviously true; and no other claim is clearly available.

[11] Paul Grice *Studies in the Ways of Words* London: Harvard University Press 1989.

[12] Of course, historically it might be that art took a reflexive turn before it took a turn to the conceptual. My claim is that conceptual art, in exploiting the communicative mechanism identified, naturally takes a reflexive subject matter. This tendency renders conceptual art suited to times in which art focusses on self-reflection. It is another matter whether such self-reflection leads to, or is itself instigated by, the discovery of conceptual art.

[13] The problem might be formulated in the following inconsistent triad:

> (A) There exists works of conceptual art, that is works the artistic properties of which are fully determined by a less than fully specific conception of their base properties.

(Again, this need not be taken as *defining* conceptual art.)

> (B) Aesthetic properties are such that they can't be fully determined by a less than fully specific conception of the relevant base properties.

> (C) Artistic properties, i.e. those which one appreciates in appreciating something as art, are necessarily aesthetic properties.