

The Epistemic Value of Contemporary Art



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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Recently in analytic philosophy, interest in the issue of the epistemic value of art has been revived. Philosophers have sought to establish whether and in what ways art is a source of knowledge, understanding or a means of inquiry. In philosophy this is a longstanding question, addressed both in the Greek and German traditions, but it seems pertinent to ask the question again today in light of significant changes that have taken place in contemporary art practice.

In my thesis, I investigate this question from two perspectives: in terms of analytic philosophy of art, and in terms of developments in contemporary art since the 1960s. In Part I, I offer a defence of a philosophical theory of artistic value, critically overview the extant philosophical literature on the question of epistemic value of art, and explain why the inherently experimental character of contemporary art makes it difficult simply to apply the available theories. I argue that a philosophical engagement with contemporary art requires a different, more inductive method. In Part II, I closely consider three recent developments in which the relationship between art and knowledge has been rendered more complex. The Conceptual Art movement of the 1960s and 1970s privileged concerns with concepts, thought processes and truth over expression, materiality and fidelity to genre. The social turn of the 1990s cast the artist in a position that is almost indistinguishable from that of a teacher, social activist or even of a technology developer. And the artists working within the bio art movement of the 1990s and 2000s have assimilated the activity of the artist to that of the scientist, sometimes blurring the two roles.

The goal of the thesis is twofold. On the one hand, I show how cases from recent art history put pressure on some key commitments in recent analytic philosophy. Revisions and challenges are suggested in particular for extant theories of artistic value, conceptions of artistic autonomy and heteronomy, and some popular accounts of the epistemic value of art. On the other hand, concepts from analytic philosophy are used to shed light on some of the more radical developments in recent art practice, and to rethink the ways in which art participates in the broader culture.

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Chapter 1 | Introduction: 'Do not look too hard for meaning here'

1. At the exhibition *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* by Grayson Perry

For his exhibition *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (October 2011—February 2012), Grayson Perry has spent two years researching and selecting objects from the British Museum's collections. These are displayed intermingled with Perry's own works. Pilgrims' badges, china sets, helmets, devotional objects, false antiques, photographs, manuscripts, and other bits of material culture from across the globe and from diverse pockets of history stand side by side with Perry's own pottery, sculpture, tapestries and costumes, some made especially for the exhibition. The collection of works is organized around several themes—shrines, 'magick', maps, cultural conversations, pilgrimage, craftsmanship, sexuality—in a way that looks and feels much like an anthropological exhibition. The thematic compartmentalization is reinforced by temporary walls, museum vitrines, display labels, information panels in the British Museum font, which all mirror conventional contemporary approaches to museum display. To the extent that this is an anthropology, though, it is one entwined with Perry's personal quirks. Various historical objects are co-opted into Perry's childhood fantasy universe, centred on his teddy bear named Alan Measles, while the artist's transvestite persona Claire is given free reign over others (Figure 1).

The first information panel in the exhibition reads:

Do not look too hard for meaning here.

I am not a historian, I am an artist. That is all you need to know.

When I was young I had an imaginary civilization. Then I became an artist and my civilization traded with the world and all its history. Now I am not sure where my imagination stops and the world starts. Deep in the mountains of my mind there is a sacred place where there is a monument to skill. ...

The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman could be another name for the British Museum.¹

The ‘work’—Perry seems to refer to the whole exhibition as an artwork in itself²—explores several themes. There is an interest in the artist’s own psychotherapy; there is a harangue against the banalities of contemporary living, which is often depicted in brutal terms on Perry’s coarsely finished pots; there is an affirmation of story-telling, magic and make-believe, which are shown to trump more doxastic religious beliefs; there is the theme of *craft* itself, the skilful manipulation of one’s environment and part of ‘relaxed, humble, ever-curious love of stuff’ that is often favourably compared to the shallowness of contemporary art. Perry has a lot to say, and so his command ‘Do not look too hard for meaning here. I am an artist.’ seems coy and difficult to follow, but it does arouse curiosity: what precisely *is* the relationship between the artist and meaning here?

Several options are offered by the exhibition. Initially it might seem as if Perry is seeking to disassociate art from any kind of rational inquiry. ‘Meaning’ belongs to ‘a historian’; the artist, then, plays with unbridled intuition and imagination, and answers to no objective standard of meaning or truth. The mantra of Alan Measles (Perry’s teddy bear), which is repeated throughout the exhibition, is ‘Hold your beliefs lightly!’ It sounds like a rallying call for a free-for-all appropriation of the accumulated

¹ Perry, 2011: Sleeve.

² *ibid.*: 20.

wreckage of history, a weaving together of a light-hearted and irreverent pastiche. Perry himself plays up such wide-eyed enthusiasm in his commentary—‘I love a good kimono’; ‘I love a good shrine.’³ On this interpretation, the disclaimer ‘do not look too hard for meaning here,’ serves to warn us not to exert our cognitive powers unduly in relation to art, not to over-conceptualize what is an exercise in style rather than substance.

However, to see Perry simply as a pastiche artist would be quite at odds with his explicit disavowals of postmodernist attempts to make artistic meaning a free-for-all,⁴ and it also clashes with other clear indications that Perry has points to make: in this exhibition as well as in his prolific career as a public lecturer. *Hold Your Beliefs Lightly* (2011), for example, is a response to the company flags made by the Fante people in the 19th century (Figure 2). Whereas the Fante flags contain visual jibes aimed at rival companies, Perry’s own flag represents his teddy bear giving some ‘sensible advice’ to world’s religions. ‘Hold your beliefs lightly!’ here seems to be an instruction, quite simply and seriously meant, to replace inflexible forms of religiosity with kinder, pluralist forms of spiritual life. If so, then Perry’s work is relaying a message; and so, it seems, it must also have more meaning than a mere pastiche.

In support of this interpretation, we might also cite Perry’s highly allegorical and yet highly straightforward approach to making images. Perry is all for dismantling the pretensions of the hermetic and theory-ridden art world, and his art is presented as easy to read. Indeed, the catalogue gives us clear guides as to Perry’s personal iconography: the bear figure comes to represent not only Adam Measles, but also the male principle and raw emotion; a small boy represents innocent reason; a woman in

³ Perry, 2011: 73.

⁴ Interview in Klein, 2009.

folk costume stands for tradition; a woman in black for the contemporary world: as can be seen in his large tapestry, *Map of Truths and Beliefs* (2011).⁵ Equipped with this visual dictionary, we are able to piece together a story: tradition and raw emotion hold the afterlife in place, assisted by innocent reason. The shrines of religious and cultural worship—their names all mixed up—are shown to provide at best an uncertain hold on spiritual life. The contemporary world, banished to the corner of the picture and somewhat smaller in stature, seems to be advancing with ominous intent. The historian, like any scientist, operates with tightly defined concepts, gathering bits of reality and unambiguously ordering them into theses. An artist employs a freer language, plays with metaphors, allegories, disparate cultural references, and arranges them in a way that suggests a new proposition about the world around us. However, the artistic language is no more difficult to read. We do not have to look *too hard* for meaning here, as Perry says; the meaning is right there.

And yet iconography will only take us so far with Perry. For it is not just artworks that are presented here, but also ordinary objects; crafted, utilitarian objects that are given a particular use. Many of Perry's objects, notably his pots, but also the shrines, statuettes, helmets, dresses and badges, have specific uses; and the notion of craft *as opposed to* art is central to the exhibition. Consider the 16th century German stoneware jug, which Perry displays side-by-side with his own ceramic version (Figure 4). The original German jug depicts a bearded figure, interlaced with acorns and leaves; Perry's version (entitled *A Family Tradition*) shows coffins and World War II bombers amid oak leaves, alluding to Perry's childhood war games and his childhood perception of Germany. If we look at the original German jug alone, it seems to be a very suggestive object, an object we might describe it as 'full of meaning', however,

⁵ Perry, 2011: 121.

its meaning is importantly not like that of the tapestry. The jug does not present a message coded in an allegory. What comes to mind, rather, is Martin Heidegger's treatment of a similar sort of earthenware jug in his essay 'The Thing'.⁶ A thing *things*, and a jug *jugs*, Heidegger rather cryptically suggests; truth 'happens' in the thing. The idea is something like this: everyday objects (things), together with the uses they suggest to us, can ground a whole nexus of culturally specific beliefs and attitudes. Their design, therefore, is important not because it would *represent* a particular set of beliefs, but because it *facilitates* or *enables* them. For example, partaking of food and drink out of a carefully wrought jug such as the 16th century German specimen suggests a completely different way of life than drinking out of a disposable plastic cup might suggest. Of course, we no longer really use jugs like this one (unless we do so ironically or we are using the jug as an antique), and therefore the world this jug discloses is no longer our own. However, as a craftsman of quasi-sacerdotal objects Perry can be seen as putting himself in the position of a maker of a *new* nexus of attitudes and beliefs. His jugs, as well as his helmets, badges, costumes and shrines, are objects for our culture. Through an imagined use of them, they allow us to express or feel more keenly what was previously inchoate. To a modern agnostic, harking for a homely spirituality but unwilling to be tied down to a particular religious sentiment, is a slightly ridiculous shrine to a teddy bear not just the thing she was missing (Figure 1)?

This suggests yet a third possible relationship between artist and meaning: unlike the historian's pronouncements, Perry's objects do not carry *semantic* meaning. They are not there to be interpreted for what they 'say'. Instead, Perry's role as an artist is more akin to that of a craftsman or a shaman, as he sometimes puts it. Perry makes

⁶ Heidegger, [1951] 1971.

meaningful objects, in the sense that their *use* facilitates new comportments towards the world.

We now have three possible accounts of meaning in Perry's works—as a pastiche, as allegorical art, as craft—all of which accord to an extent with the distinction Perry draws between the meaning produced by a historian and that produced by an artist. At the same time, however, Perry needs to *point* towards that distinction, suggesting that there is in fact much continuity between his work and that of the British Museum curators as well; so much, in fact, that without a warning we might overlook the difference between an artistic intervention and a 'regular' museum display. So what is this work: a pastiche, an allegory, work of craft or a museum exhibition? Although this is a contemporary art exhibition apparently less ambiguous than many others, there remains a constitutive instability here.

2. Philosophical questions

There are all kinds of things we may learn from works of art. We can learn about the universes depicted therein, about their authors, and about the cultural and social conditions within which they were produced. However, the question that has long exercised philosophers is not whether works of art are any good as vehicles for mundane information, or as time capsules that tell us of some long lost time in which they were created, but whether works of art represent a kind of competition for works of philosophy: whether art, too, is directed towards knowledge about matters of utmost importance. Does art, like philosophy, shed light on our place in the world, or on what we owe to one another, or on our relationship with the gods? Aristotle's view was that 'poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are

singulars’;⁷ Plato, in the opposite corner of the debate, likened the poet to the sophist rhetorician, whose goal is to instil beliefs regardless of their truth and to flatter and amuse the spectator rather than to teach him anything.⁸ Within the German classical and Romantic traditions, the relationship between philosophical and artistic knowledge was at the centre of the philosophical sense of self-identity. The eighteenth-century aesthetic tradition of Baumgarten, Winckelmann, Lessing, Kant and Schiller originated in the identification of a specifically aesthetic analogue to reason; whereas the later great systems of Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche all integrated the question of artistic knowledge into their broader philosophical projects.

Within the recent Anglophone tradition, the relationship between philosophy and the arts has been hardly quite so integral to the overall pursuit, however, the question has been recently revived within the specialised branch of philosophical aesthetics. Do works of art make significant knowledge available to their audiences, and do they do so in a way that forms part of their artistic value? This question has been largely asked in relation to literature, but considering the work of Grayson Perry, it seems appropriate to ask it in relation to contemporary art as well. Perry does not ask this question explicitly in relation to his work; instead Perry’s exhibition invites comparison between ‘meaning’ in the work of an artist and ‘meaning’ in the work of a historian. Though ‘meaning’ is not the same as ‘knowledge’, this invitation seems to imply precisely a reflection on the role that art can play in our intellectual lives, a reflection on how art tackles issues that are of interest to history, to philosophy and to other knowledge-directed disciplines. Here, we seem to have artworks that *in some way* bear on issues to do with religion, on the question how we should live in the

⁷ Poetics: 1451a-b; in Aristotle 1992.

⁸ Gorgias: 502a-c; in Plato 1993.

contemporary world, on the question of whether we should hold our beliefs lightly or hold onto them for our dear lives. What, then, is the relationship between the work and these questions? Is artistic work directed towards attainment of significant new knowledge and insight about these topics, like a philosopher's work might be?

An initial difficulty arises, however, because contemporary art can be so difficult to pin down. If there were simply one way into Perry's exhibition—if, for example, the correct approach were simply to stand in front of a giant allegorical tapestry and decode a particular story within it—then one could have a fair go at saying how that is similar to or different from philosophy. But there seem to be many points of departure in a work like Perry's and this, in turn, makes the philosophical question more interesting. In this thesis, I will attempt to pursue this lead while staying mindful of the difficulty. I will attempt to answer the question 'Do works of art make significant knowledge available to their audiences, and do they achieve this in a way that forms part of their artistic value?', and I will attempt to do so specifically in relation to difficult cases from contemporary art.

In Part 1 of this thesis I offer a critical overview of the efforts to answer the question within analytic philosophy, and I will also suggest some general difficulties in applying the question to contemporary art. In Chapter 2, I analyse the concept of *artistic value*, which frames the debate about artistic knowledge. The basic idea is that when we appreciate works of art, we do not simply appreciate them as one object among many. We can distinguish between the mere usefulness of a painting as a means to lighten up the room, and how good the painting might be as a work of art. Similarly, entering Perry's exhibition we are asked to appreciate it as art; it seems this invites us to deploy a rather specific kind of appreciatory skill or mode of attention, one that is rather different from simply wandering around a historical exhibition. I

argue that while analytic philosophers have profoundly disagreed about *what kinds* of value works of art are capable of providing (e.g. aesthetic, ethical, epistemic, expressive, and so forth), many philosophers share a common view as to *how* one might distinguish artistic from non-artistic values. Artistic values are the values works of art possess *as art*, that is, in virtue of properly artistic features such as formal properties, treatment of theme and subject matter, narrative structure, medium-specific features, and so forth. I use the theories of Monroe Beardsley, Malcolm Budd, Robert Stecker and Berys Gaut to shed some light on what ‘as art’ might mean in this context, and to illustrate a surprising agreement between these quite diverse theorists of artistic value. Finally I defend this consensus of what ‘as art’ is, against a recent attack by Dominic Lopes.

In Chapter 3, I survey the main positions offered in response to the question whether works of art make significant knowledge available, and whether that forms part of their artistic value. Two models of the kind of knowledge the arts make available have been developed, primarily in relation to examples from literature: the view that works of art yield *experiential* knowledge, and the view that they yield *practical moral* knowledge. Importantly, both models significantly expand the notion of knowledge to include more than just possession of correct information; I will refer to this expanded notion by the name ‘epistemic value’. I clarify what is meant by knowledge in each case, and how that relates to concepts like belief, truth and justification. Importantly for future discussion, I also delineate three positions regarding the relationship between the epistemic value of art and epistemic value of philosophy. These are: the dichotomy view, according to which knowledge made available in each case is different in kind; the continuity view, according to which art can contribute to philosophical projects; and the confrontation view, according to

which art clarifies a part of some philosophical problem that ordinary philosophical discourse obscures.

In Chapter 4, I consider how the philosophical questions about epistemic value of art can be asked in the context of contemporary art. First of all, what might we mean by the very term ‘contemporary art’? On the one hand, it might be possible to think of ‘contemporary art’ simply as ‘recent art’; on the other, it might be possible to think of it as a particular *kind* of art, so that not *every* recent production counts as contemporary. If so, one might set out to determine what essence or what cluster of characteristics determines the ‘contemporary’, and then draw the temporal lines according to when those characteristics became prevalent. For example, we might want to group post-1960 art together as ‘contemporary’ due to the expansion of artistic media we witness in this period; alternatively and more narrowly, the post-1989 sense of ‘contemporary’ is usually discussed by reference to the new processes of globalization that art of this period has witnessed. As several art historians have noted, there are inherent problems with any such periodization. Accordingly, I think we should use such temporal designations as a rough point of orientation, but resist attempts to treat contemporary art as a distinct *kind* of art. I will focus my investigation on art including and following Conceptual Art, covering the time span between approximately 1966 and the present day;⁹ but it is the interest in the question of epistemic value rather than any particular definition of contemporary art, which will dictate the terms of the debate.

As already noted on the example of Perry’s exhibition, it seems *prima facie* relevant to ask the question of epistemic value within the contemporary art context,

⁹ Throughout, I capitalise ‘Conceptual Art’ to refer to the specific movement originating in the 1960s and 1970s; on rare occasions I use de-capitalised ‘conceptual art’ to refer to art with a conceptual element in a broader sense.

but how applicable are the available analytic philosophical models? I first trial a top-down approach of applying these models. As I try to show, it is not difficult to find some examples of contemporary art to which extant philosophical models can be applied: for example, it is not difficult to find works of contemporary video or participatory art where one can plausibly argue that some experiential or practical moral knowledge is made available. However, I also identify three broad difficulties with the top-down approach. In comparison to artworks, which have been the main source of the philosophical debate so far, works of contemporary art are often (i) more experimental; (ii) they tend to blur the boundaries between art and non-art; (iii) they are more self-reflexive. These three difficulties can already be illustrated with regard to Perry's work. Firstly, while there are of course precedents for artists installing contemporary work within museum collections, Perry's exhibition at the British Museum is experimental in the sense that he is testing the boundaries of artistic making and display rather than following some established artistic practice. As analytic models tend to focus on relatively well-established artistic forms, such as the novel of sentimental education or portrait painting, the top-down approach has less appeal when accounting for such experimental work. What is interesting here is not the artistic achievement within some established form, but the multiple points of entry and the instabilities that the artistic experimentation shows up. Secondly, while clearly intended to belong to the category of 'art', Perry's work also comes *very close* to an ordinary historical exhibition on the subject of craft; besides, his work as an artist is continuous with his non-art activities as a social commentator and documentary film maker. The emphasis of the extant models on *specifically artistic* values and *specifically artistic* knowledge therefore seems displaced in favour of a close investigation into the very tenability of the division between artistic and non-artistic

epistemic endeavours. Thirdly, Perry's work is highly self-reflexive: the artist elucidates his views on the relationship between art and craft in the catalogue, interviews and public lectures, and notes his debt to a particular theoretical field, namely psychoanalysis. The philosopher writing on contemporary art must take stock of such information rather than rely solely on philosophical models.

All of this suggests, as I argue in Chapter 4 with the help of a few other examples, that it is difficult to simply slot contemporary art into extant models for thinking about artistic and epistemic value. I propose an alternative methodology, a kind of analytic aesthetics with a twist. In order to get it right, philosophy needs to engage with contemporary art as a serious dialogue partner in the conversation on the topics of artistic and epistemic value. I propose, then, to pay closer attention to individual works of art and to texts by artists and contemporary art commentators than is established practice in philosophy of art. My task will not be to ask whether works of contemporary art either do or do not realise some kind of knowledge that has already been described in analytic philosophy of art; it will rather be to study some of the experiments within recent art practices in order to uncover how these *in themselves* offer philosophical challenges or revisions for extant accounts. Armed with conceptual distinctions of Part 1, I go on to closely study three developments in recent history of art in Part 2, which I take to bear interestingly on the philosophical subject matter. These are Conceptual Art, the social turn, and bio art.

The first important theme that emerges across these studies is that of revising extant views on artistic value in the face of the erosion of artistic autonomy in recent art practices. Some recent artistic practices come to exhibit an increasingly complex relationship to non-artistic fields, especially to the field of politics: some art becomes indistinguishable from political action. In the face of such merging, can we still make

sense of categories like artistic value, or evaluations such as ‘good art’ and ‘bad art’? I argue that pragmatism, a view according to which artistic value derives from some broader, often purely political field of activity within which art is located, emerges as a controversial but worthy competitor to extant views.

Secondly, this larger theme comes to bear importantly on the more specific question of the epistemic value of art. Works of art that command attention here are those that we might call ‘critical art’, art which sets out to criticize a political, social or philosophical issue such as racism or the ethics of bioengineering. I argue that works of contemporary art make the same kind of (propositional) knowledge available as philosophy, and further, that they do so either in a way that is in continuity with philosophical inquiry, or even in a way that can be shown to be in direct competition with it. Both of these models offer an alternative to the hitherto more explored ‘dichotomy view’, according to which artistic knowledge is different *in kind* from the knowledge made available by philosophy. Returning to the venerable old struggle between philosophy and art, this suggests that in some works of contemporary art, the division between philosophy and art becomes less stable, lending new force to the idea that art itself is capable of ‘philosophising’ about ethical and political issues.

Thirdly, throughout my case studies, I explore the idea of art as ‘experimental’ and ‘self-reflexive’, as offering thought on what the limits of art and artistic value are. I defend a particular philosophical methodology, one which pays attention not to the ‘best’, ‘most popular’ or ‘most typical’ works of contemporary art, but those that in their radical nature come to present the greatest challenges for philosophy of art. To a large extent, my findings are affirmative of analytic aesthetics, in that I aim to show how concepts from analytic philosophy can shed light on three recent movements in

contemporary art practice, however, I also aim to show how artistic experiments shake up some of the core assumptions in aesthetics.

There are important limitations to the scope of this thesis. Firstly, contemporary art is a huge and varied field. The three points of focus of Part 2—Conceptual Art, the social turn, bio art—might seem less obvious choices than, for example, works of abstract painting, photorealism, video art, performance art or installation art, all of which currently enjoy considerable popularity and recognition. As already mentioned, I do not think that contemporary art should be treated as a distinct kind of art, and my goal here is not to write a comprehensive philosophy of it. The developments I have chosen are those that I think allow us to formulate most clearly the challenges on the subject of artistic and epistemic value. I have chosen to engage with Conceptual Art because it has recently been the subject of philosophical attention,¹⁰ but, more importantly, because some works of Conceptual Art seem to aspire to the condition of philosophy, and therefore ask us to scrutinize that relationship. The social turn of the 1990s and 2000s is a movement that has included many participatory and performance artworks, which in the most radical cases seems indistinct from pedagogy, social work, technology development, or even violent political action. Here, the question of artistic value as value of something *as art* runs against a seemingly paradoxical and intriguing situation. Lastly laboratory-based bio artworks were chosen because here art occupies an unusual relationship to science and puts itself in the role of an ethical critic of scientific progress.

Secondly, though my goal is to engage with art production and discourse in more detail than is customary in philosophy, each of these three movements has its own history and there is much more historical detail and narrative attached to each than I

¹⁰ Goldie and Schellekens, 2007.

could convincingly engage with within a primarily philosophical framework. I do not attempt to give any kind of exhaustive analysis of each movement, but have again engaged with those artists, artworks and art-theoretical texts that are philosophically most challenging. For example, within Conceptual Art, I pay particularly close attention to Adrian Piper rather than to other, perhaps more well-known and commercially successful figures. Some of the artists of the later chapters belong to the fringes of artistic activity rather than to the great galleries of London and New York. In my defence, it is not personal taste but philosophical interest that dictates the selection (though Grayson Perry will remain as an occasional companion).

A further very important limitation of scope is that I have decided to largely side-step inquiries into specifically *visual* forms of thought and knowledge, and the inquiry into the question of how *image* making could count as philosophical thought or contain it. There is, for example, an intriguing idea that artistic choices in perspective, visual field or layering of paint could constitute philosophical thought not just about what is depicted but more broadly;¹¹ or the idea that differing schools of painting could intimate different philosophical systems about the nature of truth and representation.¹² Such ideas are underexplored in analytic philosophy. As my work progressed, however, works of contemporary art that came to occupy my attention were increasingly those that have renegotiated the boundaries between art and non-art; be it philosophy, political action or science. In doing so, many works I study often eschew the visual in favour of concepts, political action or scientific experiment. I focus on the problems arising from that blurring boundaries, and I take the issue of

¹¹ Cf. Grootenboer, 2006; Grootenboer, 2011.

¹² Cf. Bull, 2013.

visual thought and knowledge to bring a distinct set of questions, pursuing which would have me chase too many quarries.

I should also note a certain chronological fluidity in the structure of the thesis. What I present as the first part on philosophy of art, and the second part on studies of contemporary art practices, is in fact the result of much movement between the two. At the outset of my doctoral work, I was familiar with the debates on epistemic value in philosophy, and the idea was, more or less, to apply the philosophical models to contemporary art. However, as I began studying recent art history, which took up the bulk of my first two years of research—work involved first reading broadly in twentieth-century history and theory of art, interviews with artists, archival research at the Adrian Piper Research Archive in Berlin, some red herrings like neuroaesthetics, and then focussed research into the three specific studies—I continually hit against stumbling blocks, which did not quite allow me to apply the models quite as straightforwardly as might be hoped. While some of these deep-running challenges posed by contemporary art are only presented later in the thesis, they have in fact informed the way in which I wrote the first, philosophical, part, even though in the first part I make only cursory references to contemporary art, and deal with the philosophical questions at a much more abstract level. The reason for presenting the material in this order is the hope that the philosophical positions I defend in Part 1 can be made to stand on their own, and that therefore a more convincing case can be made, later, for some of the rather controversial revisions, which contemporary art practices oblige us to consider.

PART I

ARTISTIC AND EPISTEMIC VALUE IN PHILOSOPHY OF ART

Chapter 2 | Artistic Value

1. What is artistic value?

Take an artwork, any artwork, and ask yourself what its value consists in. Two quite different lines of thought might develop here. On the one hand, you might assess the work's value relative to some external standard. For example, you might consider the work's monetary value, the work's personal significance for a particular collector, or the usefulness of the work for illuminating a particular part of history. On the other hand, however, you might don your art-critical hat and ask yourself whether the work is actually any good artistically. Indeed, with works of art, we seem to perform both kinds of assessment often and confidently enough, and, interestingly, there seems to be a pretty clear line separating the two, at least most of the time. We think there is a genuine distinction between a work's artistic and its non-artistic values.

The first generation of analytic aestheticians explored the subject of artistic value mostly *in passim*, in the course of discussing such connected issues as the definition and the function of art, artistic expression, and artistic representation and meaning.¹ Nevertheless, it would not be an overstatement to say that, through their work, the issue of how to demarcate artistic from non-artistic value has become central to the analytic tradition. More recently, the subject has been revived more systematically, under the specific research question of whether there *is* such a thing as artistic value, and, if so, how

¹ Monroe Beardsley has written on the aesthetic value of the arts (Beardsley, 1958; 1982); Arthur Danto has explored the view that artistic value has to do with embodying meaning (Danto, 1981); it is possible to read Richard Wollheim as describing the value of painting as having to do with expression of psychological states (Wollheim, 1987); and Nelson Goodman has questioned the distinction between the value of art and the value of science (Goodman, 1978).

we should characterise it.² The positions that have emerged within this debate can be classified as belonging to two broad camps. Aestheticism is a family of views that assimilate artistic value to aesthetic value.³ Pluralism is the opposing family of views that allow artistic value to comprise a wider variety of values, including epistemic value, ethical value and others.⁴

Here I will focus on one surprising similarity between aestheticism and pluralism. Namely, the two accounts can agree on an underlying principle of how to demarcate between artistic and non-artistic values. This principle states that artistic values are those that a work of art has *as art*: when properly attended to as art, or, equivalently, in virtue of properly artistic features. Though this principle might sound rather trivial at first, it turns out to have been a source of a substantial philosophical programme. I will also argue that attempts to break free of the principle, recently articulated by Dominic Lopes,⁵ in fact collapse back into it. My principal aim here is to contribute to the recent analytic debate on what artistic value is, however, the chapter will also provide the reader with a handy précis of the analytical thinking on the topic, which will be useful when I bring analytic philosophy face to face with contemporary art.

2. Aestheticism, pluralism and indiscernible artworks

Let us set our eyes on the target first. ‘Artistic value’, like any piece of philosophical terminology, becomes rather meaningless the more one repeats it; what is important to keep in mind is the term’s connection to our ordinary practice of evaluation of art. We

² For recent overviews see Kieran, 2005b, Stecker, 2010: Chapter 11, and Matravers, 2013: Chapter 2.

³ Beardsley, 1958; Davies, 1991; Lamarque and Olsen, 1994; Goldman, 1995; Budd, 1996; Zangwill, 1999; Iseminger, 2004; Zangwill, 2007; Scruton, 2009.

⁴ Carroll, 1986; Dickie, 1988; Stecker, 1997; Davies, 2005; Graham, 2005; Kieran, 2005a; Lopes, 2005b: Chapter 5; Gaut, 2007. Various cognitivist accounts of artistic value which I discuss in the next chapter are also usually pluralist.

⁵ Lopes, 2011; Lopes, 2014.

describe artworks as good and bad, and, when comparing, as better and worse. Artistic value is the value taken to be traced by these kinds of observations. For example, ‘This work is good art’ can be taken to be synonymous with ‘This work has high artistic value.’ Similarly, ‘This work is better/worse than that work’ is taken to have the same meaning as ‘the artistic value of this work is higher/lower than the artistic value of that work’. The question ‘What separates artistic from non-artistic value?’ can then be understood as asking what kind of factors contribute to something being good art.⁶

Aestheticism is the view that only one kind of value can contribute to something being good art: namely, aesthetic value. In order for the view to be informative, of course, aesthetic value needs to be conceived of independently of what art is, and this is where accounts within aestheticism take varying paths. The aesthetic value of an object may be described in terms of certain *properties* that some objects possess. Popular candidates include beauty, ugliness and sublimity, though some would extend the list to include elegance, dumpiness, drabness, vividness, and other such ‘minor’ aesthetic categories.⁷ Alternatively, aesthetic value may be described in terms of a distinct kind of *experience*. Kant described the aesthetic experience as jointly disinterested and pleasurable; and various philosophers in the Kantian line of succession have elaborated ‘disinterested’ to mean an experience enjoyed for its own sake.⁸ In either case, aesthetic value is taken to be a value *sui generis*, a distinct and special feature of our world, and making art is taken to aim at realising this value.

⁶ I take this to be compatible with the useful formulation offered by Louise Hanson, whereby artistic value is ‘the thing that by definition, artworks have just to the extent that they are good art.’ (Hanson, 2013: 502) Cf. Beardsley, 1958: 500.

⁷ Sibley, 1959. For a return to the simpler dyad of beauty/ugliness see Zangwill, 2001: 9-42. Ngai, 2012 presents an interesting twist on this tradition, analysing contemporary aesthetic categories ‘cute’, ‘zany’ and ‘interesting’ as indicative of consumption patterns in late capitalism.

⁸ Scruton, 1974: 143-144, 148; Budd, 1996; Iseminger, 2004.

For a reader less familiar with analytic discourse it might be helpful to point out that most analytic philosophers are happy to go with the view that being good art, much of the time, has to do with having aesthetic value.⁹ The friction with aestheticism arises not because the concept of the aesthetic, and its attendant concepts such as ‘beauty’ and ‘disinterested pleasure’, would be perceived as outdated, fictitious, or politically naïve, but rather because of the rather bold claim that aesthetic value is the *only* properly artistic value. Pluralists about artistic value hold that there are other values that count as artistic too: for example, we may learn through artworks (epistemic value); artworks may endorse or suggest a more moral or a more just state of affairs (ethical and political value); artworks may improve our psychological well-being (therapeutic value); they may be good at articulating certain psychological states (expressive value); perhaps they even bring us closer to God (religious value) and so on. Pluralist accounts vary in terms of which ones of these values they endorse—epistemic and ethical value are the most discussed on the list.¹⁰ In addition, pluralists do not claim that *all* good works of art realise all of these values. They will usually cite specific cases; for example, often novels are seen as epistemically valuable, some paintings as good at expressing emotion and so on.

It is important to note that these two main families of views do not neatly cover all the available logical space. According to aestheticism, only aesthetic value contributes to some work being good art; so all good artworks are aesthetically valuable. According to pluralism, many other values can equally contribute to a work being good art; so good artworks can realise various values. Positions that tend to go unoccupied are (i) the

⁹ Dickie, 1964 is an important exception.

¹⁰ See footnote 4. Values that artworks have in relation to other artworks—such as ‘originality’—are sometimes taken to be among those defended by pluralism. I take this to be a separate issue; see section 5.

position that all good artworks realise some value *other* than aesthetic value¹¹ and (ii) an error theory that would say good works of art realise no value at all. Given the positions that are occupied, the question at hand is how we demarcate between the values that contribute to something being good art, and those that do not.

I want to argue that aestheticism and pluralism can, should and in fact often do agree on a principle for demarcation, even if, when faced with the actual terrain, each position will draw the border differently. This principle has become somewhat obscured within the intricacies of the extant debates, but I propose we go straight into the fray, and see whether we can establish points of continuity. So let me begin by considering one point of conflict between aestheticism and pluralism, a particularly famous argument that is often employed by pluralists against aestheticism.

The argument is Arthur Danto's argument from indiscernibles.¹² Danto's most well-known example is Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*, but let us stick to our own example. Imagine, therefore, that Grayson Perry's ceramic jug *A Family Tradition* (Figure 4) has an indiscernible, non-art twin. At around the time of Perry's exhibition and unbeknownst to the artist, the IKEA furniture store produces a traditional-looking jug within its new ceramics line. The designers have combined the traditional oak leaf motif with some contemporary airplane imagery, and—perhaps a poor choice—have included some geometrical acorns that look a bit like coffins. As bad luck would have it, the 'traditional looking jug *Sven*' looks to the smallest detail exactly like Perry's creation. Since the two look the same, they must have the same aesthetic value. And yet Perry's thoughtful work and IKEA's postmodern mass-produced bauble, one might want to say, do not have the

¹¹ Possible exceptions are Goodman, 1978 and Young, 2001, who may be taken to argue that all good art realises epistemic value.

¹² Danto, 1964: 574-577.

same *artistic* value. Aestheticism, therefore, is forced on the defensive: aesthetic value cannot fully explain a work's artistic success.

The argument is still much discussed; here it is, for example, formally presented in a recent paper on artistic value by Dominic Lopes:¹³

1. If the value of a work of art is wholly aesthetic, then its [artistic] value supervenes on its perceptible features.
2. If the [artistic] value of a work supervenes on its perceptible features, then no work differs in [artistic] value from an indiscernible twin.
3. Some works differ in [artistic] value from indiscernible twins.
4. So the [artistic] value of a work of art is not wholly aesthetic.
5. So works of art bear artistic value distinct from aesthetic value.

Lopes omits 'artistic' from 1-4. However, as the conclusion (5) mentions artistic value, this must be the value we are talking about in 1-4. In any case, for our purposes, let the argument stand as an argument about artistic value.

In response to the argument, much of the debate has focussed on whether we can find some way to distinguish between the value of the artwork and the value of the indiscernible 'mere object'. The defenders of aestheticism have often done so by retreating from a more radical, *formalist* version of aestheticism.¹⁴ Radical formalism claims that all aesthetic value supervenes on perceptible features alone; for example, as having to do with the look and feel of the said pot, and the relations between the shapes on it. In that case, the aesthetic value of the artwork and the indiscernible twin must indeed be the same. However, one could also claim that the aesthetic value often depends on some *non-perceptual* features of a work, such as the viewer's background knowledge, the context of the work's display and the work's representational properties. In the case of *A Family Tradition*, we are told the planes are World War II bombers and that the strange-looking acorns definitely are coffins; we are told this alludes to Perry's childhood

¹³ Lopes, 2011: 519.

¹⁴ See non-formalist aestheticism defended, e.g., by Goldman, 1990. On the other hand, a rare return to formalism is argued for by Zangwill, 1999; Zangwill, 2000.

war games; and the work is to be appreciated in the specific context of the British Museum's collection of earlier craft objects. These considerations open up new ways of perceiving the artwork; they make for a particular, involved, and in any case *different* aesthetic experience than that offered by the department store product. With regards to the formal presentation of the argument, this is to deny (1): the perceptually indiscernible objects *A Family Tradition* and *Sven* do not give rise to the same aesthetic experience, because they differ in imperceptible features.¹⁵

However, there is also a subtly different way of responding to the argument, which is perhaps obscured by Lopes' way of formalising the problem, and which is less often mentioned in debates about indiscernibles. This option seems available to the formalist and non-formalist versions of aestheticism alike. Let us *grant* that (1) is true: however aesthetically valuable the artwork, the indiscernible counterpart can be no less so. Even if one assumes that to be the case, one could still block the move to the conclusion that the two works have the same *artistic* value, if one could restrict the *scope* of the phenomena that artistic value applies to. This would be to deny (2): even if *aesthetic* value supervenes on perceptible features, indiscernibility does not imply equal *artistic* value, because, *simply*, artistic value only applies to artworks. The twin is not an artwork, so no artistic value there. An adherent of aestheticism *might well grant* that there are all kinds of things out there in the world which realise exactly the same value as good artworks—impressive natural objects like *pietre paesine*, exceptionally interesting mass-produced objects like *Sven*—but these simply do not concern a theory of *artistic* value.

The argument from indiscernibles is in this case not resisted head-on, but by restricting the scope of the theory. The project of identifying artistic value is taken to be

¹⁵ This way of defusing the argument seems to be pursued in: Lopes, 2011: 519; Stecker, 2012: 356-357; Shelley, 2013: §2.1; Lopes, 2014: 103.

clarifying a specific art appreciatory practice, rather than a study of what value separates artworks against all other objects.¹⁶ This might seem like a simple enough move (denying 2 instead of 1), however, this way of answering the argument implies an importantly different understanding of the question ‘what is artistic value?’ The question is not taken to ask ‘what *unique* value is realised by artworks?’, but, ‘*given* what artworks are and how we appreciate them: when we assess them as good or bad, what is the value that they realise?’ If this way of addressing the argument from indiscernibles seems less explored in the literature, it is perhaps because the argument from indiscernibles sometimes runs several problems at once, including the issues of identity (what makes something an artwork?) and originality (what is it that accounts for artistic inferiority of indiscernible copy-cat artworks?). I will deal with some of these alternative ways of posing the problem in Section 5. However, before I do so, I want to point out another often overlooked feature of the argument from indiscernibles. Namely, when the argument is used as an argument about artistic value, it seems that an analogous argument applies to pluralism as the argument from indiscernibles does to aestheticism.

A pluralist might argue that the artistic value of *A Family Tradition* consists not only in its aesthetic value, but in its epistemic value as well. The work, based as it is on Perry’s childhood games, teaches us something valuable about how children perceive politics; and this epistemic value, according to a pluralist, is something over and above any aesthetically valuable experience the work may provide. Now, one might well construct the counter-example so that *Sven* the jug also teaches us something valuable about how children perceive politics. Imagine that the designers at IKEA asked some local children to help design their new line of ceramics; as it happens, this jug’s design came from a

¹⁶ This approach seems to be implied by Lamarque’s distinction between ‘work’ and ‘object’ (Lamarque, 2010c: 66), and also by Hanson, 2013: 498-499.

Yugoslav child refugee, many of whom immigrated to Sweden in the 1990s. What the designers thought were just cute hexagons were in fact coffins; and by the time they noticed the true nature of the design, *Sven* the jug is already being shipped to customers. A case can be made, then, that here is a non-artwork which is just as epistemically valuable as the artwork, and also offers valuable insights into how children perceive politics. If that is so, then the putative epistemic value of Perry's *A Family Tradition* cannot fully explain the work's artistic value.

Like the aestheticist, the pluralist has two ways of responding to the problem. The pluralist can resist the conclusion head-on by trying to argue that the two cases are actually distinct in virtue of the *value realised*. Perhaps, once we consider the history of the work, the environmental factors, the setting of the exhibition etc., the insight offered by Perry's work is in some way different or better than that offered by *Sven*. However, again there also seems to be a quicker way of disabling the counter-example. When we ask what makes *A Family Tradition* a good artwork, we can take this to already restrict the scope of our inquiry. We already recognize *A Family Tradition* as an artwork, and have already begun to engage with its motifs, setting, meaning and appearance in a way that befits that status. The question is then asked in relation to this practice and the ensuing judgement of the artwork's quality, and is aimed at figuring out what underlies this judgement. Whether some IKEA product, or anything else, could also realise similar kinds of insight lies quite outside the scope of the investigation.

Therefore, the argument from indiscernibles is potentially misleading when introduced into debates about artistic value. The question whether aesthetic value supervenes on perceptible properties is certainly an independently interesting question, however, when it comes to the further issue of *artistic value*, it is not only aestheticism, but any substantial theory of artistic value that is vulnerable to an analogous type of

argument, of which the argument from indiscernibles is but one version. This will be true as long as one can think of some example, where the putative artistic value (aesthetic, epistemic, ethical, some plurality thereof...) can be shown to inhere in some relevantly similar non-artwork object. And whenever this problem arises, there are two strategies for disabling it. The first involves a head-on dismissal of the counter-example, by trying to show that there is nevertheless something more or differently valuable about the artwork than there is about the non-art counterpart. The head-on reply makes more sense if one wants to *define* art in terms of some unique value that art objects have and non-art objects do not. Indeed the question of defining art has often, more or less helpfully, been conjoined with the question of what value art provides.¹⁷ The second strategy, however, does not try to defuse the counter-example directly, but restricts the scope of the investigation to exclude it. The scope is our specific engagement with artworks, and the values we are trying to clarify are those that underlie that engagement. Examples that fall outside of that scope—however similar the values they realise—are not of interest here. The second reply makes more sense if one already proceeds with a sense of what art is, and what it is to critically engage with it as art.

Each way of answering the problem then seems to point to a differently oriented research project: defining art by means of a special kind of value it has vis-à-vis other things, *or* an investigation into the values realised through an already familiar practice of appreciating art as art. These two approaches have been implicit in debates on artistic value, but since the revival of the interest in the question of artistic value, they have not been sufficiently distinguished,¹⁸ even though, one might think, the challenges faced by each approach will be quite different. It is the second approach I want to investigate

¹⁷ Cf. Carroll, 2000b: 14. Abell, 2012: 671ff.

¹⁸ E.g. in Lopes, 2011.

further. At an exhibition like Grayson Perry's, one is quite happy to engage with *A Family Tradition* and to dispute about whether or not it is good art; what we want to know on the philosophical level, though, is *in virtue of what* this work either is good art or not. The question of how we should define art, it seems, will only distract us. Nevertheless, an initial problem for the second approach is to restrict the scope successfully. If we do not want to commit ourselves to some full-blown definition of what art is, what exactly do we mean when we say that artistic value is the value artworks have when attended to as art?

3. Value as art and the philosophical programme

I now want to argue that the project of demarcating artistic value from non-artistic value by means of attending to artworks 'as art' has in fact been shared across a variety of positions within analytic philosophy of art, aestheticist and pluralist alike. This has largely been a matter of a shared *methodology* of attending to art. 'Attention to art as art' has on the whole been defined *ostensively*: not by giving necessary and sufficient conditions, but by pointing to examples and by exemplifying that attention through practice. By no means the only approach around, the presence of this shared method in varied corners of the debate is rather striking. A comprehensive survey of all the relevant positions is beyond the scope of this chapter; instead, I will consider as representative two adherents of pluralism and two of aestheticism.

The idea of evaluating art *as art* tended to develop independently of the argument from indiscernibles, so I will, for now, set that problem aside. I will also change the example—many of the philosophers I will discuss draw their examples from more traditional works, so problems might get invited too early if we persist with Grayson Perry. Instead, I will illustrate different theories of artistic value with a painting, *Trace*

(1993-94) by Jenny Saville (Figure 5). How would different philosophers assess this work's artistic value?

Consider first pluralists about artistic value: philosophers who argue that there are several kinds of artistic value other than artistic. Robert Stecker is a pluralist who has proposed one interesting principle for separating artistic from non-artistic values. According to Stecker, 'a valuable feature of a work is part of the work's artistic value if the work's possession of the value can only properly be grasped by understanding the work.'¹⁹ To illustrate Stecker's claim, consider two instances of value that *Trace* arguably possesses: it effectively expresses a certain peculiarly modern anxiety attached to the naked body, and it is probably very expensive, since Saville's works routinely sell in excess of £1m. In order to grasp the painting's achievement in expressing a certain state of mind about a naked body, we need to try to understand the painting itself. We will need to look at what scene is represented, what symbolism is employed, how colour is arranged and manipulated; and we will need to think about *how* all of this makes us think and feel about the attitude in question.²⁰ However, one needs no such engagement with the painting itself in order to assess how well a version of *Trace* might sell at an auction; a knowledge of market trends may be sufficient. According to the test, then, the work's expressiveness counts towards the work's artistic value, whereas its expensiveness does not.

I am not so much interested in whether Stecker's demarcation principle can be challenged through counter-examples, but rather in identifying his overall strategy. An

¹⁹ Stecker, 2010: 240.

²⁰ Appreciative understanding is said to involve, *inter alia*, 'what sort of exploration of its subject matter [the work] provides', 'what it requires its audience to imagine and to feel', and, in the case of a novel, how it succeeds in doing so '*in virtue of its literary properties such as vivid description*' (Stecker, 2012: 357; original emphasis). I have here replaced such 'literary' properties with more 'painterly' properties, to match the example of *Trace*. Compare Stecker's description of de Kooning's *Untitled III*. (Stecker, 2010: 221)

understanding of a work of art, we are told, implies a certain interpretative activity.²¹ There are, of course, substantial philosophical disputes attached to what exactly the standards for successful interpretation are; however—and this is crucial—Stecker does not take himself to be relying on any particular theory of interpretation.²² He is also not relying on any particular theory of what exactly art is.²³ He seems to be, at least in the context of the debate on artistic value, employing the concept of ‘understanding art’ in a much more theoretically innocent, ostensive manner. Stecker is *pointing us* towards some familiar cultural activity in which we engage when we try to understand artworks. When we attend to artworks as art, rather than when we attend to them as investment opportunities, we try to understand art by engaging in some sort of interpretative exercise, *a bit like this*. Stecker’s test of artistic value is best understood not as making some substantial theoretical point, but as aligned with the second strategy I outlined in response to the argument from indiscernibles: it points us to a rich sense, a kind of rule of thumb, of how we attend to artworks as art. This leads the way for the substantial theoretical difficulty Stecker engages with as a pluralist: arguing against the thesis that all that properly follows from attending to art in this way is aesthetically valuable experience, and for the thesis that some other values, such as expressive value of the painting, might also follow.²⁴

A somewhat different way of distinguishing between artistic and non-artistic values is offered by Berys Gaut who, like Stecker, would accept that art realises a plurality of values (in particular, Gaut has defended accounts of epistemic and ethical values in the

²¹ Stecker, 2010: 10; Stecker, 2012: 357.

²² ‘I do not want to confine the relevant sense of understanding to one view about interpretation.’ (Stecker, 2012: 357; cf. Stecker, 2003: 36-37). Elsewhere, Stecker has defended actual intentionalism as a theory of interpretation (*ibid.*; Stecker, 2010: 144-161).

²³ Stecker’s preferred theory, historical functionalism (Stecker, 1997), makes no appearance in his discussion of value. He also explicitly says a few examples of artistic value, rather than a definition, are sufficient (Stecker, 2012: 357).

²⁴ Stecker, 2010: 221ff.

arts).²⁵ Instead of deriving artistic value from understanding of art, however, Gaut aligns artistic value, which he also calls ‘value *qua* art’, with a set of properties familiar from *art critical* discourse: properties like dainty, dumpy, tightly knit, unified, serene, sombre, dynamic, tragic, etc. These are familiar from Frank Sibley’s earlier examination of terms used by art critics to evaluate art. But while Sibley intended these to show that there are many *aesthetic* properties not covered by the beautiful-ugly dyad, Gaut takes them to be indicative of not just narrowly aesthetic but more broadly artistic, ‘*qua* art’, value.²⁶ Therefore, though Gaut proposes no explicit demarcation principle for artistic value, his idea is that artistic value is the value tracked by the evaluative terms of the art-critical discourse.²⁷ For example, when we appraise Saville’s painting art critically, we might be moved to describe it as ‘strong’, ‘tense’ or ‘clinical.’ It is values traced by that vocabulary that are properly artistic.

Again, I wish to draw attention to Gaut’s strategy here, rather than consider whether there may be counter-examples. Gaut wants to track artistic value, or, in his terminology, value *qua* art. The ‘*qua*’ relation implies that the category of art allows us to identify which features of a work we should attend to, in order to establish its artistic value. However, the job of doing so is here outsourced to the art-critical practice rather than some *a priori* philosophical principle. Observing *Trace*, for example, the critic might attend to Saville’s choices in the way she presents the figure—the glaring light that highlights the mid-section of the body; the awkward half-forward bend; the way the figure’s inner life is suggested primarily in the hands, which are more articulated and emphasised in colour, and which turn outward, as if pushing the viewer away—in order to

²⁵ Gaut, 1998; Gaut, 2003; Gaut, 2006; Gaut, 2007.

²⁶ Sibley, 1959; Gaut, 2007: 26-27; 34-37. Gaut’s terminology can be somewhat unhelpful here, since he takes ‘value *qua* art’ to be interchangeable with ‘(wide) aesthetic value’.

²⁷ ‘Putting together these thoughts, we have the hypothesis that (wide) aesthetic terms are terms that are evaluative of art *qua* art.’ (Gaut, 2007: 34)

arrive at the final characterisation of the work as, for example, ‘tense.’ It is the philosopher’s job to establish what kind of value is being tracked by this process. For example, one might claim the work is described as ‘tense’ because it *teaches* us something about the unpleasant, domineering male gaze to which (women’s) bodies are routinely subjected or merely because it *communicates* that gaze in a new or interesting way.²⁸ However, *which* features of the work it is relevant to attend to—for example, the painting’s portrayal of the inner life of the figure rather than the price of the painting—is something Gaut seems to take as established by art-critical practice; and, indeed, it is exemplified by Gaut’s own critical attention to the artworks he considers.²⁹ Like Stecker’s focus on interpretation and understanding of artworks, Gaut’s approach grounds the artistic value of a work not in a theoretical definition of art³⁰ or on an *a priori* definition of what it is to attend to art as (*qua*) art. Gaut points us towards what he takes to be the familiar practice of art criticism, and exemplifies this practice by his own attention to artworks.

Gaut explicitly distances his account from that of ‘aestheticists’ like Monroe Beardsley,³¹ however, his reliance³² on art criticism to establish value ‘*qua* art’ has strong echoes of Beardsley’s project in his *Aesthetics*.³² Subtitled ‘Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism’, Beardsley’s work proceeds through a systematic, close art-critical attention to works of visual art, literature and music. In the case of the visual arts, Beardsley analyses pictures in terms of, *inter alia*, the use of colour, line and shape, how visual mass and

²⁸ *ibid.*: 136.

²⁹ Compare my description of *Trace* to Gaut’s analysis of several versions of the *Bath of Bathsheba* from Rembrandt’s workshop, where features attended to include how the sitter’s inner life is depicted in each case, and how that is achieved through painterly skill. (*ibid.*: 87-88). See also Gaut’s discussion of art criticism (*ibid.*: 95ff) and his ‘critical vocabulary’ argument (*ibid.*: 166f; 170n10).

³⁰ Gaut’s cluster theory of art (Gaut, 2000) makes no appearance in qualifying what it is to attend to art *qua* art.

³¹ Gaut, 2007: 31ff.

³² Beardsley, 1958.

depth are represented, how represented objects relate to one another on the picture plane and how they relate to the picture's edge, the structure and texture of the visual design, composition, focus, balance and harmony.³³ Beardsley's core thesis is that all of these critical appraisals are ultimately reducible to the aesthetic principles of unity, complexity and intensity; the ultimate value realised by artworks is the aesthetic value inherent in these principles.³⁴ This is quite different from the conclusions reached by pluralists. However, let us consider the similarities.

An analysis of *Trace* along Beardsley's lines might establish that the painting is highly aesthetically unified: there is a clear focus on the middle of the back, which is central to the painting and lightest in colour; there is a balance between the trace left in the skin by the bra and the trace left in the skin by the underpants; the two darker hands seem to ground the composition and seem to stop it from spilling out of the canvas; there is a harmonized tonality present throughout the painting, as the use of complementary orange-pinks and teals is muted and steady throughout.³⁵ To apply Beardsley's categories: aesthetically, *Trace* seems to be highly unified and intense; though it is arguably not as complex as Saville's other works, which include more figures and more segmented pictorial planes. The conclusion that the painting's aesthetic value is all that is artistically good about it would be disputed by Stecker and Gaut. However, I want to suggest that, barring perhaps some issues of emphasis, the method practised by Beardsley seems quite in line with Stecker's and Gaut's recommendation of art interpretation and art criticism. The features attended to by Beardsley (focus, colours, balance...) do not follow from

³³ *ibid.*: 168-173; 192-196; 205-209.

³⁴ *ibid.*: see especially Chapters IV; XI.

³⁵ Cf. 'The *Las Meninas* of Velázquez [...] exhibits many of the unifying features that have been reviewed above: a focus in the figure of the Infanta Margareta, serial orders among the other figures, balance, clearly defined planes of space, a harmonized tonality due to controlled value-intensity relations throughout.' (*ibid.*: 196).

some *a priori* definition of art,³⁶ but from Beardsley's practical familiarity with a particular art critical tradition of looking at art. He seems to expect that his audience will recognize what he is doing as attention to art *as art*; rather than attention to some object among many, which might include financial or historical considerations.

As the fourth and final example, consider Malcolm Budd's suggestion that artistic value—which he refers to as the value of a work of art *as art*—is the intrinsic value of the experience, which the artwork properly affords.³⁷ Beardsley's notion of aesthetic value relies on three formalist principles; by contrast Budd's notion of intrinsically valuable experience is more inclusive and includes the process of apprehending symbolism and meaning in a work. In *Trace*, for example, one might notice a morbid similarity between the way that the traces of the bra and knickers cut up the body in front of us, and, on the other hand, the way in which pictures of cattle are often divided up by similar lines in order to indicate what cut of meat one is getting on the plate. The slight turn of the hands now receives a more pained aspect of resisting literal violence; the unpalatable pink comes to signify the sense in which the body is mere flesh. The whole painting may now appear different to us, indicating not just a female body subjugated to an intruding male gaze, but a broader, disturbing sense in which that gaze occasions harm. On Budd's account, this *whole contemplative experience* would count as part of the kind of intrinsically valuable experience that art offers.

Unlike the pluralists, Budd would deny that the truth or usefulness of what the painting might communicate about the male gaze is part of its artistic value; the value inheres in the quality of the interpretative experience as such.³⁸ However, Budd's position

³⁶ Indeed, Beardsley refused to define art (*ibid.*: 59) until much later (Beardsley, 1982: 299).

³⁷ Budd, 1996: 1-8. Budd does not use the term 'aesthetic experience', but if we understand aesthetic experience as an experience valued for its own sake (as many do), he may rightly be counted among adherents of aestheticism. For a recent account of artistic value following Budd's, see Matravers, 2013: 31-49.

³⁸ Budd, 1996: 13-16.

is in one respect strikingly similar especially to Stecker's insistence that artistic values are only those that follow from the features identified through a proper understanding of an artwork. Interestingly, Budd allows for more than one correct way of understanding the work, but clearly there are limits: 'only an experience in which the work is understood is relevant to the work's artistic value'.³⁹ We are told that understanding a work demands a certain way of interacting with it, such as reading or looking, but for more than that, it seems, we are left to our own intuitions.⁴⁰ Like Stecker, Gaut and indeed Beardsley, Budd anchors artistic value in the intuitive, interpretative process of appreciating the work as a work of art, and explicitly rejects the possibility of deriving attention to art *as art* from some *a priori* definition of art.⁴¹ He relies instead on a kind of *a posteriori* exploration based on his own critical understanding of various art works.⁴²

Can we discern a pattern common to these four approaches? The goal of all four authors is to establish what value artistic value consists in: a kind of aesthetic value, adequately described, or perhaps a plurality including, for example, epistemic, ethical or expressive values. To achieve this aim they need to attend to art in an appropriate way, which means attending to certain features of artworks to the exclusions of others. In the example of *Trace*, we did not attend to features like its weight, price, provenance or what the painting looks like upside down; we rather attended to features like its formal balance and focus, 'thick' artistic properties like being sombre or oppressive, the theme and subject matter of the painting, its narrative structure, representational properties like how emotions are portrayed, and medium-specific features like how colour is used. Crucially, in all four cases, attending to *these* features is not a matter of having an *a priori*

³⁹ *ibid.*: 41-43.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*: 4.

⁴¹ *ibid.*: 3.

⁴² It is interesting that this similarity is not noted, or perhaps not felt to be important, in Stecker's criticism of Budd (Stecker, 2010: 226-233).

blueprint—it is not reliant on a theoretical definition of art—but is rather a matter of participating in what is recognized as a shared, familiar practice of art appreciation. Therefore, what it is to attend to art as art seems to be defined not through intension (in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions) but through ostension (by examples): either by pointing to some familiar phenomenon like art criticism or art interpretation; or by pointing to examples of properly artistic features, that are intuitively felt to be such.⁴³

To articulate this more precisely, I would like to suggest that aestheticism and pluralism employ the same methodological principle for demarcating artistic from non-artistic value. The principle states that artistic values are the values work has *as art*: only those values that a work of art makes available *when properly attended to as art*, or, equivalently, only the values a work of art makes available in virtue of its *properly artistic features*. Identifying ‘attention to art as art’ and ‘properly artistic features’ is a matter of an ostensive rather than a conceptual definition. Artistic values are realised through →*this* kind of attention and through →*these* kinds of features; and this is where the analysis stops. I will refer to this principle as the ‘value as art methodological principle.’

If this common starting point has not been emphasised and articulated in the literature, this is for at least two reasons. The first is that it tends to be implicit in the shared methodology: philosophers mostly rely on their intuitive sense of what counts as proper attention to artworks; they are less concerned to defend that mode of attention, save by pointing out continuity with ordinary cases of art criticism and understanding. The second reason is that this methodological principle is really just a starting point. The bulk of philosophical disagreement is reserved for the question *which values* are candidates for

⁴³ NB. Ostensive definition is weaker than a definition by a cluster of non-essential properties (which is still an intensional definition). Though we give *examples* of attending to art as art, there is no suggestion that some combination of these is essential to that mode of attention.

artistic value. Is Beardsley's account of aesthetic value too narrow, or Budd's too broad? Can Stecker's and Gaut's claims that art gives us knowledge withstand rigorous standards for justification that the concept of knowledge implies? In what cases exactly does a work's ethical value contribute to its overall artistic value? I have only looked at four accounts of artistic value here, but it would seem that the value as art methodological principle is implicit or taken as a starting point in much analytical writing that deals with such questions.⁴⁴ It is precisely because of a shared sense of what it is to attend to art as art, that such substantial research programmes seem possible.

I will consider some objections to my way of formulating the shared methodology in section 5. Having spent some time to formulate it, however, I can now put the principle itself under some critical pressure. One may want to ask for more detail about exactly what kind of practice of art appreciation is being pointed to in the ostensive definition, and, in particular, one may doubt that a sufficiently unified appreciative practice exists across the arts. Such a critique of the methodological consensus has been recently presented by Dominic Lopes. It is to this critique, and to Lopes' alternative suggestion, that I now turn.

4. Lopes' buck-passing theory of artistic value

In his recent book, Dominic Lopes challenges the view that artistic value is value a work has as art.⁴⁵ He attributes the view that artistic value is value '*qua art*' chiefly to Berys Gaut and Noël Carroll, though Lopes observes that the view seems quite widespread.

Lopes complains that '*qua art*' is an adverbial phrase that implies little more than 'artistic

⁴⁴ See, for example, references to artistic value, value as/qua art, value in virtue of what makes something a work of art, value works of art have non-accidentally or non-incidentally, value that follows from engagement with works *as art*, or value in virtue of artistic features in: Carroll, 1986; Carroll, 1996; Freeland, 1997; Gaut, 1998; Kieran, 2005b; Harcourt, 2010; John, 2013.

⁴⁵ Lopes, 2014: Chapter 5; esp. pp. 90-100.

value'; so, before he attacks it, he gives it two glosses that would give it a bit more substance. The first is to understand value *qua* art as a value 'a work appears to have when and only when it is correctly appreciated in the category of art, comprising all and only works of art.'⁴⁶ The evaluation of a work *qua* art, on this conception, has to do with comparative appraisal in the relevant comparative class of other art. The second suggestion is to understand value *qua* art as 'value of the work as the product of an artistic achievement.'⁴⁷ To appraise a work *qua* art is to appraise it as an achievement of an artistic kind of activity, rather than, say, as an achievement of financial planning.

Lopes' protest against both accounts is the same: 'art' is too broad a category to tell us either what comparison class we are evaluating the work within, or to tell us against what standards we are evaluating something as an achievement. To appreciate a Mozart sonata as vivacious, we must appreciate it within the comparison class of other sonatas, not within a class that includes Goethe's *Faust* and Rodin's *The Kiss*. Going along with this analysis, the achievement in Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* consists, according to Lopes, in the way the painterly surface is marked up in order to create an illusion of sunflowers in front of us.⁴⁸ We can speak of its *painterly* achievement, but it is hard to see what its 'artistic' achievement is, apart from that. For an account of artistic value to be informative, then, the buck must get passed, in Lopes' phrase, from the category '*qua* art' to some more specific art kind.

How is this related to the value as art methodological principle I have elaborated above? Lopes is quite correct in his complaint that the phrase '*qua* art' rarely receives a more detailed explanation. However, a charitable interpretation should take stock precisely of the fact that philosophers tend to use such phrases without backing them up

⁴⁶ *ibid.*: 94. This elaboration is inspired by Walton, 1970.

⁴⁷ Lopes, 2014: 97. This elaboration is inspired by Wollheim, 1987; Currie, 1988; Davies, 2004.

⁴⁸ Lopes, 2014: 98.

with a fully worked out theory. As I have argued, a plausible interpretation is to say that ‘*qua art*’ (or ‘*as art*’ in my terminology) is that this signifies a familiar way of attending to art. This ostensive way of defining ‘as art’ implies neither of the two elaborations offered by Lopes.

Firstly, to point to a particular kind of attention is not to say that this attention is reducible to one kind of judgement. Consider the way a gardener attends to her garden; this might imply a variety of quite diverse procedures, such as looking for disease or keeping track of the seasons. Similarly, when Gaut, or any of the other theorists, attend to artworks as art, they make a much wider variety of judgements than *just* comparative judgements or judgements of achievement. One may compare *Trace* to other paintings and one may assess Saville’s painterly achievement, but there is clearly much more and much less that one can do, such as construct a narrative around the gesture in the figure’s outwardly turned hands.

Secondly, the claim that there exists a particular kind of attention is distinct from the claim that there is *one category* which structures that attention. A gardener attends to the plants in a different way than a child playing hide and seek, but it is not clear that she treats her tulips and her turnips under some singular category. The ostensive definition of attention to art *as art* implies a similar flexibility. Attention to art as art might well *also* include bringing artworks under more specific categories, as Lopes would want us to do.

Lopes’ two elaborations of ‘value *qua art*’, then, miss the mark. However, Lopes seems to attack the ostensive approach directly when he mentions the ‘anti-theoretical’ option that we ‘read off’ value as art from our art critical practices. He dismisses this option swiftly:

The trouble is that a theory that distinguishes evaluations of art as art from other evaluations is a prerequisite for, and so cannot be used to motivate, a distinction

between bits of discourse made up of “art critical evaluations” from bits of discourse made up of other kinds of evaluation.⁴⁹

This is patently false. A theory is no *practical* prerequisite for making the distinction between art-critical and, for example, financial evaluations in particular cases. It is true that defining attention to art as art by pointing to examples does not provide us with sufficient and necessary criteria for telling the two kinds of discourse apart; but all that is needed is that we agree there is some familiar practice we can point to. Nevertheless, we may well sympathise with Lopes’ frustration here. If one expected an *a priori* set of guidelines for evaluating art as art, simply pointing to an art critical practice and saying ‘this is it’ leaves something to be desired. Can Lopes’ positive account do better on this score?

Here we reach something of a predicament since Lopes’ view of artistic value is not directly articulated, but is based on his buck-passing theory of what art is. He describes his preferred, buck-passing theory of artistic value as:

V is an artistic value of an art work = V is a value of the work as a K , where K is one of the arts⁵⁰

K here stands for ‘kind’ here; and Lopes provides some examples of the kinds that are among the arts: painting, literature, music and cinema. So, it seems to follow from the above definition that the artistic value of, for example, *Trace* is just its artistic value as a painting. How does this help us where the received view of artistic value allegedly failed?

To answer that question we would need a substantial theory of what painting is. While Lopes provides no theory of the specific arts here, he does give us a framework within which such theories may be formulated:

⁴⁹ *ibid.*: 92.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*: 103.

X is a work of *K*, where *K* is an art = *x* is a work in medium profile *M*, where *M* is an appreciative kind, and *x* is a product of *M*-centred appreciative practice, *P*...⁵¹

Lopes is here arguing for what he takes to be the minority position, namely, the view that the arts are distinguishable from one another in virtue of a particular *medium profile*, and that appreciation of the arts is centred around that. A medium profile is in turn informally defined as a particular set of resources and techniques.⁵² Lopes takes it to be an empirical matter as to which medium profile defines each one of the arts, and offers no examples of what a *full* description of a medium profile would look like.⁵³ However, let us say, for the sake of the argument, that *M* for figurative oil painting has something to do with the resource of applying paint to canvas and the technique of creating the image of some depicted content in that surface.⁵⁴ How does that help us see what is good about *Trace* as a painting?

This will depend on how restrictive we take Lopes' focus on the medium profile *M* to be. On the one hand, Lopes insists on the importance of the *medium* profile: the buck gets passed to 'the arts' as individuated by their medium profiles, and not to some 'other art kind', such as genre, style, tradition or oeuvre.⁵⁵ We could then take the qualification of the appreciative practice *P* as '*M*-centered' to mean that our appreciation of a painting *as a painting* will always take medium-specific considerations as its starting point.

This would indeed provide a more detailed set of guidelines for approaching artworks than the admittedly more vague suggestion to attend to artistically specific features.

Coupled with Lopes' focus on comparison class and standards of achievement, we could

⁵¹ *ibid.*: 161.

⁵² *ibid.*: 133ff.

⁵³ Cf. *Ibid.*: 139-142.

⁵⁴ Cf.: 'Accordingly, an achievement in painting is one realized by marking up a surface to support seeing-in.' [...] 'The value of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* as a painting is its value as an achievement of painting—an achievement in handling of the materials of painting to carry meaning.' (*ibid.*: 98)

⁵⁵ *ibid.*: 133. Cf. Lopes, 2005b: Chapter 3.

take this to suggest that appreciation of *Trace as a painting* should start out either by considering the work in the comparison class of other paintings, or by considering the work's achievement with regards to painterly techniques and resources.⁵⁶ Once Lopes' account is fleshed out in this way, however, the question emerges: why *should* we start here; why should we, for example, start with or prioritise specifically painterly features? It seems equally plausible to attend to some other feature of *Trace*—such as subject matter, who the sitter might be, any implied narrative content, the symbolism, and so forth—which the work might share with works of sculpture, literature, film or music. Indeed, it would seem quite possible to compare *Trace* (1993) to other works of that time with a similar subject matter—perhaps to works of sculpture or installation by Saville's fellow Young British Artists, or perhaps to roughly contemporaneous works of in-yer-face theatre, such as Sarah Kane's and Mark Ravenhill's works, which explore themes of the body and de-personalised sexuality in similarly stark terms.

The other possibility would be to understand Lopes as arguing for a less restrictive sense of what *P* is: an appreciative practice associated with one of the arts, like painting, but which does not necessarily take medium-specific considerations as a starting point. This version seems to predominate later in Lopes' book, where Lopes cites as an exemplar Peter Lamarque's account of literature, which foregrounds such (non-medium-specific) features as 'symbolic, figurative, or thematic significance of the work's elements'.⁵⁷ On this conception of *P*, however, the buck-passing theory of artistic value collapses into the view that artistic values are values works have as art. The buck-passing theory says that the value of a painting *as art* is merely its value *as a painting*; and its

⁵⁶ Cf. footnote 54 on page 50.

⁵⁷ Lamarque himself does not embrace the buck-passing account: a key question for him is what makes literature one of the arts, and therefore what literature *shares* with painting, music, etc. (Lamarque, 2010a: 77-78; Lamarque, 2009. discussion in Lopes, 2014: 150-152).

value *as a painting* derives from a particular appreciative practice. That appreciative practice includes attention to features specific to painting, but also includes attention to features shared by the other arts. This is, however, much the same as saying that the value of a painting *as an art* derives from a particular appreciative practice, which includes attention to features specific to art kinds, but also includes attention to features shared by the other arts. Neither Lopes' theory nor the standard account provide us with a set of guidelines for attending to art (or to paintings) in the appropriate way; both refer us to some general practice. The difference between the two is simply in the emphasis.

Is there, then, such a thing as artistic value or only value specific to the individual arts? The question, it turns out, points to a false dichotomy. Whether or not some value contributes to artistic value, everyone seems to agree, depends on whether that value is made available through the practice of art appreciation. If we return to our analysis of Beardsley, Budd, Gaut and Stecker, we can see this includes attention to features that we can find across the arts: for example, formal properties, 'thick' artistic properties like 'sombre' or 'tense', the theme and subject matter, narrative and representational properties and so on. As these philosophers do not fail to point out, the relevant mode of attention may *also* include attention to features that are specific to some more tightly constrained category of art. Categories of art are, in Stacie Friend's succinct formulation following Kendall Walton, 'ways of classifying artworks—by medium, art form, genre, style, or what have you—that guide appreciation.'⁵⁸ A work's membership of a given medium profile may very well inform our appreciation, but so may one of the other categories; for example, when we compare works in the same genre, movement or style but in different media. Which categories an artwork belongs to is importantly going to

⁵⁸ Friend, 2012: 187. Cf. Walton, 1970. Lopes, as we have seen, uses 'kinds' rather than 'category', but I will from now on prefer the term 'category'.

influence appreciation, however, this is not the same as saying that specific categories are the *only* thing that guide appreciation.⁵⁹

We are left then with our ostensive approach. An account of artistic value needs merely a sense of what it is to attend to art as art as its starting point. It does not need an intensional definition of that mode of attention; nor does it need—as we have seen Stecker and Budd emphasise—a definition of art.⁶⁰ This point gets obfuscated when debates on artistic value and definition of art get mixed up: we have seen this with the case from indiscernibles, and it is also the case with Lopes, who writes on artistic value within his larger project of attempting to dethrone classical definitions of art, and replace them with definitions of individual art kinds. However, a definition of art, or of painting for that matter, is always going to underdescribe the various ways of attending to art as art. We will need to rely on examples and on practice. That is not, as Lopes suggests, ‘anti-theoretical.’ It is to ground a shared methodology in a shared practice of art appreciation for the difficult inquiry to come: the inquiry into which values art realises when attended to as art.

5. Objections and replies

My aim has been to show that the competing accounts of artistic value in analytic aesthetics—aestheticism and pluralism—share an underlying commitment to demarcating artistic from non-artistic values. I have argued for this claim in three steps. First I have shown that the argument from indiscernibles applies equally to aestheticism and pluralism

⁵⁹ Gaut seems to endorse something much like this: ‘An artistic mode of expression is constituted at the most general level by widespread artistic strategies, such as viewing the universal in the particular and getting viewers to respond affectively to represented characters and events, and by strategies more specific to individual media, genres and art forms, such as the employment of painterly techniques or the use of narrative and literary techniques in the case of literature’ (Gaut, 2007: 88). Note how Gaut’s use of ‘such as’ implies an ostensive definition here.

⁶⁰ See footnote 23 on page 39; footnote 41 on page 44.

(not just aestheticism, as sometimes assumed), and that both aestheticism and pluralism can reasonably refer to practices of art appreciation to defuse the argument. Then I provided close readings of two representatives of aestheticism and pluralism to argue that this practice is ostensibly defined. Lastly, I have argued that Lopes' attack on the received position fails. I will now consider some objections.

In my treatment of indiscernibles I have used a particular version of the argument: the version including a valuable artwork and an indiscernible non-art, manufactured object. This is not the only version of the argument, however, so one could complain that I have chosen the one best suited to my ends. Another variant, perhaps, really cuts against aestheticism only, and this might belie a deeper distinction in method between aestheticism and pluralism than I have been willing to countenance. I will now consider some other variants.

Another case of indiscernibles is that of a perfect forgery.⁶¹ Imagine that the twin of *A Family Tradition* were not produced by a Swedish department store, but by a master forger. The argument now goes like this. Intuitively, the original is *artistically* better than the forgery. Since the two are indiscernible, we cannot appeal to aesthetic value to distinguish between them. However, unlike in the department store case, the forgery will still be attended to *as art*, since forgeries, arguably, are still art. We cannot, therefore, appeal to the mode of attention to art *as art* to explain the difference in artistic value. Instead, some have suggested we refer to *sui generis* artistic values, like 'originality', 'influence' and 'art historical value', to explain the difference.⁶² Such values are compatible with pluralism, because pluralism says there are multiple kinds of value realised by art. But they are not compatible with aestheticism, because aestheticism says

⁶¹ Lopes, 2011: 519-521..

⁶² Cf. Hoaglund, 1976; Kulka, 1981; Sibley, 1985.

there is only one kind of value realised by art. And so, unlike what I have been saying, aestheticism and pluralism do appear to be differently affected by the case.

There is a confusion here, which arises from conflating two quite different kinds of value that pluralism can be taken to espouse. Originality, influence and art historical value are values works of art have in relation to other art. The puzzle of why artworks that stand in certain special relations to other artworks are more valuable is indeed a puzzle. However, it applies equally no matter what we take the *non-relational* artistic values to be. A perfect forgery of *A Family Tradition* must be as epistemically valuable as *A Family Tradition* itself, so, a pluralist who wants to argue that the artistic achievement of *A Family Tradition* consists in its epistemic value, will have an analogous problem to the aestheticist. The feud between aestheticism and pluralism is best seen as a feud about what non-relational values works of art realise in virtue of properly artistic features. The question of relational values such as originality is best seen as a separate philosophical problem.⁶³

Another version of the argument is perhaps the most famous of the ones discussed by Danto: this is the version involving an artwork and an indiscernible *mundane* object.⁶⁴ One might say that *Sven* the jug is still, in some sense, a really interesting, artful object; a better case from indiscernibles would therefore be something like Duchamp's *Bottle Rack*, where an artwork is indiscernible from some truly mundane, unartistic, mass produced object (because it *is* just such an object). It is possible to read this version in at least two ways.

On the one hand, it is possible to interpret the example as making the same point as the *Sven* example. Here is a work of art, which is visually indiscernible from a mere

⁶³ Indeed, the topic originality is often treated as a separate problem in aesthetics: Goodman, 1976: 112ff; Elkins, 1993; Irvin, 2005a.

⁶⁴ Danto, 1964: 575-576; 580-581; Danto, 1981: 1ff; 94-95; Danto, 1997: 91; Danto, 2003: 7.

object; therefore, how can aesthetic value distinguish between the two? I have already dealt with such a case. The answer is that we do not attend to mere bottle racks as art. Their value is not what a theory of artistic value is interested in.

On the other hand, it is possible to read the case of *Bottle Rack* as a head-on counter-example to aesthetic value. Here is a great artwork, but it is not aesthetically valuable at all: it is as visually interesting as a common bottle rack. Danto seems to sometimes use arguments from indiscernibles in this way. However, what is doing the work here is clearly not indiscernibility but the alleged lack of aesthetic value. And indeed, aesthetically lacking artworks present aestheticism with a substantial research project: the question, roughly, is how can a theory of artistic value based around beauty accommodate drab, ugly and aesthetically unexciting artworks?⁶⁵ This question, however, comes at a logically later stage than the point I want to make, namely, that there is a methodological principle—value as art—which aestheticism and pluralism share. Whether *Bottle Rack* is ugly or beautiful, clever or stupid, the values it succeeds or fails to realise are of interest to both theories only insofar as they are realised when we attend to *Bottle Rack* as we attend to art.

There are other variants. One includes two indiscernible artworks, independently fashioned, such as when two painters, unbeknownst to each other, create abstractions that look exactly the same, but mean something different.⁶⁶ Another variant is of one artist appropriating another so as to create an indiscernible copy, such as when Sherrie Levine appropriated Walker Evans' photographs.⁶⁷ These variants can suggest that non-perceptual considerations play a role in our appreciation of artworks; it is an argument

⁶⁵ For example: one may deny these works are good art; one may argue against the grain that after all these works do aim to realise an aesthetic function; or one may claim these works are 'second order' art, making a comment on the mainstream aesthetic function of art (Zangwill, 2002).

⁶⁶ Danto, 1964: 577-578; Danto, 1981: 1ff.

⁶⁷ Stecker, 2012.

against pure formalism rather than aestheticism as such. These are therefore not relevant to the present debate.

I will now consider an objection to my way of deriving the methodological principle of value as art. One worry may be that in my characterisation of the shared principle, I am overstating the similarities between the theorists and neglecting the differences. There might be notable differences between the kinds of features considered by philosophers as properly artistic. For example, among those arguing for aestheticism, Beardsley tends to consider rather more formal features, whereas Budd also includes the narrative and representational content of the works. There might also be disagreement regarding new artistic practices. Some authors (pluralists and aestheticists alike) berate contemporary practices such as appropriation; these are not felt to be sufficiently artistic and so are excluded from attention to art *as art*.⁶⁸ Do these differences among philosophers matter?

The methodological unity among disparate philosophical views on artistic value is a matter of degree; whether we focus on similarities or differences is a question of what is more illuminating. It is an overlooked feature of debates on artistic value that aestheticism and pluralism seem to share a commitment to attention to art *as art*; another overlooked feature is that this mode of attention is defined through ostension rather than through necessary and sufficient conditions. With the exception of Lopes' recent attack, this method is on the whole not disputed. Beardsley, for instance, has been criticised for his view that all artistic value can be measured by just three aesthetic principles; not, on the whole, *for the way in which* he attends to artworks.⁶⁹ And while more recent art practices are variously evaluated—something I will take up again in Chapter 4—the main method used by philosophers is one of using safe, uncontroversial, canonical examples of

⁶⁸ See esp. Young, 2001: 135ff.

⁶⁹ Indeed, like Budd, Beardsley also attends to narrative, symbolic and representational features, even if he tends to stress the formal ones (cf. Beardsley, 1958: Chapter VI).

artworks, and one which showcases a considerable unity of practice when it comes to attending to them as art.

There are also objections not against my characterisation of the principle of value as art, but the principle itself. The ostensive definition relies on a general sense that philosophers have about what it is to attend to artworks as art. One real concern here is that any such ‘general sense’ is going to be guilty of provincialism, in that it privileges a particular, historically and geographically specific, tradition of art appreciation over others. Another real concern is that even within the European/American tradition of art appreciation there is in fact a multiplicity of traditions; there is no *one* way of doing art criticism, which is what an ostensive definition might seem to misleadingly imply. Indeed, there are many serious art critical traditions—Marxism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction and post-structuralism—which analytic philosophy has on the whole not engaged with.⁷⁰ These traditions may describe attention to art *as* art differently than the philosophers discussed, or, indeed, altogether dispense with such attention as an interesting category.

These two worries have no obvious answer. The reliance on a shared art critical practice (and, often, on a shared sense of the art historical canon) may well be guilty of provincialism from a broader historical and geographical perspective; and it might also be at odds with other respectable intellectual traditions in the West. It may well be, also, that there are inherent ideological difficulties with the idea of an attention to art *as art*, which analytic philosophy has not been very alive to (for example, the sense in which a seemingly formal analysis of a work such as *Trace* might belie a rather particular, male, objectifying gaze that the work precisely sets out to resist). Though analytic aesthetics is not deaf to such concerns, it is fair to say that there is relatively little discussion about the

⁷⁰ Cf. Graham, 2005: 230ff.

historical, geographical or ideological boundaries of one's interpretative intuitions in analytic aesthetics. It is simply not that kind of method; the aim is not to critique the dominant art-critical intuitions but to clarify them. In order to engage with this method, we must, at least initially, go along with it.

On the consensus view I have here clarified and defended, artistic value is value *as art*: artistic values are those made available through the practice of art appreciation, ostensibly defined. This starting point—notwithstanding the misconceptions and misgivings addressed above—I take to be rather uncontroversial, and shared by philosophers that take up opposing positions as to the *kind* of value that art realises. The interest of many developments in contemporary art, as I will argue later, is precisely in that they put pressure on such a widely shared, and seemingly commonsensical, starting point. Before I do that, however, I turn to more closely investigate one kind of artistic value that is of particular interest to the present inquiry: the epistemic value of art.

Chapter 3 | Epistemic Value

‘In France there is an old saying, “stupid like a painter”. The painter was considered stupid, but the poet and writer very intelligent. I wanted to be intelligent.’ So said Marcel Duchamp, somewhat tongue in cheek, in a late interview.¹ Surveying analytic philosophy on the epistemic value of art, one could quite possibly emerge with the feeling that philosophers have largely shared this old French sentiment.

Since at least the 1990s, there has been a resurgent interest in analytic philosophy in the epistemic value of literature. In part this literary dominance has had to do with a revival of Plato’s ‘old quarrel’ between philosophy and poetry. As analytic philosophy began to extend its area of concern from matters of logic to matters of ethics and the good life, it seemed increasingly relevant to ask whether, in these two areas at least, more artful ways of using language might not pose a worthy rival to the analytic method.² On the other hand, the renewed interest in the relationship between literature and knowledge has had more to do with what has been referred to as a ‘humanist’ defence of the literary canon against post-structuralism: a defence of the idea that the literary greats exert influence beyond intertextuality, and are of continued significance to our social and ethical lives.³

By now these debates have reached a mature stage, with several positions clearly delineated. I will critically survey the main positions and the challenges faced by them, and I will then relate these to the question that initially drove the debate but that

¹ Roberts, 1968: 63, quoted in Judovitz, 1995: 78.

² See the interview with Iris Murdoch in Magee, 1982; also Nussbaum, 1990: 8-20. Cf. Plato, 2000: 607b5-6.

³ Cf. Lamarque and Olsen, 1994: 21-23; Novitz, 1987; Nussbaum, 1990: 21; Gaskin, 1995.

now sometimes gets obscured: what is the relationship between the epistemic value of literature and the epistemic value of philosophy? To qualify my somewhat contentious claim about the omission of visual art, I should stress that many of the theories I will discuss are meant to apply not just to literature, but to the other arts as well;⁴ however, literature has been clearly dominant in this respect, and this will inform my choice of examples as well: *Down and Out in Paris and London* by George Orwell, *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink, and *Elizabeth Costello* by J.M. Coetzee. This literary excursion will prepare the ground for considering the relevance of analytic thought to specific problems raised by contemporary art in the next chapter.

1. Epistemic value of art

In analytic philosophy of art, the idea that art is epistemically valuable has been formulated as a position called *cognitivism*, which we may sum up as follows:

Cognitivism: Some works of art make significant knowledge available to an appropriate appreciator, and this is what forms part of their artistic value.⁵

Cognitivism thus formulated consists of two claims, and therefore puts two constraints on cognitivist theories of art.

The first constraint is provided by the claim that some works of art ‘make significant knowledge available’. The kind of knowledge philosophers expect art to make available, as noted, is taken to tally with the humanistic conception of the arts as participants in our ethical, social and more broadly intellectual lives; as vehicles through which, much like through philosophy and science, we strive to align ourselves more correctly with ourselves and with the world. The conception of knowledge in

⁴ See especially Young, 2001 who offers a cognitivist analysis of all of the arts.

⁵ Cf. formulations in Freeland, 1997: 19; Kieran, 2005b: 299; Gaut, 2006: 115; Nanay, 2013: 357; John, 2013: 384-5.

question therefore goes beyond the very narrow conception of knowledge as acquisition of new items of information. What the arts teach us is often said to include, for example: experiential understanding of the inner lives of others, an immersion in a new kind of moral vision of the world, formation of one's character, as well as artistic revisions of philosophical concepts. Despite this variety, the classification of the different kinds of epistemic gain under the joint category of 'knowledge' implies that they have certain features in common. To clarify what these may be, let me consider artistic knowledge in relation to one common starting point in philosophical analyses of knowledge: the notion of knowledge as *justified true belief*.⁶

The idea that knowledge involves some kind of *belief* is taken to imply that the knowing subject possesses a mental attitude, which bears some content about the world, and which the subject holds with a degree of conviction as to its truth. In relation to art, the relevant distinction here is between belief and free-wheeling fancies and imaginings, and between belief and thought processes internal to an artwork. Across cognitivist accounts, the arts are taken to teach us something that is held with a degree of conviction and that applies to something about *the world*, to something outside the artwork. For example, if a cognitivist theorist maintains that an artwork makes available a certain moral vision of the world, this is to suggest that the moral vision in question applies beyond the fictional content and that it can be projected outwards, towards the real world. The moral vision of a fantasy work like *The Lord of the Rings*—involving, as it does, rather undeveloped conceptions of honour, absolute goodness and absolute evil—tends not to form the basis of cognitivist theories, but the work of serious moral writers such as George Eliot, Henry James or G.K. Chesterton often does.

⁶ For overviews, see Shope, 2005; Schwitzgebel, 2014; Ichikawa and Steup, 2014.

It is also important to note at this point that while the notion of ‘belief’ in contemporary epistemology is mostly taken to involve a *propositional* mental attitude—I believe *that* something is the case—some kinds of knowledge are not thought of as involving propositional attitudes. A distinction is often made between propositional knowledge (knowledge-that), practical knowledge involving aptitudes, patterns of thought, predispositions or skills (knowledge-how) and experiential knowledge, which involves an acquaintance with some experience (knowledge-what something is like).⁷ As we shall see cognitivist accounts of the arts make use of all three types of knowledge. In all three cases, however, the requirement is that the arts impart beliefs, dispositions, skills or experiences that are candidates for reflecting the real world, or that are candidates for being correctly applied to real life scenarios.

The second constituent of the standard analyses of knowledge to consider is *truth*: to say that I know *x* implies that *x* is true, that is, one cannot know falsehoods. What truth is, of course, is a rather contested philosophical issue, especially truth in the domain of morality, with which literature often appears concerned. I do not propose we delve into this meta-issue now. Cognitivists about the arts can be more or less realist about the metaphysical underpinnings of what it is that the arts are taken to be teaching us, however, what is important to note is that cognitivism does presuppose *some* standard of correctness to apply to what the arts teach. That is the case for propositional knowledge, as well as practical knowledge and experiential knowledge. For example, if we take a work of art to impart practical knowledge with regards to interpersonal morality, then we cannot take interpersonal morality to be a complete free for all. We need to have some sense in which the ideas of interpersonal morality

⁷ Cf. Fantl, 2014. These are thought to be at least *prima facie* different; though one may argue some of these are more basic than the others.

proposed by one work of literature can be better than those in another, and we have to have some sense that there is genuine progress in moving from the less good to the better position (e.g. from Tolkien to Chesterton).

Thirdly, there is the issue of *justification*, which is standardly taken to imply that a true belief can only count as knowledge if it is formed in a proper way, that is, in a way that has more than a merely incidental relation to truth.⁸ In relation to cognitivism about art, this points to a certain disparity between the arts and philosophy, science and humanities, where there is a more rigorously enforced normativity attached to the protocols of argumentation, formation of hypotheses and verification, through which knowledge is pursued.⁹ Given the disparity, the question emerges what analogous processes of reflection or verification are operative in our engagement with the arts, so as to ensure the knowledge in question is formed in the proper way. There is no unified position on what the answer here might be, but each cognitivist account will have to have something to say on the matter.

To sum up, cognitivism conceives of ‘knowledge’ made available by artworks rather broadly, in ways that may go beyond propositional knowledge of new facts. Minimally, however, the knowledge made available by artworks is taken to imply an acquisition of a mental state which is also world- rather than merely work-directed, and which is taken to be accountable to knower- and work-independent standards of correctness and justification.¹⁰ I will use the terms ‘knowledge’, ‘epistemic value’ and ‘epistemic gain’ interchangeably to refer to this expanded notion.

The other parts of what cognitivism requires are easier to explain. As well as making knowledge available, the knowledge involved must be in some sense

⁸ See footnote 6 on page 63.

⁹ Cf. Stolnitz, 1992.

¹⁰ Cf. John, 2013: 384.

‘significant’. ‘Significant’ is of course a relative term, but the nature of the knowledge involved needs to track the magnitude of artistic value we want to attach to the work in question. One cannot adequately explain the epistemic value of *Crime and Punishment* by saying one can usefully learn from it that the Neva runs through Saint Petersburg. As we shall see, arguing for the epistemic significance of the arts often involves comparisons with other fields that aim towards knowledge, such philosophy.

Lastly, a work of art only need to be shown to make some knowledge ‘available to an appropriate appreciator’. The claim is not that upon engagement with an artwork, one will automatically attain some knowledge. The relevant comparison here is with works of philosophy or works of science, which may also be valuable for furthering knowledge about something, even if there is no guarantee that every single reading will result in possession of the knowledge in question. Nevertheless, in order to make good the claim that a *work of art itself* makes knowledge available, there has to be some reasonable expectation that a set of specified, appropriate users will attain the knowledge through engagement with the work. The knowledge in question cannot be a product of a particular user’s idiosyncratic or creative use of the work.

The second constraint on cognitivist accounts is that they should show how the knowledge made available forms part of the *artistic* value of the work. The constraint seeks to exclude, for example, the considerable epistemic value works of art hold for a historian, who may profitably study art to learn about its social context, networks of patronage, the life of the author, and so on. The knowledge in question has to be traceable to what makes the work in question a *good artwork*. This is sometimes expressed as a requirement that works of art should make knowledge available ‘non-accidentally’ or in virtue of ‘specific features of artistic experience,’¹¹ but we can

¹¹ See footnote 5 above.

profitably connect the constraint to the notion of artistic value I argued for in the previous chapter. In order for a value to count as an artistic value, it has to be a value a work has *as art*. We can therefore restate cognitivism as saying that some works of art make significant knowledge available, when they are properly attended to as art or, equivalently, in virtue of their properly artistic features. It is not enough to just show that some artwork is a source of significant knowledge, but rather how the specific modes of attention, resources, techniques, which are proper to art as art, are marshalled towards epistemic goals.

Here are, then, two constraints upon cognitivist theories: I will refer to these as ‘significant knowledge’ and ‘as art’ constraints. As we will see, the debate between cognitivists and anti-cognitivists proceeds on both fronts. However, before I provide an overview of individual theoretical approaches, there are a few other clarificatory points that I want to note.

The first is a point with regards to the previous chapter: I understand cognitivism as subscribing to the ‘value as art’ rather than the ‘buck-passing’ principle for demarcating artistic value, and to belong squarely within pluralism rather than the aestheticist family of theories of artistic value. As pluralists, cognitivists need not deny that good works of art realise other values in addition to epistemic value; nor do they need to claim that *all* good works of art realise epistemic value. A cognitivist theory may be restricted to just some works of art, or even to just some works of art within one of the arts (such as literature). Importantly, though most cognitivists attend to literature in the first instance, subscribing to the ‘value as art’ principle means that they do not have to attend merely to features that are specific to literature *as literature alone*, or as governed by a particular medium profile specific to literature. In arguing that some work of literature is epistemically valuable *as art*, there is no attempt to

exclude attention to features that are shared between literature and other artworks, or that are shared by works of art more generally.

The second point of clarification concerns weaker and stronger theses that one might want to make in relation to epistemic gain made available by artworks. Cognitivism, as I understand it, claims that works of art make significant knowledge available as art, which is distinct from the stronger claim that some kinds of knowledge are *exclusively* transmittable through properly artistic means. This stronger claim is sometimes expressed as the view that artistic knowledge is ‘unparaphrasable’: that some moral truths are so subtle that they can *only* be expressed in poetic language.¹² On the other hand, there is also a weaker claim than cognitivism, which says only that art is good for enhancing our cognitive capacities: that it might make us better or quicker at reasoning even if it does not impart any epistemic gain directly.¹³ My primary concern here is the moderate claim that works of art make knowledge (rather than just cognitive training) available, though this leaves open the possibility that the same insights are in principle communicable by other, non-artistic means as well.

Finally, there are two red herrings to get out of the way. One is purely terminological: ‘cognitivism’ is also the name of a view in meta-ethics which claims, roughly, that moral statements express beliefs rather than non-cognitive states such as emotions or endorsement. (When I say ‘Killing is wrong’ I am expressing a belief that killing is wrong and not just an emotional aversion to killing). This is not related to cognitivism under discussion here. The other red herring is the philosophical debate about the relationship between *fiction* and truth. Philosophical questions arise about

¹² E.g. Graham, 1996; Nussbaum, 1990: 4-5.

¹³ Even aestheticists like Beardsley are usually happy to accept that claim (Beardsley, 1958: 574-5).

the curious ontology and truth-conditions attached to statements such as “Little Red Riding Hood has two nostrils.” Do fictional characters in some sense *exist*? Are statements about them—such as this one above—in some sense or other true or false? Surely, Little Red does not have three nostrils; but surely she also does not have two nostrils in the same sense as I have them. The debate about truth-in-fiction¹⁴ is likewise not directly related to cognitivism. Our concern here is with the kind of knowledge afforded by *art*; but not all art involves fictions, and not all fictions are art. As we shall shortly see, however, the way in which works of especially literary art lead us to imagine things that do not immediately obtain is something that gets discussed in debates about literary cognitivism.

2. Experiential knowledge

One prominent theoretical line within cognitivism involves the claim that the arts allow us to vicariously experience other people’s situations, and thereby allow us to learn what it is like to find yourself in a particular situation.¹⁵ George Orwell’s early work *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) might help us to illustrate this claim. The work is a partially fictionalised account of the author’s experience as a scullion in Paris and his brief stint in hostels and shelters for the homeless in London. The work presents the situation of the underclasses of the two cities with an exceptional vividness and the reader, presumably herself unfamiliar with such circumstances, may well feel herself transported, experiencing, as it were, situations that she otherwise would not have access to. Orwell himself seems to have attached great importance to the sense of recreating his own experience in the work, and accordingly saw the

¹⁴ See, e.g. Searle, 1975; Lewis, 1978.

¹⁵ Walsh, 1969; Walton, 1990: 25-30; 34-35; 95; 211; Walton, 1992; Currie, 1995; Currie, 1998; Gaut, 2007: 141-202; Green, 2010.

literary artist as playing an important role in the attempt of correcting the social prejudices of the middle classes.¹⁶ The idea that there is a particular kind of knowledge transmitted in works such as this goes by various names in cognitivist literature—‘knowledge what it is like’, ‘knowledge by acquaintance’, ‘understanding’ and ‘*Verstehen*’ being some popular terms—but I will continue with the term I have already used, ‘experiential knowledge,’ to refer to the kind of knowledge advocated by this family of views.

Some philosophers would deny it is even coherent to talk about experiential knowledge. You either have been down and out in Paris or not; but to say you know what it is like to be down and out, as separate from having had the experience, makes no sense.¹⁷ Proponents of the experiential knowledge view, on the contrary, suggest that there are phenomenologically distinct, experiential mental contents—that is, some mix of emotions, inclinations, thought processes, dispositions, etc.—which are associated with particular experiences. And crucially, at least for some of these, we can become acquainted with the experiential content without actually ourselves undergoing the relevant experience. The key resource for obtaining such knowledge is imagination. Gregory Currie, for example, has drawn on empirical findings in cognitive psychology to argue we use imagination regularly to ‘simulate’ a situation we do not in fact find ourselves in, and in the process obtain the relevant information of what it would be like to be in that situation.¹⁸ We feel pangs of emotional pain when listening to a friend retell their heart-ache; we start salivating when we imagine slowly licking the surface of a lemon; we reach for our own shins when it is another

¹⁶ Sabin, 2007: 45ff.

¹⁷ That would be one reading of Wittgenstein’s private language argument (Wittgenstein, [1951]2001: §§243-330).

¹⁸ Currie, 1995. Cf. Currie and Ravenscroft, 2002 for Currie’s more recent views on the ‘simulation theory’ of imagination.

receiving a kick. Currie describes this process as our belief-desire systems running ‘off-line’, producing mental states without acting upon them. However, we need not accept the entirety of the ‘simulation theory’ to go with the idea. As other proponents of the view have pointed out,¹⁹ we often rely on imagination to put ourselves in another’s shoes or into a situation we have yet to experience; and there *does* seem to be a degree of epistemic success or failure—a degree of correctness—attached to such imaginings. We imagine what it would be like to break up with a partner; and when we finally have the uncomfortable conversation, it turns out to be more or less like we imagined it.

Provided we accept there is experiential knowledge and that there is, at least sometimes, a way of accessing it through the use of imagination, it has further been argued that art, in particular literary fiction, plays a pivotal role by aiding the imaginative process. Kendall Walton’s influential view is that we use fictions like children use props in their games of make-believe; Dorothy Walsh has likened works of literature to “virtual experience”; Gregory Currie compares literary fictions to pulleys and levers with which we aid our own imaginings; Berys Gaut sees literary works as products of a division of labour, where skilled writers produce enhanced imaginative exercises, of which the rest of us would be incapable by ourselves.²⁰ These metaphors suggest that when our own imaginings fail us, works of literature like *Down and Out* supply a great amount of vivid detail, focus and attention, as well as special techniques such as encouraging identification with a character. Literary art is therefore non-accidentally connected to the project of making some epistemic gain available. Given the various subject matters that novels present us with, it has been

¹⁹ Gaut, 2007: 145-160.

²⁰ Walsh, 1969: 91; Walton, 1990: Chapter 1; Currie, 1995: 254; Gaut, 2007: 145.

suggested that literature may teach us what it is like to be trapped in a loveless marriage, to fight in a war, suffer racist abuse, grapple with autism, mourn the loss of a loved one, undergo a religious conversion or be a victim of abject poverty.²¹

Emphasising the experiential element of the knowledge conveyed by literature gets around some of the worries surrounding justification of literary and artistic knowledge, which I noted earlier. David Davies has emphasised that the justification process is internal to our experience of a work of literature, because in imagining ourselves into non-existent scenarios, we mobilize unarticulated cognitive resources, which are based in our real experience.²² Currie, Gaut and Mitchell Green have emphasised that justification can also be external to the work: the experiential accuracy of a work is debated through reviews and discussion, it gets verified by reference to the author's research credentials or experience, it is confirmed by attestations of others who have had the relevant experience.²³ We care that Orwell actually went to Paris and London; similarly, fictional works on loveless marriages, autism, bereavement, addiction, racism and so on are publically discussed and confirmed or disconfirmed in relation to real life examples by people who have had the relevant experiences. This is not to suggest that works of literature cannot deceive us or get it wrong, however, experiential knowledge that we can draw from them can be justified.

Though the view that works of literature (and other arts) may provide experiential knowledge has been popular, it faces some difficulties which, I will argue, seriously restrict the scope of the theory. First, it is unclear that when reading works of literature we in fact characteristically 'simulate' the fictional contents we are presented with.

²¹ Walsh, 1969: 96; Gaut, 2007: 145-155; Green, 2010: 363.

²² Davies, 2007a: 160; Davies, 2007b: 44.

²³ Currie, 1995: 254; Gaut, 2007: 187; Green, 2010: 362-3.

We are likely to empathise with characters and may certainly feel ‘transported’, but that is not the same as actively imagining *ourselves* to be doing or witnessing something. The most striking feature of the latter part of *Down and Out* is the terrible sense of boredom, invisibility and despondency that pervades the life of the London homeless. The reader may be shocked or outraged to learn how the homeless feel or are treated, but hardly any reader will *herself* vicariously undergo the feelings of boredom and despondency while reading the work. Similarly, it is not clear we imagine ourselves to be trapped in a loveless marriage when we read *Anna Karenina* or a victim of racist abuse when we read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Though it *might be possible* to read works of art like this, it is questionable how paradigmatic of literature the idea of simulation actually is. We tend to sympathise with characters; much more rarely do we actively imagine ourselves in their position.²⁴

Secondly, even if a case could be made for a more restricted sense in which—with some works of literature, or some parts of literary works—we do engage in mental simulation, it seems some proponents of the view are overly optimistic about the extent to what we can gain knowledge through imagination in this manner. A teenager reading *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* might imagine Constance’s feelings to be quite different from how a mature reader, more experienced in the ways of extramarital affairs, might imagine them to be. When engaging with literature we often seem to draw on the bank of experiential contents already available to us. While, as Davies points out, this can be a source of justification if the scenario we are invited to imagine is suitably familiar (I am justified to believe a person in Constance’s situation would feel in a certain way, if I have had a relevantly similar experience), it must surely by the same token also limit the extent to which we can obtain new knowledge in this

²⁴ Cf. Carroll, 1999: 74ff; Meskin and Weinberg, 2003; Scruton, 2010.

manner. After all, we do not walk up to victims of some disastrous circumstance, and reassure them that we know what they have been through because we have read many books. In other words, if the epistemic gain involved is conceived of to be something quite extraordinary and far away from the reader's previous experience—such as the experiences presented in Orwell's book from the standpoint of his middle class readers—then it will seem all the more difficult to show that the reader is in fact gaining some specifically *experiential* knowledge through the work of literature. What remains is the much weaker and less surprising claim that Orwell's *Down and Out* usefully informs the reader about the experiences had by other people. The work then makes propositional knowledge available in much the same way as well-researched journalism does: we may derive certain true propositions from this works, such as that 'homeless people are often bored', simply because this well-researched work depicts them as such. This weaker claim, however, does not yet secure any exceptional place for literature vis-à-vis more mundane forms of reporting.

These objections demand a refinement rather than a complete abandonment of the original idea that literature is epistemically valuable in virtue of aiding the faculty of imagination. One line that seems fruitful to explore has been gestured at by David Davies and Elisabeth Camp, who both compare literary imagination to the use of imagined fictional scenarios in thought experiments in philosophy and science. Davies has suggested that by marshalling our unarticulated cognitive resources literature can '[make] manifest what are presented as patterns underlying [our] actual experience', and Camp has proposed that literature allows us to imagine not only *that* something is the case, but *how* it might be the case, which *inter alia* can mean that 'the content of a

work of art serves as the frame for understanding some analogous situation'.²⁵ In both cases, the idea is not that literature is adding new contents to our bank of experiences, but rather that it is guiding our imaginings so as to clarify already possessed experiences. In his more mature work, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), Orwell describes another situation that would be foreign to his middle class readers—that of the living conditions of coal miners and other members of the working class in the English North—but now the writer more explicitly confronts both himself and his audience as 'intruders' in the situation, failing to be a part of it regardless of the good intentions and the level of imaginative exertion. Orwell's readers are still invited to vividly imagine this world, but are now lead to recognize, *in this very act of imagining*, a potentially false and all-too-comfortable experience of gawking and of pity. The point is not to vicariously inhabit the life of the destitute, but to see more clearly the relationship the privileged occupy in relation to them.²⁶ In this more specific sense, it seems, works of literature can be sources of self-knowledge: they may lead us to imagine already familiar situations or recall already possessed experiences, but articulate more clearly what these are.

3. Practical moral knowledge

Whether and to what extent we imaginatively insert ourselves into fictions might be disputed, but it seems less problematic to claim that we can *sympathise* with literary characters. In fact, we seem to take all kinds of attitudes towards characters and situations depicted: we may be outraged by them, approve of them, feel sad about

²⁵ Davies, 2007b: 44; Camp, 2009: 123. Note that both Davies and Camp merely gesture at a cognitivist thesis, their primary theoretical interest is the nature of justification in thought experiments (for Davies), and the varieties of literary imaginings (for Camp), rather than epistemic value. Beginnings of this approach also seems suggested by Gaut, 2007: 152-154.

²⁶ For a similar analysis of Orwell's shift of emphasis between the two works see Sabin, 2007.

them, and so on. The observation that reading literature is a matter of going through morally relevant attitudes towards fictional contents leads to a different cognitivist claim, the claim that literature provides case-by-case training for our moral sensibilities. Here then is a different way of dividing up the terrain, which takes the emphasis away from particular experiential contents. Philosophy and literature both advance *moral knowledge*, but philosophy does so through general theses, theory and argumentation; literature, on the other hand, provides us with distinctly *practical* moral knowledge.²⁷ To illustrate what might be meant here, we can take Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* (1995) as an example. Set a few years after the Second World War, and written by an author born in 1944, the work explores a complex set of moral attitudes, relating to the previous generation's complicity with the Holocaust.

The focus for these attitudes is the main female character, Hanna Schmitz. The narrator of the story, Michael, is Hanna's lover—it is an unlikely love affair, a few years after the war, between the thirty-year old tram conductress and an awkward but precocious teenage boy—who, several years later, is a law student sitting in on an Auschwitz trial. Hanna, it turns out, is one of the defendants, a former SS guard responsible for the death of several inmates, whom the guards had failed to release from a burning building. Though told in the past tense, the narrator's perspective does not depart from the time of the action; so, crucially, we get to sympathise with Hanna in the first part of the book, before we get to judge her in the second. We warm to her somewhat hard, inapproachable exterior and her inner vulnerability, and we share the narrator's shock when she appears as a defendant. Hanna's illiteracy is another important theme—successfully employed both as a plot device and as a way of

²⁷ Nussbaum, 1990; John, 1995; Kieran, 1996; Carroll, 1996; 1998; 2002; Young, 2001: 102ff; Gaut, 2007: 163ff. Cf. Wilson, 1983.

symbolically exploring her moral illiteracy, her initial inability to read the morally obvious aspects of a situation, and her gradual, mortifying realisation, during the trial, as to what she had in fact done. While the novel does not relativize Hanna's moral failure, it attempts to break through the automatic, absolute censure and revulsion that a figure like a former SS guard would normally invite. Instead, the novel attempts to get us to consider Hanna's act as a more complex product of ignorance, apathy, blindness, self-indulgence, and yet not of evil; it attempts to portray Hanna as someone who merits condemnation, certainly, as someone who is perhaps also beyond forgiveness and beyond self-forgiveness, but nevertheless as someone who is not entirely beyond contrition, atonement and pity.

The Reader leads us towards a particular set of affective and cognitive attitudes towards a fictional character. We judge her and we feel about her in a way encouraged by the novel. It also seems clear enough that a novel like *The Reader*, touching upon a national topic and written by a respected judge, aims to convey something about these attitudes that goes beyond the fictional world itself. What, however, can the novel suggest or even teach us about the world outside the fiction through the story?

An obvious suggestion, but one rather difficult to argue for, would be that in arriving at judgements about Hanna, we are really arriving at general theses, for which our experience of the fictional character provides evidence. We might *conclude* that if *Hanna* is not a moral monster, then (and this is a general hypothesis) those collaborating in the Holocaust were themselves not *all* moral monsters.²⁸ As noted earlier, though, employing literature in the service of forming and arguing for general

²⁸ Part of what Jenefer Robinson argues we learn from Edith Wharton's *The Reef* is the hypothesis that 'knowledge of moral principles without sensitive perception of the feelings of others is insufficient to ensure good conduct.' (Robinson, 1995: 226). James Young claims we learn from Jane Austen's *Emma* that 'it is dangerous to delight in making a sport of one's acquaintances' (Young, 2001: 95).

hypotheses seems problematic, given that literature is precisely *so unlike* systematic inquiry. After all, what weight should we attach to the evidence provided by one fictional character; would not a documentary, a survey, a comprehensive historical analysis be much better put to the service of such general claims?²⁹

A more promising line takes the particular attitudes towards fictional contents as *in themselves* instances of moral learning. The moral knowledge in question is *practical* and *tacit* rather than theoretical and explicit: it has to do with enhancing our ability to arrive at correct moral judgements in particular cases, rather than an ability to formulate abstractly stated moral rules in propositional form. This kind of practical moral knowledge is sometimes referred to as ‘moral perception’, moral knowledge-how or *phronesis*, and often goes hand in hand with views in virtue ethics about how our moral formation depends on learning in particular cases. Works of literature, then, allow us to rehearse and refine our pre-existing patterns of moral judgement by means of practice on what are usually especially interesting, hard or borderline cases. In this way, *The Reader* can be read as suggesting both cognitive moral judgements (e.g. ‘Hanna is beyond forgiveness but not beyond pity’) as well as other morally relevant attitudes (e.g. the *feelings* of pity towards Hanna); however, while the novel leads us to take such attitudes towards a fictional perpetrator, what we are working on is the general predisposition to reach morally appropriate judgements and attitudes, one that applies to real life cases as well. That is not to preclude any judgement we may arrive at in any particular real-life case of a former SS guard; it is to say that the range of judgements and attitudes we will be predisposed to arrive at has been enhanced. In

²⁹ Cf. Stolnitz, 1992.

Martha Nussbaum's phrase, works of literature make us more 'finely aware and richly responsible'.³⁰

The description of such moral knowledge as practical and tacit requires some clarification. There is much debate about whether the cognitivist view that literature makes practical moral knowledge available relies on some form of *particularism*; the view in meta-ethics that can be taken to state *either* that moral knowledge cannot be expressed in abstractly stated moral rules *or* as the view that abstractly stated moral rules play little or no role in our moral reasoning and formation.³¹ In fact, two much more modest claims are sufficient to support most forms of practical moral knowledge cognitivism about literature. The first is the claim that for a subject to count as knowing something to be morally the case, the subject is not always required to be able to subsume the given case under an abstractly stated rule. Secondly, for a subject to count as having enhanced her moral knowledge, she will also not always be required to do so by reference to an abstractly stated moral rule. A useful comparison can here be made to the linguistic competence of native speakers.³² Like competent speakers, morally competent people need not always possess the ability to extrapolate to abstractly stated rules; and they may acquire new knowledge by learning from specific new cases. These two claims about moral knowledge seem perfectly plausible about the kinds of beings we are and the kind of moral formation most of us receive; though the two claims remain silent on what additional role abstractly stated moral rules may play in that process. Therefore, the fact that works of literature do not

³⁰ Nussbaum, 1990: 148.

³¹ See discussion of particularism in Nussbaum, 1990: 37-40, 66-75, 93-96, 155-157; Carroll, 1998: 148. Cf. Dancy, 2004: 1ff.

³² Cf. Evans, 1985: 124-125, 133.

extrapolate to abstract moral rules, should not by itself be an objection to the thesis that literature can make *moral* knowledge available.

However, in order for the cognitivist claim here to be an interesting one, it is not enough to show merely that literature can serve as a training tool in moral formation, but that it makes *significant* moral knowledge available; that, in some way, it makes progress. One way to argue for the significance of what is learnt is to point out, comparatively, what literature may contribute to aspects of moral judgement, which receive less attention in abstract reasoning. While moral judgement is often thought of as something that takes the form of a propositional belief such as ‘This action/character/situation is morally good/bad’, an expanded picture of our moral psychology includes several other dimensions to moral judgement. These include the emotional dimension (e.g. *The Reader* encourages a shift from being outraged to being compassionately disposed while morally condemning Hanna), dimension of focus or salience (e.g. we morally condemn Hanna but the importance of that condemnation is weighed against the importance of her trying to understand her actions), and the employment of thick rather than thin moral concepts in moral judgement (e.g. we morally condemn Hanna but use concepts like ‘tragic’ rather than simply ‘morally bad’ to describe her failure). If moral judgement can be more or less appropriate along these additional dimensions, then literature, which arguably encourages shifts in judgement precisely along these dimensions, can be seen as contributing to practical moral knowledge in a significant way.³³

Some of the more interesting objections to the practical moral knowledge view are those concerning the justification of knowledge allegedly available. Do we have good

³³ Cf. Wilson, 1983; Nussbaum, 1990: 36-49; John, 1995; Simoniti, 2015 (forthcoming); Wilson, 2013.

grounds for the judgement that Hanna deserves pity and not just censure? If not, then it seems hard to see how the shifts to our moral dispositions, which we may incur as a consequence of that judgement, will be shifts towards knowledge. The worry here is that literary modes of persuasion do not warrant beliefs in the way sound arguments do, even with regard to particular cases.³⁴ *The Reader* certainly can convince one that we should pity Hanna Schmitz, but it does not employ systematic, dispassionate means of doing so. Like rhetoric, literature may use all kinds of ‘tricks’ to encourage a particular emotion or a particular moral attitude. Which forms of literary persuasion, then, are such that lead to justified judgements, and which ones are such that do not?

The challenge here is to offer alternatives to the picture of justification and valid reasoning as solely characterised by an emotionless process of drawing logical inferences. Bence Nanay, for example, argues that the ‘pure logical inference picture’ of reasoning is wrong both as a descriptive model of how we generally reason—our everyday reasoning tends to be informed by all kinds of emotional and environmental biases—and as a normative picture of how we *should* reason in the philosophical context: in order to be illuminating of our everyday concerns, philosophy has to be able to connect abstract arguments to our intuitively felt, not strictly ‘rational’ beliefs.³⁵ Though Nanay makes the normative point in relation to academic philosophy, the point may seem even stronger in the domain of everyday moral reasoning, where normative standards of justification likewise obtain. Indeed, as several virtue ethicists have pointed out, in particular situations the *best* cases of moral reasoning will sometimes be those that do not involve drawing dispassionate logical

³⁴ Lamarque, 2010b: 106.

³⁵ Nanay, 2013: 355-358.

inferences.³⁶ This seems to be especially the case with those moral judgements, mentioned earlier, that involve judgements of character, salience or have emotional components. For example, if we think that a correct moral judgement of a person's character can demand a recognition of that person under a different 'thick' description (such as 'morally blind' rather than 'a monster'), then getting there may require something subtler than a dispassionate argument, such as being shown the person's behaviour against contrasting cases. Further, if we think the correct moral judgement sometimes requires an affective dimension—such as compassion—then, again, something that provokes that response, rather than just an argument, will be required. In at least some cases, then, arriving at correct and justified moral judgements seems inextricably linked to cognitive processes that involve something more or other than dispassionate logical inferences. If literature can be shown to supply these other forms of reasoning, then the point can be made that literature not only *sometimes* delivers justified moral beliefs, but even that it stands as an exemplar of how moral reasoning *should* look like.

There are several such kinds of literary persuasion that philosophers have identified. Noël Carroll refers to the employment of 'wheels of virtue' in works of literature: certain novels, such as E.M. Forster's *Howards End*, juxtapose various characters so as to bring out more clearly the various virtues and vices the author wants us to recognize in them.³⁷ Edward Harcourt, discussing George Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical*, explores how the bond of trust that the author creates between the narrator and her audience, can lead us to recognize a certain model of love as superior

³⁶ Cf. Lovibond, 2002: 9-14; 26-27; 37. For some work in virtue ethics particularly relevant here, consider: McDowell, 1978; McDowell, 1979; Blum, 1994; Lovibond, 2002.

³⁷ Carroll, 2002: 11-12.

to another.³⁸ James Young even attempts something like an exhaustive list of literary devices that may be employed, such as amplification, simplification, and exemplification; and which seem similar to how we negotiate moral terrain in everyday situations.³⁹ Importantly, the philosophical goal here cannot be to conclusively show a particular literary device leads to a justified belief: just as with non-literary kinds of reasoning, philosophy cannot put down *practical* guidelines for which beliefs count as justified (philosophical analyses of justification do not come up with pronouncements like ‘you must reflect on it for at least three days, consider at least two counter-examples and consult at least 70% of your peers, and then your new belief will be justified’). As in life, whether or not a work of literature gets us to a justified belief will depend on the specifics, and can be subject to further reflection. A critical analysis of *The Reader* might say, for example, that work does not employ ‘cheap’ tricks in getting us to sympathise with Hanna (she is far from an idealised character); that it allows space for reflection (for example, by providing foils to her character in other defendants, in a manner similar to Carroll’s wheel of virtue); and so on.

There is, however, a further worry that attaches to literary justification. This is the claim that when we engage with literary fiction, we do not in fact *seriously* engage with moral persuasion. That we sometimes tend to ‘turn off’ serious moral engagement when it comes to art is best illustrated in relation to more obviously amoral works: the enjoyment of ironic works like *Lolita*, of dark fantasies like Frank Miller’s graphic novel *Sin City*, and even of most of Grimm’s fairy tales, seems to require that the reader takes up a morally compromised outlook (we enjoy the

³⁸ Harcourt, 2010.

³⁹ Young, 2001: 89-91.

mutilation and drowning of the Big Bad Wolf, though it is hardly an enlightened form of punishment). The anti-cognitivist suggestion is that even with more morally upstanding literature, we likewise disengage from serious moral cognition; here, our morally relevant emotions and thought processes are likewise subservient to aesthetic gratification. Primarily, we *enjoy* taking pity on Hanna, because working towards that feeling is part of the dramatic structure of the novel. However, if moral reasoning within literature is in this way subject to aesthetic constraints in a way that moral reasoning outside of literature is not, then the moral judgements we arrive at while reading novels are not the subject of the same process of careful moral deliberation. As such they ought not to be inserted into our practical moral dispositions when we tackle the real world. To do so would be to repeat Emma Bovary's mistake, and confuse the pleasure of engrossed reading for genuine reasoning about the good life.⁴⁰

There are two points here to be teased apart. On the one hand, there is the broad and multifaceted issue of the ways in which our cognitive and affective engagement is continuous or discontinuous across real life and fictional scenarios. The emotions we experience when we read fiction may be more or less like those we experience in real life,⁴¹ and there is a growing debate on the ways in which what we can be made to imagine is or is not constrained by our moral beliefs.⁴² Though these debates allow for various positions, it seems unlikely that our cognitive and affective engagement with literature is radically and globally different from how we think and emote in real life. This broad issue aside, the objection has to do with the question of how the pleasure of moral drama interacts with genuine moral deliberation. This point, however, seems to suggest the need for a critical examination of specific works and genres of literature

⁴⁰ Landy, 2009; cf. Diffey 1995.

⁴¹ Walton, 1990: Chapter 7; Carroll, 1999: 74ff.

⁴² See, e.g. Gendler, 2011: Chapters 9 and 10.

rather than a wholesale rejection of cognitivism. Works like *Lolita* capitalise on artistic levity when it comes to moral issues; other novels, of which *The Reader* seems to be a clear example, are intended to be read and critically discussed as serious works of moral reasoning. There must also be room in the analysis for the suggestion that serious works may also fail at achieving that aim. We sometimes describe such a failure as sentimentality or as ‘moral kitsch’, denoting works that allow us to indulge in morally relevant emotions such as pity, without rooting these in sound moral thinking.⁴³ However, the very possibility of such a failure suggests that we *do* typically engage at least some works with serious moral attention. Emma Bovary’s failure is one of reading uncritically or maybe one of reading unserious books seriously; it does not point to a global failure of literature to engage the right faculties.

4. Literature and philosophy: dichotomy, continuity or confrontation?

Literature has tended to be foremost among the arts that philosophers have considered for elevation to the domain of knowledge. Nevertheless, this amicable, if somewhat uneven, relationship has not been entirely free of struggles for dominance.

A singularly lively confrontation developed in the aftermath of J.M. Coetzee’s Tanner lectures, given at Princeton in 1997. The topic of the lecture series was the rights and treatment of nonhuman animals, but, instead of a lecture, Coetzee offered a story. The story presents the character of a famous Australian author, Elizabeth Costello, who has also been invited to give a lecture at a famous (fictional) college. Elizabeth argues that our treatment of animals is an atrocity akin to the Holocaust. She

⁴³ Sentimental works, in particular, seem to fall into this category (for discussion of sentimentality see, e.g. Tanner, 1976; Solomon, 1997; Furtak, 2002).

delivers a withering attack on philosophy's over-rational attempts to make sense of animal rights; and draws on poetry by Ted Hughes to back her plea for animals. In the story, Elizabeth's poetry-over-philosophy approach causes much consternation for her daughter-in-law Nora, herself a less than stellar analytic philosopher. Outside of the fiction, however, the story had much the same effect on Peter Singer, a real life Princeton luminary in analytic ethics. In his invited response to Coetzee's address, Singer wrote a rather sneering short story himself, in which a 'fictional' analytic philosopher 'Peter' is invited to give a response to a fictional author 'Coetzee'. 'Peter' champions the side of reasoned inquiry, and likens Coetzee/Elizabeth's preference for poetry and emotion to Hermann Göring's chilling quote that he 'feels with his blood.' This, in turn, prompted other eminent philosophers to come to (the real) Coetzee's defence, defending the *Elizabeth Costello* lectures as a literary work that, as such, bears upon the issue of animal rights in a much more complex way than Singer has acknowledged.⁴⁴

Indeed, Coetzee's lectures are a singularly intricate text: a lecture, within a short story, within a lecture; they offer food for thought on animal ethics, on the clash between poetry and philosophy, and the identity of the author, to give but a few points of entry. Peter Singer's frustration with the lectures, however, points us to one issue in particular, that of the boundary dispute between literature and other, more systematic modes of inquiry, such as philosophy. Several philosophers of art have tried to establish a sharp division between the two in a way that chimes with Singer's complaints against the lectures. Jerome Stolnitz has argued, for example, that

⁴⁴ The lectures and responses appeared as Coetzee and Gutmann, 1999. Coetzee reused the lectures as two chapters of his novel *Elizabeth Costello* (Coetzee, 2004: 59-115). The sympathetic responses to Coetzee's lectures are gathered in Cavell, *et al.*, 2008; Mulhall, 2009; whereas Singer also later co-edited a book on Coetzee's ethics, and offered another response (Singer and Dawn, 2010).

philosophical theses explored in works of art are at best badly supported and at worst banal.⁴⁵ He acknowledges that we sometimes *describe* works of literature as arguing for interesting and controversial theses—such as the controversial claim that our treatment of animals is akin to the Holocaust. However, it seems difficult to see why such theses would not be better explored within a philosophical, academic context, where they can be systematically presented, supported by evidence and argument, and can be discussed within some disciplined corpus of knowledge already amassed. Accordingly, as Peter Lamarque and Steig Olsen have argued, it would be more appropriate to understand ‘theses’ of works of literature as *themes*. The theses put forward by great novels or plays can be seen as structuring our aesthetic attention, but, unlike in works of philosophy, they are not presented in a way that is conducive to a reasoned inquiry; when attempting to broach philosophical territory, literary art will always be epistemically inferior.⁴⁶

So far, I have charted the pros and cons of two ways of thinking about the *kind* of knowledge literature makes available: experiential knowledge and practical moral knowledge. Coetzee’s lectures, however, are among those works of art which seem to intrude on philosophy’s turf and therefore demand that we clarify more precisely what the relationship between the epistemic value of art and that of philosophy might be. Possible answers, it turns out, cut across the debate about the kind of knowledge made available by the arts. I will consider three possibilities.

The first possibility is to maintain a strong dichotomy between literary and philosophical knowledge. Experiential and practical moral knowledge, made available in works like *Down and Out* or *The Reader*, may be thought of as parallel and

⁴⁵ Stolnitz, 1992.

⁴⁶ Lamarque and Olsen, 1994: 324ff, 368, 384-5, 402ff. For comparable anti-cognitivist points, see: Diffey, 1995; New, 1999: 120ff; Lamarque, 2009: 236ff.

complementary to abstract philosophical knowledge, rather than directly contributing to it. Philosophy contributes to philosophical knowledge in the form of *general propositions*; whereas experiential and practical literary insights contribute to our everyday, practically involved moral reasoning.⁴⁷

Among those who propose a kind of dichotomy between philosophical and literary knowledge, Martha Nussbaum's position is arguably the most sophisticated. Through her close readings of the novels of Henry James, she argues that these contribute to our practical moral knowledge; but she also claims this ought to count as a *kind of philosophy*, in the qualified sense that these novels also contribute to the exploration of the Socratic question 'what is the good life?'⁴⁸ For Nussbaum there are two ways in which we might want to approach such a question: the theoretical way, which attends to the concept of the good life, and the practical way, which asks the question from a perspective already involved in life. Novels like those of Henry James plot out and describe with poetic precision the nature of people's moral characters and the nature of their choices, and they are therefore able to adjust our perception with regards to moral issues as these arise in more domestic settings.⁴⁹ These are instances of engaged reasoning that for Nussbaum illuminate the same terrain as philosophical inquiry into the good life, but that do so in a complementary and incommensurable way. It might be possible to account for more socially engaged works like *The Reader* and *Down and Out* in a similar way: these works adjust our practical moral perceptions, and bolster our engagement with questions of justice in society, but do so in an engaged rather than abstract way. There is a connection to philosophy here, in the sense that

⁴⁷ Cf. Currie, 1998: 170; Carroll, 1998: 141ff.

⁴⁸ Nussbaum, 1990: 24-27; 36-43.

⁴⁹ See Nussbaum's analysis of the father-daughter relationship in James' *Golden Bowl* (*ibid.*: 150ff.).

both literature and philosophy attempt to achieve clarity of vision on issues that matter greatly, however, the dichotomy persists: it seems that the two paths to understanding do not necessarily have to intersect.⁵⁰

To the extent that the relationship between philosophy and literature has been mentioned under explorations of ‘cognitivism’, the dichotomy view appears to be a widely held position. Most of the philosophers I discussed in the two sections above seem to treat the epistemic value of literature as not directly linked to that of philosophy. However, some philosophers have also emphasised links between philosophical and literary inquiries. Imagination and emotion are faculties exercised by both literature and philosophy. There seem to be, as already mentioned, continuity between literary works and the philosophical exploration of thought experiments, as well as continuity between some forms of literary persuasion and philosophical argumentation.⁵¹ If that is so, then it is possible to think of literature as playing a role that is continuous with philosophical inquiry; it is possible to think of experiential contents and morally relevant cognitive-affective attitudes, which are achieved in the course of reading a work of literature, as lessons to be later inserted into thinking about philosophical concepts. On what I will call the continuity view, literature may contribute to the philosophical project of making available knowledge in the form of general propositions.⁵²

The challenge for the continuity view is not to show that, as a matter of fact, some significant and philosophically relevant propositional knowledge (knowledge *that*

⁵⁰ John Gibson has a comparable view: instead of discovering new philosophical truths, literature ‘weaves’ the ‘knowledge it assumes into the fabric of the social’; it ‘embodies’ a particular ethical vision of the world which, for Gibson, is to go beyond abstract reflection. (Gibson, 2007: 81-120).

⁵¹ John, 1998: 332; Gaut, 2007: 160-164; Davies, 2007b; Camp, 2009; Nanay, 2013; Zangwill, 1999. For dissent (but in relation to film) see Smith, 2006.

⁵² Bence Nanay explicitly argues against the ‘discontinuity thesis’ (and thereby, it would seem, in favour of a ‘continuity’ thesis) about the relationship between literature and philosophy (cf. Nanay, 2013: 358).

something is the case) can follow from engagement with works of literature. If someone engaged with *The Reader* or *Down and Out*, and as a result revised their views about moral failure or social justice for the better, then that would seem like a pretty convincing story about how someone obtained propositional knowledge about these matters. Moreover, many works of literature are hailed explicitly for dealing with philosophical or near-philosophical topics; if my old school curriculum is anything to go by, it certainly seems possible to derive propositions as to the nature of free will from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* or as to the disenchanted state of late Capitalism from Max Frisch's *Homo Faber*. The anti-cognitivist claim, presumably, is not that it is *only* through philosophy that anyone *can* acquire any propositional knowledge at all about philosophical issues, or else we would have to claim that nobody other than those engaging with professional philosophy has any knowledge of these issues at all. The difficulty is to show, rather, (i) that literature can contribute to such propositional knowledge in a way that is not merely inferior or ancillary to philosophy, and (ii) that literature can make such knowledge available in a way that is part and parcel of how we engage with literature as an art form, rather than merely as a way of illustrating independent philosophical arguments. If at all possible, the continuity view should avoid occupying the position jocosely assumed by the narrator of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, who advises: "The mind should be accustomed to make wise reflections, and draw curious conclusions as it goes along; the habitude of which made Pliny the Younger affirm, "That he never read a book so bad, but he drew some profit from it.""⁵³

The plausibility of the continuity approach is going to depend on the specific work in question; some works lend themselves more naturally than others to readings

⁵³ Sterne, [1759-67] 2003: v.1 §XX.

continuous with philosophical inquiry. Where they do, the task is to show, in Eileen John's words, that a 'conceptual inquiry is integrated into basic literary interpretive activity'; to show how works of literature can put us in a position to draw conclusions and offer space for critical reflection in a way that is part of the work's artistic conceit.⁵⁴ This can be illustrated by reference to *The Reader*, which lends itself well to the continuity reading. The work suggests conceptual reflection at multiple points by means of its clear, parable-like symbolism. Hanna's illiteracy clearly stands for moral blindness, and her attempts at learning how to read in prison stand for attempts at contrition and understanding. However, Hanna commits suicide upon being released from prison, and the sole surviving victim of her crime refuses to accept the money that Hanna leaves her in her will. Read as a kind of a parable, *The Reader* suggests the importance of including a distinction between ignorance and evil in philosophical accounts of moral failure, and it suggests the importance of being able to account for attempts at contrition for deeds that nevertheless do not merit forgiveness.

This is not to go with the bald suggestion, attacked by the anti-cognitivists, that works of literature implicitly argue for some grand philosophical hypothesis. It is rather to suggest, as Eileen John does, that literature *contributes* something to the philosophical inquiry, and possibly something that philosophy finds difficult to achieve by itself.⁵⁵ A purely philosophical inquiry into concepts such as 'moral failure' and 'contrition' might be free-wheeling; the novel, by contrast, supplies the urgency with which we are directed to a particular corner of conceptual space, and grounds the conceptual inquiry in relation to specific aspects of our lives and culture, in this case, specifically in relation to the German national trauma of the Holocaust

⁵⁴ John, 1998: 346. Cf. Putnam, 1978: 87ff; Wilson, 1983; Nanay, 2013: 353; 2014: 4.

⁵⁵ Cf. John, 1998: 345-346.

and the widespread complicity with it. It is important to emphasise, then, that the ‘involved’ reading of the novel—captured by the dispositional shifts in moral perception outlined in the previous section—goes hand in hand with moments of conceptual reflection. This takes care of the objection that philosophical readings of works of literature render them merely ancillary to conceptual inquiry. *The Reader* is not shown to merely argue for a conceptual point; it rather contributes to and motivates philosophical thinking by making it clear what the philosophical inquiry should account for.

Returning to Coetzee’s story, however, we find a case that presents an interesting *challenge* for, rather than a confirmation of, the continuity view. Unlike many examples considered by philosophers writing on cognitivism—despite the academic proximity, the Singer/Coetzee controversy did not get picked up in analytic aesthetics—here is a work that comes very close indeed to directly addressing an issue that is also addressed by a branch of academic philosophy, namely animal ethics, and yet also a work that explicitly attacks philosophical reasoning on that issue (Elizabeth Costello berates academic philosophy as ‘the specialism of a rather narrow self-regenerating intellectual tradition whose forte is reasoning, in the same way that the forte of chess players is playing chess.’)⁵⁶ Certainly, this is not *simply* an argument for literature and against philosophy; there are many layers here. For once, Elizabeth argues with considerable philosophical astuteness for her uncompromising, inflammatory position that the plight of animals is akin to the Holocaust, both in her lectures and in off-stage conversations. There is also her point—indeed, a cognitivist argument for literature—that only *poetry*, such as Ted Hughes’ *Jaguar*, offers a true,

⁵⁶ Coetzee, 2004: 69.

kinetic empathy with animal life, which ordinary discourse (and thereby perhaps her lecture itself?) fails to deliver. There is the web of personal relationships within which these arguments are made: Elizabeth's sometimes uncaring relationship to her son, a rivalry with her philosopher daughter-in-law, a painful exchange with a Jewish academic who finds her comparisons distasteful for good reasons. There are intertextual points of departure, and the tantalisingly unclear point of identity between Elizabeth and Coetzee. Against this rich background, however, I want to focus on the point of confrontation between philosophy and literature: not the point of confrontation between philosophy and poetry that Elizabeth herself mentions, but the confrontation between literature and philosophy that Coetzee's lectures as a whole dramatize. Can *Coetzee's lecture*, his literary treatment of the topic, hope to tell us something about animal ethics, which philosophy not only needs some help in making clear, but constitutively fails to elucidate?

Beginnings of an answer to this question may be found in the story itself.

Elizabeth Costello is presented as anything but a confident and persuasive defender of animal rights. Instead, she is shown as possessed by a revulsion and exasperation that often renders her silent and incoherent when she attempts to articulate her views. She is bewildered at the indifference or at the rationalised sympathy others have towards her views; she feels it to be like people calmly sitting down in a room where furniture is made of human skin. Thence her frustration with philosophy. One can philosophise about animal rights at academic conferences, but this feels crushingly inadequate: just as it would feel crushingly inadequate, like a gross, absurd, callous deflection of the real moral issue, to sit in the midst of Khmer Rouge killing fields and debate the pros and cons of various philosophical arguments about human rights.

And yet, Elizabeth does also *not* quite find herself in the killing fields. She is in a perfectly pleasant world, where we solve our problems step by step, and in which the global violence against animals is masked by the comfortable skin of Western living. It is difficult, in this situation, to be so certain about one's outrage or indeed to sustain it. Mentally as much as economically she is part of the quiet machinery which perpetuates the treatment of animals, and so her loud protestations soon make her feel at odds not just with others but also with herself. Going on as before seems wrong, and yet activism seems to her to be tokenistic and inefficient, and academic debate self-indulgent. At the point of her departure, Elizabeth breaks down tearfully when her son—wanting to help but slightly confused by his mother's militancy—tries to ask her, kindly and sincerely, what it is that she wants to do about animals: 'John, I don't know what I want to do. I just don't want to sit silent.'⁵⁷

If this is the position one finds oneself in,⁵⁸ then writing about animals will not be easy. It will demand writing that with clarity and strong arguments condemns what one feels to be a crime, and yet *also* show the debilitating, maddening incongruity between level-headed discourse and the scale of that crime. *Elizabeth Costello* seems to go remarkably far in fulfilling these contradictory demands. First, it does so, relatively simply, by telling a story; it allows us to embody the difficulty in a fictional character's struggle. Describing Elizabeth from her son's point of view allows Coetzee to bring out the inefficiency of Elizabeth's opinions as these are perceived by her environment, and to make palpable her personal fragility in trying to assert them. Even more importantly, however, we would do well to remember that the work began life as a lecture delivered by Coetzee, and so it continually throws up the question: is

⁵⁷ Coetzee, 2004: 104.

⁵⁸ Indeed, though Coetzee is famously reticent about his own political views, it seems he finds himself in a similar position (cf. Coetzee, 2007).

this a lecture, a story, an argument? Is it Coetzee speaking or Elizabeth Costello? To give just one example, at some point Elizabeth is described in this way (from her son's point of view): 'His mother does not have a good delivery. Even as a reader of her own stories she lacks animation.'⁵⁹ I have seen Coetzee speak and he is himself not a very animated reader; so, as he read out this sentence at a Tanner lecture—and then proceeded to read out parts of Elizabeth Costello's lecture in her voice—he could not have hinted more clearly that him and Elizabeth are the same person. And yet, through the irony inherent in the remark, the identity is also denied and distance established. It is only through such an opaque text that Coetzee is able to sustain the paradox, to assert, in a voice half his own, that the plight of animals is akin to the Holocaust, while at the same time showing the difficulty of maintaining this thought. After all, this thought is so radical, that seeing it through would call for actions much more decisive—perhaps even violent—than what can be offered within the confines of a polite university lecture.

One might, of course, disagree with Coetzee's position on animal rights or find fault with his way of thinking about it. What interests me here, however, is how *Elizabeth Costello* suggests a structurally different relationship between literature and philosophy than either the dichotomy or the continuity position. Coetzee's writing aims to show that a set of convictions about animal suffering appears to be jointly urgent and difficult to maintain. On the other hand, philosophical debate aims to solve difficult problems about animal rights; it does not, on the whole, seek to bring into view the psychological struggle involved in maintaining such radical opinions. If this contrast obtains, then the experiential and emotional elements of *Elizabeth Costello* should not be taken to naturally lead into a philosophical discourse on the topic

⁵⁹ Coetzee, 2004: 63.

(continuity view); nor should they be taken to enhance our moral perception of animals without bearing on the philosophical debate (dichotomy view). Instead, the literary lectures attempt to make clear an aspect of the problem which ‘straight’ philosophical discourse would obscure.⁶⁰ That does not imply any of the stronger theses that Singer seems to impute to Coetzee; for example that philosophy is always and inevitably trumped by poetry, or that it has nothing useful to say on animal rights. It is simply to say that if Coetzee is to hold a significant aspect of the problem in sight, he has to move to a different register of writing.

This is what I will label the ‘confrontation’ view of the relationship between literature and philosophy: a literary treatment shows up an aspect of a *philosophical* problem, which it is harder, and perhaps impossible, to adequately show within the usual philosophical register. The confrontation view is something that may seem quite difficult to argue for, and yet it seems important to capture those works of literature—like Coetzee’s—that bear on philosophical issues and yet seem to actively resist being slotted into philosophical discourse. There are other instances where philosophers have identified philosophy and literature to be in confrontation with one another. Iris Murdoch, and, in her steps, Cora Diamond, have argued that the usual philosophical discourse obscures aspects of the ethical picture of the world—such as wonder, tragedy and what Diamond calls the ‘difficulty of reality’—which literature can make visible.⁶¹ Stanley Cavell has argued that Shakespeare’s plays present us with a kind of existential understanding of scepticism about other minds that the philosophical way of phrasing the problem inherently misrepresents.⁶² Each of these claims would

⁶⁰ I take my interpretation of Coetzee’s story to be roughly in line with interpretations offered by Mulhall, 2009: 140ff; 252; Diamond, 2008; though neither of them is primarily concerned with a cognitivist thesis about literature.

⁶¹ Murdoch, 1991: 85. Diamond, 1996a: 91-97; Diamond, 1996b: 245; Diamond, 2008. Nussbaum also comes close to this position sometimes (Nussbaum, 1990: 8).

⁶² Cavell, 1979: 480-496; Cavell, 2003: 1-2;105-109.

require a more sustained analysis, of course, but the idea they seem to have in common is that, for at least some problems that arise within philosophy—animal rights, the good life, scepticism about other minds being some examples—representing these problems adequately will require at least a partial shift to a different, literary mode of writing.

Considering the three options for characterising the relationship between the epistemic value of philosophy and the epistemic value of literature side by side, which one seems the most plausible? One should not expect the question to have a one-size-fits-all answer; it is telling, for instance, that I had to swap my examples several times. The dichotomy view, which emphasises that literary knowledge is attained through involved readings, separate from abstract philosophical inquiry, may seem the most appropriate for works that call for an involved, immersive experience. The continuity approach seems to work best in relation to reflective, philosophical novels; and may be profitably employed especially with regards to moral parables such as *The Reader*. Finally, the confrontation view seems to apply best to works of literature that seem to directly address themselves to a philosophical issue, but do so in a way that aims to deliberately frustrate, rather than aid, the more straightforward lines of reasoning. The continuity and confrontation view both seem to be applicable to those categories of literary writing—such as didactic literature, parody, satire, the philosophical novel, autobiography, aphoristic writing, the essay and the polemic—that lie on the border between the literary and the philosophical, and which have received on the whole less attention from philosophers writing on literary cognitivism.

To summarise, there are two constraints on cognitivist theories: the significant knowledge constraint and the ‘as art’ constraint. I have presented two main positions that describe the kind of knowledge made available by the arts—experiential

knowledge and practical moral knowledge. Regardless of which kind of knowledge we go with, there are further options for how we describe the relationship between the epistemic value of art and the epistemic value of philosophy—as dichotomy, continuity or confrontation. The debate about the epistemic value of literature is by now well-established and quite extensive, so my purpose here has been to disentangle some of the issues, and to supply a conceptual map, rather than either to erect a new theory or to knock down the existing ones. The question I want to consider now is, given the dominance of the examples from literature, to what extent are these accounts generalizable to the other arts? How does the old French phrase, *bête comme un peintre*, hold up when we consider contemporary art?

Chapter 4 | How easy is it to apply philosophical models to contemporary art?

1. What is contemporary art?

The name ‘contemporary art’ itself suggests a temporal and indexical designation: whether or not an artwork is ‘contemporary’ seems to depend on its temporal relation to the speaker, so that this is simply the art made now or recently. At the same time, however, ‘contemporary art’ has come to mean something more than just a temporal slice; it seems to stand for an identifiable subsection of recent artistic production. It seems that we can classify both Saville and Perry, to return to my two examples so far, as contemporary artists, as opposed to, say, merely a recent painter and a recent maker of ceramics and tapestries. Saville is often discussed in the context of Young British Artist, who are by no means all painters; Perry won the Turner Prize in 2003, against diverse competition including the Chapman brothers, Anya Gallaccio and Willie Doherty. The ‘contemporary’ label, one might think, picks out something that differentiates these diverse artists from the rest of recent cultural production, and this sense tends to get reinforced by the institutional framework, within which the label has come to obtain particular weight and validity: the framework of international biennales and festivals (such as *documenta* and the Venice Biennale), dedicated museums (Los Angeles, Sydney, Chicago, Tokyo, Krakow, Berlin, Zagreb and many other cities all have a dedicated ‘Museum of Contemporary Art’), specialised contemporary art publications (such as *Frieze* and *e-flux*), a host of smaller contemporary art galleries and artists’ spaces, and even academic programmes in ‘Contemporary Art’ (such as the MA at Goldsmiths or the MFA at Edinburgh). If this

label has come to structure our expectations of a particular *kind* of art we are going to experience when we enter one of these institutions, then does that mean there is some essence or cluster of properties which defines it? And, if contemporary art really can be in this way defined, when *did* it begin, and how ‘recent’ is the temporal frame within which it appears?

The answers to these questions are far from settled. In 2009, the journal *October* invited several historians and curators of contemporary art to respond to what Hal Foster described as the somewhat paradoxical situation where, on the one hand, much ‘present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment’, and, on the other, “‘contemporary art’ has become an institutional object in its own right.”¹ Though the responses are varied and marked above all by the desire to flag up the problems inherent in any periodization of the ‘contemporary’, they help to flesh out two popular possibilities.²

The more inclusive option describes as ‘contemporary’ roughly the period from the late 1950s or early 1960s to now. The starting point is here associated in particular with Conceptual Art, Minimalism or even Pop Art, which in their different ways are felt to have begun to erode some of the tenants of painterly and sculptural modernism. It is the shifts precipitated by these movements that are felt to have led to the more full-blown and thoroughgoing ‘postmodernist’ experiments of the 1970s and 80s, which in turn can still be felt down to the present day. How to describe the nature of these changes is again highly contentious, but perhaps the easiest way to do so is by means of the ‘expanded field’ of media and processes within which contemporary art

¹ Foster, 2009: 3.

² Even these two are of course not the *only* two possibilities. Peter Osborne, for example, distinguishes between three ways to delimit the ‘contemporary’: post-1945 art with Abstract Expressionism at its helm; post-1960 art starting with Conceptual Art; and post-1989 art marked by the rise of the international biennale (Osborne, 2013: 18-21).

operates. While bearing a relationship to painting, photography and sculpture, art practices from the post-1960 period are felt to be distinct in that they include many new art forms, such as conceptual art, performance art, land art, installation art, sound art, video art, new media art, participatory art, and a host of other subcategories. As Mark Godfrey notes, the sense that ‘contemporary art’ stretches roughly the period 1960-now seems particularly popular with public museums: as the post-1960 art forms sometimes demand new types of conservation and display, they physically require to be considered separately.³

On the other hand, a narrower conception suggests that ‘contemporary art’ belongs to a more recent time, namely to the time when the theoretical resources and concerns of the category ‘postmodernism’ could no longer sufficiently capture the diversity of new artistic production. On this view, ‘contemporary’ is made to coincide with the new economical and geo-political situation, ensuing after the weakening of the Soviet Union in 1989. This is for example how the historian Terry Smith seems to date ‘the contemporary’; accordingly he identifies three strands of contemporary art: one that perpetuates and heightens the aesthetic of global capitalism (Damien Hirst and the other Young British Artists, Jeff Koons, Julian Schnabel...), a second that thematises the political processes of decolonization (William Kentridge, Shirin Neshat, Steve McQueen...), and a third that closes itself off from global influences to address local issues (Paul Chan, Rivane Neuenschwander...)⁴ Though few are as willing as Smith to identify ‘contemporary’ with the post-1989 world order, this periodization seems

³ Aside from Mark Godfrey’s contribution to the *October* questionnaire, see also those by Miwon Kwon, Alexander Alberro and Helen Molesworth (Foster, 2009: 13-15, 30-32, 55-60, 111-116).

⁴ See Terry Smith’s contribution to the questionnaire (*ibid.*: 46-54). Smith later developed these ideas into a book (Smith, 2009).

implicit in the way several other authors also discuss ‘contemporary art’, if nothing else, on the basis of which examples they choose to include.⁵

‘Contemporary’ then, could be associated with a set of materials, themes or socio-political conditions, and depending on what identification is used, so the temporal lines will be drawn. However, it seems that any such periodization is best used as an initial point of orientation, rather than as a means for defining the category. The interesting problems do not seem to depend on getting the definition ‘right’. For example, it seems quite possible to have productive debates about the effects of globalisation on art, or about permutations within a particular medium, without tying that conversation to any particular definition of what ‘contemporary’ might be. If anything, the diversity of works encompassed by the label suggests that we should avoid treating ‘contemporary art’ as a cohesive and unified *kind of art*; instead, we can simply recognize that the loosely designated field of recent artistic practice offers up many distinct problems to investigate. This is the approach I propose to take here. Short of a definition, I will draw my examples of contemporary art from works made after 1960, and my choice of examples will be guided not by some coherent and all-inclusive account of what ‘contemporary’ is, but by the sense that many works of this period crystallise distinct challenges to the philosophical treatment of the questions of artistic and epistemic value. The hope is not to say something that is true of contemporary art in general, but rather to say how specific moments within contemporary art may help refine our philosophical theories.⁶

⁵ For example, in his *Very Short Introduction to Contemporary Art*, Julian Stallabrass does not offer an explicit periodization, but tends to discuss works after 1990 (Stallabrass, 2004).

⁶ In her forthcoming *Immaterial: A Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Sherri Irvin suggests a similar approach: rather than define contemporary art, she focusses on a ‘cluster of tendencies’ that become salient in recent art and that she finds philosophically interesting (Irvin, forthcoming: Chapter 1).

However, before I identify these challenges, it is important to also emphasise points of continuity between philosophical theories so far considered and contemporary art. In Chapter 2 I formulated and defended a conception of artistic value as value *as art*, and in Chapter 3 I presented the major views within philosophy of art as to the ways in which art makes significant knowledge available. Considering a few examples of recent artistic practice, I now want to investigate how these models, developed primarily in relation to older arts and in relation to literature, can or cannot be applied to cases of contemporary art as well. So, how easy or difficult is it to use extant philosophical theories in relation to contemporary art?

2. Points of ease

Consider the work of the American artist Ryan Trecartin, such as his hypnotic video *P.opular S.ky (section ish)* (2009) (Figure 6). Trecartin's videos exist primarily on Internet platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo, but are also shown as multi-channel video installations in a gallery setting. In the videos, an array of trashy, alluring performers stumble about, drink, party and exchange snappy put downs. The camera shifts about and the video rapidly cuts from one scene to the next; garish colour filters highlight the action; strings of text and visual logos are periodically pasted over what we see; the picture heaves, billows and contracts with cheap special effects of the open source video editing software. There is no sense or plot to what anybody is doing or saying, but there is an engrossing familiarity. These are the overstated gestures, lurid punch lines, clunky buzzwords, perpetual sound effects, ephemeral phrases, and easy posturing that a whole generation reared on the memes and media enabled by Web 2.0—Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, 4chan, illegal streaming websites—has been exposed to for the better part of our on-line lives.

Trecartin has managed to find a way to visually and aurally amplify the *kind of experience* that the Internet characteristically presents, and in doing so he makes the experience patent and present. This interpretation of Trecartin's work may be usefully compared to the model of experiential knowledge I considered in the last chapter. I did not find the view fully satisfying, but the basic suggestion there was that a work of art can either acquaint the audience with what a certain experience is like or articulate something about that experience more clearly. Trecartin's work seems to fall in the second category; we here have viewers who *are* already acquainted with the frantic, absorbing phenomenology of the Internet, but only come to realise its nature more fully through the work.⁷ The plausibility of this interpretation needs to be confirmed by the work itself; but what interests me here is that in this instance a work of contemporary art seems to fit the analytic model of experiential knowledge quite well. A work stimulates a particular, already familiar experiential content in its audience, but in a way that over-emphasises it, thereby suggesting to the audience a piece of significant knowledge about the nature of our Internet experiences.

Consider, secondly, a case that suggests works of contemporary art make practical moral knowledge available. The Czech artist Kateřina Šedá works within the field that has come to be described as 'relational aesthetics';⁸ her works involve facilitating new interactions and behaviours among her audiences. Her work *There is nothing there* (2003) was made in a small Czech village, called Ponetovice, population 300. The titular phrase is a Czech cliché, describing the sentiment that in small villages and towns there is nothing of importance to see or do. Šedá spent much time interviewing the local inhabitants to establish how they tend to spend their time, and, after

⁷ For discussion of works that incorporate aspects of the Internet into artistic practice—sometimes referred to as 'Post-Internet art'—see, for example Vierkant, 2009.

⁸ Bourriaud, 2002.

considerable persuasion, convinced them to completely synchronize their actions for the duration of one Saturday only. They went shopping at the same time; they opened their windows at the same time; they went for a drink all at the same time; and they all went to bed promptly at 10pm (Figure 7).

Šedá's work does not argue for a particular interpretation of these events, and it does not seek to conclusively establish under what description rural life in the Czech Republic should be seen. But it does seem to want to influence the participants' affective and cognitive attitudes with regards to that life. To explain what that change may amount to, we may want to recall accounts of practical moral knowledge developed with regards to literature. If it is right that the prevailing attitude of the villagers used to be that there is 'nothing there', the simple action of undertaking this 'nothing' together places the participants in a position where they can take up a more positive attitude towards their everyday activities. Of course, whether the shift actually happens—and whether it is justified—is something to consider upon closer engagement with the work. However, in principle the epistemic value of the work, for the participants at least, seems to be explicable along the lines of the analytic model of practical moral knowledge. Just as, for example, Henry James' novels might contribute to our tacit knowledge of what the good life is, here is a work of relational aesthetics, which attempts to align the participants more closely with a better way of seeing their lives.

Finally, with regards to connections between artistic knowledge and abstract thinking, let me draw again on the Grayson Perry example. In the Šedá case, the cognitive shift involved is practical and particular; it might be expressed, for example, in a particular judgement of a participant, such as, 'Ah, perhaps our Saturdays are not so bad after all.' On another model I considered, the continuity view, works of

literature may also play a role in abstract thinking about specifically philosophical concepts, by directing us towards a corner of lived experience, one that needs to be accounted for within a philosophical framework. While it is possible to understand works of participatory art, such as Šedá's, as furthering practical knowledge, a work such as Perry's installation *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* is richer in conceptual pointers. As we have seen, 'Do not look too hard for meaning here' are the opening words of the exhibition, while the words 'Hold your beliefs lightly!' are emblazoned on the pottery and weaved into tapestries. These seem like clues that point towards abstract questions. How should we find meaning without looking for it; what is it to hold beliefs, but hold them lightly? The work does not argue for a thesis, but, within the context of these clues, we might well find that the quasi-religious significance given to Perry's everyday objects points us towards the suggestion that a satisfying account of a meaningful life should make room for play, pretence and ritual, rather than for doxastic beliefs. The full philosophical implications of that are to be figured out separately, but it is Perry's objects which nudge us in this direction.

I have merely offered a few starting points, but looking at these three examples it seems plausible enough that *mutatis mutandis* one could apply the models of epistemic value discussed in the previous chapter. With regards to the significant knowledge constraint, one would have to argue that these contemporary artworks make available some world-directed rather than work-directed mental state, to which standards of correctness and justification apply. This might be a realisation about the nature of a particular kind of online experience (Trecartin), an affective attitude one takes towards simple everyday tasks (Šedá), or a sense of direction that an inquiry into meaningfulness in a secular life should take (Perry). With regards to the 'as art' constraint, one would need to show that the epistemic gain in question follows from

the specifics of each artistic expression. At least initially, it seems we should not encounter any problems we have not already encountered with literature. However, when we broaden the range of our examples and examine them more closely, we see that matters are more complex.

3. Points of difficulty

As argued in Chapter 2, artistic value is the value works of art have when we attend to them *as art*. This mode of attention is ostensibly defined. It denotes a particular appreciative practice, which is variable, contested, changeable, and difficult to pin down, but is nevertheless one that we rely on, when we approach artworks. Analytic philosophers writing on artistic value have largely taken the appreciative practice of art appreciation to be more or less stable. Occasionally, there may have been some dispute about how much weight one should give to the content of a painting *versus* a painting's formal composition; or some disagreement over how much philosophical reflection it is proper to engage in when reading a novel. On the whole, though, these disputes have not been in the foreground; how we attend to art as art has been taken to be something familiar, and something that does not require prior justification. The first point of difficulty for applying models from analytic philosophy to contemporary art is that contemporary art introduces several novel features to art making and to art appreciation.

Among analytic philosophers, Arthur Danto was probably the first to write about the specifics of the appreciative practice surrounding certain contemporary artworks. While for Danto all appreciation of art requires inculcation into an artistic practice, with contemporary art we seem to be more likely to find ourselves in a position of the kind occupied by 'Testadura' who sees only a commonplace thing where there is a

ready-made or only messy paint where there is an abstraction.⁹ Danto influentially wrote on some new features which we have to get used to attending to in works of contemporary art; for example, he examined the rhetorical significance of the stylistic quotations and appropriations in works of Pop Art. This, he claims, becomes central to the meaning of the work, rather than what is actually depicted.¹⁰ Sherri Irvin catalogues a list of features that often command attention in contemporary art, and which are less common in older art forms: for example, the symbolic significance of the material of which the work is made, the damage wrought upon the work by time, or the work's interactivity.¹¹

Such new features may be a source of some confusion or resistance. James Young has argued, for example, that all 'avant-garde' art fails to engage the viewers through properly artistic features (whereby Young's understanding of 'avant-garde' encompasses much of what we might deem contemporary art).¹² Certainly, a work like Trecartin's or Šedá's might seem pretty confusing or 'not even art' to someone not familiar with Internet art or community-based art; to approach these works *as art* one needs to familiarise oneself with what that involves. The point, however, is not just that in order to write about contemporary art one needs to become familiar with it (this should go without saying), but rather also that, to a degree, some of the new forms of artistic expression are *themselves still in flux and contested*. When Malcolm Budd writes about Chardin's *House of Cards* or Martha Nussbaum about James' *The Golden Bowl*, they are relying on a relatively stable, familiar normative practice of

⁹ Danto, 1964: 577-580.

¹⁰ Danto, 1981: 142-148.

¹¹ Irvin, forthcoming: Chapter 1. Aside from Irvin's book—at the moment of writing only two chapters are available online—there has been little systematic treatment of the category 'contemporary art' within analytic philosophy. Issues of ontology (Irvin, 2005b) and interpretation (Irvin, 2005a; Maes, 2010) have been sporadically addressed, but these are not directly relevant to my inquiry.

¹² Young, 2001: 135ff. For a reply see Irvin, 2003.

what is involved in appreciating an 18th century figurative painting or an early 20th century novel, and they can then move quickly onto the question of what value that process realises. The practice is less stable with some contemporary works. For example, does it matter whether we view Trecartin's videos online or in a gallery? Is Šedá's work only accessible to the people who participated in it, or, in some way, also to a secondary audience through documentation of the event? Does Perry's exhibition convey meaning through an irreverent pastiche, through allegorical readings, through the making of essentially useful objects to be incorporated into our everyday lives, through a subversion of the role of the museum curator, or through some combination of the above? These dilemmas have no definite answer in contemporary art practices themselves. In this sense, contemporary art practices are often *experimental*; that is to say, the interest of many of the works discussed here is not (only) in what they can be seen to achieve within a familiar artistic practice, but in their sometimes haphazard attempts to push artistic practice into new and unfamiliar territory. Philosophical writing on contemporary art, then, cannot simply inhabit the relevant appreciative practice, pick a few canonical works, and proceed to establish what their value comes down to. Philosophical writing on contemporary art needs to account for the sense in which contemporary art is not a finished business, and clarify what the experiments *within* art amount to. That may involve selecting not necessarily the 'best' (intuitively most artistically accomplished) works, but examples that expand or experiment with the artistic practice.

This is the first difficulty for applying the analytic models of artistic and epistemic value to contemporary art. There is, however, another rather deep-going challenge. Philosophers since Danto have mostly come to acknowledge that almost anything can be art, as long as it is placed within an art context and attended to as art. What seemed

like non-artworks (readymades, Pop Art appropriations) were transfigured into genuine works of art through their entry into the art world. Now, however, the reverse phenomenon seems to be underway. Works of contemporary art burst out of the artworld, and lead a double life as acts of political activism, works of mass culture, programmes of outreach and education, technology development or as statements in the public discourse. On the one hand, Kateřina Šedá's *There is nothing there*, and her other interventions, seem to call for attention as an artwork. Like participatory performance artists such as Tino Sehgal, Carsten Höller or Marina Abramović, Šedá can be seen as setting up a subtle, participatory game, which interestingly transforms the participants' experience—even though, unlike the work of these superstar artists, *There is nothing there* does not take place at a biennale or an international gallery, but in a small Czech village. On the other hand, though, it seems also possible to evaluate Šedá's work simply as a work of experimental social policy making: here is an experimental attempt to get people to do some activities together in order to make rural village life a little less boring, and this might be part of a broader endeavour for social cohesiveness. Our evaluation of the work seems ambiguous between two quite different frames of mind: evaluating the success of something as art, and evaluating its success in terms of how it functions within a broader social context—not *as art* but simply as social activism.

The ambiguity between these two modes of evaluation seems to be writ large across many recent contemporary art practices. In terms of older work, it is easy to think of artists who are firmly anchored in historical narratives of recent art, but whose importance seems inseparable from their political activity: the Argentine Conceptual Artists gathered around the collective Grupo de artistas de vanguardia (1968-), South African photographers such as Peter Magubane (b. 1932) or David Goldblatt (b.

1930), the Yugoslav/Slovene collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (1984-), or the American collectives Art Workers' Coalition (1969-1971), and the artistic branch of the American direct action group ACT UP (1987-). More recently, however, contemporary artists have expanded their practices to include not just direct activism, but many kinds of social activity, to the point where the concept of a self-sufficient 'art world' has been declared obsolete by some art historians.¹³ The work of the American artist Theaster Gates is typical of what has become known as the 'social turn'; his bright renovations of abandoned buildings in Chicago have been an art-critical success, but they have also been lauded as efficient urban planning, quite outside of the art context. The work of the Russian art collective Voina—whose most well-known offshoot are the art punk band Pussy Riot—is sometimes indistinguishable from acts of violent political disobedience: their art actions have included painting a huge phallus on a drawbridge or destroying a police vehicle. Works of what has become known as sci-art or bio art, such as that of the Brazilian artist Eduardo Kac, blend art and biotechnology. Grayson Perry's site-specific exhibition is unmistakably artistic, but as other examples of site-specific work it also doubles as a kind of historical research, and cannot be fully accounted for without reference to Perry's not so obviously artistic activities, such his lectures, writing and documentaries.

This broad phenomenon is what I will refer to as the erosion of the autonomy of artistic practice,¹⁴ and it is easy to see how this can cause some trouble for established ways of thinking about artistic and epistemic value, both of which have the concept of valuing something *as art* at its core. The practices mentioned above on the one hand

¹³ Lee, 2012.

¹⁴ Cf. Rancière, 2002.

demand to be attended to *as art*—as new, unusual art, perhaps, but nevertheless as art—but on the other hand, they also seem to attempt to realise values quite apart from any such attention. This, then, is the second difficulty for applying the analytic models to contemporary art: many contemporary art practices no longer seem to possess their own, fully autonomous modes of production and appreciation, but willingly blur into other fields. The very distinction between attending to artworks as art and attending to them within the broader context of the artist’s political or discursive activities therefore needs to be revisited.

The third point of difficulty is easier to explain; this is the self-reflective and self-critical nature of contemporary art. Philosophical theories of artistic and epistemic value have mostly taken as a starting point works of art that are appreciated in an atmosphere of relative theoretical sparseness. For example, writing about the moral vision in Henry James, Martha Nussbaum feels the need to exculpate herself for relying, very occasionally, on what James wrote in the foreword to his novels, rather than exclusively focusing on the novels themselves.¹⁵ The idea here seems to be that we ought to elucidate the value art has for the ‘average’ consumer of novels (or other works of art), one who is presumed not to be overly interested in art theoretical questions. Contemporary art, however, exists in anything but in an art theoretical vacuum. For the Liverpool Biennial 2010, Alfredo Jaar presented *The Marx Lounge*, which consisted of a reading room and a series of talks. Thomas Hirschhorn is well-known for his ‘monuments’ to philosophers, such as Spinoza, Deleuze, Bataille and Gramsci, which involve performance pieces as well as sculptural elements. Even less philosophically minded artists are often highly self-reflective and critical about their practice, and freely discuss what preconceptions about art they are aiming to revise:

¹⁵ Nussbaum, 1990: 10.

Grayson Perry's frank catalogue, interviews and lectures are a good example. That is not to suggest that philosophical writing on contemporary art must take the artists' word as gospel, or that it needs to proceed by means of some theory that happens to inspire contemporary artists. However, a philosophy that simply attempts to apply older philosophical models to contemporary art will risk getting it quite wrong. Philosophy, it seems, needs to engage in a dialogue on what artistic value is, rather than simply impose some theory top-down. Engaging with an already existing body of theory and artists' writing, however, might require us to hold onto our own theoretical models more lightly.

As illustrated above, it seems in principle possible to apply the models of epistemic and artistic value as art to works of contemporary art. One can imagine a rather straightforward philosophy of contemporary art, whereby one would take specific artistic categories from within contemporary art—for example, post-Internet art, relational aesthetics and institutional intervention—and would then (i) describe what it is to appreciate as art the artworks within these categories, paying attention to the specifics of each category; and, then, (ii) attempt to identify what kind of value is realised in that process, for example, what kind of knowledge is made available to the audience. While such an approach might yield interesting results, the three difficulties pointed to suggest that this would not be the most philosophically exciting way to proceed. Artistic experimentation, the erosion of artistic autonomy and the high degree of self-reflexivity all suggest that a philosopher cannot proceed by applying extant models, but needs to engage art in a way that would tie in more closely with live concerns and developments within contemporary art production.

So how should one proceed? The difficulties mentioned point to a need for specificity, engaging contemporary art not by picking scattered examples from the last

twenty or even sixty years, but by giving more attention to quite particular changes and shifts within the recent art practice. In the second part of the thesis, I will attempt to address the issues of the artistic and epistemic value of art from 'within' three recent movements in contemporary art. These movements each present different challenges to the philosophical models I have so far been employing; precisely by being experimental, by merging into non-art fields of activity, and by being self-reflexive and relying on artist's manifestoes and other theoretical texts. Each of these movements puts forward a particular claim to epistemic value; be it in relation to philosophy, education or criticism of science. These movements are Conceptual Art, the art of the social turn, and bio art.

PART II

THREE STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Chapter 5 | Art and Philosophy: Conceptual Art

1. Philosophers and Conceptual Artists

How should a philosopher approach Conceptual Art? A recent attempt has been made in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*,¹ an anthology of papers edited by Peter Goldie and Elizabeth Schellekens. The collection concludes with an invited response by the collective Art & Language, one of the most prominent artistic collectives within the original Conceptual Art movement of the late 1960s. Here, a curious breakdown in communication between the philosophers and the artists becomes visible. Art & Language seem highly resistant to the attempt at building bridges. They write:

We were surprised to be invited to speak at the conference on Philosophy and Conceptual Art. [...] The brief for the conference seemed historically naïve – unaware of the vicissitudes and variations in the use of the term conceptual art. [...] What was disturbing was the sense of aestheticians' dreariness: a sort of killing abstraction that failed to recognize the practical and philosophical connectedness of the territory. Edwardian uncles get round to it after thirty-five years and get it wrong. (Imagine philosophy discovering cubism in 1947.)²

The causticity may be typical of Art and Language's communication with other parties, but is nevertheless surprising since the evaluation of Conceptual Art in the volume is largely positive. What could have gone wrong?

The passage quoted presents at least three charges, which are worth disentangling. The first of these is contained in the characterisation of the philosophers as 'Edwardian uncles'; the philosophers are presented as thinkers of a very antiquated kind. The difficulty, then, may be that philosophers have applied to Conceptual Art a

¹ Goldie and Schellekens, 2007.

² Art&Language, 2007: 157.

philosophical method whose concerns and methodologies were developed quite autonomously from the more recent history of which Conceptual Art was a product. Indeed, some of the key questions in analytic aesthetics have been developed in relation to examples roughly stretching the period from the 1870s to 1930s: Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, James' *The Golden Bowl*, Duchamp's *The Fountain*, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. 'Getting it wrong', asking the wrong questions with regards to more recent movements like Conceptual Art, might be the result of this lag.

The second complaint has to do with an insufficient art-historical sensitivity to the 'vicissitudes and variants' in the use of the term 'conceptual art'. This charge is in part unfair. At the outset of the collected volume, Goldie and Schellekens distinguish between 'Conceptual Art', used to denote the art movement that existed roughly between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, and 'conceptual art', which they use to denote a much broader group of 20th century artworks, in which ideas rather than sensory pleasure take the central place, and which might include for example also Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) and Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991).³ Art & Language make a similar narrow/broad distinction.⁴ So it seems that their disagreement with the philosophers cannot be with regard to this ambiguity of the term but rather with the philosophers' alleged insensitivity to the *varied* nature of what each term denotes. Art & Language exhort us to pay more attention to the very specific and often qualitative differences between different 'conceptual' movements that succeeded Conceptual Art. These differences, importantly, have their beginnings in the fissures within the original Conceptual Art

³ Goldie and Schellekens, 2007: x-xii.

⁴ Art&Language, 2007: 259.

movement *itself*. The practices of, say, Art & Language, Joseph Kosuth and Sol LeWitt all carried within them very different potentialities.

The third charge has to do with the failure to ‘recognize the practical and philosophical connectedness’ of the territory. The allegation is that the philosophers failed to take seriously the protestations by some Conceptual Artists that what they were doing *was* a kind of philosophy or, in any case, had an interesting kind of relation to philosophy or to theory itself.⁵ It is odd that philosophy of art should ignore attempts by the artists whose work forms the subject of their investigation to encroach on philosophy’s territory.

As we shall see, these reprimands are not entirely fair to the philosophers who have contributed to the volume; nevertheless, the remarks are useful to focus the challenge at hand. Though Conceptual Art offers many points of philosophical interest,⁶ the one that seems crucial is that of ‘connectedness’ of philosophical and artistic territory; this will be my focus as I investigate the epistemic value of Conceptual Art. After a short introduction to Conceptual Art (section 2), I will turn to the treatment of epistemic value as addressed within the *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* anthology (section 3). On the whole, these approaches apply, ‘top-down’, dichotomy models for thinking about knowledge in art. These have been developed with regards to older art forms, and are here applied to the Conceptual Art movement *as a whole*. I will show the limits of this approach. Instead (section 4), I will provide an analysis of epistemic value in Conceptual Art that more carefully traces the

⁵ Charles Harrison writes: ‘The British artists [chiefly Art & Language] seem to have been far less confident that they what they were producing was art – or they were far less interested in the issue; and they were far less sure of the grounds on which enterprises might be distributed between such categories as “artwork”, “notes” or “essay”’. (Harrison, 2002 [online edition: p. 5]).

⁶ The issues broached by contributors to the volume have included, for example, trying to find identity conditions for a conceptual work (Hopkins, 2007), establishing what role is played by imagination in learning about conceptual works (Stock, 2007), or the thesis that conceptual art is not really a plastic art but its own art form (Lopes, 2007).

‘vicissitudes’ within the movement, and that focusses on its complex, but continuous relationship with philosophy. I do not develop these claims in relation to Conceptual Art as a whole, but by focussing closely on a specific shift in emphasis in a handful of Conceptual works by Adrian Piper. Piper’s distinctive artistic experiment *within* Conceptual Art is thereby shown to offer an interesting and philosophically underexplored model of how art may be epistemically valuable in a way that is continuous with philosophy.

2. What was Conceptual Art?

Art historians usually locate the beginnings of Conceptual Art around 1965 or 1966, and describe the group identity of the movement as based on some combination of the following tenets: privileging of ideas, intentions and concepts; denigration of the perceptual encounter with an art object (sometimes to the point of its complete elimination); opposition to the theory and practices of modernism; and the destabilization and questioning of the usual channels of art commerce and distribution.⁷ The work of artists such as Joseph Kosuth (*One and Three Chairs*, 1965; *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)*, 1966), Christine Kozlov (*Sound Structure*, 1965-6), Mel Bochner (*Working Drawings and other Visible Things on Paper not Necessarily Meant to be Viewed as Art*, 1966), On Kawara (date paintings, 1966), John Baldessari (*Everything is Purged...*, 1966), John Latham (*Art and Culture*, 1966), Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin (*Air Show / Air Conditioning*, 1966-7) are usually cited among the earliest American and British examples of the movement, though these artists, at this stage at least, did not necessarily think of themselves as a part of a larger group.

⁷ For relevant histories of Conceptual Art see especially Alberro and Stimson, 1999; Buchloh, 1990; Godfrey, 1998; Lippard, 1997; Morgan, 1996; Osborne, 2002; Wood, 2002.

The identity of the movement was forged through group exhibitions like Seth Siegelaub's *1-31 January* and *1-31 March* in New York and Lucy Lippard's *557.087* in Seattle (all 1969), and writings, particularly Sol LeWitt's 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' (*Artforum*, 1967) and 'Sentences on Conceptual Art' (0-9), Lucy Lippard and John Chander's piece 'The Dematerialization of Art' (*Art International*, 1968), Joseph Kosuth's 'Art After Philosophy' (*Studio International*, 1969), and the launch of the *Art-Language* journal by the group Art & Language. By 1970, the movement was recognized by the art establishment (as, for example, in the *Information* exhibition at MoMA). However, by 1972 Conceptual Art began to show signs of internal fissures and decline. It is at that point that Lucy Lippard noted its adaptation to the commercial system and declared its failure.⁸ Most art historians consider the movement to have come to an end or fallen out of the mainstream in the early to mid-1970s, with other artistic currents displacing it in prominence. This short chronology focusses on the New York and English variants of Conceptual Art, and I will not have the space to consider equally important French, Eastern European and South American counterparts. For the sake of convenience I will use the label Conceptual Art to refer to the extension of this movement in the Anglophone world.

Adrian Piper was one of the younger participants in the movement (she was born in 1948), though she was involved with it early on, from at least 1968, initially through her acquaintance with Sol Le Witt.⁹ As early as 1969 she is mentioned by Joseph Kosuth in his manifesto 'Art After Philosophy' as one of the movement's core participants practising 'pure' conceptual art, and from that same year onward she is included in most of the defining group exhibitions, including *Information* at MoMA in

⁸ Lippard, 1997: xii.

⁹ Piper, 1996: 3ff. Piper, 2007.

1970. I will argue that Piper's work and its changing relationship to Conceptual Art offers a singularly interesting subject matter for research into the epistemic value of contemporary art. To do so, I need to posit something like a 'mainstream' of Conceptual Art, to which Piper's work bears this interesting relationship: something that is at the outset difficult to do, since Conceptual Art—even when narrowly circumscribed to the activity of Anglophone artists who mostly all knew each other—was anything but an unvarying entity. To deal with this issue, and to give us something to start with, I propose to outline three *tendencies* within Conceptual Art, in relation to which we can consider the work of any particular artist. These are not to be thought of as common denominators of the movement, but rather as a heuristic device: as general trends partly identified by Conceptual artists and partly by their historians, and against which the 'vicissitudes' of individual artistic outputs may be better understood.¹⁰

The first of these tendencies concerns the subject matter for Conceptual Art: that of abstract concepts. We may think of this tendency as breaking aggressively with the theoretical tenets of Greenberg's modernism, shunning painterly abstraction in favour of what is variously referred to as *ideas* or *concepts*. As Sol LeWitt puts it: 'In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work.'¹¹ Various artists' writings from the period echo LeWitt's pithy remark, variously stressing the likeness between art and propositions of philosophy,¹² the importance of the artist's

¹⁰ As several historians have stressed (e.g. Alberro and Buchmann, 2006) Conceptual Art was not as unified a movement as its many manifestoes, group exhibitions and attempts at formulating 'pure' Conceptual Art in writings of both Kosuth and Art & Language would suggest. Consider, for example, Benjamin Buchloh's observation that the different tendencies had to do with different interpretations that Conceptual Artists had of Minimalism (Buchloh, 1990: 108ff). Privileging some of these tendencies over others caused considerable rifts within the movement, as the vitriolic responses to Buchloh's account by Joseph Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub suggest (Kosuth and Siegelaub, 1991).

¹¹ LeWitt, 1967.

¹² See especially Kosuth, 1969.

idea of which the physical work is merely a communication, and the unimportance of the physical work to the point where it becomes almost redundant.¹³ However, amid all this enthusiasm for concepts it is important to note that what an idea or a concept is taken to be in fact varies from artist to artist and is, as with LeWitt's own 'Paragraphs' and 'Sentences on Conceptual Art', often left undefined.

On the one hand, 'idea' or 'concept' could mean some *abstract notion*. A good example is Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1969) (Figure 8), which simultaneously exhibited a real chair, a photograph of that chair and a blown-up dictionary definition of 'chair'. The work seems to be about the abstract notion (concept) 'chair'; it is this notion, represented by the oversized dictionary definition, which seems to be curiously displayed side-by-side with an actual chair. The late Conceptual work *Oak Tree* (1973) by the British artist Michael Craig-Martin is also a good example; here the artist displayed a glass of water on a shelf together with a note explaining that the glass has been transformed into an oak tree by the artist's intention. The work's challenge to the viewer is in the demand to apply the abstract notion 'oak tree' to something to which we would not usually apply it. Each work seems to be about the relationship between concepts and things.

On the other hand, however, 'concept' has also been taken to mean something quite different: some kind of *thought process* that occurs to the artist; such as an 'in one's head' consideration of a geometrical shape and the different procedures that might transform this shape into another. Here 'concept' comes closer to the German *Konzept*, which can also mean a first draft of something before it is realised. This is

¹³ To quote just two early examples, Mel Bochner writes of 'logics' [*sic*] which 'precede the work' and govern its structure (Bochner, 1967/1999: 23), while Terry Atkinson argues with Lucy Lippard on the exact meaning of 'dematerialization' and describes his own practice as engaged in "'objectless" quiddities... developed inside what I can, at the moment, only call a framework of mention.' (Atkinson, 1968/1999: 54)

the sense of ‘concept’ that Sol LeWitt seems to pick up on in some of his serialist work, whereby he would produce a certain drawing design, which he would not necessarily draw but merely denote by a simple mathematical pattern. The design could then be executed by either himself or someone else, and would then equally result in the artwork. For example, for his contribution to “Xerox Book” (1968), a booklet devised by the New York art dealer Seth Siegelaub, LeWitt separated each page into 16 squares in a 4x4 formation, and systematically assigned each square a number between 1 and 4. These numbers then represent a pattern of either vertical, horizontal or diagonal lines; and permutations of the formation appear over twenty-five pages (cf. Figure 9). This set of permutations, presumably, *is* the concept or idea that the artist communicates: ‘[I] did the drawings [of Xerox Book and wall drawings] as a kind of documentation, to clarify the system, because this particular system seemed to be very difficult for people to glom on to.’¹⁴ The ‘concept’ that LeWitt took to be of paramount importance in ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’ is an abstract system of lines and shifts between them, which one can come up with in one’s head, and point to by marks on the paper.

So, while prominent Conceptual Artists seemed to have at least these two different ideas of what the ‘concept’ of ‘Conceptual’ art is, it may be interesting to note that one constant across both approaches is that they are both concerned with primarily *abstract* thought. Both abstract *notions* (‘chair’, ‘oak tree’) and permutative thought *processes* (from the diagonal lines, to the vertical, to the horizontal, to the diagonal) are abstracted from instantiations in specific objects, and are undistinguished by personal, emotional, political or even just visually distinctive properties.

¹⁴ Interview, in Norvell, 2001): 117.

The second tendency to note has to do with a development of a certain kind of shared aesthetic or, simply put, appearance of artworks among Conceptual Artists. This aesthetic involves a pared-down geometrical and angular look related to New York Minimalism, which Conceptual Artists built upon by including words, technical-sounding descriptions, type-set notes, and by eschewing sculpture and painting in favour of a variety of easily transportable and reproducible media such as photocopies, mail art, perishables, intangible (merely described) objects, and performances – an aesthetic that is apparent in the LeWitt, Kosuth and Craig-Martin examples discussed above. It is important to mention this aesthetic separately, since it is not strictly implied by the Conceptual Artists' concern with abstract ideas. It is not obvious that abstract concepts could not be represented with iridescent and organic as opposed to black-and-white and angular shapes.¹⁵ What seems to be going on, instead, is, first, an affirmation of a kind of 'look' that a technical, scientific or philosophical inquiry often has, and, second, an attempt to divert the attention of the viewer away from the medium to the idea behind it.

The third tendency has to do with an artistic methodology, which emphasises an intellectual process and premeditation. The artistic process has to do with establishing the concept, plotting through what its communication demands, and *only then* manipulating physical materials to achieve that communication. Often, therefore, the final execution can be achieved by anyone following the artist's instructions, as per LeWitt's work. This contrasts with a conception of artistic process as an 'as-you-go-along' manipulation of materials, as attempt and correction until it 'looks right', and it also contrasts with the idea of the artistic process as an immediate, involved, 'inspired'

¹⁵ Some late work by first generation Conceptual Artists deploys a more obviously appealing, colourful aesthetic, as I discuss later (see Figure 11).

activity, associated, for example, with Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. With Conceptual Art the artwork, as well as the audience's interaction with it, becomes more planned and controlled by a previously devised protocol.

These tendencies are general enough to allow for further interpretative complications within the movement, to which Art and Language draw attention. Indeed, all three tendencies may be observed in Adrian Piper's early work (1968-70). *Sixteen Permutations on the Planar Analysis of a Square* (1968) (Figure 10) the artist seems to execute a description of a changing geometrical shape, in a visually regimented language. Piper's notes for the work suggest a keenness that her audience should engage with the idea to which the work points; the 'idea' here is presumably the mental process of imagining a geometric shape undergoing a series of pleasingly symmetrical permutations.¹⁶ This seems similar to LeWitt's approach, and suggests that in order to appreciate this work as art, the audience is supposed to imagine the permutations, aided by the visual representation. Other works of this period, while interested in mental *processes*, appear also (or more so) to be concerned with the relationship between abstract notions and things. This is, as evidenced by Piper's references to the 'objectness' of a thing and its 'nonrelational qualities', its 'referential and representative qualities', and its 'perceptually unavailable' properties.¹⁷ A good example is her *Hypothesis* series (1968), for which Piper takes herself, as an object with a consciousness, to be the primary object of her conceptual inquiry. For the work, she went about her daily business, but—for a prescribed period of time and at prescribed intervals—she recorded the contents of her own body's consciousness by taking a snap with a camera held at her forehead. Aesthetically and methodologically,

¹⁶ Piper, 1996: I: 3-5.

¹⁷ *Re: Three Untitled Projects* (written 1969; *ibid.*: I: 17-18).

Piper's work is typical of her artistic context; it invariably involves a pared-down aesthetic and is previously planned and executed rather than produced through spontaneous making. In a characteristically Conceptual mode of presentation, using graph paper, documentation photographs and text, she tracks the movement of her body in the final presentation; the whole process had been meticulously prearranged, as the strict time intervals within which she captures the visual contents of her consciousness suggest.

As dominant as these three tendencies—abstraction, pared-down aesthetics and premeditation—were within Conceptual Art, it is important to note that within them there were many more or less intended disturbances, not least in the work of Adrian Piper herself. In the performance *Meat into Meat* (1968), originally entitled *Five Unrelated Time Pieces*, she documented the time process during which five objects (four hamburger patties and a man) come together (during the process of the man eating them). Quickly it became apparent, though, that the piece was not about this 'metaphysical' inquiry into the travelling and merging of abstract entities, but about the vegetarian artist's confrontation with her aggressively carnivorous boyfriend.¹⁸ *Food for the Spirit* (1971) is also different—a touching performance piece that is documented by a nude self-portrait photograph of the artist, who had spent weeks fasting and studying Kant, and which serves to her as a reminder that she has a body as well as a mind. When a viewer contemplates either piece, she is invited to empathise with the physical and emotional predicament of the artist; this is quite contrary to the Conceptual mainstream with its emphasis on abstraction and intellect.

¹⁸ *ibid.*: I: 9-10

Even in the days of pure conceptualism when Piper was, as she describes it, ‘drunk’ on ‘abstract thought’, something human occasionally crept into her work.¹⁹

3. Conceptual Art: philosophical investigations

As noted, contributions to *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* consider a host of philosophical issues; I will address those touching on epistemic value: these are by Diarmuid Costello, Peter Goldie and Elizabeth Schellekens. All three philosophers espouse a pluralist conception of artistic value and use this to suggest that Conceptual Art has both aesthetic and epistemic value. The methodology of these papers is to establish certain general properties that Conceptual Art is taken to possess, by means of referring to mainstream examples, such as the works of LeWitt, Kosuth and Craig-Martin; and then to apply to these properties extant philosophical models of epistemic and aesthetic value. This methodology, I will argue, is only partially successful.

Elizabeth Schellekens argues that Conceptual Art can yield propositional knowledge.²⁰ She uses two examples to demonstrate this claim. The Art Workers Coalition shocking black and white photograph *Q: And babies? A. And babies.* (1970) shows pile of bodies by a road in Vietnam with the question and answer laid over the image in a stark red font. According to Schellekens, this can yield propositional knowledge that ‘innocent people have suffered tremendously as victims of US foreign policy’. Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs*, on the other hand, can give us propositional knowledge that ‘there is such a thing as the metaphysical relation between appearance and reality’. Schellekens stresses, however, that this cannot be the whole story of the works’ value, since such information could be easily obtained without any specifically

¹⁹ *ibid.*: I: xxxv; 227

²⁰ Schellekens, 2007.

artistic intervention, and so she claims that, in addition, each work brings us a kind of ‘experiential knowledge’ connected to the propositional knowledge we have obtained:

[C]onceptual art can convey understanding and awareness of being, say, the victim of neo-imperialist or belligerent forces or in the grip of metaphysical doubt in a particular experiential way. The cognitive value of conceptual art – as with most other art, it must be said – lies in breathing life into the idea it seeks to represent by making us grasp the idea phenomenologically.²¹

This, Schellekens argues, is the reason the ‘message is brought home so effectively.’²²

Peter Goldie’s position is similar: works of Conceptual Art can yield experiential knowledge and knowledge of difficult philosophical concepts, though he tends to separate the two. Difficult concepts are made more digestible in visual form: in addition to *One and Three Chairs*, he refers to Michael Craig-Martin’s *An Oak Tree* (1973), which, according to Goldie, helps explain the concept of transubstantiation. This metaphysical concept is probably most familiar from its appearance in Roman Catholic liturgy where the host is said to ontologically transform into the body of Christ, while physically remaining unchanged. *An Oak Tree*, where the glass of water is similarly taken to now obtain a new identity as an oak tree, allegedly helps us understand this difficult notion better.²³ Goldie discusses experiential knowledge separately, in relation to Santiago Sierra’s *Space Closed by Corrugated Metal* (2002). Here, Sierra has bolted closed the gallery, preventing the gallery-going crowd from entering, which Goldie alleges can engender feelings of what it is *like* to be excluded from a space, thereby reinforcing its political message.

Both philosophers discuss two quite different cases together: one a work of ostensibly political art; another more ‘purely’ conceptual. As I will discuss connections between Conceptual Art and political subject matter in the next section, I

²¹ *ibid.*: 83.

²² *ibid.*: 84.

²³ Goldie, 2007: 166.

will for now focus my discussion on the more ‘purely’ conceptual examples, namely Craig-Martin’s *Oak Tree* and Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs*. I also want to bracket the issue of plausible interpretation: given the hint of humour in Craig-Martin’s work it would be possible to object to the view that the work sets out to seriously bear on a metaphysical issue. The interesting question is whether Conceptual Art *can*, as evidenced by its more well-known examples, be epistemically valuable in the way suggested by Schellekens and Goldie. To examine this, I want to draw on the two constraints on cognitivist accounts of artistic value discussed in Chapter 3: the ‘significant knowledge’ constraint and the ‘as art’ constraint. A plausible account of epistemic value of art must show how a work of art makes some significant knowledge available, and must further show how a work of art makes such knowledge available when properly attended to as art.

The first problem for the Craig-Martin and Kosuth examples arises from the ‘significant knowledge’ constraint: for our admiration of the work to be justified, the work needs to make available some *significant* knowledge. But the knowledge either work is taken to yield does not in fact seem particularly significant. The works perhaps *raise* the philosophical issues associated with the name-appearance-thing relationship or transubstantiation, or encourage one to think more about them, but clearly even just perusing a philosophical dictionary or having an informal conversation would probably yield more insight into each topic. Schellekens recognizes this worry and therefore invokes the ‘experiential’ element of such knowledge. This suggests a dichotomous conception of epistemic value, or a division of roles between philosophy and Conceptual Art, each approaching the problem from a different, not necessarily commensurable perspective. However, can one really speak of such a dichotomy, of two *kinds* of knowledge, when it comes to issues so

abstract? Even if one grants that the process of considering the topic of the ‘metaphysical relation between appearance and reality’ has some phenomenological colouring to it (such as the feeling of ‘being in the grip of metaphysical doubt’, as Schellekens puts it), it is still questionable what the *adding of that colouring* to our catalogue of phenomenologically familiar states would, by itself, contribute to the knowledge of *the issue itself*. Is it just that we learn what philosophers contemplating this complex issue *feel like*, without having to be a philosopher? Is it epistemically *valuable* to experience such feelings of frustration, without actually having to work through the issues at hand? These seem like meagre rewards.

Goldie, while also emphasising the experiential component, seems to draw lines of continuity—of a shared project of tackling philosophical issues. He reminds the aloof philosopher that she should think of ‘her excellent graduate student who has a reproduction of *An Oak Tree* pinned to the wall [...] to help him to think about the difficult philosophical notion of transubstantiation’ or all those people who do not aspire to be philosophers but might still want to grasp the idea.²⁴ This is an amusing image, but it still seems to sell short the epistemic value of Conceptual Art. The epistemic goals of Conceptual Art are here presented as continuous with the goals of philosophy, but the art remains in a decidedly servile position (similarly, it would be possible to imagine Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* as an illustration of the idea that there is some kind of isomorphism relationship between names, appearances and things). Like stained glass windows representing Bible stories to the illiterate, *An Oak Tree* is presented as epistemically significant only to someone who is presumed to be lacking the understanding that a fully-fledged philosophical professional is portrayed

²⁴ *ibid.*: 169.

as having already grasped. On this analysis, the work is merely an instrument in a didactic process, and seems to have little to contribute by itself.

Co-opting Conceptual Art into the philosophical investigations of this kind then seems to be a difficult path to pursue; so let me for the moment set this option aside. A more promising account holds that that works of Conceptual Art are *aesthetically* valuable, but in a way that ties in with our cognitive consideration of the abstract concepts with which they deal. Rather than address Schellekens' account of the aesthetic value of Conceptual Art,²⁵ I will concentrate on Diarmuid Costello's account, which appears to me to be more plausible.²⁶ Costello returns to Kant's aesthetic theory to shed light on the matter.

The aspect of Kant's theory that Costello finds of particular interest is §49 of the *Critique of Judgement*. Here Kant discusses 'aesthetic ideas'. An 'aesthetic idea' is a

[r]epresentation of the imagination, allied with a given concept, with which, in the free employment of imagination, such a multiplicity of partial representation are bound up, that no expression indicating a definite concept can be found in it [...] and the feeling of which enlivens the cognitive faculties [...] (CJ 49; 314)²⁷

For example, the concept 'heavenly magnificence', when expressed as an aesthetic idea in a beautiful poem or painting, brings about in the reader a multitude of various associations and feelings, which overwhelm and stimulate the mind. This is achieved by juxtaposing a concept and what Kant calls an 'aesthetic attribute': a kind of artistic extra that can take the form of, in poetry, a metaphor or simile or, in painting, an actual conventional attribute, such as Jupiter's eagle holding a lightning bolt in its

²⁵ Schellekens' position depends on accepting her position on cognitive value: then the ideas on Conceptual Art can be found to be more aesthetically pleasing, in the same sense a theory may be found elegant or a joke witty (Schellekens, 2007: 84-87).

²⁶ Costello, 2007.

²⁷ All citations from *The Critique of Judgement* (Kant, 1790/2008) are marked 'CJ' henceforth. The summary of §49 is my own, but I think it for the most part matches Costello's interpretation.

claws. Presumably there are more kinds, but these are the ones Kant mentions. An aesthetic idea encourages the imagination to ‘spread its flight over a whole host of kindred representations’ and ‘stirs up a host of sensations and further representations for which no expression can be found’. (CJ 316)

Costello tries to show that Sol LeWitt’s works function in a similar way; taking as its ‘aesthetic idea’ the ideas of ‘seriality’ and ‘systematicity.’²⁸ Epistemic and aesthetic value are not wholly separate here: while the experience is a source of an aesthetic pleasure, Costello also notes that this is the model of art which ‘expands ideas in imaginatively complex ways’ and ‘[encourages] us to think about such ideas in a new light.’²⁹ This cognitive element is important to Costello, as it separates his account of aesthetic pleasure from the perhaps more well-known Kantian account of free beauties, like those of the decorative patterns *à la grecque*, which have the mere form of purposiveness or are ‘purposive without a purpose’ (CJ §16, 229). The advantage for Costello of rooting his LeWitt interpretation in the ‘aesthetic idea’ approach of *Critique of Judgement* §49 instead of in the earlier sections that mention decorative patterns, is that this allows him to show LeWitt’s work to have value that is more specific to *art* (rather than just decoration). It also allows him to make reference to the *concept* of ‘seriality’, which he takes to be central to LeWitt’s work (in a way that would not be central to the mere making of decorative patterns). Costello finds some impressive similarities between LeWitt’s writings and CJ §49 to support his interpretation.³⁰

Nevertheless, there are curious discrepancies between LeWitt’s work and Kant’s own examples. The aesthetic idea generates ‘much thought’, and Kant gives us further

²⁸ Costello, 2007: 111-13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 110; 103.

³⁰ *Ibid.*: 104-09.

indication as to what the nature of that thought might be. In art the imagination ‘spreads its flight over a whole host of kindred representations’, we are told, and ‘stirs up a host of sensations and further representations for which no expression can be found’ (CJ 316). These are not, however, just an amorphous mass, but are so *multitudinous* that no expression can be found *for the whole*. In fact, these associations are ‘representations’ and ‘feelings’ (CJ 316). So, Jupiter’s eagle with lightning, presumably, leads us to have certain thoughts about heavenly magnificence as including, for example: power, ability to destroy, splendour, control over nature, and so forth, together with related feelings of awe, respect and terror that can accompany these thoughts. But I am not sure that LeWitt’s wall and Xerox drawings bring forward a similar richness of associations that go with ‘seriality’. Firstly, ‘seriality’ is a concept, much more removed from our cultural lives than ‘heavenly magnificence’; it seems much easier to think of a cultural context where ‘heavenly magnificence’ exercises people’s minds. Therefore it is hard to see what kinds of associations could go with it, and how these associations could be aesthetically driven in the same way as those posited by Kant could be. Secondly, in the case of LeWitt, the ‘aesthetic attribute’ that ‘seriality’ is coupled with is, presumably, twofold: that of the visual end-product (lines on the wall) and the spectator’s knowledge that these were created following some more or less arbitrary serial system. This is much more foreign and less suggestive than the cognitive richness that Kant detects in the visual vocabulary of allegorical visual and plastic arts, or in the metaphors employed by poetry. The depiction of Jupiter together with an eagle with lightning in its claws juxtaposes several familiar visual elements—muscular man, throne, eagle, lightning—to create an image of a power that can control even the most violent forces of nature. A poetically charged phrase such as ‘the sun rose, as out of virtue rises peace,’ (CJ §49: 315) again

juxtaposes several rich, culturally loaded concepts—sun, virtue, peace—to create the required multiplicity of ideas. It is unclear to me that this is analogous to what goes on in a work such as LeWitt's.

There is a kind of subjectivity in Kant's account (in CJ §49) which allows for appeals to personal disagreement. Costello could put his foot down and insist that *in his experience* LeWitt's serial drawings do provide a rich, boundless, ungraspable suffusion of associative thought and feeling on the theme of 'seriality.' But given the problems identified above one begins to wonder whether the initial plausibility of his account is not really due to the fact that Costello can rely on his philosophical reader to unconsciously conflate the two Kantian accounts of aesthetic value – the 'aesthetic ideas' approach with the 'purposiveness without a purpose' approach. LeWitt's often visually dynamic lines and shapes certainly lend themselves well to the Kantian 'free beauty' analysis, whereby the beauty of the forms gives rise to a gently frustrated attempt at making sense of some complex visual pattern. The patterns seem to have a purpose or an order to them, but we can't quite put a finger on what that sense is: 'Beauty is the form of *purposiveness* [Zweckmässigkeit] in an object, so far as this is perceived in it apart from *the representation of a purpose*.' (CJ 236) LeWitt's work is like that; his patterns invite us to impose order on them, but the order is often complex to the point of evading us. However, this analysis would make LeWitt's work seem much more conventionally beautiful than Costello would have it be. It would coincide with the 'free beauty' Kant admired in flowers, crustacea and wallpaper designs (CJ 229-30; 242-3), and secure for it an intellectually humbler standing than Costello's interpretation of it as a rich metaphor on the theme of 'seriality' would suggest.

If my arguments against Schellekens, Goldie and Costello are convincing, what consequences follow for the evaluation of Conceptual Art? Each of these approaches

alludes to a model of epistemic value that has been developed in relation to another kind of art. The ‘experiential knowledge’ mentioned by Schellekens and Goldie, as seen in Chapter 3, is a concept put forward by philosophers like Walton, Currie and Gaut to make sense of the idea that some vividly narrated novels extend or enhance the set of experiences the reader is familiar with. This leads Schellekens and Goldie to suggest Conceptual Art deals with some philosophical issues in a way that is either dichotomous with or continuous with philosophy. On the other hand, Costello makes use of a Kantian account that links aesthetic experience to freer modes of cognition; this is an account initially developed in relation to allegorical visual and plastic arts and poetry, and which Costello applies to Conceptual Art. In both cases, however, one might begin to doubt whether one can take a pre-existing philosophical model of artistic knowledge or cognition and convincingly apply it to Conceptual Art. Secondly, though all three philosophers discuss specific examples, they seem to treat them as *paradigm* examples. Schellekens runs together two quite different examples (Kosuth and Art Workers Coalition) in support of the same model and Costello mentions several first generation Conceptual Artists.³¹ Perhaps, though, there is no one typical way in which Conceptual Art makes knowledge available.

Instead, one might begin to suggest that the early experiments of Conceptual Artists—many of whom were, with the notable exception of LeWitt, in their twenties—do not belong to a unified art kind, much less one that would *collectively* attempt to rival or complement philosophy in the analysis of abstract concepts like transubstantiation, or name-appearance-thing relation, or mathematical series. To

³¹ Costello’s argument centres on LeWitt, but he offers other examples: Dan Graham works with ‘standardization and homogeneity in mass production’, Art & Language with ‘the Borgesian idea [...] of the exhaustive catalogue’, Lawrence Weiner with ‘making visible the background conditions and support structures of art’, Adrian Piper with ‘the ideas of social exclusion and marginalization’ (*ibid.*: 111).

portray Conceptual Art as such is to set it up to fail as bad philosophy.³² Rather, one may think of Conceptual Art as a movement of young artists, a buzz of activity which produced its own aesthetic, its own set of concerns, its own expectations of art making, but which then splintered off into many different directions. Adrian Piper's reminiscences of the early period of her work are telling here:

I made another small hop, this time to the level of abstract thought about space, time, and the object within it; their materiality, concreteness, their infinite divisibility and variability, [...] I began to carve up humble, dusty, austere objects on grids and maps, vary their properties and relations, and line them up sequentially [...]. I worked furiously, constantly, and hermetically. [...] Reality could be rearranged, relocated, varied, shot through with metaphysics. I was drunk on intellectual construction, theory, abstract structure; swooping and swerving crazily through uncharted sky.³³

Some Conceptual Artists went on to develop extraordinary and obscure (and extraordinarily obscure) theories of the abstract world, as with John Latham's rather bizarre flat time theory;³⁴ others, like Art & Language, came to appropriate but also parody academic disciplines; and others still came to elaborate their Conceptual styles in a more gallery-friendly, visually appealing manner (the late works of LeWitt, Kosuth and Mel Bochner perhaps being the most prominent examples: Figure 11). The practices grouped as 'Conceptual Art' in the 1960s and 70s carried different potentialities.

There are the philosophical models of artistic knowledge, mostly developed in relation to older art forms; and then there is Conceptual Art, an experimental artistic movement. I have argued against three recent philosophical attempts to apply philosophical models to the movement of Conceptual Art as a whole. Accepting the

³² For some uncharitable philosophical assessments of Kosuth's early work, see Sclafani, 1975 and Osborne, 1999. One should note that Kosuth was 20 when he made *One and Three Chairs* and 24 when he wrote 'Art After Philosophy.'

³³ Piper, 1996: I: 226-227.

³⁴ See Latham's essay 'Art After Physics', reprinted in the appendices of Walker, 1995.

most well-known examples of Conceptual Art as paradigmatic is going to only make things more difficult. Instead, one might consider specific artistic experiments within Conceptual Art and ask: if these are artistic *experiments*, how do they break out of the more familiar thinking about artistic knowledge, and what would it take, then, for some of them to come to ‘philosophise’?

4. Adrian Piper: Conceptual Art turns to an immediate concern (1970s-1990s)

‘Abstraction is flying’, writes Adrian Piper in her 1987 essay *Flying*, quoted above. An artist, who moves away from tangible objects, experiences an immense freedom; a freedom from everyday concerns, a freedom to develop pure forms unchained from standards of faithful representation, as well as a kind of solipsistic license to take an unbounded interest in her own thought processes. However, at some point in the 1970s, Piper says, she ‘plummeted back to earth, where [she] landed with a jolt.’³⁵ What pulled her from the skies of abstraction were the joint realities of sexism and racism that the artist encountered in the academic environment where she was now active (parallel to her artistic career, Piper has pursued a successful career as a philosopher), and which attuned her to the pervasiveness of both conditions within American society. What emerged was a distinct body of work concerned with racism and racist stereotypes, produced in a between the late 1970s and early 1990s.³⁶

³⁵ Piper, 1996: I: 227.

³⁶ Periodization of an artist’s work is tricky. The body of work I am concerned with here begins with *Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma* (1978), and continues until the *Decide Who You Are* series (1992). Issues of race and gender appear in Piper’s work as early as her *Mythic Being* series (1973-), however, the work from the 1978-92 period is characterised by a more focussed interest in racism, and a distinct aesthetic across installation, self-portraiture and performance media. I will sometimes label this period (1978-92) as ‘middle period’, purely for the sake of convenience. After 1992, there is a break in Piper’s work; but she has continued as a prolific artist since 2002. In this, latest period, her art has turned other subjects, including mortality and Yoga.

As an example consider the installation *Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems* (1980), a claustrophobically small, darkened room, which admits only a few people at a time. Inside, the viewer is faced with backlit pictures of four black men, light projecting eerily from their eyes (Figure 12). On the headphones, the viewer hears different in-character monologues, spoken by Piper, which mimic a potential (white) viewer's reactions to the work. Each monologue goes on for several minutes. These are the defensive 'alarm systems' of the title; each of them starts off as what might appear to be a fairly reasonable position, though little slips of the narrative give away each speaker as attempting to deflect the real issue. There's the aesthete ('It's an interesting attempt to disrupt my composure as an art viewer,'... 'I don't think that it works as art, because I really couldn't care less about racial problems when I come to a gallery...'); the suburban moralist ('She's representing all blacks as completely hostile and alienated, and I just think that that's not true. ... I know lots of black people.... Well, of course I wouldn't advise my daughter to marry one...it's just because society makes it so difficult for an interracial couple'), the false identification response ('This is really right on... I mean I've been really down and out myself. I can really understand black anger, because like, I'm real angry too...'), and then one of straightforward racist hostility ('This certainly doesn't bring me any closer to the so-called black experience.... I've found that blacks are just angry they're difficult to get along with.').³⁷

Piper's work of this period often points to the immediate gallery context within which it is located, and at the politically oblivious art world participant within it. This is evident in *Four Intruders*, where the voices reflect on the images they recognize to be art; and perhaps is even more evident in the installation *Aspects of the Liberal*

³⁷ Piper, 1996: I: 183-5.

Dilemma (1978). Here a newspaper picture of black South Africans is taken out of context and covered with glass that reflects the visitor's face (Figure 13). The monologue accompanying the picture explains the viewer's expectation to emerge with an 'aesthetic experience: to be fulfilled, elevated, edified, irritated', and recounts the viewer's frustration at being only left with this picture of angry black people.³⁸ More often than not, Piper's work is quite confrontational; it does not impute particularly *pleasant* attitudes to the viewer. The installation *Cornered* (1988) (Figure 14) includes a video of the artist announcing 'I am black'. Then, in a calm direct address, she proceeds to unpick the discomfort this out-of-the-blue declaration may have caused us to have. Do we think she is causing unnecessary fuss by proclaiming her race? do we feel affronted, embarrassed, accused? why is that so? The confrontation in these works may involve a long speech or spoken monologue (*Cornered*), combine found image with a monologue (*Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma*) or superimpose drawings upon found images and text (*Vanilla Nightmares*, 1988).

The first difference I want to note between Piper's middle period and the early Conceptual Art is that the work of the middle period explicitly directs the audience's attention to the world outside the work itself. I do not mean merely to say that these new works are political, since in some way even the more abstract Conceptual Art was not always entirely 'apolitical'; in particular, there was the (later disabused) expectation that the impermanent nature of Conceptual Art might provide a means of resisting the object-focussed art market and the proximity of many on the New York art scene to the anti-war movement.³⁹ The difference is deeper and more structural in

³⁸ *ibid.*: I: 169-70.

³⁹ Lippard, 1997: xii.

that Piper's middle period works appear quite explicitly to be *about* something that is taken to obtain in the world: a set of racist attitudes within contemporaneous American society. It seems harder, as I argued above, to claim that Kosuth's work is really *about* name-appearance-thing relations or that Craig-Martin's work is really *about* transubstantiation; neither seems to disclose much significant content about either topic. By contrast, Piper's later work seems to push the audience, rather more straightforwardly, towards a particular belief; a propositional attitude that we may express as 'racism is more prevalent in American society and may manifest itself in more subtle, covert ways that I previously thought'.

Accordingly, the claim that Piper's work can be a source of propositional knowledge does not strike me as difficult to argue for philosophically. In comparison to work like Kosuth's, LeWitt's or Craig-Martin's, here is a work with an uncompromising, potentially even didactic clarity of message—a work much more similar to the 1970 Art Workers Coalition poster that Schellekens mentions. Piper's works, it seems interpretatively safe to say, claim that racist attitudes are prevalent among various members of society, exemplifies these attitudes, and shows them to take rather oblique, pernicious forms. Whether or not we take this to make knowledge available in a way that meets constraints of significance, correctness and justification depends, of course, on what we think about the world (whether we think such attitudes really obtain as Piper portrays them to be). However, especially if we think of the works in their 1980s context—though arguably, no less today—many of the subtly racist attitudes brought to light indeed do ring rather uncomfortably close to home; the work makes the recognition of such views available to a suitable viewer. Here, the real challenge to the idea that art is a source of knowledge is that this analysis sets up a comparison between art and other modes of discourse. Attaining propositional

knowledge about racism seems aimed towards answering questions such as ‘What forms does racism take?’, ‘Why is racism so pernicious?’ or ‘How widespread is racism?’ If Piper’s art is to put us on a road towards a better understanding of these issues, then it will be continuous with other disciplines that seek to answer these questions. However, to recall the objection from anti-cognitivist philosophers, art does not adduce comprehensive evidence, arguments and explicitly formulated theses in answer to such general questions; indeed, Piper’s art does not, for example, present us with a sociological study of American attitudes in support of the view that the racist attitudes Piper’s work is so good at bringing into focus are indeed typical. This opens up the possibility that art such as this, though potentially epistemically valuable to some particular viewer, is always going to be inferior to the more systematic pursuits of other disciplines.

To push back against such a diagnosis, one needs to say what it is that Piper’s art, as art, contributes to the viewer’s understanding of the issue vis-à-vis more systematic disciplines. To do so, I think, it is important not to overstate the break with earlier work. It is not that Piper suddenly stopped doing Conceptual Art and started participating in a political discourse.⁴⁰ The picture I want to develop, rather, is one of Conceptual Art turning outwards and becoming continuous with a broader political discourse, while crucially still preserving many aspects of identity with early Conceptual Art.

Among the points of identity, the first is easy to observe: it is a continuation of a certain Conceptual aesthetic in Piper’s work. Consider for example her *Close To Home #IV.B* (1987) (Figure 15). The work displays a newspaper advert for

⁴⁰ This also seems to match Piper’s own continued self-characterisation as a Conceptual Artist (Piper, 1996: I: 20 Also see the biography section of the artist’s website at www.adrianpiper.com (accessed 23 October 2013).

Courvoisier cognac: a good-looking black couple seductively meet the viewer's gaze. Underneath, there is a questionnaire: have you ever had sexual relations with a black person, and if so, who have you informed about it? Do you feel uncomfortable at the thought of displaying such questions on your living room wall? A recorded monologue accompanies the piece. Visually, the piece is unmistakably akin to other Conceptual works. The technical-sounding questionnaire and incorporation of text into the visual plane of the work recalls what Benjamin Buchloh called 'aesthetics of administration,'⁴¹ and then there is the instantly recognizable type-writer font in which the work is presented. It looks like the kind of font that might be used at a local registrar's office. There is also the kind of humorous element typical of Conceptual work, whereby something that looks quite unspectacular—like a form left in the photocopying room, or like a quickly jotted personal note—makes a surprisingly incisive point; such as with John Baldessari's *Everything is Purged from this Painting* (1968) or Mel Bochner's *No Thought Exists Without A Sustaining Support* (1969). There is also a continued interest here in the relationship between the text and its physical trace. And yet, what is of prime importance now is not how the text features in the visual field, but the uncomfortable questions it is asking.

The continuation of the Conceptual aesthetic can also be seen in what Piper herself has called 'catalysis.' This strategy is first explicitly named in Piper's early *Catalysis* series (1970-73), which involved unannounced, and often undocumented, interventions in public spaces. These involved Piper riding the metro with a towel stuck in her mouth, walking down the street in clothes soaked in food, or playing a recording of loud belches on a tape recorder hidden on her body while in the library. *Catalysis* has been discussed as an early attempt by the artist to break outside of the

⁴¹ Buchloh, 1990.

art context, inserting herself as a repulsive, aggressive presence in the political sphere of life.⁴² However, the series did not yet explicitly present a political or institutional critique, but primarily sustained the Conceptual interest in mental processes of the artist and the audience (in a 1973 interview, Piper describes *Catalysis* as ‘wholly apolitical’ in terms of her intention; she is rather interested in the way her presence impacts on the audience’s minds, unimpeded by the gallery context).⁴³ This seems continuous with the way in which earlier Conceptual works, such as LeWitt’s wall drawings or Piper’s own *Sixteen Permutations* (Figure 10), are meant to assist the viewer’s mind to grasp some complex blueprint or mental process with the mind’s eye; it is this mental transfer that matters, while the visual trace of the drawings themselves are only of secondary importance, a means to an end. The *Catalysis* series is similarly focussed on what happens in the mind. The young woman riding the metro with a towel in her mouth was closely monitoring the extent to which her psychological state can remain unchanged—catalytic—while the audience’s reactions entered her consciousness, and her presence entered theirs.

What is preserved from these experiments in the later work is, crucially, the attempt to exercise a high degree of control over the viewer’s mental processes, and the high degree of scrutiny the viewer herself is expected to exert over these changes. Each work is designed to achieve a specific shift in the viewer’s consciousness, attempting ‘to have a directly catalytic effect on the viewer’s perception of political issues.’⁴⁴ The initial trigger, usually, is simply a found image. An image, usually, of black people in a particular situation: looking menacing or angry (*Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma*; *Four Intruders*), as part of an advert (*Close To Home IV.B*), or in a

⁴² Cf. Bowles, 2011.

⁴³ Lippard and Piper, 1972. Cf. Piper, 1996: I: 41ff.

⁴⁴ *Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma* (1978; in Piper, 1996: I: 169.)

big group (*Safe*, 1990). There might also be a text, such as the questionnaire in *Close to Home*. The viewer's reaction to the image is then closely anticipated, usually by means of a voiceover played on the headphones. In *Four Intruders* and in *Safe*, the viewer is played what could be *his or her own* voice, the voice expressing thoughts such as '...of course I... I'm concerned with problems of racism and unemployment, and the problems of our ghettos[...] of course trouble everyone. I just think that the context is wrong for presenting this material.'⁴⁵ In *Close to Home*, the viewer is not mimicked but addressed in a way that presumes a particular reaction: 'I know these are difficult issues, and... And nobody's perfect. Please don't be angry. [...] I, I didn't mean to antagonize you.'⁴⁶ The effect of these devices is that the viewer must now pay close attention to the effects the images have on his or her own consciousness. *Do we feel antagonized and lectured to? Which one of the four voices in Four Intruders comes closest to our own? What would have been perhaps a fleeting reaction to an image, has now become the object of intense internal scrutiny. The contents of the viewer's consciousness that are so relentlessly examined, however, are no longer a permuting shape or sequence; they are politically relevant reactions.*

Another point of development is Piper's transformation of what she calls 'the indexical present': her interest in the nature of the indexical present (what is it for something to happen right now). The *Hypothesis* series, discussed above, takes snapshots of the artist's present field of vision at structured intervals. By comparison, Piper's later work always attempts to catch the viewer's consciousness in the conditions in which the viewer finds him or herself at the very moment of confrontation with the work. Usually that situation is the gallery. Presenting the

⁴⁵ *Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems* (1980; *ibid.*: I, 183).

⁴⁶ Voiceover transcribed at APRAF Berlin. See Figure 15.

viewer with an image of black South African men, the monologue to *Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma* begins: ‘It doesn’t matter who these people are. They’re parts of a piece of art, which is part of an art exhibit, in an art gallery, right here, right now.’⁴⁷ A case in point outside the gallery context is Piper’s *My Calling Card #1* (1986-1990), an unannounced performance whereby Piper handed out cards announcing her racial identity to people who made racist remarks in her presence, not realising they were insulting a black person due to Piper’s lighter skin tone (Figure 16). In these works, Piper’s more formal interest in the indexical present has led her to a particular kind of exploration of racism: not in general or in principle, but within that immediacy of the ‘right here, right now’.

Catalysis and indexical present are the two terms that Piper uses to describe the specific kind of attention that her works exert on a moment in the viewer’s consciousness. Here, I now want to suggest, is also the point where the resources of Conceptual Art are marshalled in a way that suggests a potentially interesting relationship to philosophy and other kinds of systematic discourse. Though Piper’s art has been sometimes described as ‘dialogic’, it seems more fitting to suggest that her works become rather more similar to philosophical *polemics* than to philosophical dialogues.⁴⁸ These are works which, like a well-delivered polemical address might do, identify and confront a deep-seated but easily overlooked bias in those who would listen to them. Therein lies the key to resisting the objection that art is inferior to systematic discourse. Namely, if the monologues in Piper’s work indeed reflect

⁴⁷ Piper, 1996: 169.

⁴⁸ The dialogic structure of Piper’s works leads the art historian Grant Kester to analyse her art within the context of ‘dialogic art’: participatory art which typically co-opts the audience into authorship of the work (Kester, 2004: 69-81). While noting that Piper’s work in fact tends to incorporate monologues rather than dialogues, Kester does not make it precisely clear how, then, Piper’s work is to be thought of as dialogic (cf. *Ibid.*: 79-81). I think ‘polemic’ is a better description also since Piper’s work—with some exceptions such as the performance *Funk Lessons* (1982-3)—tends not to be participatory.

something true about an only seemingly progressive society, then we—that is to say, the predominantly white, liberal audience that the works anticipate—will have no trouble in signing up to all kinds of equality, or agreeing with the arguments and statistics that prove the perniciousness and pervasiveness of racism. What we have difficulties with, however, is being honest about our own internal biases. If this is the case, then a more ‘straightforward’ discussion about racism is simply not going to achieve the desired shift; indeed, the fact that the everyday consciousness of seemingly liberal-minded spectators is a part of the problem might even be obscured by arguments they find it all-too-easy to agree with. Therefore, the polemical form used by Piper’s work shows up an aspect of the problem which it would be difficult to adequately show up within the usual, straightforward manner of presenting theses and adducing arguments and evidence. The ‘significant knowledge’ constraint is met as the work is continuous with other modes of obtaining propositional knowledge, but in a way that structurally complements them, rather than in a way that would be merely illustrative or ancillary.

It is important to qualify my claims here. In my discussion of early Conceptual Art, I have argued that certain familiar models of epistemic value (such as experiential knowledge or aesthetic ideas) are not applicable to early works of Conceptual Art, and in particular that no one model is applicable to Conceptual Art when this is conceived of as a homogeneous entity. I am not claiming that Piper’s work is some kind of logical or superior development to these early works (there are many Conceptual Artists, and they may be good or interesting for all kinds of reasons). The claim is rather that from the standpoint of a philosophical interest in the epistemic value of contemporary art, Piper’s later work provides a rather interesting case. It is here that certain artistic resources, which were developed in the spirited exercises of earlier

Conceptual work—the attention given to the easily perishable present moment, the appropriation of administrative devices such as the questionnaire, the selective use of found imagery, the interest in the involuntary movements of one’s consciousness—are deployed within a new kind of discursive, polemical form. In Piper’s polemical practice we then have a distinctive artistic experiment and achievement *within* Conceptual Art, rather than a paradigm case of some well-established art form. As it turns out, when we attend to this experiment, Piper’s practice emerges as continuous with ‘straightforward’ modes of discourse; it is directed towards propositional knowledge about the kinds of racism that exist, though it does so in an idiosyncratic form which has its own advantages to offer. Curiously enough, the ‘connectedness’ between philosophy and Conceptual Art is shown not to be located with those distinctly philosophical, metaphysical issues that ignited the imaginations of young Joseph Kosuth and others; it emerges by comparing form rather than subject matter.

If the ‘significant knowledge’ constraint is met, what about the other, ‘as art’ constraint? Does Piper’s art make significant knowledge available when properly attended to as art? On one level, this seems straightforwardly so. Piper’s way of engaging the audience is derived from her development of the artistic resources of Conceptual Art. There are modes of engagement we would clearly recognize as artistic here: her artful monologues, as well as the use of imagery, collage, theatrical delivery and sometimes drawing. At the same time, however, the continuity of her work with non-artistic forms of polemical discourse also points to a further, and rather difficult issue. To what extent does it still make sense to insist on a sharp boundary between artistic and non-artistic means of attaining knowledge here? One might wonder whether it makes sense to maintain that Piper’s work represents a kind of polemical art, rather than a kind of polemic that utilises images and monologues.

Artistic and non-artistic categorizations seem to misbehave and seep into one another. The philosophical interest of the works I consider in the next chapter is that they seem to obliterate the distinction altogether.

Chapter 6 | Art and Politics: The Social Turn

1. The Social Turn

In 1983 Adrian Piper gave an audience-focused performance called *Funk Lessons* at the University of California, Berkeley.¹ The performance took the form of an interactive class in funk, and though it was intended as fun and easy-going, the *Funk Lessons* series fitted clearly within the serious themes of racial power relations and stereotyping that characterised Piper's artistic output of that period. The aim of the lesson was to challenge the stereotypes associated with funk as a working class, African-American musical form, in particular in relation to the 'high' culture forms of musical expression, tacitly associated with white culture. To effect this challenge, Piper taught funk in the manner of an art appreciation class: tracing the history of funk reaching to soul and disco, pointing out the particularities of rhythm and melodic structure, and identifying the meaning and expressiveness of the possible dance moves. As the initially awkward, white, middle class, university-going audience learned to groove, a previously overlooked piece of culture could show up as a rewarding and complex musical form. This work was produced at the same period as the works discussed in the previous chapter, yet it seems importantly different in structure. The *Lessons* are participatory and pedagogical in a way that the other work I have discussed is not. There is a way to listen and dance to funk, Piper's lessons give you that knowledge, and perhaps that will contribute to a more cohesive and less racist

¹ Piper, 1996. An edited video of the performance is available on http://www.adrianpiper.com/vs/video_fl.shtml (accessed 12 June 2013).

society. It seems more difficult to speak here of a form of relaying content in a way specific to Conceptual Art.

Funk Lessons might be seen as an early precursor to the participatory, socially engaged art practices of the 1990s and 2000s. The spirited efficacy of doing something together in *Funk Lessons* is not dissimilar to the joint undertakings of Kateřina Šedá's *There is nothing there* (2003), which—to recall—consisted of the artist instructing members of a village community to synchronise their actions for a day. Like with *Funk Lessons*, Šedá's work is aimed at bringing about a new way of perceiving the society; like with *Funk Lessons*, Šedá is achieving this aim not so much by making an art object for a particular audience to attend to, but rather by instructing and co-ordinating a group of participants in a common pursuit. However, while in 1983 Piper's work would be referred to primarily as a performance art piece, by 2003, Šedá's work would be recognised as part of a growing trend of socially engaged art, which took off in the 1980s and 1990s and which has since spread to become an established part of the global contemporary art mainstream.²

Social engagement among artists today encompasses diverse practices. An artist might acquire a set of abandoned buildings to create a library and a kitchen for the local community to use (Theaster Gates, *Dorchester Projects*, 2009); work with a group of miners to re-enact a strike action, which had been brutally suppressed by the police (Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001); mount a wind turbine on top of a railway bridge to demonstrate its benefits to an eco-reluctant community (Marjetica Potrč, *The Wind Lift*, 2014); or work together with a disadvantaged group of garbage pickers to produce a series of self-portraits, and sell them to finance community

² Bishop, 2012 is the most comprehensive study of this trend. See also Kester, 1998; Bourriaud, 2002; Hlavajova, *et al.*, 2008; O'Neill and Wilson, 2010; Jackson, 2011.

projects that benefit the participants (Vik Muniz's *Waste Land* series of works, 2008). Works such as these have been the subject of much discussion in recent art theory, and have been theorised under a number of designations, such as the social turn, pedagogic turn, educational turn, relational aesthetics, project-based art, post-studio art, community-based art, knowledge production and participatory art. The main focus of my investigation will be a certain cross-section of these practices, those which share two characteristics: (a) the intended *value* of the art project is coextensive with its *social and political impact*, and (b) the *methods* utilised to produce that impact seem to closely resemble non-artistic forms of political and social activism. For convenience's sake, I will use the term 'the social turn' to refer to this group of works.³

The key question I will be investigating with regards to the social turn is: what happens to the philosophical requirement that artistic value is value works of art have *as art*? To answer this question, it will first be important to get a sense of the historical development that led to the social turn. While there are several historical studies available,⁴ I will focus on Miwon Kwon's account in *One Place After Another*,⁵ which analyses the art practices of the social turn in the context of a broader narrative of site-specificity in recent art, and Jason Gaiger's criticism of Kwon's work.⁶ This will allow me to introduce two important critical terms—site and artistic autonomy—which will be crucial to formulate the challenge which the arts of the social turn pose for philosophical theories of artistic value.

³ This term was popularised by Claire Bishop (Bishop, 2006), though in her 2012 book she switches to the term 'participatory art'. Not all the works I discuss are obviously participatory, so I will favour the 'social turn' label.

⁴ See footnote 2 above.

⁵ Kwon, 2002.

⁶ Gaiger, 2009.

2. The Genealogy of the Social Turn: Site-specificity and Artistic Autonomy

In *One Place After Another*, Kwon's concern is to explain the post-1960s shifts in artistic practice as a series of responses to post-war modernist production; a series in which, she argues, the artwork's engagement with its site is of crucial importance. She divides up this process into three paradigms, and while these are roughly chronologically consecutive, she emphasizes that she does not conceive of them as governed by some internal historical necessity, but as different practices that may be 'overlapping with one another and operating simultaneously in various cultural practices today.'⁷

She terms the first paradigm 'phenomenological'.⁸ The crux of this moment, for Kwon, is the confrontation between the New York school of abstraction championed by Clement Greenberg, and the younger generation of artists whose work has come to be described under labels like Minimalism, Conceptual Art and land art. While the kind of painting favoured by Greenberg required the viewer to become absorbed into the work, contemplating the internal relations of the shapes in the virtual world of the canvas alone, the later interventions by artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Mel Bochner, Sol LeWitt or Robert Smithson required the viewer to move about the space, with the aesthetic experience becoming inseparable from the interaction with the work's site (Figure 17). Here, Kwon interprets the term 'site' literally. In opposition to the idea that artistic value inheres in the pure, uninterrupted contemplation of the self-sufficient artwork, phenomenological site-specific art intends the value of the work to be realised in a threefold interaction between a

⁷ Kwon, 2002: 30.

⁸ *ibid.*: 11-13. She also uses the term 'existential'; but 'phenomenological' seems to better describe what this paradigm is about.

specific location, an observer as affected by that location, and the difference made to both by the artist's intervention into the space.

This phenomenological paradigm has, of course, its own history and permutations,⁹ but it soon became clear that the critical impulse present in the 'phenomenological' sitedness did not go far enough. At some point, the site-specific exhibition 'comes to *represent* criticality rather than performing it.'¹⁰ Kwon's second paradigm is what she calls 'social/institutional', and covers attempts by visual artists, perhaps in response to this failure, to resist commodification and to engage with the sites of production and display more critically by directly seeking to uncover their historical and socio-economic conditions. Kwon's examples include Mierle Laderman Ukeles' performance, in which Ukeles washed the museum floors to draw attention to the (gendered) labour relations of that institution (*Washing the Museum*, 1973); and Hans Haacke's ideological exposés of various institutions through the 1970s.¹¹ Works usually labelled 'institutional critique' tend to fit snugly into this paradigm (Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Fred Wilson, Andrea Fraser), and Adrian Piper's later work discussed in the previous chapter might be recognised, to an extent, as belonging to it as well. Though in comparison to works of institutional critique, Piper's work does not tend to reference the *specific* venue where her work is exhibited, it tends to criticize the socio-political relations undergirding the gallery system as a whole.

The third paradigm is a further expansion of what counts as the artwork's site. If initially the artwork's site was considered to be coextensive with the formal and phenomenological properties of the space where it was exhibited, and later with then the social and political facts pertaining to that institution (the gallery, the museum, the

⁹ E.g. Krauss, 1985.

¹⁰ Kwon, 2002: 38. Much the same analysis is offered by Lippard, 1997: xii.

¹¹ Kwon, 2002: 14-24.

public park), the final paradigm considers the work's site to be the social, cultural and political world *in general*. Since this will be the focus of subsequent discussion let me quote Kwon's characterisation of this paradigm at greater length:

Concerned to integrate art more directly into the realm of the social, either in order to redress (in an activist sense) urgent social problems such as the ecological crisis, homelessness, AIDS, homophobia, racism, and sexism, or more generally in order to relativize art as one among many forms of cultural work, current manifestations of site-specificity tend to treat aesthetic and art historical concerns as secondary issues. Deeming the focus on the social nature of *art's* production and reception to be too exclusive, even elitist, this expanded engagement with culture favors public sites outside the traditional confines of art both in physical and intellectual terms.¹²

'Both in physical and intellectual terms' is crucial here. The work tackles social and political issues, but the work's physical location and means of doing so has now been expanded beyond the gallery, to include several non-artistic contexts. Kwon's examples include Mark Dion's environmental project, for which the artist gathered tropical vegetation close to the Orinoco river, and then displayed and wrote about them in both the arts and in broader environmental publications (Mark Dion, *On Tropical Nature*, 1991), and curator Mary Jane Jacob's 'Culture in Action' (1993), for which the curator transformed the annual Sculpture Chicago festival into a series of events, whereby invited artists teamed up with communities to tackle local issues, organize workshops, and put on political marches and talks.¹³ In the artist Suzanne Lacy's words (herself a participant), this new genre of public art deals with 'some of the most profound issues of our time—toxic waste, race relations, homelessness, aging, gang warfare, and cultural identity' in a way that is 'based on engagement.'¹⁴ This third paradigm, which to a large degree seems coextensive with what Claire

¹² *ibid.*: 24.

¹³ *ibid.*: 28-29; 101ff..

¹⁴ Lacy, 1995: 19.

Bishop has labelled the ‘social turn’ and Suzanne Lacy the ‘new genre public art’, for Kwon represents the final transformation in the artwork’s site-specificity. Kwon labels the third paradigm ‘discursive’: the site of the artwork becomes not just its immediate environment, but the political and social discourse in the broadest sense.

It is on the viability of this metaphorical expansion of the artwork’s ‘site’ that Jason Gaiger applies critical pressure.¹⁵ To characterize the site of art as ‘discourse’ is to provide a criterion too lax to capture the class of artworks that Kwon is interested in:

Reference to a discourse or field of knowledge is too weak to serve as a criterion of identity for it is arguably the case that *all* art, including the non-site-specific art of earlier periods, occupies a position within a wider field of knowledge, ideas, and debates.¹⁶

As his discussion of Courbet’s *The Stonebreakers* (1849) illustrates, even non-site-specific, portable pre-modernist figurative art could be construed as site-specific on Kwon’s definition of the discursive paradigm, for it also engages in a wider field of discourse. In Courbet’s case, the painting clearly highlights the wretched social and working conditions of the workers it portrays. In response to this difficulty, Gaiger’s analysis unstitches the post-1960s artistic practices at roughly the same seams as Kwon’s three paradigms do, but proposes a more principled criterion for doing so. This criterion is a vector that moves away from a modernist conception of artistic autonomy towards a conception of artistic heteronomy.

On Gaiger’s analysis, artistic autonomy (self-governance) is understood as a normative doctrine about artistic value. According to artistic autonomy, art is not valuable for some external end to which it may be put, such as education or religious veneration, but is a valuable end in and of itself. Gaiger does not use terms

¹⁵ Gaiger, 2009: 49-51.

¹⁶ *ibid.*: 49.

‘formalism’ or ‘aestheticism’ exactly to describe artistic autonomy, but he does associate the view with modernist art critics, such as Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and Clement Greenberg, who emphasised aesthetic effects in painting, and for whom a concern with formal properties took precedence over ‘substantial referential content’ of the works.¹⁷ The modernist take on artistic autonomy, then, is the one that came to favour certain kinds of artwork, abstract paintings and sculpture, from which referential content has been purged in favour of formal features. Autonomy also came to favour certain conditions of viewing, namely those inherent in a white cube gallery setting, and which minimise interference due to any factors external to the work itself. A correct appreciation of an artwork should exclude certain factors from consideration: the viewer’s body and her particular mood, the space within which the art object is located, and the purpose to which the object may be put are all irrelevant.

The three paradigms which for Kwon represent the ever-expanding engagement with the work’s site, then, for Gaiger constitute progressive stages of chipping away at the modernist (Greenbergian) conception of autonomy. The artists of Kwon’s ‘phenomenological’ paradigm—Minimalism, Conceptual Art, land art—represent the first dent in the edifice, by challenging the *formalist* aspect of artistic autonomy. Though their concerns can still be predominantly described as ‘aesthetic,’ that is, intended to produce a pleasurable, interesting, or phenomenologically distinct experience, this aesthetic impact no longer derives only from the internal relations within the work, but from the more complicated interaction between the work, the location, and the viewer. The artists of Kwon’s institutional and discursive site paradigms, on the other hand, can be interpreted as challenging the second tenet of autonomy, namely the claim that the arts should primarily be concerned with aesthetic

¹⁷ Gaiger, 2009: 53.

value. Rather than invoke Kwon's vocabulary of expanding a work's *site* to the institutional and then to broader socio-political discourse, it just seems simpler to say that post-1960s advanced art practices were increasingly turning away from concerns of aesthetic experience and towards social and political critique. In Gaiger's words, '[t]oday's project-based artists take it as a given that it is possible to intervene in real-world social issues while maintaining a position in the vanguard of contemporary art.'¹⁸ It is by taking on these pursuits, one might suggest, that art becomes not autonomous but heteronomous: normatively and critically determined not by pursuits specific to art alone, but with pursuits that are shared with a broader social and political agenda.

What is at stake between Gaiger's and Kwon's accounts is how we tell the story that takes us from post-War American modernism, via its critique at the hands of Minimalists and Conceptual Artists in the 1960s and 1970s, and then institutional critique in the 1970s and 80s, to the global, project-based, and socially embedded critical art practices of the social turn that take off in the 1990s. This is a broad-brush picture, and one that has been given many narratives.¹⁹ For the purposes of thinking about artistic value, however, Gaiger's account of the gradual erosion of artistic autonomy is particularly useful in explaining how the conception of artistic value inherent in these movements has changed. Autonomy, as Gaiger writes about it, corresponds roughly to different versions of philosophical aestheticism: the view that I described in Chapter 2 as stating that *only* aesthetic value contributes to something

¹⁸ *ibid.*: 54

¹⁹ Another narrative to mention here is that of the *October* school's interest in the shift from modernism to postmodernism. The vector towards heteronomy is a move towards what has been described by Hal Foster as 'critical postmodernism'—art that turns towards critical interrogation of the political and ideological bases of the dominant modes of representation—as opposed to 'postmodernism as pastiche', art which stays in the realm of complete autonomy and self-indulgence, at one remove from real-world issues. (Foster, 2002). Cf. also Foster, 1996; Potts, 2000.

being good art. Heteronomy, on this analysis, corresponds roughly to pluralism: the view that many kinds of value—notably, political engagement and epistemic value—also contribute to something being good art. It would seem then, that at the end of the anti-modernist trajectory, art of the social turn brings us all the way from philosophical aestheticism to philosophical pluralism.

The picture Gaiger gives, then, usefully aligns the stages leading to the social turn with different views of what artistic value is. However, this picture needs to be further refined. As it stands, there is a danger in Gaiger’s analysis to bring the story of 20th Century advanced art practices full circle. Gaiger’s argument is one that describes Kwon’s three paradigms as leading towards ‘a partial *restitution* of a more inclusive conception of art.’ Minimalism and Conceptual Art, which present a kind of internal critique of the self-contained and self-referential abstraction valorised by Greenberg, eventually lead to art practices that orient the viewer towards the ‘broader, experiential, social and political issues [but] without adopting the outmoded conventions of figurative realism’.²⁰ Undoubtedly, interest in social engagement is what aligns socially engaged art of the 1990s with the early 20th century avant-garde movements such as Dada and Russian constructivism, and even with socially engaged realist painters such as Courbet—as Gaiger’s persuasive interpretation of *The Stonebreakers* shows. However, this picture of a partial return does not seem to do full justice to the sense in which the trajectory towards art of the social turn presents a particularly radical departure, one that in fact goes beyond the kind of political efficacy one could expect of a Courbet painting. To show that this is the case, I now

²⁰ Gaiger, 2009: 51; 54. My emphasis. The notion of a *return* seems to be also intimated in Gaiger’s quoting of Duchamp: ‘Since Courbet it’s been believed that painting is addressed to the retina. That was everyone’s error. The retinal shudder! Before, painting had other functions: it could be religious, philosophical, moral.’ (Interview with Marcel Duchamp in Cabanne, 1987: 43; quoted in Gaiger, 2012: 57n41).

wish to suggest some criticisms of Gaiger's position and return a few steps closer towards Kwon's notion of site-specificity.

Kwon's claim is importantly that the *primary* site of the art of the social turn is the political, social and theoretical engagement with socio-political issues. This site is what Kwon (perhaps slightly confusingly) terms 'discourse'; however, what she includes under this paradigm is not merely art which discusses social issues. Her primary examples are not works like, say, Piper's but rather works that come very close to social activism (Culture in Action programme) or to environmental research (Mark Dion's *On Tropical Nature*).²¹ Saying that activism and research are now among the *primary* sites of artistic production seems to amount to the claim that not only have contemporary artists begun to engage with theory, society and politics, but also that some contemporary artists have come to adapt themselves more or less *completely* to these (extra-artistic) fields. These are works seem to have eroded, in the process, much of what might think of as autonomous artistic practices and ways of appreciation. These works are more radically heteronomous than self-identifying works of art have ever been.

The most telling examples of this trend that Kwon discusses are the community work projects, such as those realised as part of 'Culture in Action' in Chicago.²² Within the project, the plan for Suzanne Lacy's *Full Circle: Monuments to Women* (1993) included not just sculptural works commemorating the city's notable women, but was also planned to include Lacy's service at a shelter for homeless people and a dinner party honouring the city's women. Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's *Tele Vecindario*

²¹ Kwon discusses artists like Fred Wilson, Lothar Baumgarten, Tom Burr, and Mark Dion as distinct from, e.g., Richard Serra or Mierle Laderman Ukeles, in that the 'primary' site addressed by them is discourse. The work is no longer bound to the contingencies of the particular institution or place in which the work is located. Kwon, 2002: 30-31.

²² *ibid.*: 130-135.

(1992-3) was an ongoing community project teaching local teenagers from a disenfranchised, Latino background to make video works. Other works in the programme included a community project spearheaded by the HaHa Collective, which involved growing food for AIDS patients (*Flood*, 1993), Daniel J Martinez's pride march organized for the local Latino and Black communities (*Consequences of a Gesture*, 1993), Mark Dion's untitled ecology initiative with local schoolchildren, and a collaboration between Simon Grennan, Christopher Sperandio and a local candy factory workers' union to create and sell their own chocolate bar (*The Workforce Makes the Candy of Their Dreams*, 1993). Notably, all these projects were led by artists, and seemed to be for the most part conceptualised as artworks, identified as such by the often somewhat poetic titles in italics. Nevertheless, the execution of these works seemed for the most part indistinguishable from any other community project that seeks to ameliorate the living conditions and political empowerment of a disenfranchised group.

Other recent examples of the works of the social turn since 1993 show that such work is more than merely a passing trend. I have already mentioned the work of Kateřina Šedá, Theaster Gates, and the collective Voina whose artistic practices can be directly evaluated in terms of the social regeneration or political change they attempt to carry out in their particular communities. The case of continued italicization is interesting here: such is, for example, Voina's *Cops Auto-da-fe, or Fucking Prometheus* (2011), which is the title the group have given to their action of breaking into a police station and setting a vehicle on fire.²³ Other contemporary artists

²³ <http://rebelart.net/voina-cop%E2%80%99s-auto-da-fe-or-fucking-prometheus/0011994/> ; accessed 1 June 2013. Despite the title, it is not entirely clear whether the artists conceptualised of their action as an artwork or just an act of protest. Voina group also presented similar work and documentation of *Auto-da-fe* at that year's Berlin biennale (on the 'Occupy' theme).

contribute to social change more peacefully, by developing technologies. For their project *picidae* (2007-ongoing), the German art duo Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud developed software that circumvents censorship in Iran and China. The technology operates by transforming a banned webpage from text into a clickable image: this preserves its contents, but because the information is saved as an image it can evade the text-based censorship tools.²⁴ In Marjetica Potrč's *Caracas: Dry Toilet* (2003), the Slovenian artist worked closely with impoverished communities in Caracas, Venezuela to devise a "dry toilet": a device which collects human waste and converts it into fertilizer; at the same time, the work doubles as an architectural study of makeshift and improvisational structures.²⁵ Artists have emerged as radical educators or pedagogues; for example, Tania Braguera's *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* (Behaviour Art Department; 2002-09) is effectively an alternative artists' academy in Havana, presented as a durational artwork. For examples like this, Gaiger might be quite right that the notion of 'site as discourse' is too broad to identify a distinct category or kind of artistic practice, however, the important lesson is that in becoming closely assimilated to political action, technology development, education and community engagement, the art of the social turn seems to have taken some very decisive steps away not just from the tenets of formalism and aestheticism, but from the very conception of art as a separate field of activity.

I have arrived, then, at something of a synthesis. If we look at the historical trajectory running from Minimalism to the social turn, Gaiger's contribution flags up a plausible deeper mechanism than site-specificity to explain that movement. This

²⁴ The artists' website (http://www.wachter-jud.net/projects_online/picidae ; accessed 1 July 2013).

²⁵ Marjetica Potrč: *Caracas: Dry Toilet* (<http://www.nordenhake.com/php/exhibition.php?id=42&year=2004> ; accessed 1 July 2013).

mechanism is the move from artistic autonomy to artistic heteronomy. But what Kwon's analysis shows is that the final result on this vector is a rather radical version of heteronomy, one that separates it from the kind of political engagement one might expect of a realist painting. While the context and the particular goals of the artworks of the social turn may vary, and though it is hard to say in some cases to what extent exactly the work is thought of as an artwork, in each case we can observe that art begins to seep into another, non-art field: be it political action, pedagogical experiments or technology development. It is then not just that the new art is socially engaged; the whole notion that works of art should make some value available when properly attended to *as art*, or in virtue of some set of properly *artistic* features seems to be called into question. This notion, as I argued in Chapter 2, is shared between both philosophical aestheticism and philosophical pluralism. And so it seems that the art of the social turn poses a particular challenge not just to the modernist conjunction of aestheticism and formalism, but to pluralism as well. In short, the social turn represents a difficult case for most mainstream philosophical accounts of artistic value.

3. The Social Turn and Philosophical Theories of Artistic Value

How might one describe this challenge philosophically? In contrast to aestheticism and pluralism, the social turn invites us to remove the constraint that artistic values are those that works of art have 'as art'. What happens to traditional models of artistic value once we remove that constraint is best represented diagrammatically.

appreciation is a distinct and identifiable one.²⁶ What that practice is taken to be tends to be implicit in each philosopher's engagement with works of art. With Jenny Saville's *Trace* one might consider, for example, the formal relationship of the shapes on the canvas, the portrayal of the nude in relation to previous art-historical precedents, the relationship between the application of paint and depicted content, etc. Though what *exactly* counts as art appreciation here is left undefined, there are clearly some factors that are excluded: one would not, for example, evaluate the painting on the basis of how socially useful it might be, if we were to sell it and use the proceeds to finance some community project. The practice of art making and art appreciation, for aestheticism and pluralism alike, is therefore conceived of as a familiar, distinct, self-sufficient—that is, autonomous—cultural activity: both are on the left-hand side of the schema.

The disagreement between the two has to do with the question of what *kind* of value is made available by art in this way: represented in my schema by the division of the left-hand column into the upper and lower half. According to aestheticism, what is valuable about art is that it realises aesthetic experience. This further enhances the sense in which art has its own manifest destiny, and leaves it in a kind of splendid isolation from other fields of cultural activity. While some other fields of activity—interior design, landscape gardening, science, perhaps even philosophy and mathematics—also arguably provide aesthetic experience, they seem to be constricted by other values in doing so: such as correctness in the case of mathematics and philosophy, and pragmatic considerations in case of the 'applied' arts. True art stands alone as that specialised realm, in which aesthetic experience can be pursued without any interference; therefore, aestheticism can also be described as 'radical autonomy',

²⁶ Chapter 2; pp. 44ff.

and may be associated with modernist criticism mentioned by Gaiger. Meanwhile, according to pluralism which occupies the bottom-left corner of the schema, engaging in a specifically artistic, autonomous practice of art making and appreciation is taken to realise not just aesthetic value, but also epistemic, ethical, political and other values that are continuous with the values we pursue in other fields. Socially engaged works—of the examples I have mentioned, one might think of George Orwell’s *Down and out*, Bernard Schlink’s *The Reader*, Gaiger’s example of Courbet’s realist painting, Adrian Piper’s works—are foremost among those that fuel the pluralist claim that art *as art* may also realise values that are relevant to other fields of life. On the axis specifying the *kind* of value that art realises, aestheticism can be described as edging towards autonomy and pluralism towards heteronomy.²⁷

What is interesting in the contemporary context, however, is the movement towards the right-hand side column, the movement towards practices of making and appreciation that themselves are no longer fully autonomous, but begin to more closely resemble non-artistic fields of activity. As we move towards heteronomy on the right-hand side of the schema, it must be noted, the question that remains is what *kind* of value is meant to be realised in the work. This then leaves us with two further options. On the one hand, the movement towards heteronomy can be conceptualised as expanding the sites, processes, tools and modes of appreciation of art into other

²⁷ The usage of the two terms in recent analytic aesthetics tends to confirm this description. The term ‘autonomy’ often appears in debates about whether *ethical* value of a work forms part of its artistic value. ‘Ethicism’ is the name for the positions that affirm this claim, and ‘autonomism’ the name for those that deny it; this corresponds, I take it, to the up-down axis on my schema (for overview of the debate see Carroll, 2000a). The term ‘heteronomy’ is less often used, though the opposition between autonomy and heteronomy has been explicitly taken up in a recent collection of essays (Hulatt, 2013). Here, Peter Lamarque argues that artistic value is autonomous, and that it has to do with the work’s ‘appearance under-a-description, a residual fascination with its subject matter, and any universal themes it expresses and projects’ (Lamarque, 2013: 62). Robert Stecker argues that artistic value is ‘heteronomous’ in that it is derived from a plurality of other values (Stecker, 2013). Lamarque veers towards the top-left; and Stecker towards bottom-left of my schema.

fields, but with the still recognizably ‘artistic’ aim of realising aesthetic experience. That is represented by the move towards the top-right corner of the schema: here, appreciation of art can derive from any kind of practice, as long as it is directed towards the realisation of a distinct, intrinsically valuable, aesthetic experience. This line of thinking, towards what I will call ‘aesthetic expansion’, can be perhaps best illustrated by reference to Kateřina Šedá’s *There is nothing there* and other works that have been described as falling under heading ‘relational aesthetics’.²⁸ While a contemporary art critic might appreciate Kateřina Šedá’s *There is nothing there* as art in the sense that he might endeavour to understand it within the frame of recent art history and theory, the inhabitants of Ponetovice village, who the work obliged to synchronise their actions, probably did not appreciate what they were doing *as art* in any concrete sense of the word. They were certainly aware of the fact that Šedá is some kind of an artist, but one can hardly imagine them to have taken up the position of a connoisseur, who ruminates on the significance of the artist’s choices or tries to ‘read’ the work by reference to art-historical precedents or its formal features. In synchronising their actions, they were not tapping into any particular, familiar, distinctive art-appreciatory practice. It was simply their bare, everyday experience—such as shopping or going for a beer—that was transformed; made significant, intrinsically interesting, aesthetic.

Though aesthetic expansionism is not the option I will focus most of my discussion on, it is important to differentiate it from the other options. The ideas represented by this view importantly go a few steps beyond the familiar case made by Arthur Danto on the occasion of ready-mades and Pop Art, which for him signified that something can be artistically appreciated regardless of how close its appearance is

²⁸ This is Nicolas Bourriaud’s influential term. Bourriaud, 2002.

to something quite mundane. Appreciating ready-mades and Pop on Danto's analysis still presupposed the mental processes of appreciating art *as art*: for example, Danto's response to Roy Lichtenstein's Pop artworks involved an approach of a connoisseur art critic decoding the significance of the artist's distinct style, within the critical atmosphere afforded by these artworks' inclusion in the art world.²⁹ So, while a work of Pop Art may have looked like a comic book panel, appreciation of it as art was something *sui generis*, and most certainly did not include responding to it simply as one would to a comic book panel. Works of relational aesthetics such as Šedá's, by contrast, do not rely on the art world atmosphere for creation of aesthetic value, but rather seem to push against the need for such atmosphere. *There is nothing there* arguably has to do with exploring, changing, heightening, or bringing into focus the intrinsic qualities of some experience or action, however, this has been divorced from particular art appreciative practices of say, formal analysis or decoding of messages. Indeed, in some of Šedá's works, the artistic nature of the work remains entirely unannounced to the participants until the experience is at an end.³⁰ The precedents of this kind of aesthetic expansionism can be found among the Minimalists and Conceptualists that Kwon discusses as taking a 'phenomenological interest' in the site of the work. There too, it seems that aesthetically significant experience was expanded beyond the bounds of the work and towards the work's (everyday) environment. Sol LeWitt's transportation of his lined patterns from the canvas onto the walls of the viewer's environment tried to focus the viewer's attention away from the art and towards the environment; in the *Catalysis* series, Adrian Piper attempted to change the

²⁹ Danto, 1981: 142ff

³⁰ For her ominously named *For every dog a different master* (2007), Šedá's role as an artist was partly invisible to some participants; she paired up inhabitants of an apartment block, starting contact between them by sending them mail, with the other (unwilling) participant's address on the back. She then revealed herself, recording the interaction between participants (documenta 12 catalogue, 2007). Consider also the works of Tino Seghal or Rirkrit Tiravanija.

intrinsic quality of the experience of the people riding the subway, but crucially without announcing to them that this is something they should be perceiving *as art*. One may think here of John Cage's attempts to get his audience to listen to incidental background noises in performances—the sound of the traffic, the coughs, the shuffling of chairs—most notoriously in *4'33''* where this was all that there was to listen to. In doing so, Cage was trying to get the audience *unused* to the act of listening to works of music *as art*; instead of applying musical knowledge and appreciating a Beethoven sonata in familiar terms of musical connoisseurship, a Cage-ian listening would have had to do with the 'mere' experience of listening in one particular moment.³¹ The top-right corner that these examples push us towards is what one might call 'aesthetic expansionism': artistic value of a work of art is its aesthetic value, in whatever way that work might realise it.

However, it is the move towards the bottom right-hand side, the radically heteronomous corner of the schema, which is arguably the most far-reaching. This move seems reflected in those works of the social turn, which Kwon describes as occupying the site of 'discourse'. Such art dispenses with both notions of specifically artistic spheres of activity, and also with the sense of aesthetic value as the primary, special value for art to realise. In relation to the historical vector traced by Gaiger, one might be tempted to say that these artists follow the path traced by politically motivated artists like Courbet, but have given up on the traditional methods and sites of art because they have proved to be too ineffectual. Therefore, the avant-garde character of the works of artists like Voina, Suzanne Lacy, Marjetica Potrč, Iñigo

³¹ See the interviews in Kostelanetz and Cage, 1988: 65, 188. Interestingly, the philosopher Stephen Davies argues that the proper way to appreciate Cage's *4'33''* is *as art*, and more specifically, as a 'happening' or 'a piece of theatre'; and that Cage's own position on how his work should be listened to is incoherent (Davies, 1997).

Manglano-Ovalle, Tania Braguera and others I have discussed is in their willingness to forgo limitations of artistic expression in favour of political or social action. While it is not the case that these artists have given up everything that they might have learnt through their training as artists, their practices decidedly subject this training to their non-artistic goals, retaining only those vestiges of art that are useful. Thus, Voina's disruptive political actions retain elements of performance; Wachter and Jud's software solutions retain elements of graphic design; in designing her environmentally friendly solutions Marjetica Potrč applies lessons of interior design and architecture; Mark Dion's research into ecological effects on tropical plants is exhibited in galleries as well as disseminated in non-art contexts: Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle uses some of his skills as a video-maker to teach them to his students. The difference is in the underlying logic: artists, just like everybody else, should simply use whatever means are at their disposal for the achievement of their political, ethical or epistemic goals. It is these goals, which dictate the nature of what they do; there is no sense in which the sphere of art might be one which either specifies a distinct value, *or* constrains artists' activity with a distinct set of practices, media, sites and modes of appreciation.

This is evident, as well, in the critical discourse that has accompanied the social turn: the art of the social turn is sometimes assessed purely on the basis of its positive social impact, rather than on the basis of any specifically artistic appreciation of it *as art*. As Claire Bishop points out, this has sometimes lead to rather uncritical positive appraisals, extolling work purely on the basis of making attempts at effecting social change, without attempting to put that work within a relevant perspective: 'The aspiration is always to move beyond art, but never to the point of comparison with

comparable projects in the social domain.³² In other cases, however, a more comprehensive assessment is attempted. Returning to Miwon Kwon's discussion of the 1993 'Culture in Action' festival it would seem that Kwon reserves positive judgement for those works which have in fact ameliorated the conditions of the community they engaged with, which would seem to imply that such art is to be judged chiefly on the same criteria as any other community project. Manglano-Ovalle's *Tele Vecindario*—the project teaching local teenagers to make video works—seems one of the few that in this sense succeeded, leaving a successful community programme in place even after the artist had left Chicago. Other projects tended to lack the necessary skills or resources to bring about a significant and lasting change.³³ Art historian Julian Stallabrass also reserves the most praise for socially engaged art projects that he deems actually effective, especially those that approach direct political activism and protest. The examples Stallabrass discusses include 'etoy', an online art collective who made a game, which could be used by the audience to effectively sabotage an online toy retailer (*Toywar*, 1999), Mark Wallinger's *State Britain* (2007) which used the exhibition space at Tate Britain to restage a banned protest against the war in Iraq, and an action by the ecological protest movement Reclaim the Streets, which used performers on stilts to conceal activists drilling holes in the roads (1996). The artistic training and resources of artists-cum-activists are put to use in the service of political goals, as but one in an array of tools that someone might use in the struggle for what they believe would be a better society. The idea that there might be a

³² Bishop, 2012: 19 (see especially Chapters 1 and 8 of Bishop, 2012 for her analysis of the reception of the social turn).

³³ Kwon, 2002: 126-137.

competition between artistic and political goals of a work, says Stallabrass, comes from a 'lazy conservative thinking.'³⁴

The thought that underlies the making and evaluating of much art of the social turn, then, suggests a rather interesting model of artistic value. These works are still evaluated as 'good art' but their success or failure is assessed according to their efficacy in a much broader field, within which such art is located. In most of the examples described, the intended value of such art can be described as 'political' or 'ethical' in the sense that the success or failure of the artwork is measured in terms of whether or not it brings us closer towards a politically more desirable state of affairs. In some cases, it might also be described as epistemic. As mentioned, Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), often quoted within the social turn and participatory art contexts, consisted of a huge restaging of the brutal 1984 confrontation at Orgreave between the police and the miners protesting Margaret Thatcher's policies. The artist's aim was to commemorate the event, but in the course of his 2-year research, another achievement of the work was also the creation of a historical archive of the miners' testimonies.³⁵ Mark Dion's work, such as his ecological research project *On Tropical Nature* similarly seems to pursue epistemic value within a political context, as do works that develop new technologies (Wachter and Jud's *picidae* or Marjetica Potrč's *Dry Toilet*). In all these cases, it seems difficult to speak about any kind of autonomy of specifically artistic practices or specifically artistic values, and this points towards a new model of artistic value, in the bottom-right corner of the scheme. I will call this view 'pragmatism': artistic value is some value that a work of art realises in any way,

³⁴ See my interview with Julian Stallabrass (Simoniti, 2010). Grant Kester and Suzanne Lacy also seem to be among the commentators who judge works of the social turn mostly on the grounds of their political efficacy or their ethical correctness (Lacy, 1995; Kester, 1998; Kester, 2004: 12ff).

³⁵ Bishop, 2012: 30ff.

as long as it is recognized as a value within the broader field of activity within which the work is produced.

In fact, philosophers have sometimes considered the pragmatist conception of artistic value, but most often in a way that suggests it to be untenable. Peter Lamarque speaks about ‘the pragmatic value of art’—which, by reference to the example of David’s *The Death of Marat*, he describes as the value the painting had as an emotional tribute within its immediate, now-gone, political context—but he explicitly *contrasts* that value with the work’s lasting artistic value.³⁶ Dominic Lopes, following Nicolas Wolterstorff, considers what he calls a ‘trivial’ theory of artistic value, whereby artistic value is ‘realized in a work of art to the extent that the work serves the purposes for which it was made or distributed’; instead, he claims, any workable conception of artistic value must include a more substantial notion either of *art* or, in his preferred ‘buck-passing model, one of the arts.³⁷ To talk about the *artistic* value of the works of the social turn while at the same time refusing to impose on them some specifically artistic frame of reference and evaluation, in other words, seems one step short of paradoxical: some such frame seems like an obvious requirement to distinguish between artistic and non-artistic value in the first place.

However, is such a position really completely untenable? I do not intend to show that either ‘pragmatism’ or ‘aesthetic expansionism’ is the *correct* position to take with regards to artistic value, but I do want to show why they might not be quite as self-defeating as they might appear. I will take up the case of ‘pragmatism’ alone, since it seems like the more difficult case to argue for and ties in more directly with my concerns, though I think similar points can be made with regards to aesthetic

³⁶ Lamarque, 2013: 56.

³⁷ Lopes, 2014: 86; cf. Wolterstorff, 1980: 157

expansionism as well. The motivation for pragmatism is the shift within contemporary art towards the works of the social turn. Here is art the value of which we can no longer account for when we look for value *as art*, therefore, the concept of artistic value has to be expanded to include it. What seems like a good objection to pragmatism, however, is that these works no longer appear to be art in any meaningful sense. Precisely through the completeness of their assimilation to other fields of activity, they no longer seem candidates for being art; therefore, philosophical accounts of artistic value need take no notice of them.

This objection to pragmatism points to a prior, definitional issue of what it is for something to be a work of art. However, though the artworks of the social turn represent an important break with previous traditions of art making, many of them explicitly self-identify as art, and emerge from an identifiable trajectory connecting them to previous *bona fide* cases of art. At least for some popular definitions of art within analytic philosophy, this should suffice for an identification of these works as works of art; especially for those definitions of art that have been developed to account for identity of art across a variety of historical functions. This would be the case, for example, on Jerrold Levinson's historical definition of art, according to which something is an artwork if and only if it is intended to be regarded at least in some way, in which artworks of the past were correctly or standardly regarded.³⁸ Here, Kwon's analysis is particularly interesting, since it explains how works of the social turn are intended to be regarded as engaging with their site—and are in that respect continuous with works of Minimalism—even if what has changed is that this engagement is now not to be thought of in phenomenological, but in much more broadly social and political terms. More broadly, one could also draw lines of

³⁸ Levinson, 1979.

continuity between works of the social turn and previous socially engaged avant-gardes (Futurism, German Expressionism, Russian Constructivism...); however, what makes Kwon's analysis all the more interesting is the derivation of radical social engagement from what initially seemed like a purely formal interest. This fits snugly, it seems, within Levinson's definition. Similarly, institutional definitions of art—based on the claim that whether something is art depends on whether members of art institutions accept it as such³⁹—should have no problem with works of the social turn, given their inclusion in various biennials, galleries, art-historical accounts, etc. Of course, functionalist / aestheticist definitions of art, which in one way or another define art as human artefacts intended to realise aesthetic *value*,⁴⁰ will have a problem with art of the social turn. However, clearly one cannot espouse a value-based definition of art in order to argue against a rival theory of artistic value (pragmatism) without begging the question.

So, at least on some respectable definitions of art, the radical works of the social turn are art, and should therefore be included in discussions about artistic value. However, another way to defuse the motivation for pragmatism would be to maintain that these works—while art—are simply not good art. One could simply dig one's heels in: these works are marginal, eye-rollingly awful attempts at social do-goodery by deeply confused individuals. If one feels this way, then the other three theories of artistic value can quite conveniently explain why that is. These works are bad because they fail to realise any aesthetic value (aestheticism, aesthetic expansionism), or else, because they fail to realise any value in a distinctly artistic way (aestheticism, pluralism).

³⁹ E.g. Dickie, 1969.

⁴⁰ E.g. Beardsley, 1982: 299.

The appeal to taste, of course, is of limited value in philosophical discourse on artistic value: we are now at a point, it seems, where the argument reaches a stalemate. One can motivate the case for art of the social turn in two ways: simply by trying to find cases that one likes—personally, I find it difficult not to share some of Stallabrass’ enthusiasm for some of the more ingenious attempts at social activism by the artists he discusses—or, alternatively, one could point out that the enthusiasm for direct political efficacy of the more radical examples I have been discussing has in fact also spread into the artistic practices of more mainstream, and widely acclaimed, contemporary artists. Consider Ai Weiwei’s *Fairytale* (2007) performance for Documenta 12: the work consisted of the artist bringing 1001 Chinese citizens, selected from over 3000 applicants, to Kassel. This act was rich with symbolic resonances: it related to the brothers Grimm who were from Kassel; it included a display of 1001 traditional Chinese wooden chairs shown across the exhibition to signify the invisible presence of Chinese migrants/guests; and included a companion piece, a large structure made of Qing and Ming dynasty doors, taken from buildings which had to be destroyed to make way for new constructions (*Template*, 2007). At Documenta, it was certainly possible, then, to ‘appreciate as art’ the otherwise mostly invisible presence of the 1001 Chinese, to appreciate the work as a curious invisible performance. However, for all these nods to artistic autonomy, the Documenta catalogue also described the work simply as facilitating a cultural exchange programme, enabling 1001 people to experience Europe, its culture and political system, in many cases for the first time.⁴¹ I have already mentioned the example of Vik Muniz, who also often combines relatively traditional art making with social impact; his collaboration with garbage pickers of Rio de Janeiro resulted not only in

⁴¹ documenta 12 catalogue: 208.

social action but several highly appealing portraits. Even an artist as suited to high-end gallery consumption as Olafur Eliasson has developed socially-involved art projects. As an offshoot of his highly successful immersive installation *Weather Project* (2003) at Tate Modern, in which mist, mirrors and light projections created an illusion of a giant solar orb, Eliasson later created *Little Sun* (2012), a social project that brings solar-powered reading lamps, designed by the artist, to off-grid areas of the world. Here, attractively designed solar-powered reading lights could be bought by the gallery-goers, thereby donating money to a company founded by Eliasson, which distributes similar lamps in off-grid areas of the developing world (Figure 18). Aside from being for sale in every contemporary art museum I have visited in the last two years, Eliasson's *Little Sun* has enjoyed critical success as well. As the enthusiastic reviewer in the *TLS* noted: 'If Olafur Eliasson can enlighten those of us who have time and resources to devote to art, well and good; but if he can literally enlighten places of darkness, that must be more valuable.'⁴² Therefore, while pragmatism is most clearly articulated in works of the social turn, thinking about what makes something a good artwork in pragmatic terms seems far from marginal within the contemporary art world. The social turn can be thought of as a limiting case that most clearly outlines a new, pragmatist conception of artistic value, while at the same time such pragmatism also (partially) informs other, more mainstream corners of the art world.

None of this is to suggest, of course, that pragmatism is an unassailable position. From the point of view of philosophy of art, the interesting consequence of the social turn is that it requires us to expand the landscape of sensible options in the debate about the nature of artistic value. I have here taken up the case of pragmatism, but both of the new possibilities—aesthetic expansionism and pragmatism—offer a new

⁴² Flanders, 2012

take on the question ‘What makes good art good?’ Instead of attempting the kind of art-critical analysis that I illustrated by reference to *Trace* in Chapter 2, one is invited to either evaluate the bare change to one’s experience or to evaluate the bare effect of the work in a broader (usually political) context.

4. The Shuttling between Autonomy and Heteronomy

The reason why it seems so difficult to accept works of the social turn as artistic achievements is because in these works, the artistic and political callings of art seem to clash against each other. The artistic seems to play second fiddle to the political. Even Claire Bishop, otherwise sympathetic to the political goals of much of the participatory artworks of the social turn she describes, bemoans this fact. She criticizes curators Charles Esche and Maria Lind for assessing artistic community projects by art collectives Superflex and Oda Projesi, respectively, merely on grounds of their political efficacy and not also ‘*as art*’; conversely, Bishop, praises the ‘*artistic work of participatory art*’ in the case of Jeremy Deller’s *Battle of Orgreave*.⁴³ Rather than just assess socially engaged art as politics, ‘[it] is also crucial,’ Bishop wants to argue, ‘to discuss, analyse and compare this work critically *as art*, since this is the institutional field in which it is endorsed and disseminated’.⁴⁴ As seen in some of the more mainstream examples I have mentioned, this tension between the political and the artistic pervades not merely the social turn but contemporary art more broadly. Jason Gaiger, in a later piece, likens the tension between the aesthetic autonomy and political calling to the concept of a conflict of values, familiar from the work of Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams, arguing that even in contemporary art works that lack an

⁴³ Bishop, 2012: 17, 22, 33. Original emphases.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*: 13. Original emphasis. See also pp. 275ff.

explicitly political dimension ‘there remains a tension between aesthetic autonomy, understood in terms of an address to concerns that are internal to the practice of art, and the countervailing struggle to open art up to the world at large.’⁴⁵ Jacques Rancière, the philosopher whose work Bishop often cites, has even characterised the whole modern era of artistic production—what he calls the ‘aesthetic regime’ and identifies as spanning the period of Western art from mid-19th century to now—as a ‘shuttling’ back and forth between artistic autonomy and heteronomy.⁴⁶ Here the formulas of art as entirely merged with the political, social and everyday life, or as entirely separate from it, get played against each other through various avant-garde ‘scenarios’. There is the pragmatic insertion of art into daily lives by the Arts and Crafts movement (‘William Morris was among the first to claim that an armchair is beautiful if it provides a restful seat’), and at the other end of the spectrum, the idea of an entirely autonomous, artistic teleology practised by artist thinkers like Kandinsky. Somewhere in the middle, Rancière locates the re-aestheticization of everyday debris of ordinary life in the poetics of the *flâneur* in the works of Balzac and Baudelaire, an unusual reprise of which may be found in the recycling of commodity imagery in Pop Art.⁴⁷

However far back in history one might want to trace the struggle between autonomy and heteronomy, my claim so far has been that the social turn represents one particularly radical outcome of it. As such, it enables us to pinpoint the struggle more precisely: I have argued that the tug-of-war between artistic autonomy and heteronomy takes place along more than one dimension, and that this expands the menu of acceptable accounts of artistic value. At this point, however, a certain

⁴⁵ Gaiger, 2013: 83.

⁴⁶ Rancière, 2002: 150.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*: 139, 142, 144.

methodological point ought to be clarified. Once the opposition between the four positions is identified, the usual way to proceed in philosophy would be to argue for some resolution of that conflict. This might be done, on the one hand, by arguing that one of the positions is superior to the others; implicitly, this would be to throw one's weight behind a particular artistic programme, such as the social turn. On the other hand, however, one might try to resolve the tension by showing it to be a tension that successful artworks can negotiate. What secures Claire Bishop's esteem for Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* seems to be the work's putative ability to *both* socially remobilize former miners *and* dialogue with the primarily artistic subject of history painting.⁴⁸ I want to now explore the idea that works of art may resolve tensions between autonomy and heteronomy, though I will argue solutions do not come easily here.

Some works, as Bishop would have it, seem to retain recognizably artistic features, which are governed by autonomous concerns of the arts, *but also* produce positive social impact. The works of Ai Weiwei, Olafur Eliasson and Vik Muniz I discussed above are good examples. I will more closely consider Muniz's photographic series, which arranges its material so as to imitate famous art-historical works, as is the case with his *Marat (Sebastião)* (2008) (Figure 19). For this work, the artist had one of the collaborators pose in a setting recalling David's painting. The photograph of the scene was then remade as an assemblage of various bits of rubbish, and was then photographed again. The work then (a) is in conversation with art history, quoting a famous painting in a way that lends a new sense of revolutionary identity to the sitter, and broaches the art-specific theme of the relationship between materials and image,

⁴⁸ Bishop, 2012: 32-34. Cf. Jason Gaiger's analysis of Ai Weiwei's art as 'a dual address to art and politics' (Gaiger, 2013: 82-83).

and (b) draws attention to the social predicament of the São Paulo garbage pickers and raises money for their cause through its sale.

In some sense, here is work that seems to potentially satisfy all four corners of my autonomy-heteronomy schema, and this would suggest that the opposition between the four corners is merely illusory, or is something that can be overcome. First of all, the photograph can be assessed purely on the grounds of whether or not it realises an interesting aesthetic experience by means of its formal and material features, and by means of the conversation it engenders with earlier works from art history (aestheticism). The picture can alternatively be assessed on the grounds of whether or not it communicates an interesting political sentiment or thought—perhaps the thought that it is people like the sitter, the garbage picker Tião Santos, who are the true revolutionaries of our time—but *through* specifically artistic means of photography, creative use of materials and art-historical quotation (pluralism). Another option would be to assess Muniz's series by asking oneself whether it expands the field of our aesthetic perception, perhaps by allowing us to now aesthetically perceive *garbage*, which is elevated to the status of a key visual component of a touching portrait (aesthetic expansionism). And the picture can also be assessed purely as a work of socially engaged art, which has raised in excess of £30,000 for Tião Santos' new recycling business (pragmatism). All of these kinds of evaluation are possible; and Muniz's artwork might conceivably succeed in convincing on all four counts. Does the work negotiate the tension between autonomy and heteronomy?

It does not. The four criteria for evaluating the work remain vastly different, and they continue to pull apart. In much the same way, adherents of pluralism and aestheticism often agree on which works of art are good (recall my analysis of Jenny Saville's *Trace* in Chapter 2), but apply quite different criteria in evaluating the work.

Our intuitions about artistic value remain as conflicted as before, even though, for quite different reasons, they can all be satisfied. The question then arises whether satisfying all four criteria *somewhat well*, is somehow what constitutes the best approach in contemporary art. Though this seems like a plausible explanation behind the kind of art that today enjoys popular success, it is not quite clear what could make such a view theoretically appealing.

I think this should warn against the sentiment, expressed in Bishop's positive evaluation of Jeremy Deller's work, that there can be a kind of synthesis between artistic autonomy and heteronomy, a kind of dialectical overcoming of the opposing intuitions. In fact, Bishop's theoretical basis for such optimism seems to lie with her reading of Jacques Rancière; though Rancière's is a complex and multi-faceted position developed across a large body of work, an aspect of it that has been perhaps best received across the art world is the idea he has adapted from Schiller, namely the view that it is precisely within the aesthetic experience, conceived of as a *sui generis* phenomenon that chiefly occurs in art alone, that the key to true democratic emancipation lies.⁴⁹ The aesthetic elevation of the everyday, the insignificant, the uncouth or the vulgar in works such as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* or Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* achieves what Rancière calls a 'redistribution of the sensible': the world is perceived alongside new patterns where anything at all—such as the infidelities and inner life of a country doctor's wife—can be rendered important, in a way that can break down traditional hierarchies of significance. By contrast, Rancière is more sceptical of explicitly politicized art, such as Brecht's 'epic theatre' or Zola's naturalism.⁵⁰ The attraction of developing such a position would be

⁴⁹ Rancière, 2004:12-19, 42-44; Rancière, 2009. Cf. Bishop, 2012: 25ff; 265.

⁵⁰ Rancière, 2004: 58, 60.

clear: it would amount to a claim, that it is precisely within the greater autonomy of art—the freer, more aesthetic and seemingly less directly socially engaged artistic experiments—that art’s political power lies, and indeed, that therefore autonomous art has a unique place within our endeavours towards political progress. However, it is also clear just how difficult and ambitious such a position would be, involving a defence of the idea that aesthetic experience itself is political—even when occasioned by the most abstract, non-obviously political work. A less extreme, though also ambitious, strategy would involve specifying more precisely what kinds of aesthetic experience or particular thinking processes associated with it can lead to political emancipation and why. One idea that seems to be suggested by Bishop—though I am not so sure Rancière would agree—is that it is in the very freedom from all instrumental thinking that the aesthetic moment intimates a kind of joyful being together with others, itself a prerequisite for a more just society.⁵¹ Another option, following Adorno, would be to suggest that aesthetic freedom offers a rare alternative to the instrumental reason pervading the rest of the capitalist society.⁵² Though I do not want to discount these options, pursuing either would take us rather deep into an analysis of that highly contested term, ‘aesthetic’, and too far beyond the scope of my investigation.

I will therefore put the question of whether there can be a full synthesis of autonomy and heteronomy to one side for now. Instead I suggest we for now accept the tension between the two, without forcing the issue. One gain of the discussion so far has been to put pressure on the idea that artistic value is value ‘as art’, even though

⁵¹ Bishop, 2012: 38-40. Like Bishop, Ernst van Alphen has also recently argued that the emancipatory and critical potential of contemporary art be best thought of in aesthetic terms (cf. Alphen, 2005: xx).

⁵² Cf. e.g. Adorno, 1970/1997: 227.

I am not suggesting this should lead us to dispense with the idea *altogether*. In the next chapter, I want to show how this opens up the way for more productively studying those forms of artistic expression, which seem to lie somewhere in the grey zone between artistic and non-artistic practices. This also returns me to the issue of epistemic value; we now move from a study of art that produces oppositional political action to a study of art that attempts to produce what we might call, instead, oppositional thinking.

Chapter 7 | Art and Science: Bio Art

1. Bio Art: A Promise of a Critique

The central piece of Eduardo Kac's project *Natural History of the Enigma* (2003/08) is a genetically modified, living artwork; in this case, a transgenic petunia (Figure 20). The pinkish flower appears at first to be a pleasant, unthreatening, even mundane representative of its species, familiar from window boxes and suburban gardens. It is only once we are informed of the flower's provenance that its appearance may acquire an uncanny quality. The flower has been produced by introducing a gene, extracted from Kac's blood sample, into the plant's DNA. The gene utilised is normally responsible for a protein that plays a role in the human immune system, however, it has been modified to express itself as the blood-red, vein-like pattern on the petunia's bloom. With this knowledge, the previously unremarkable flower acquires a new, perhaps phantasmagorical quality. It is on this living image of blood, imprinted in the biological matter of the flower, that we are now invited to reflect.

Since the early 1990s a new direction has emerged within contemporary art, a consequence of an accelerated knitting of connections between the visual arts and the sciences. This area of activity has been variously referred to as sci-art, art-sci or bio art, denoting the work of artists who are closely involved in some scientific area of study, usually biology.¹ The degree and nature of the involvement with science varies within bio art, including work that is arrived at through collaboration with a scientific laboratory, work that merely thematises recent scientific findings within the artistic

¹ For overviews of bio art, see Arends, *et al.*, 2003; Anker and Nelkin, 2004; Ede, 2005; Kac, 2007; Reichle, 2009; Anker, 2010; Mitchell, 2010; Wilson, 2010.

process, and work that directly appropriates some of the scientific technologies or methodologies. From the standpoint of a philosophical inquiry into the question of the epistemic value of art, bio art presents a noteworthy development for at least two reasons. First, works of bio art are often explicitly discussed as works of *criticism*, and more specifically, as works that intend to critique the ethical implications of scientific developments. Kac himself describes the aims of his art in these terms:

As both utopian and dystopian artists such as Moholy-Nagy and Tinguely have done before, in my work I appropriate and subvert contemporary technologies—not to make detached comments on social change, but to *enact* critical views, to make present in the physical world invented new entities (artworks that include transgenic organisms) which seek to open a new space for both emotional and intellectual aesthetic experience.²

Secondly, as seems to be implied by Kac's claim about the 'enactment' of critical views, the notion of critique within bio art is tied up with the special place this art occupies in relation to scientific developments. When living tissue and technological processes of biological engineering are made into an artistic medium, as bio artists sometimes put it, the ethical critique of science attains another dimension; it is carried out from within the scientific process itself, rather than from an external vantage point.

The intention to think critically about scientific progress suggests that bio artists seek to realise what philosophers would call epistemic value. When we criticize something, we are trying to make some progress in our thinking; we are trying to move from worse to better positions as judged by some independent standard of significance, correctness and justification. Philosophical cognitivism, developed primarily with regards to literature, emphasised *specifically artistic* ways through which works of literature made some kind of epistemic value available. Works of bio art are interesting because they occupy that strange grey zone between artistic and

² Kac, 2007: 164.

non-artistic means, between autonomy and heteronomy of practice. Here is work that attempts to be critical, and that does so by curiously blurring the lines between artistic practice and the non-art field of biotechnology. In bio art, I will claim, we can observe how works of contemporary art can *partially* incorporate non-artistic practices in order to realise what we can qualify as a kind of critique.

To show that, however, I need first to tell a story that traces developments and diversity within bio art. First, I offer some institutional and historical context and explore a few more examples of bio art to back up my suggestion that many bio artists aim to present an ethical critique of scientific progress. Within that broader intention, we can then observe an oscillation between works that, by borrowing biotechnological methods, come closely to approximate bioengineering itself, and works which seek to recuperate an autonomous artistic practice against that borrowing. To illustrate this, I will study earlier works by artist Oron Catts, Ionat Zurr, Stelarc and Eduardo Kac on one side, and more artistically autonomous works such as Kac's later *Natural History of the Enigma* on the other. Finally, I will try to get clear on exactly what we might mean by 'critique' in bio art and how continuous or discontinuous such critique might be with other fields. I will do so by attempting a rather unusual comparison, but one which emerges as necessary if we are to test the claims of bio art to realise epistemic value. I will compare *Natural History of the Enigma* with a philosophical academic paper on the subject of ethics in biotechnology. After all, philosophy itself offers a paradigm example of the kind of discourse we usually have in mind when we say that someone has attempted to critically examine the ethical implications of scientific progress.

2. Ethical questions posed by semi-living objects

By the time of Kac's *Natural History of the Enigma*—the first tests were made in 2003 and the work was exhibited in 2008—bio art was well past the point of novelty. Though narratives accounting for the interweaving of art and biological science reach back to various points in history, bio art as a relatively clearly defined, self-contained arts scene with its own set of references, institutions, patrons and practitioners has been underway since the 1990s. The 1993 exhibition 'Genetisches Kunst / Künstliches Leben' at Ars Electronica in Linz can be singled out as one of the first larger exhibitions presenting such art.³ In the years that followed, artists' engagement with various aspects of biology and bioengineering have spanned several institutional contexts. Dedicated funding programmes, such as the Wellcome Trust's 'Sciart' programme in the UK (since 1996), have supported several such engagements, usually through artistic residencies with the aim of stimulating interest in the sciences or disseminating recent scientific discoveries to broad audiences.⁴ While there are many lesser known artists who regularly participate in such programmes and residencies, several mainstream contemporary artists have also occasionally interacted with various subject matters or techniques drawn from biomedical sciences. Marc Quinn's 'genetic portrait' of the Nobel laureate geneticist John E. Sulston is perhaps one of the best known examples; the work is a striking miniature which, instead of capturing the geneticist's visual likeness, preserves strains of the sitter's DNA in agar jelly on a

³ An alternative, and much earlier starting point cited by several narratives of bio art is Edward Steichen's 1936 exhibition of cross-bred delphinium flowers at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Anker and Nelkin, 2004: 66; Reichle, 2009: 63-65; Mitchell, 2010: 36ff). This appears to be a complete red herring. Steichen's appeared to be a rather conventional flower show, which MoMA put on for a week to indulge the already well-known photographer's hobby horse.

⁴ According to an internal Wellcome Trust report this has led to a situation where a 'significant minority of respondents' were concerned that the arts are being utilised for a public relations exercise for science (Glinkowski and Bamford, 2009: 7, 30).

golden, backlit surface (*Sir John Edward Sulston*, 2001). Against this broader background, a strong undercurrent of bio art has developed, one that takes an ethical critique of science to be a key part of its identity.

As early as 1993, Peter Weibel, the curator of ‘Genetisches Kunst / Künstliches Leben’, wrote:

Genetic art as artistic counterpart of genetic engineering is on the one hand intended to simulate processes of life with the same modern technological tools and methods as the latter. On the other hand, it is to use traditional methods and strategies for a critical reflection on the potential consequences of such simulations and the synthetic creation of life.⁵

This promise of criticism is also often picked up and discussed in companion texts to bio art, either by artist themselves or by bio art theorists. Suzanne Anker and Dorothy Nelkin speak of the artists’ ‘interrogation’ of science,⁶ Robert Mitchell discusses bio art as critique of the prevailing culture of bio commerce and state regulation,⁷ Ingeborg Reichle follows the sociologist Donna Haraway in framing the discussion of bio art around a bleak vision of an age of exploitative, ethically blind ‘technoscience’ to which bio art functions as an agent of subversion,⁸ and an edited collection by artists Beatriz DaCosta and Kavita Philip, including writings by several bio artists, theorizes bio art explicitly within the frame of activism and biopolitics.⁹ This line of thinking has been echoed by those who sponsor bio art; for example, the internal review of the Wellcome Trust’s Sciart programme describes artists as ‘scrutinisers’ and ‘pseudo-“public representatives” in what might otherwise remain hermetic sanctums of knowledge.’¹⁰ Initially, the artists participating in the critique of science

⁵ Gerbel and Gsöllpointner, 1993. Catalogue accessible on *Ars Electronica Archive* (<http://archive.aec.at/>; accessed on 2 December 2013).

⁶ Anker and Nelkin, 2004: 4.

⁷ Mitchell, 2010: Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

⁸ Reichle, 2009: Chapters 1 and 2. Reichle uses in particular Haraway, 1991; Haraway, 2008.

⁹ Da Costa and Philip, 2008.

¹⁰ Glinkowski and Bamford, 2009: 65.

did not in fact have much access to bioengineering, and tended to rely on more ‘traditional methods’ of critical reflection. For example, Eduardo Kac claimed of his early work *GFP Bunny* (2000) that he had commissioned a commercial laboratory to create a genetically modified rabbit, which would shine in fluorescent green when exposed to UV light. When the lab refused to release the rabbit to Kac, the artist contacted the media, and conducted a very sensationalist ‘custody battle’ with the lab, demanding that the pet be handed over. In fact, however, it is likely that the rabbit was never created,¹¹ and in any case, Kac had merely attempted to commission it, but played no direct role in its creation (he later insisted that the artwork consisted not just of the putative animal, but also of the public dialogue that ensued).¹² Other early works included various actions, installations, and initiatives, as well as photographs, sculptures and paintings, starkly thematising ethical issues arising from scientific developments, but with similarly limited access to the ‘same modern tools’ Weibel spoke about.¹³

The early work of the Tissue Culture and Art Project—a collaborative, ongoing project of the artists Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr—represents a significant departure in this respect, and I will therefore make it into my first case study. In 2000 and 2001, the artists developed a series of project-based works as artists in residence at the Tissue Engineering and Organ Fabrication Laboratory in Massachusetts General Hospital at the Harvard Medical School. They were given considerable resources and freedom, producing arguably the first bio art series in which artists directly utilised

¹¹ Greely, 2011: §3p10

¹² Kac, 2007: 165

¹³ E.g. Larry Miller offered viewers to protect their genetic material in the action *Genetic Code Copyright Certificate* (1992); Catherine Wagner’s photographic series presented a Bechers-like typology of freezers housing human tissue (*-86 Degree Freezers*, 1995); Alexis Rockman makes acrylic paintings presenting dystopian futures (*The Farm*, 2000), and Chrissy Conant subjected herself to hyper-ovulation and offered her egg cells for sale in *Chrissy Caviar* (2000-1).

biological technology at a level comparable to that of professional laboratories, allowing them to supervise manipulation of biological matter after their own design.

Within the series, one such example is *Pig Wings* (2000-2001), for which Catts and Zurr collaborated with scientists to cultivate three sets of small ‘wings’ out of pig bone marrow cells. These were grown from pig stem cells over an artificial, wing-shaped polymer support. The resulting wing-shaped objects resemble three culturally significant shapes—wings of an angel, of a demon, and of a pterosaur. These were subsequently covered in coloured gold and have been kept as precious *objets d’art* in jewellery boxes (Figure 21). Another animal tissue project originating at the residency, the *Victimless Utopia* series (2000-2006), included several more such projects. *Disembodied Cuisine* (2000/2003), had the artists grow frog flesh in the laboratory. Making use of frogs’ regenerative ability, the samples were harvested from living frogs and grown separately, while the frogs were allowed to recuperate and were then released. The experiment was repeated in 2003 at the ‘L’art biotech’ festival in Nantes: while the donor frogs were (presumably) happily hopping about in their natural habitat, their artificially grown flesh was consumed at a dinner party held at the exhibition.¹⁴

Works such as these—somewhat gruesome yet technologically accomplished—seem to have established the norm in recent bio art. Catts and Zurr have been directly influential in this respect (in 2000 they went on to found SymbioticA, an artist research lab at the University of Western Australia’s School of Autonomy and Human Biology), as have been other artists appropriating biological technologies, such as Orlan, Stelarc, Eduardo Kac, the Critical Art Ensemble and others.¹⁵ This propensity

¹⁴ *Tissue Culture and Art Project Website* (<http://tcaproject.org> ; <http://www.tca.uwa.edu.au>; accessed 1 March 2013).

¹⁵ For example, Paul Vanouse, Beatriz DaCosta, Joe Davis, Ralf Baecker, Maja Smrekar.

towards the bizarre ought not to deceive us into thinking this is merely a joke. The authors of *Pig Wings* describe their project in this way:

This absurd work presents some serious ethical questions regarding a near future where semi-living objects (objects which are partly alive and partly constructed) exist and animal organs will be transplanted into humans. What kind of relationships we will form with such objects? How are we going to treat animals with human DNA? How will we treat humans with animal parts? What will happen when these technologies will be used for purposes other than [*sic*] strictly saving life?¹⁶

The shock, absurdity, oddness and warped humour of these works seem to be in the service of an ultimately serious, critical engagement with ethical issues. To give another more recent and technologically more complex example, Stelarc's infamous *Ear on Arm* (2010) involved the artist creating an ear shape from his tissue, which was then grafted onto his forearm, together with a microphone and a transmitter, enabling Stelarc to transmit what the ear 'hears' over the Internet. Together with a Bluetooth headset, this 'third ear' can also be used as an inbuilt mobile phone. As with *Pig Wings*, however, this seemingly puckish act was intended to contribute to a serious debate about transhumanism and the limits of enhancing our capabilities.¹⁷ Despite the macabre aesthetic of some of these works, the critique and scrutiny in question do not have to do merely with an expression of a negative moral attitude towards the biotechnologies utilised. There is at least as much enthusiasm about biotechnology in these works as there is fear, as evidenced, for example, in the more optimistic projects such as *Victimless Utopia*.

What kind of a critique, then, is represented by these works? One line of thought has emphasised that bio art operates from *within* biotechnology; to recall Eduardo

¹⁶ *The Pig Wings Project* (http://www.tca.uwa.edu.au/pig/pig_project.html; accessed 4 March 2013).

¹⁷ *Ear on Arm* (<http://www.aec.at/repair/en/2010/08/16/ear-on-arm/>; accessed 17 March 2013).

Kac's phrase, 'enacting' critical views rather than merely stating them. Developing this line, the bio art theorist Robert Mitchell claims that the proper medium of bio art is not so much biology, in the sense of living matter, but *biotechnology* itself, understood as a politically and socially embedded practice.¹⁸ The importance of bio art has to do with the very act of putting the artist into the driving seat, as a representative of the non-specialist, non-scientific public. By proxy, the viewer is made to function in 'the position of experimenter rather than to function simply as donor (of tax money and materials) or consumer.'¹⁹ Interestingly, Mitchell seems to *oppose* this kind of critique to the idea of a rational exchange of arguments about the ethical limitations that should be placed on science, such as might be conducted in the public sphere among journalists, scientists, philosophers, and others. Inspired by the work of Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Brian Massumi, Mitchell claims that instead of fostering public debate, works of bio art produce an 'affect':

[A]ffects are understood not as individual psychological responses to an existing state of affairs but rather as what we might best describe as the 'embodied indices' of the emergence of new states of affairs. Affect, in other words, emerges when an individual becomes linked in new ways to his or her surroundings (a linkage that thereby also changes those surroundings).²⁰

The critique that is implicit in the bio artists' 'misuse' of technology has to do with the reshuffling of relationships of authorship and power, and it achieves that aim by creating new affects.

I am not here going to discuss the affect theory in detail, but since similar lines of argument seem popular in narratives of bio art's critical potential,²¹ I will take some

¹⁸ Mitchell, 2010: Chapters 3-5.

¹⁹ *ibid.*: 31, cf. 63-64.

²⁰ *ibid.*: 75

²¹ A comparable view is suggested by some of the contributors to the edited volume *Tactical Biopolitics* (e.g. Claire Pentecost and the Critical Art Ensemble in Da Costa and Philip, 2008). Also see Reichle, 2009: 6-13.

more time to explore what Mitchell's claims might mean in the specific context of bio art. According to one interpretation within affect theory, 'affect' tends to be opposed to the mere creation of intellectual arguments ('concepts') and is also opposed to creation of mere emotional responses such as disgust; instead, 'affect' is seen to be rather similar to an 'ability to act'.²² Mitchell's claim could then be interpreted to mean that works of bio art, *rather than* creating mere emotional responses or mere intellectual arguments, *literally* enable non-scientists to make use of biotechnology in ways they previously could not have done. Indeed, some works of bio art combine art making with audience participation that would seem to suggest such a reshuffling: such was Beatriz da Costa and the Critical Art Ensemble's *Transgenic Bacteria Release Machine* (2001-3), where the audience had the choice of releasing some (harmless) genetically modified bacteria into the environment.²³ However, it seems difficult to argue that either such participatory gestures or even the unorthodox uses of biotechnology by provocative artists like Stelarc in fact extend the non-scientists' ability to use biotechnology to a greater than marginal extent. What is possible remains limited by the law, and the resources and technical knowledge tend to remain firmly in the hands of the institutions sponsoring bio art.

A more charitable reading of Mitchell's point is that the affect produced by works of bio art consists not so much of a new *ability* but of a new action-related *disposition*. Mitchell's reference to the 'embodied indices' of an 'emergent state of affairs' suggests that rather than merely causing the emotions of disgust or wonder, a successful work of bio art will create in the viewer a sense of urgency, a sense that *the viewer herself* is crucially called upon to bear some of the ethical responsibility for

²² For my possible interpretations of 'affect' I draw on Mitchell, as well as Deleuze and Guattari, 1980/1987: ix-x; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 1-28 and Deleuze and Guattari, 2003: 163-200.

²³ Mitchell, 2010: 59-68.

how we are going to use technology. The viewer is empowered to act in the sense that she witnesses something she can imagine herself doing: the artists are not biologists and are therefore are no more authorised than the viewer would be to create these works. This serves to break down the perceived barrier between scientific specialists who are qualified to undertake experiments in bioengineering—and therefore *appear* qualified to also make ethical decisions implicit in such experiments—and the ‘ignorant’ rest-of-the-world who are not so qualified. At the same time, the bizarre, provocative and culturally significant themes and imagery of bio art contrast with the drabber, culturally less visible production of *bona fide* scientific laboratories. This aids the viewer’s involvement in the issues, and therefore causes her to become ‘linked in new ways to his or her surroundings’. It is in this way, then, that the critique of bio art operates at a stage that is in some sense *prior* to public debate. For the sake of convenience, we may sum up this interpretation by saying that successful works of bio art: (i) present scientific developments in a culturally significant way that lends itself to discussion of ethical implications, (ii) empower the viewer with the sense that these ethical issues are something she is entitled to have an opinion on, and (iii) emotionally motivate the viewer to get involved by imparting her with a sense of urgency.

Locating scientific developments within a culturally ‘felt’ ethical inquiry in this way certainly seems to answer a real need. Questions about what kinds of modifications of plants and animals are permissible, what kinds of treatment these new organisms deserve, and what kinds of transformation our own species can be subjected to, are all of paramount importance. I think that the sometimes gruesome semi-living objects of bio art do in fact compel us to attend to such questions, and that they do so depends crucially on the proximity that this art has to bioengineering. So far so good, then. However, I now want to suggest that this very proximity leads to a

potential inadequacy of bio art, and a hole in the ‘affective response’ argument. This potential inadequacy stems precisely from a potentially insufficient differentiation between these works of bio art and bioengineering itself.

To consider this point, let me draw attention to some interesting new applications within bioengineering itself. In 2013, a group of scientists seem to have gone a step further from *Disembodied Cuisine*. While a decade earlier Catts and Zurr made use of the frog’s inherent regenerative capacities to grow new tissue from frogs’ muscles, the vascular physiology research team at Maastricht University, headed by bioengineer Mark Post, grew a beef burger patty from muscle *stem cells* of a cow, which had been artificially nourished and developed into tissue. Since cows do not possess frog-like regenerative capacities, this was a significant technological improvement.²⁴ The public presentation of this research was also interesting: a public tasting of the patty was organized in London, and—in a comical gesture reminiscent of bio art tactics—food critics and professional chefs were invited to comment on the taste of the burger and to provide recipe suggestions; this led to more serious discussion of the environmental and ethical consequences of such research.²⁵ *Ear on Arm* also possesses a curious parallel in non-art bioengineering, the infamous image of a laboratory mouse with what looked like a human ear growing on its back (Figure 22). The image was initially released in a scientific journal in 1997, and became an early Internet sensation, principally because it invited the misinterpretation that the mouse was a product of irresponsible genetic engineering (interestingly, this misinterpretation seems to survive into Alexis Rocman’s painting *Farm* (2000), which often also gets discussed

²⁴ See the project website at Maastricht University (<http://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/web/Main/Research/ResearchUM/FirsteverPublicTastingOfLabgrownCulturedBeefBurger.htm>; accessed 25 August 2013).

²⁵ ‘What does a stem cell burger taste like?’ *BBC News*, 5 August 2013 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-23529841>; accessed 25 August 2013).

in the bio art context; see Figure 22). In fact, the mouse did not obtain the ‘ear’ as a result of being genetically manipulated to grow one; the ear-shaped cartilage was grafted onto its back as part of an experiment to test techniques for supporting artificially grown tissue on a living organism.²⁶ These findings have since contributed to later advances in reconstructive surgery in humans; indeed, in reconstructive surgery an artificial ear-shaped cartilage is first grafted onto the person’s arm to test whether the body will accept it, before transplanting it onto the head.

Here we have two curious cases of mirroring: bio art potentially mimicking non-art bioengineering (the case of two ears) and non-art bioengineering potentially mimicking bio art (the case of two steaks). While Stelarc says he first had the idea prior to the mouse experiment, in 1996, there can be little doubt that the final realisation in 2010 was executed with the iconic image of the ‘earmouse’ in mind.²⁷ On the other hand, science just might be following art in the case of the artificial burger. It would be difficult to trace any direct lines of influence, but Elizabeth Stephens, an academic who has worked with Catts, points out that there are clear parallels in sensationalism that both the frogs’ legs and the beef patty attempted to generate.²⁸ Other examples of non-art bioengineering that look much like they might be bio art include Biosteel Goats, genetically modified goats that produce spider silk in their milk, genetically modified rice that for the first time included an insertion of a human gene into a plant species for commercial purposes, and pigs modified to have less pollutant agents in their excrements, branded as Enviropig™. Some of these inventions go relatively unnoticed, existing away from the public eye until pointed out

²⁶ Cao, *et al.*, 1997.

²⁷ Ben Myers, ‘Future Mods’ *Bizarre*. April 2009 (http://www.bizarremag.com/tattoos-and-bodyart/tattoos/7719/future_mods.html ; accessed 10 January 2014).

²⁸ Elizabeth Stephens, ‘World’s first lab-grown burger? Don’t forget the semi-living steak’ *The Conversation*, 12 August 2013. (<https://theconversation.com/worlds-first-lab-grown-burger-dont-forget-the-semi-living-steak-16941>; accessed 10 January 2014).

by the media (the rice, for example, quickly acquired the nickname ‘frankenrice’).²⁹ Others are much advertised by the research bodies or companies that produce them; for example, it was soon announced that the burger research was privately funded by the Google co-founder Sergey Brin, the presence of a private donor perhaps explaining the need for the sensational presentation of the experiment.³⁰

While in 1993 Weibl spoke about ‘genetic art as artistic counterpart of genetic engineering’, it seems that today’s bioengineering has less need for such a specifically artistic counterpart. Today’s biotechnology, taking a page from the art book perhaps, seems to be quite successful in attracting attention to what goes on in those ‘hermetic sanctums of knowledge’: be it through the catchy names, branding and appearance of the products of bioengineering, or simply through the inherently sensational nature of what is being produced. To draw again on the categories of autonomy and heteronomy, one might suggest that the need to produce an ‘affect’, ethical focus and culturally legible presentation have, since Weibl made those remarks, become identifiable autonomous constraints within the field of *bioengineering* itself. If these three features initially distinguished bio art from bioengineering, it is easier to see how bio art could be thought of as supplying a kind of ‘critique’ of bioengineering, precisely by imposing these new constraints upon it. However, if we can now also identify these constraints within bioengineering itself, it seems to make less sense to speak about two separate fields or to speak about bioengineering as separate from its artistic critique. The two seem to merge. In other words, bioengineering *as it is*

²⁹ Ethan Huff, ‘Human genes engineered into experimental GMO rice being grown in Kansas’ *Natural News*, 2 May 2012. (http://www.naturalnews.com/035745_GMO_rice_human_genes_Kansas.html; accessed 10 December 2013). The insertion of a human gene into rice parallels Maja Smrekar’s artwork *Maya Yoghurt* (2013), which inserts the artist’s gene into yoghurt to make it more nutritious.

³⁰ ‘Google’s Sergey Brin: the man behind the test-tube burger’ *The Guardian Technology Blog*, 5 August 2013 (<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/blog/2013/aug/05/google-sergey-brin-test-tube-burger>; accessed 25 August 2013).

already seems to stand within an easily relatable ethical focus; it already raises, with urgency, affect and immediacy, those difficult ethical questions posed by semi-living, or indeed living, things that are made in laboratories.³¹

Nothing I have said disputes the need for a critical, independent interrogation of what goes on in our labs. However, the increasing similarity between sensational bioengineering and sensational bio art points to a gradual obsolescence of the affect-based model of how bio art might constitute a genuine critique. If bio art is to remain critical, the first prerequisite is that it should insert a further point of difference between itself and its subject matter.

3. Bio art as a (more) autonomous art form

The flower in the *Natural History of the Enigma* (2003/08) is a transgenic organism; it is a flower whose appearance has been influenced by the insertion of a modified human gene. On one level, it functions much like the other works of bio art discussed above. The veins on the flower begin to look curious, bizarre, even threatening; one might compare it with dangerous plants from B-category horror movies, such as the villainous pot plant in *The Little Shop of Horrors* or the man-cloning plant aliens of the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. However, underneath that initial affective response, the work has a more complex, and indeed not immediately visible structure.

To uncover that structure, it will be helpful to revisit some basic biology. Genes are sections of the DNA in eukaryotes (including plants and animals), which code for individual characteristics of the organism. Genes are ‘expressed’ in the proteins that

³¹ Such merging also seems to be encouraged by the more commercial aspects of bio art, which is sometimes referred to as ‘bio design’ (cf. Myers and Antonelli, 2012). Even at Ars Electronica, that bastion of ‘critical’ bio art, several winners at the 2013 festival seemed quite indistinguishable from works of bio design. Such was, for example, Phil Ross’ work *Mycotecture* (2012), for which the artist developed eco-friendly building material out of mushrooms.

they are codes for: each gene contains information that determines what protein molecules the organism will produce. These proteins underscore every process in our bodies. For example, the genes responsible for the shape of my nose or for the functioning of my kidneys code for specific proteins, which then gradually organize themselves into cells and then into the nose or the kidneys. When scientists genetically modify organisms, they often do so by transferring a gene from one species to another, thereby conferring some of the properties of the first organism onto the second one. Genetically modified strawberries, for example, may contain genes from fish in order to allow them to survive at lower temperatures so that they can be better stored and transported. In the case of Kac's petunia, the flower has been produced by introducing a gene, extracted from Kac's blood sample, into the plant's DNA. In humans, the gene is normally responsible for a protein, IgG, which plays a role in the human immune system. The genetic modification means that the protein IgG is now being produced by the flower. However, before being inserted into the flower, the human gene was further modified in two ways. First, the gene was modified so that it would *only* express itself in the veins on the petals of the flower: the protein IgG is therefore only produced there and not in the flower as a whole. Secondly, the gene was also modified so that its expression was linked with the production of a blood-red colour. This is a usual procedure in biotechnology, known as 'flagging': by linking a gene sequence with another gene that codes for a colour or for bioluminescence, scientists can visually test where the gene is being expressed. The final result of the modification, then, is a plant which expresses the IgG protein in the veins of its flower, and in which this is made visible through the effect of the dark red coloration of the veins.³²

³² *Natural History of the Enigma*; the artist's website (<http://www.ekac.org/nat.hist.enig.html>); Accessed 10 February 2014).

What is interesting here, is how utility has been eliminated from the process. The gene does not in fact confer any new immunity properties onto the petunia or its veins. Indeed, the protein IgG does not seem to play any role in the petunia. It is just there: an unusual, inert human presence in the veins, which the flower has no known use for. Instead, what has motivated this kind of modification are concerns that seem to suggest a greater degree of artistic autonomy; these are concerns which we might, for want of a better word, call ‘poetic’, and which the audience can discern only once they are made aware of how the flower was made. First, there is a desire to produce a sense of dramatic irony in the work. A protein normally indirectly responsible, through our immune system, for repulsing alien life forms from our bodies is now precisely what has united man and plant. Secondly, the artist is trying to create an image of blood, reminding the viewer that the gene has been extracted from a human blood sample, but also creating an easily recognizable iconography: blood stands for an essential part of our humanity, for our mortality, and for our kinship with other humans. It now looks *as if* this very quality, this human ‘essence’ is coursing through the veins of the flower, and has made the flower our kin. But thirdly, the fact that this is a living image of blood, not painted but genetically seared into the bloom, confers upon the work a further curious property. This is an artwork where a fictional representation turns out not to be entirely fictitious. The red veins on the flower *symbolically represent* a genetic unity of plant and man, however, at the same time this very representation is a *direct consequence* of that genetic unity. The blood-redness is the ‘flag’ that not merely represents but directly traces the expression of the human gene. This creates a tension in the work, and lends it an uncanny quality. We can indulge in tranquil contemplation of the ingenious layering of symbols and ironies representing the nature of genetic modification, but these also continuously point us towards the sense in

which the genetic modification has really taken place. We could touch those fleshy, partially human petals.

Here I want to point out a certain important difference between *Natural History of the Enigma* and the previous works I have discussed. Unlike the burger patty, the frog steaks, the pig wings, or the ear on arm, the *Natural History of the Enigma* is neither concerned with a proof of concept, nor is it concerned with a sensationalist presentation of what is possible in biotechnological engineering. As such, it is not clear that the work lends itself well to discussion of ethical implications, or emotionally motivate the viewer with a sense of urgency, enthusiasm or direct relevance. Though some criteria of success from bioengineering are certainly present—the work would be considered a failure if the genetic manipulation did not work—there are additional criteria placed upon the work, which seem at least equally as important: the attempt to create a sense of irony, the symbolic representation of a human-plant kinship, and the play with the representational/non-representational aspect of the work. These additional constraints suggest a shift towards an autonomy of artistic practice. They would appear wholly arbitrary and indeed pointless from the point of view of even the most ‘art-like’ works of bioengineering, such as the artificially grown burger patty.

It is important to note that the differences here can be subtle. I am not claiming that *Natural History* is produced within a wholly autonomous artistic practice, or that a work like *Pig Wings* is decidedly not. *Natural History* does retain a great deal of proximity to non-art bioengineering; both in terms of how and where it was made, and what concerns went into its making. Conversely, a work like *Pig Wings* obeys some criteria that one might consider arbitrary from the point of view of a bioengineer, though these are fewer and implemented less imaginatively: for example, the shapes

chosen for the wings represent culturally significant shapes (angel, devil, pterosaur). The difference between the two works, then, is a matter of degree. In a work like *Natural History* we see a proliferation of additional criteria which would seem arbitrary from the point of view of bioengineering, and which therefore *differentiate* that work from it. It seems one can here avoid the question of where exactly bioengineering stops and art begins, and yet sensibly identify degrees of artistic autonomy or heteronomy.

Natural History, it should be said, is not entirely alone or exceptional in this respect among works of bio art. The shifts here are quite delicate, and may be detected within the work of a single artist. Kac's *GFP Bunny*, mentioned earlier, seemed more like a straightforward, if sensational and ultimately never realised act of bioengineering. This contrasts with his other and more symbolically complex works. In *Move 36* (2002/04), Kac portrayed Gary Kasparov's defeat at chess by a computer, by genetically modifying a plant to carry the invisible message '*cogito ergo sum*' in its genetic code, and then growing that plant on a grass chess board. The plant was located on the field on which the Big Blue made its 36th move: this was not the move that would win the game, but the move that Kasparov recognized as risky, creative and irrational. Among other artists, Tania Candiani makes poetic installations which thematise machine/life amalgamations and reference historical narratives of living automata; Marta de Menezes's practice is similarly more poetic and sculptural, as with her work *Tree of Knowledge* (2004/05), a sculpture made of artificially grown neurons. Outside of visual bio art, Zev Gordon and Ruth Padel's project *Allele* (2010) is a choral work that incorporates information about the individual genetic sequences of the singers into the music. In all of these cases, just as with *Natural History of the Enigma*, there appears to be a greater degree of autonomous—narrative, aesthetic,

symbolic, medium-related—criteria placed upon the production of the final work than in the more sensational works of bio art.

If this seems like a sensible analysis, then one might be moved to conclude that the difference between autonomy and heteronomy in a given artistic practice is not an all-or-nothing affair. There is a degree to which a self-identifying artistic practice shares or does not share processes, sites, media, modes of appreciation, and other features with some non-art field. I will return to this issue in general terms later, but we can perhaps here already begin to observe how the ‘as art’ qualifier traces a property that may be a matter of degree. If that is so, then within bio art, *Natural History of the Enigma* and other works like it represent a shift towards greater artistic autonomy. As a more autonomous artwork, *Natural History of the Enigma* certainly offers different lines of thought to engage in, lines of thought rather less straightforward, rather less directed. There is a distance between the ordinary public discourse on biotechnology and the artwork’s concern with irony, symbolism and visual representation. However, identifying a greater degree of autonomy within artistic practice does not yet answer the question of the kinds of *value* that are realised in the work. Could a kind of *epistemic* value, a certain kind of critique be realised in this very distance?

4. Critique in bio art and critique in bioethics

Writing in 2009, the curator Robert Zwijnenberg suggests that bio art attempts to fill the role of an ethical scrutiniser of science, but sounds a cautionary note. Even though the early bio artists were, according to Zwijnenberg, among the first ‘humanists’ to ethically critique science while being direct users of biotechnology, he wonders whether their role will not eventually be supplanted by academics working in philosophy, sociology and other disciplines, who can deploy a greater degree of rigour

in analysing the challenges of biomedical progress.³³ Though Zwijnenberg has a point in that bio artists are unique among humanists in terms of their very hands-on engagement with biotechnology, attempts within the humanities to ethically scrutinise science in no way seem to lag behind in terms of direct access to information, tools and processes of biomedical technology. From its inception in the 1960s, the development of bioethics has been an interdisciplinary enterprise, bringing together medical doctors, scientists, philosophers and others to interrogate the ethical implications of biomedical developments, and new choices that we can now make as a result of it.³⁴ In terms of subjecting the progress of science to serious ethical critique, one might think, the humanities have already supplanted art; indeed, one might think that the pre-eminence of the humanities was never at stake.

So far, I have been using the term ‘critique’ rather loosely, and I have considered the possibility that when we say bio art is critical, what we mean is that bio art ‘affectively’ locates scientific enquiry in the domain of ethical inquiry. However, to really test the designation of bio art as ‘critical’, it seems one should also compare, as Zwijnenberg begins to suggest, the ways in which bio art allegedly scrutinises science with the ways in which other forms of thinking scrutinise it. To rise to that challenge, what is needed is a direct comparison between philosophy and bio art—however awkward or difficult such a comparison might seem—and an attempt to directly answer the question as to the kind of critique each of these fields might offer. A comprehensive comparison would be more ambitious than what I can hope to deliver here, so what I will offer is something more modest but something that has, to my

³³ Zwijnenberg, 2009: xvi-xviii; xxiii.

³⁴ The first journal dedicated to bioethics, the *Hastings Center Report* began to be published in 1969. The field gained additional momentum in the 1970s and again in the 1990s, and is now an established, interdisciplinary, global field of study (for an overview, see Kuhse and Singer, 2009).

knowledge, not yet been attempted in discussions about bio art. I will compare the kind of critique that appears to be inherent in *Natural History of the Enigma* with that of a single paper in the field of bioethics.

One paper that seems like a good candidate for comparison is Julian Savulescu's 'Genetically Modified Animals: Should There Be Limits to Engineering the Animal Kingdom?'³⁵ Savulescu is Professor of Practical Ethics at Oxford University, where he heads the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, working broadly within the utilitarian school of ethics. He has been on the permissive side of the bioethics spectrum, defending, for example, principles of selective procreation,³⁶ and the 'transhumanist' idea that, if possible, we should engineer ourselves into a morally superior species.³⁷ The paper chosen for discussion here was published in 2011, three years after *Natural History of the Enigma* was first exhibited, and it makes for an interesting comparison not only because its timing indicates an engagement with roughly the same state of development in biotechnology, but also because, like *Natural History of the Enigma*, Savulescu's paper pays attention to the possibilities of augmenting non-human species with human-derived tissue or genetic material.

In 'Genetically Modified Animals', Savulescu argues that there ought to be no single regulation applicable to all genetic modification of animals. Instead, he thinks we should assess the ethical permissibility of genetic modification procedures on a case by case basis, for which he proposes a four stage evaluation model. These stages are: (1) establish where the new genetically modified animals (GMAs) would feature in the moral hierarchy of beings; (2) justify the creation of a new GMA by establishing that doing so would benefit either the GMA itself, other species or both;

³⁵ Savulescu, 2011.

³⁶ Kahane and Savulescu, 2009.

³⁷ Persson and Savulescu, 2010.

(3) justify any new creation by assessing the relevant risks and by obtaining appropriate consents from the donors of genetic material; (4) make sure that the creation will not harm others unreasonably. These four stages, Savulescu contends, provide constraints on the creation of new GMAs. He also argues, however, that there are no general, overriding reasons against creation of GMAs. He argues against four such *tout court* reasons: including the argument that genetic modification involves ‘playing God’, and the slippery slope argument, which says that allowing benign genetic modifications might lead to a gradual liberalization, which would end up in a moral catastrophe. He concludes that biotechnological progress will soon put pressure on the current regulatory policies, and that we desperately need a ‘full-blooded normative framework for evaluating the creation of genetically modified animals.’³⁸ His four-step account is the first move in that direction.

My intention here is to structurally compare Savulescu’s paper with a work of bio art, so I will not be so much concerned with whether his arguments are sound or not. However, to get a better sense of the paper, let me show where his argument may invite resistance. Notably, Savulescu’s four-step framework does not include any such non-utilitarian category as ‘sanctity’ of naturally occurring life forms, ‘dignity’ of the human species, or any proviso for excluding the creation of animal forms that we may find intuitively perverse or gruesome. According to the framework, utilitarian considerations will override most such misgivings that we might have (the only non-utilitarian proviso, it seems, is the consent that has to be given by those humans whose genetic material will be used). For example, as Savulescu notes, his framework would allow us to create a pig, which would be modified so that it could be implanted with a human womb and gestate human embryos, the purpose of which could be either to

³⁸ Savulescu, 2011: 7f.

deliver children as a kind of birthing machine, or to gestate foetuses which could then be aborted and used for organ donations. Such an animal could be of great benefit to us, liberating women from the more onerous aspects of reproduction and/or supplying us with efficiently grown human replacement organs. Provided that such a pig would have a fairly happy life, Savulescu sees no reason not to create it.³⁹ Another example Savulescu's framework would permit is that of a chimp-human chimera (a tissue-based fusion of the two species). Chimps, as our close relatives, are often used in various medical experiments, since we consider it unethical to use human volunteers when high risks are involved. The chimp-human chimera could therefore be very useful in this regard. Despite approaching humans in biological make-up, its moral status would not be quite as high as a human's, and this would allegedly justify our experimentation on the new animal. Indeed, Savulescu thinks the benefits of the existence of such a chimera for medical progress would be so great, that it could outweigh at least some considerations about the chimera's own well-being or its confused sense of identity.

The [...] human-chimp chimera can have no complaint, even if mildly depressed, regarding the act of creating it, because without the act of fusing human and chimp embryonic cells, it would not have existed and its life is not all bad.⁴⁰

Though one might recoil at the idea of such freakish creatures, Savulescu uses such arguments (in this case, the idea that even from the *chimera's* point of view, mild depression resulting from its unusual condition is preferable to non-existence), in order to put pressure on our intuition that the bare existence of such creatures somehow offends dignity. Savulescu deliberately chooses shocking examples, since these are precisely those where our intuitions that we should be conservative when it

³⁹ *ibid.*: 12.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*: 8.

comes to genetic manipulation are the strongest. The goal of the paper is to show that even in the face of such examples, the utilitarian weighing of projected benefits against projected risks should win out over more deontological considerations.

One rather obvious point of commonality between Savulescu's 'Genetically Modified Animals' and Kac's *Natural History of the Enigma* is that in both cases there seems to be a distance between each work and biotechnology. Savulescu's paper asks us to entertain a philosophical framework for morally judging biotechnological applications, but no bioengineering, it seems, was necessary to make these arguments. Though Kac's artwork does incorporate bioengineering, I have argued that it is distinct from that field, in that it focusses our attention on ironic tensions, symbolic meanings and a representational tension. Neither Kac's artwork nor Savulescu's paper is then wholly classifiable as a work or a research paper within bioengineering proper; instead, both works invite thought which seems to be *about* biotechnology. The question is whether, comparing these side by side, there is a qualitative difference in the sense in which we can call each of these works a 'critique'.

One obvious and important difference has to do with how conclusive each piece is; in this sense we might describe the conclusion of the artwork as 'open' and that of the philosophical text as 'closed.' Savulescu sets out to *convince* the reader: if you accept these premises, then you ought to accept this conclusion, and the conclusion is that this is the four-step framework we should be applying when deciding whether or not to make a particular genetically modified animal. The text puts forward statements about what we should or should not do in bioengineering, and gives us reasons to believe these statements. This is not to say that the text *automatically* yields new propositional knowledge. We do not simply take what Savulescu is saying on board (as we might with a fact book), however, the text is directed towards acquisition of

propositional knowledge, in that considering Savulescu's conclusions and arguments, as well as resisting them and thinking through alternatives, should bring us closer to knowledge about what kinds of bioengineering are morally permissible. By contrast, there is no 'conclusion' to *Natural History of the Enigma*, no particular belief on the rightness or wrongness of either the petunia or of genetic engineering in general. One notices the symbolism of the blood, the uncanny quality, the irony—but none of that suggests something quite as definite as whether or not bioengineering is good or bad.

Before commenting on this difference, let me consider another comparison the two works invite. Kac's work leads the viewer to consider a single, real work of bioengineering, namely the petunia. The viewer is invited to dwell on the image of 'blood' veins on the pink, skin-like flower, and the uncanny tension between the reality of what has been accomplished and the fiction in the image. This flight of thought returns us time and again to the realisation that the object in front of us is a real, fragile, paradoxical living thing, an already existent eventuality; and this focussed meditation could not be more different from the use of thought experiments in Savulescu's paper. Philosophy can dream up moderately-but-not-overly-depressed chimp-humans, happy baby-bearing pigs, humans with no conscious experience, furniture with conscious experience. One can dream up these apparitions at will and change the variables with the abandon of sci-fi fans. Of course, how philosophy uses such thought experiments is a complex and contested matter. There is certainly also a way of using thought experiments—as more carefully crafted 'intuition pumps,' as thought experiments that are supposed to elicit appropriate emotional reactions, and therefore show us the way in which an argument in ethics should go.⁴¹ In the case of the Savulescu text, however, this is clearly not how thought experiments are used. We

⁴¹ See Chapter 3, pp. 69ff, and especially distinctions made by Camp, 2009.

are not supposed to take our gut reaction to the baby-bearing pig as something to dwell on; we are rather supposed to recognise that the overall sound utilitarian logic should lead us to overcome such moments of moral queasiness.⁴²

What is the relevance of these differences? It is important to stress that *Natural History* is a work that offers no conclusions; the experience it offers is importantly different from, for example, Piper's Conceptual work that I considered, which offers strong, crystal clear statements about the state and nature of racism. It is this very inconclusiveness of *Natural History*, however, which seems to be a kind of artistic achievement of the work. We meditate on the flower, we return time and again to the sense that here is a *strange living thing* in front of us; but we at no point do we quite know what we should think about it. The flower may repulse us to some extent, but it is also fragile and engaging and appears to be our kin. It is a thing to which we may have some duty of care; and it is something that seems to matter a lot—and yet we do not know what to do with it. This feeling of care, seriousness and trepidation is precisely one that the philosophical paper may be seen to obscure. Of course, the philosophical paper is *serious* in that it means what it says, but the alacrity and levity with which it dreams up its examples seems to have the effect of emotionally desensitizing the reader to the extreme moral difficulty of these choices. To put it perhaps over-simply: in the case of the flower we have a lack of conclusions but a greater sense of moral difficulty; in the case of the philosophy paper we have conclusions but are encouraged to let go of the moral trepidation. We simply follow through the arguments, and are then invited to implement the conclusions we have reached.

⁴² Savulescu, 2011: esp. 3-4.

Which of these two modes of reasoning should we then call a ‘critique’ of bioengineering? I do not mean to overreach with my argument here, because here we reach a rather difficult point. The answer can be, at best, given as a conditional claim. It is only *if* one thinks that there is something *missing* from the philosophical way of thinking as evidenced above, that the artwork can be seen as stepping in, and offering something to ethical thought about bioengineering that philosophy hides. That something is the amount of difficulty and responsibility attached to the ethical choices we have to make here. The artwork brings this difficulty into focus both by sustaining our attention while refusing us any clear conclusions; and by perpetually meditating on the ‘fleshy’ reality of the object in front of us. Philosophy, on the other hand, needs to reach conclusions, think through different options, and put forward arguments. While it may have some use for more finely described thought experiments, it would simply get hampered if it were made to brood for too long on the difficulty of the choices involved. That is why we tend to avoid long essayistic preambles in philosophy and cut to the chase. However, acknowledging that necessity does not mean that nothing of importance gets lost in such a discourse.

The comparison between the work of bio art and the work of philosophy, then, suggests that both may supply a kind of ethical critique, though not in ways that would be continuous with one another. The inconclusive gravity of the bio artwork and the clear thinking of the philosophy paper are rather at odds with each other. The ‘continuity’ strategy which I have employed with regards to Piper’s work would therefore seem inappropriate here. Instead, the analysis given seems to be more similar to the ‘confrontation’ model, which I presented in relation to J.M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*. There, art was said to show up some aspect of a philosophical problem, which it is difficult and perhaps impossible to show within the usual

philosophical register.⁴³ That is not to put forward the much stronger claim that art is supposed to *replace* philosophical discourse; one can engage in both modes of thinking. It is rather to allow for the possibility that the epistemic value made available by philosophy and the epistemic value made available by art are in opposition with one another; what one makes available the other obscures, and vice-versa.

We can think of *Natural History of the Enigma* as an experimental artwork within the broader bio art paradigm. It subjects an act of bioengineering to additional, autonomous and idiosyncratic artistic criteria; in doing so, the work seems to think through the ways in which one could fulfil the promise of bio art to ‘enact’ a critique of bioengineering. While some earlier works of bio art have come so close to bioengineering that their ‘affective’ critical potential was expended, I have argued that it is precisely by following idiosyncratic artistic criteria—a sense of irony, symbolic depiction of kinship, a negotiation between representation and instantiation—that *Natural History* offers a different kind of critique of bioengineering, one that is based on creating an attitude of care, seriousness and trepidation. I have suggested how this differentiates the work both from earlier, affect-producing bio art, and from works of philosophy that address ethical problems in a more precise, conclusive but detached way. This brings my own attempt to think through philosophical problems from within three art movements to a close; next, I turn to bring my findings together.

⁴³ Indeed, the difficulty here may well be what Cora Diamond calls ‘the difficulty of reality’ in her discussion of Coetzee (Diamond, 2008); see Chapter 3, Section 4.

Chapter 8 | Conclusion

1. Artistic value between autonomy and heteronomy

In his influential paper ‘Categories of Art’ Kendall Walton, one of the founding fathers of contemporary analytic aesthetics, writes:

The energy and brilliance of a fast violin or piano passage derives not merely from the absolute speed of the music (together with accents, rhythmic characteristics, and so forth), but from the fact that it is fast *for that particular medium*. In electronic music different pitches can succeed one another at any frequency up to and including that at which they are no longer separately distinguishable. Because of this it is difficult to make electronic music *sound* fast (energetic, violent).¹

Writing in Michigan in 1970, on the cusp of the popularization of electronic music—Kraftwerk were formed that very year in the remote Düsseldorf—Walton perhaps had little way of knowing that the ethereal *glissandos* of experimental electronic pioneers like Stockhausen were about to be transformed into a musical genre that would, in time, allow its audiences to enjoy unprecedented degrees of musical speed, energy and violence. The validity of Walton’s philosophical argument in the paper does not depend on the plausibility of this one example, but it conveniently illustrates how philosophical writing on contemporary art can be a risky business. Aestheticians drawing examples from classical music or Greek pottery do not have to fear that the nature of their subject matter will change drastically right under their noses, or indeed, as we saw with Art & Language’s rebuke to philosophical writing on Conceptual Art,

¹ Walton, 1970: 350 (emphases in the original).

that art practitioners might talk back, all too ready to resist being fitted into any particular theoretical mould.

One of the leading motivations behind my thesis has been the thought that interesting experiments with regards to the nature and value of art happen within contemporary art itself. We need to keep track of these experiments if, as philosophers, we want to speak to the arts in a way that is relevant to them. The downside of this is that the relevance of many of my arguments may be hostage to fortune. Some of the recent trends I have identified might be forgotten tomorrow, or take quite a different turn or interpretation. Somewhat mindful of the changeability of trends, however, I have tried to pick not the most common forms of contemporary artistic production—I have hardly touched on any of the ‘big names’, which, after all might not be so big tomorrow—but those that, to my mind, pose the more interesting challenges to established ways of thinking about artistic and epistemic value in philosophy. In conclusion, I want to draw together the main findings of the discussion so far, and say what some of the philosophical suggestions drawn from the artistic experiments I have considered are. These concern, first, artistic value; second, epistemic value; third, philosophical methodology.

In Chapter 2 I have explored the nature of artistic value, as this has been theorised in recent analytic philosophy. To ask what is artistic value is to recognize the inherently evaluative nature of our dealings with art. We talk about artworks as better and worse, and to ask what artistic value is equals asking what factors contribute to something being good art. Two philosophical camps have traditionally existed with regards to this question. Aestheticism holds that only aesthetic value contributes to some work being good art. According to pluralism, many values (as well as aesthetic value) can contribute to a work being a good work of art. I have argued that the two

disparate views share a commitment as to the nature of artistic value: namely, both positions subscribe to the claim that artistic values are only those values that a work of art has *as art*; that is, values the work makes available *when properly attended to as art*, or, equivalently, the values a work of art makes available in virtue of its *properly artistic features*.

I have argued this on two counts. First, I considered the argument from indiscernibles which is usually presented as an argument against aestheticism: if an artwork and a non-artwork look the same, then aesthetic value cannot be what fully captures artistic value. I argued that in fact an art object and a non-art object can in principle realise *all* the same values; and that the argument applies equally to pluralism as it does to aestheticism. To stop the argument from going through, both aestheticism and pluralism can rely on a prior restriction of which values are artistic: it is the values that a work has *as art*, so non-artworks are *a priori* excluded from possessing artistic value. Value *as art*, however, is not ‘a value something has, when that something is an artwork’, but rather a value that follows from appropriate specifically artistic features or modes of appreciation. Secondly, I have offered close readings of two philosophical adherents of aestheticism (Beardsley, Budd) and two of pluralism (Stecker, Gaut), and tried to show that in their analyses of artistic value, all four philosophers methodologically rely on exactly some such prior sense of what sorts of protocols one follows when one appreciates artworks *as* works of art. This prior, familiar, appreciative practice is then taken to *constrain* plausible accounts of what kinds of value are artistic. As I illustrated by reference to Jenny Saville’s *Trace*, appreciating something *as art* might involve, for example, an analysis of the visual, formal, narrative, medium-specific or symbolic properties of the painting, as well as the ways in which the painting transgresses or conforms to the expectations placed

upon it by the more specific artistic category of figurative painting. Appreciating it *as art* excludes certain options: in this case, one cannot turn the painting upside down, or consider how much the painting might fetch at an auction. Though adherents of aestheticism and of pluralism would disagree on *what* it is that is good about *Trace* as art—its aesthetic interest alone or some insight it affords, for example—they can agree on the overall practice within which artistic values emerge. They can in principle agree on the constraints of *how* artistic value may be realised.

One might be dissatisfied by the wooliness of the designation ‘as art’: *which* practices precisely count here and which ones do not? I have suggested that a definition of art will not help us here; and have argued against Dominic Lopes’ attempt to abandon the ‘as art’ designation in favour of more tightly constrained, medium-specific art kinds. While it is true that more narrow artistic categories such as medium, genre, style, form, period and so on importantly guide our appreciation of a work—as Kendall Walton influentially pointed out in the paper quoted above—I have argued that (i) our appreciative practice does not seem to privilege medium-specific categories over others; (ii) the overarching category ‘art’ may be as important as the narrower categories in some cases; (iii) appreciative practices are by their nature fluid, contested and woolly; therefore, narrowing down the categories is not going to any more conclusively capture what the proper way of appreciating something as art might be. We will just have to rely on our inculcation into the art culture here. The first point of conclusion, then, is that within analytic philosophy the view that artistic value is value *as art* can be and indeed is shared by aestheticism and pluralism; and that, *pace* Lopes, this is a sound position to occupy.

One of the motivations behind Lopes’ book, as well as that behind certain other recent revisionist accounts of artistic value such as Nick Zangwill’s revival of

aestheticism, is the sense that the modern system of the arts is now obsolete; that the venerable pentarchy of poetry, music, painting, sculpture and architecture, inaugurated in the 18th century and conjoined by a shared sense of purpose, had since evolved into something else. That system has been replaced by new and diverse cultural activities, such as interior design, wine tasting, cooking, gardening and computer games, which do not necessarily share those old exalted goals of ‘the arts’; therefore we need to give up the old ways of thinking about artistic value.² This narrative strikes me as not an uninteresting one to pursue, and the philosophical attention to such modern pastimes is welcome. However, it is not the only transition that has happened, and it is not the one that I have been tracing here. The contemporary art movements I have discussed have, rather conversely, attempted to retain some of the old aspiration, the sense that art realises some crucial value and therefore sits apart from mere leisure as a uniquely important part of culture—one only needs to think of Kosuth’s triumphal announcement of art taking over from philosophy; Piper’s relentless attempts to penetrate beneath everyday consciousness; Voina’s mission to overturn Russian society; Kac’s desire to critique science itself. Interestingly, however, this avant-garde mentality has *also* spelled the erosion of the old system of the arts, though by quite different means: by beginning to merge artistic practice with other ‘culturally exalted’ fields, such as politics, philosophy and science. To paint a rather broad-brushed picture, this is the movement away from the autonomy and towards the heteronomy of artistic practice that I have been concerned with, and the challenge has been to formulate that movement philosophically.

² Lopes’ medium-profiling emphasises continuation of the arts with ‘fashion design, sports and games, cuisine, nature appreciation, and non-literary writing’; (Lopes, 2014: back cover) whereas Zangwill is seeking to group the traditional arts with everyday activities such as ‘advertising, weaving, whistling, cake-decorating, arranging and decorating rooms, religious rituals, and fireworks displays’ on the basis of their joint commitment to aesthetic value (Zangwill, 2002: 116). The ‘modern system’ is the one articulated by Kristeller, 1951.

The shift towards heteronomy is most clearly seen in the case of the social turn, where in some cases, artistic practice seems to become completely coextensive with the field of political or social action. Whereas the conflict between aestheticism and pluralism represents a clash about what *value* works of art should pursue—whether aesthetic value, or values shared with some broader field such as politics, religion or philosophy—there now appears to be another variable in place: namely, the question of *how* art pursues these values, whether within a practice specific to itself or within a practice shared with other fields. Certainly, that erosion of the autonomy of artistic practice is not an entirely recent development; one step in that direction has been made by ready-mades, as was recognized within analytic aesthetics by Arthur Danto. However, Danto’s analysis emphasises that something that looks like non-art, such as a Brillo box mimicked by Warhol, can be appreciated *as art*: in this sense, it is telling that Warhol’s work was a silkscreen replica, something that one could not really take the soap pads out of and use to start cleaning, but rather something that one was supposed to stand around, and the meaning of which one was supposed to decode by considering it within that familiar practice of artistic analysis, as Danto himself had done.³ The further erosion of the autonomy of artistic practice I have traced lets go of that constraint. The erosion is at its most extreme in cases of the social turn, where even the notional ‘frame’ of perceiving something as art is hidden from or unimportant for the primary audience of the artwork—as is the case for the non-artworld participants in Kateřina Šedá’s games like *There is nothing there*, for the beneficiaries of ‘social installations’ such as Theaster Gates’ refurbishing of abandoned buildings (*Dorchester Projects*), for the users of Wachter and Jud’s censorship-eliding software solutions like *picidae*, or for those who benefit from

³ See Chapter 4; footnote 9 on page 108.

Marjetica Potrč's *Dry Toilet*. Elsewhere, the 'as art' frame plays an entirely subordinate role. In the auction sale of Vik Muniz's portrait *Marat (Sebastião)* the appreciation of the work as art seems to be important merely instrumentally: it secures the funds for the social project. Any sense of a 'specifically artistic' practice works itself out of the value equation, a discarded pupa out of which the winged imago of mere experience, or of political action, is born. The empty shell remains for those either nostalgic, gullible or covetous enough to have a use for it.

To capture the way of thinking behind these radical works, two additional positions on the autonomy-heteronomy spectrum become available, in addition to aestheticism and pluralism. According to aesthetic expansionism, artistic value of a work of art is the aesthetic experience it offers, in *whatever* way that work might realise it. This includes incidental, environmental and other factors, rather than only the aesthetic experience obtainable from the appreciation of the work as art, according to some established practice of artistic appreciation. Paradigm artworks that would be favoured by such a position are those that try to block attention to themselves *as art*, and strip away precisely the kind of listening and looking that is available to a connoisseur. John Cage's incidental and chance-generated sounds, Adrian Piper's excursions on the subway in her early *Catalysis* work, Kateřina Šedá's unannounced interventions; these all try to divert from 'schooled' listening and looking and try to get us to attend to the mere experience of something. What I have termed 'pragmatism', on the other hand, not only expands the concept of artistic value to non-artistic practices but also to non-aesthetic values. According to pragmatism, artistic value is some value that a work of art realises in any way, as long as it is recognized as a value within the broader field of activity (e.g. politics) within which the work is

produced. The political activities of Voina, and the social activism of projects like ‘Culture in Action’ are the paradigm examples here.

I have tried to show that the new positions are interesting candidates, which challenge the more traditional views of artistic value. In particular, I have tried to dispel some initial worries about pragmatism: that the works that motivate the positions are no longer art, that they are bad art, and that they are marginal art. If these works are capable of being good, non-marginal art, then it seems a theory of artistic value should accommodate their value, and pragmatism can do that.⁴ This being said, though there are certain paradigm cases which motivate pragmatism, this is not to say that pragmatism is meant to *only* apply to those cases. Similarly, pronouncedly anti-aesthetic works such as works of Dada have been among the examples motivating pluralism over aestheticism, but pluralism is meant to apply to art globally.⁵

Pragmatism suggests a new kind of evaluation of art of the previous eras as well, and of art, which is now perhaps no longer thought of as explicitly political. Here are some examples. As mentioned, Peter Lamarque, whose accounts of literary and artistic value tend towards aestheticism, draws an explicit distinction between the artistic value of David’s *Death of Marat*, and its pragmatic value as a means of stimulating revolutionary fervour.⁶ Robert Stecker, who is a pluralist, similarly differentiates between any ‘causal effect’ that naturalistic novels *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair and *Germinal* by Émile Zola might have had on social policies of that time, and the way these novels are socially engaged ‘*in virtue of [their] literary properties such as vivid description*’.⁷ Pragmatism, as an alternative to both aestheticism and pluralism, puts

⁴ Chapter 6; pp. 175 ff.

⁵ See e.g. Kieran, 2005b: 298.

⁶ Lamarque, 2013: 51-52. See also my discussion in Chapter 6, pp. 174 ff.

⁷ Stecker, 2012: 358; original emphasis. See my discussion of Stecker in Chapter 2, pp. 38 ff.

pressure on insisting on a firm 'as art'/'not as art' distinction. If we ask what makes *Marat* or *Germinal* good art, it seems now possible to include in that account the direct role such works might have played within their broader socio-political context, instead of considering only their 'specifically artistic' features. In particular, pragmatism offers a way to evaluate various historical politically engaged movements (e.g. Futurism, Constructivism, Bauhaus, Agitprop, epic theatre, war art...), which analytic philosophy has perhaps tended to neglect. And, while I have discussed pragmatism in relation to realisation of political goals, the discussion also points to other cases of heteronomy, where artistic value is to be thought of within, for example, a religious or an ethical context.

Though I have tried to motivate pragmatism and, to a lesser extent, aesthetic expansionism, my intention has not been to argue *conclusively* in favour of any one of the four positions now made available. My sense is that much contemporary art that I have discussed exists somewhere within the tension between the four different evaluative positions. Art tries to be appreciated *as art*, but also tries to be appreciated within the broader social context, and it tends to realise multiple values. The work of Vik Muniz, as I tried to show, arguably tries to satisfy all four positions; Grayson Perry's exhibition doubles as artwork *and* as discourse about craft; Olafur Eliasson aims to be a high-end gallery artist and a social activist in one move; bio artists carry on with their risky liaison with bioengineering, sometimes merging with it and sometimes maintaining a distance. Conversely, in philosophy, we formulate different positions about the nature of artistic value, which tally to some extent with our everyday intuitions, and then we argue for the one that we think is correct. In this way, aestheticism and pluralism were formed and then argued for and against on the abstract level, but this dialectical tug-of-war, I take it, was of interest precisely

because it was taken to reflect an existing tension within our art culture itself. My point is that the cases I have studied reveal that these tensions have existed across a more complex matrix of autonomy and heteronomy than has been acknowledged in philosophy so far.

From this point onwards, whereto can one proceed? On the one hand, the hope is that the philosophical tools show themselves to be useful within contemporary art discourse itself, such as debates around the social turn. In particular, the notion of ‘artistic value’ rarely appears in these debates—presumably because the noun phrase implies a reification of ‘value’, as if value might be something that can be capitalised upon in a way that would be inimical to many of these political art practices. However, the need for a more transparent discussion of how to evaluate these works is often voiced; for example by Claire Bishop, whose persistent italicization of ‘artistic’ and ‘as art’ suggests a concern that tallies with philosophical accounts of artistic value.⁸ The value question concerns what we expect works of art to achieve and how, and within these discussions pragmatism should be an open option. If so, thinking about ‘artistic value’ need not be politically backward-looking; instead it demands a more uncompromising assessment of the role that art actually plays within its host field (of pure politics), than tends to be customary in contemporary art criticism. Too often, it seems, politically activist art is praised for its anti-aesthetic political engagement, when the gains are rather pitiful or at least questionable when compared to non-art political or broader cultural activities. For example, the reception of Olafur Eliasson’s *Little Sun* initiative has been positive, but has not been compared to similar non-art initiatives, many of which seem to deliver a much higher impact (see Figure

⁸ Bishop, 2012: 17, 22, 33. See my discussion in Chapter 5, pp. 179 ff.

18). In other cases, though, art *can* be a powerful ally in a struggle for social change; there is room for philosophy to inquire into when and how that happens.

On the other hand, the broader picture of the erosion of autonomous artistic practice and of the tensions between autonomy and heteronomy may inform more specific questions within philosophy of art itself. There is room to probe further whether pragmatism is really a sustainable position, and to say more about how pragmatism might bear, for example, on discussions about the relationship between aesthetic and ethical value.⁹ However, this has not been my most central concern. It is rather in relation to the epistemic value of art that I want to draw further conclusions.

2. Epistemic value between continuity and confrontation

Cognitivism is the view that some works of art make significant knowledge available, and that this constitutes a part of their value as art. As such, cognitivism is usually considered as a member of the pluralist camp of positions on artistic value. In Chapter 3, I have provided an overview of some of the popular positions within analytic philosophy on the topic. The idea that literature can yield significant *propositional* knowledge, particularly the view that works of literature can yield quasi-philosophical ‘theses’, has not been the most popular, since this is taken to imply an unfavourable comparison with more systematic forms thought. The more popular suggestion has been that the relationship between epistemic value of literature and that of philosophy is a dichotomous one: literature and philosophy are after essentially different *kinds* of knowledge. Philosophy is abstract thinking; literature points towards more involved (experiential or practical) understanding. However, I have also considered views that suggest a more complex relationship between literature and philosophy, be it one of

⁹ E.g. Carroll, 1996; Gaut, 1998.

continuity (literature is continuous with philosophy and can play a role in philosophical inquiry), or of confrontation (literature shows up aspects of philosophical problems that the philosophical discourse itself obscures). How do these options hold up when applied to contemporary art?

There would certainly be room for developing dichotomous accounts of knowledge in contemporary art, analogous, for example, to Martha Nussbaum's explanation of how practical moral knowledge is made available by the psychologically astute novels of Henry James. Specifically visual forms of knowledge, perhaps in relation to video art or contemporary painting, would be interesting possibilities to explore in this regard. Are there *specifically visual* forms of knowledge that contemporary video and painting tap into, in the same way as Nussbaum has argued there are forms of practical moral knowledge specifically connected to the kind of rich, literary description of our inner lives that she identifies in some of Henry James' novels?¹⁰ This is an interesting and demanding suggestion, and while analytic aesthetics has had a lot to say on the semantics of pictures,¹¹ there has been less debate about the ways in which visual art is the source of knowledge or thought.¹² This is by no means an option I wish to exclude, but it would require a different line of inquiry than the one I have offered here. My inquiry has centred on another interesting feature of contemporary art, namely its continuous transgression of boundaries of art and its incursion into other fields.

As I was researching the material for the thesis, aside from the unstable relationship between artistic autonomy and heteronomy, another important theme has

¹⁰ Nussbaum, 1990: 151-152.

¹¹ The problems described by different theories of depiction (e.g. Goodman, 1976; Lopes, 2005a; Hyman, 2006).

¹² A possible exception is Nelson Goodman's idea that art and science alike are 'world-making' (Goodman, 1978).

emerged: that of art as *critical* of something or as carrying out a *critique* of something. Because the notion of art as critical has not been at the forefront of the discussions of the epistemic value of art in analytic philosophy, I have not made that term into the starting point of my thesis, however, by the end of the investigation I think this statement will sound quite plausible (perhaps even plausible to the point of triviality): much contemporary art seeks to participate in a critique of some broader social, political or cultural phenomenon. Examples include the way in which we might want to describe Adrian Piper's art as a critique of racism and racial stereotyping, and the way in which we might want to describe Eduardo Kac's art as a critique of the ethics of scientific progress. To give other examples from the thesis: one could speak of a critique of our relationship to the body in the works of Jenny Saville, of the relationship between the urban and the rural in the work of Kateřina Šedá, of the Internet in the work of Ryan Trecartin, or of post-religious spirituality in the work of Grayson Perry. One must not get carried away, of course, to suggest that every artistic engagement with a topic constitutes a 'critique'; so when I introduced the term, I used it to imply an intention to move from worse to better ways of thinking as judged by some independent standard of significance, correctness and justification.¹³

Both the erosion of the autonomy of artistic practice and the criticality of contemporary art point to a situation, where a plausible philosophical account of the epistemic value of contemporary art will need to take stock of the emergent, more complicated relationship between art and the non-artistic fields of criticism. We cannot stay satisfied with the view that systematic, measured, disciplined thought alone offers a cogent critique of things that matter socially, culturally and politically, whereby art is left exploring some other, complementary, specialised (practical or

¹³ Chapter 7, pp. 188 ff.

experiential) domain of knowledge. While the dominant approach within philosophy has been to concentrate on relatively well-behaved, autonomous artistic practices like the novel or figurative painting, and to look at the ways in which such artworks make some knowledge available in a way that is specific to them as art, contemporary artworks are not quite as easy to categorise, and seep into other fields. In this respect, I have most closely explored the ambiguous relationship between philosophy and Conceptual Art, and bio art's ambiguous relationship with both science and ethical criticisms of science. Here we encounter artworks which borrow in some respects from non-artistic forms of discourse, and yet they do not fully blend into them, but subject them to further, alien, artistic constraints. They exist in grey areas between the autonomy and heteronomy of artistic practice. That is to say that to test the critical ambition of such art, and to account for its unwillingness to stay within its own, exclusively artistic sphere, we need not only to study such art *as art*, but also in terms of their resemblance to and distance from other modes of critique, such as academic philosophy itself. Here it is possible to take inspiration from the models of continuity and confrontation that have been developed with regard to the relationship between literature and philosophy.

To recall, these models draw comparisons between literature and philosophy, where the latter is conceived of as an ordered, disciplined and systematic progress towards philosophical knowledge. The kind of knowledge that is associated with philosophical inquiry is usually labelled 'propositional knowledge', that is, knowledge expressible in propositional form ('it is the case that...').¹⁴ While, clearly, not every step of the way is going to involve stating propositions—but also questions, requests, introducing new distinctions, etc., as made familiar by the philosophical method—the

¹⁴ Cf. Lamarque and Olsen, 1994: 324ff; 368.

philosophical knowledge is thought of as propositional, in the sense that the philosophical enterprise is engaged in finding reasons to believe certain propositionally expressed descriptions of the world. The difficult question posed with regards to the epistemic value of literature was whether literature can contribute to this process as an equal partner, or even present a viable alternative to it, in a way that does not render it merely the second-best option, or merely ancillary to a broader philosophical project. An analogous question arises if contemporary art is to be considered as critical, as contributing for example to critical discussions about racism or about the ethics of bioengineering. An anti-cognitivist suggestion would be that ultimately we already have superior means of pursuing criticism of these difficult questions. As one of the dissenting monologues in Adrian Piper's *Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems*, puts it: 'Certainly it's one thing to watch editorials on TV and have this material presented in a thoroughgoing way. And somehow I just think that that's a lot more effective than trying to turn it into art, because after all, art is not social commentary.'¹⁵

One way to resist this thought is to draw lines of continuity between more regimented critical thought such as is typical of philosophy, and the critical works of contemporary art. As Hilary Putnam, Eileen John, Bence Nanay and others have emphasised with regard to literature, though artworks are less likely to draw explicit conclusions for us than works of philosophy, this does not mean that we do not draw conclusions from them, or consider artworks in a way that is not directed towards a more explicitly formulated inquiry.¹⁶ To stay with my example of Adrian Piper's work of the middle period, I have argued, along similar lines, that her work directs the

¹⁵ Piper, 1996: I: 183.

¹⁶ John, 1998; Putnam, 1978; Nanay, 2013. See my discussion in Chapter 2, pp. 89 ff.

viewer towards a propositional statement about the world, such as the one expressed by the statement ‘racism is more prevalent in American society and may manifest itself in more subtle, covert ways that I previously thought.’ We should grant that the truth of such a statement and its exact implications *could* be explored in a more systematic way than through Conceptual Art; to push back against the view that therefore artistic ways of broaching this subject matter are always going to be inferior, I have considered the structure of Piper’s work and asked what is gained by such a structure in comparison with ‘straightforward’ discourse. I have focussed on Piper’s interest in the present moment in consciousness, which derives from earlier, more abstract Conceptual concerns. The benefit of that artistic form vis-à-vis straightforward discourse can be seen against the social context within which Piper’s works were normally shown, a context within which it would have been relatively easy to get people to agree with anti-racist statements, but harder to get them to acknowledge their own subtle biases. Piper’s polemical work—unlike more systematic discourse—conspires to generate a strong, often negative reaction in the viewer, and then forces the viewer to dwell on the implications of such a reaction. It is in that sense that we can characterise this work as a ‘critique’: identifying the epistemic achievement of the artwork has to do with identifying the specifics of what is hard or easy to achieve in a given situation, and the way in which the autonomous artistic form of the work relates to those difficulties.

The continuity approach, however, has its limits. To be plausible, it must be limited to the analysis of those artworks that are complementary to more structured, philosophical or academic discourse. Many of Adrian Piper’s works are like that; they suggest to us certain clear if uncomfortable conclusions, and are similar in that respect, for example, to works by Martha Rosler, Mark Wallinger, Jeremy Deller, Hito

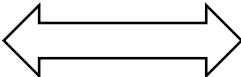
Steyerl, Alfredo Jaar and others. However, several contemporary works precisely and deliberately resist clear conclusions, *even though they also* appear to participate in the broader discourse on a particular topic. Among my examples, such was the case with Kac's *Natural History of the Enigma*. Kac repeatedly describes his art as attempting to enact critical views, but at the same time it is interpretatively harder to say exactly what conclusions the work leads us to entertain about the ethical limits of bioengineering. Other recent cases might include Ryan Trecartin's 'post-Internet' work or Grayson Perry's exhibition: work that has a clear topic but where imposing overly clear conclusions would seem interpretatively forced. This is a harder case to argue for. Can art be epistemically valuable, in a way that contributes to a broader critical enterprise, when it does not even suggest any propositionally expressed conclusions?

There is a much-exercised cliché in contemporary art discourse, which is to say that an interesting work of art does not provide answers, but poses questions. I have tried not to succumb to that rather unhelpful formulation. The real challenge is, rather, to find cases where artistic resistance to drawing conclusions can be seen as allied to a more subtle form of reasoning, one that aims to reveal an aspect of the philosophical difficulty that putting things clearly and explicitly would in fact obscure. Here we have a confrontation rather than a continuity between art and straightforward discourse. To illustrate this, I drew a parallel between the way in which J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* only opaquely presents arguments against the eating of animals, and the way in which Eduardo Kac's *Natural History of the Enigma* refuses to make a definite point about the ethical status of a genetically modified organism. Importantly, the mechanism at work in each of these complex works is not exactly the same. The reasons for wanting to resist clear conclusions are different: in the case of

Elizabeth Costello, this has to do with the unthinkable *immensity* of what Elizabeth Costello feels is our crime against animals; in the case of *Natural History* it has to do rather with the presence of a real *uncertainty* about what to think about or do with genetically modified organisms. The analogy is this: in both cases, there is something that makes the ethical situation very difficult, and which drawing up conclusions is going to misrepresent as simple. There is an embodied feeling of not knowing what to do, and the epistemic value of a work like *Natural History* is that it keeps that difficulty in view. The validity of this point, it is important to note, is predicated on a prior condition: *if* one disagrees with the assessment, and thinks—like a professor of applied ethics such as Julian Savulescu might—that the rights and wrongs of our treatment of other species is something we can figure out if we throw enough intellectual power at it, *then* such artworks are unnecessary and obscurantist. However, if one agrees with the point that the stumbling block is really there, and that it is important to keep sight of it, then the epistemic value of these works is that they do just that. I have avoided the temptation to ground the description of this ‘stumbling block’, or difficulty of ethical reality in a further philosophical anthropology, instead trying to put it in conditional terms.¹⁷ From the standpoint of inquiry into the epistemic value of art, this is what is interesting: if one thinks there are parts of ethics where it is the difficulties that we *should* keep in our sight rather than work our way up to conclusions, then there emerges a place for forms of art where sustaining obscurity is an epistemic virtue. Everything will depend, then, on where we think these difficulties are located, and how successfully a work makes us face up to them.

¹⁷ There could be many possible sources for such an anthropology, depending on the case in question: see Cora Diamond on the ‘difficulty of reality’ (Diamond, 2008); Stanley Cavell on the distinction between knowing and acknowledging (Cavell, 1969); Bernard Williams on the regret involved in a correct moral choice (Williams, 1973); or Martin Heidegger’s ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ on the sense in which we do not (anymore) dwell in a world in which moral certainties are given to us (Heidegger, [1954] 1971).

Both in terms of the continuity and confrontation strategies, the autonomy-heteronomy schema I developed in Chapter 6 may be useful to represent that area of ‘connectedness’ to philosophy and other modes of non-art discourse, which critical contemporary art occupies. These are works of art which *share the kind of value* that is aimed at by philosophy and critical non-art disciplines (epistemic value), but which *only partially* share the means and practices of these disciplines.

<p style="text-align: center;">PRACTICE</p> <p>VALUE</p>	<p>Autonomy (Practice):</p> <p>Art realises critique in a way that is specific to art</p>	<p>Heteronomy (Practice):</p> <p>Artistic realises critique in a way that is shared with other fields</p>
<p>Heteronomy (Value):</p> <p>Art realises critical thought, much like straightforward (philosophical) discourse does.</p>		

On the one hand, works of contemporary art such as Piper’s, Kac’s, Perry’s and several of the others I have discussed share several features with straightforward, academic or philosophical, discourse. They can make us draw conclusions, they can use text, they may be associated with lectures, they can incorporate bioengineering; it may even be that an artist supplies a large amount of theoretical notes in addition to his or her work, which are integral to the understanding of it (in this way, for example, Kac’s description of the scientific process behind *Natural History of the Enigma* are

crucial for interpreting the work). The weakening of the 'as art' constraint suggests that we ought not to be very worried about situations where art comes to resemble non-art discourse in this way. At the same time, however, the assimilation is not complete; these works make discourse idiosyncratic. They make it more confrontational or more open-ended; drowned in imagery or sparse and to the point; they introduce fictional characters or they focus our attention on one particular living creature; they make us chase conclusions or ram them down our throats. The question of epistemic value is the question of what is gained or lost by these modifications.

Here, then, is a picture of the epistemic value of contemporary art, or an account of how contemporary art may be both 'critical' and can even 'philosophize'. Art, like philosophy, can be engaged in pursuit of propositional knowledge on any number of topics, including topics of philosophical interest. Whether or not art will have something to contribute or be merely ancillary to the dominant modes of discourse will depend on an individual analysis; the strategies of 'continuity' and 'confrontation' provide the guidelines, but as every work demands an individual analysis, as I have tried to show on examples of Piper's and Kac's works. A tempting further line to explore here would be to liken such works of contemporary art to minor philosophical genres, such as the polemic, the dialogue, the aphorism or the philosophical confession. These, too, are more than neutral containers for the thought they advance, and it might be possible to think of contemporary art as offering us new versions of such forms.

3. Contemporary art: discipline, deviation and experiment

When I started the research on this thesis three years ago, I relocated from the Philosophy department at Oxford, where I wrote my Master's, to the Ruskin School of

Art at the same university. Taking part at the Ruskin research seminar, collaborating on several art projects, and just conversing with my peers has reoriented my thinking about art in many ways, but perhaps the main realisation has been that in philosophy of art, we sometimes approach art as if it is a finished business, as if there is relatively little experiment. Attention tends to be given to the great works of the canon, which to an extent makes perfect sense: if one wants to write about what is good about art, then it seems advisable to look at those places where everybody agrees art is done extremely well. Contemporary art, however, presents a challenge to philosophical thought insofar as it is so experimental. Of course, the traditions of painting and sculpture persist, and have been supplemented by newer and by now well-established practices such as installation, performance and video; in spite of these continuities, few of my colleagues at the Ruskin simply pick up their tools and go about executing a work under some widely shared and well understood autonomous artistic practice. When contemporary Anglophone philosophers write about the epistemic value of art—when Martha Nussbaum writes about Henry James, or Berys Gaut about Rembrandt, or Stanley Cavell about Shakespeare—they are writing with admirable attention to the ways in which these notable figures have revolutionised their respective arts, but presumably when each of these great artists tasked themselves with the writing of a play or a novel or the painting a painting, they proceeded from a much lesser degree of uncertainty, and with a more constricted set of possibilities than many contemporary artists do. At the Ruskin, my art practitioner colleagues often had a theme, an interest or a political agenda to work with, and then a world of possibilities in terms of how to engage that topic. I think the thought that everything is allowed in contemporary art is false, but reading for my doctorate at the Ruskin I came to recognise that the mode of production within this field is in such a complex state of

flux that there would be little hope in writing a general philosophical theory about artistic or epistemic value in contemporary art, in general.

This brings me to the third point of conclusion, which is a methodological one. Arthur Danto remarked that art and philosophy of art are often after quite different things: ‘however richly illustrated, philosophy of art only intersects the plane of human interest in art at right angles’ and ‘encourages when it is best and most exemplary, the view that the philosophy of art is *deeply* irrelevant to the life of art, that nothing much worth knowing about art can be gleaned from those dry and eviscerated analyses.’¹⁸ It is difficult to tell from Danto’s ironic tone whether he intended this remark to be affirmative or critical of philosophy, and to what extent he saw his own work to rise above it. He certainly thought the converse was true and that art should inform philosophy. As I have tried to show, contemporary art with its sheer impetus to experiment, is like an accelerated laboratory of philosophical theories; in that sense, not only does it philosophize about matters like bioethics, but also about the limits of what art itself could be and what kinds of value it could conceivably realise. Philosophical interest does not necessarily emerge in the best known (most astounding, most popular, most breath-taking) works of contemporary art, but rather in the experimental and radical practices, such as those I have tried to address. Perhaps this suggests a validity of a particular methodology in philosophy of art, one which starts off with unusual, risky, challenging or even failed art, and tries to translate into philosophical language what those experiments have meant for the practitioners that undertook them. Of course, this is not to suggest that this is the *only* valid methodology nor am I suggesting that I invented it (indeed, Danto himself is a likely exponent). However, by paying attention to recent and perhaps lesser known

¹⁸ Danto, 1981: 55-56.

experimental art, philosophy may turn out to be not quite as ‘deeply irrelevant’ to the life of art, as Danto self-deprecatingly suggested, but another voice participating in the practice.

Let me summarise my conclusions. In the first part of the thesis, I have shown as prevalent and tenable the conception of artistic value as *value as art*, that is, value works of art realise in ways that are specific to artistic production and appreciation. Contemporary art, however, exists within a more complex matrix of autonomy and heteronomy. The distinction between artistic and non-artistic means is blurred and sometimes obliterated to the point where art merges wholly with other areas of activity. I have argued this gives rise to an expanded struggle between views as to what artistic value might be. Pragmatism and aesthetic expansionism emerge as candidates; and I have argued they are tenable views. Secondly, in terms of epistemic value of art, a popular view has been that art makes available experiential knowledge and practical moral knowledge, and that these are distinct from propositional knowledge pursued by philosophy. Conversely, I have argued that the works of contemporary art can be either continuous with or in confrontation with works of philosophy and non-art discourse. Art ‘philosophises’ and ‘is critical’ precisely by constituting a deviation from ordinary discourse; in this way works of art make propositional knowledge available or else show up aspects of philosophical problems that philosophical discourse obscures. Thirdly, throughout the thesis I have tried to demonstrate the viability of a philosophical methodology, whereby rather than apply extant theories to famous works of art, I have tried to engage with more experimental recent art: I have tried to show that concepts from analytic philosophy can be relevant to problems in recent advanced art practice, and, conversely, that experimental practice can supply worthwhile problems for philosophy of art.

This points to several possible future departures. The need for few and clear examples has meant that I have accorded a dominant role to certain case studies, but there are many experiments out there that merit attention. Grayson Perry's exhibition that I described at the beginning is a good example of a relatively mainstream work of art the starting point of which—the nature of craft—is shared with disciplines like history or anthropology, but which, while incorporating some classical devices of museum display and historical narrative, departs from such 'ordinary' thinking into digressions of personal reminiscence, psychoanalysis, cross-dressing and object making. What lines of thought are offered by such seemingly whimsical resources? Is this a quasi-philosophical comedy, a visual essay, a historical melodrama? The comparison with minor philosophical genres I mentioned earlier would seem like a worthwhile one to explore in accounting for the epistemic import of recent art practices such as this one. In this respect, one consideration that I have consciously avoided, due to the wealth of issues that it implies, is the role played by specifically visual considerations in philosophical thinking:¹⁹ a future, more complete account of the epistemic value in contemporary art would have to take specifically visual considerations into account.

There is more contemporary art to explore, but, no doubt, some of the lessons learnt can also be imported back into philosophical discussion of older visual art, as well as literature, film and other art forms. For example, in discussion of epistemic value, overly 'conceptual' works of literature are sometimes berated on the grounds that literary quasi-philosophizing is inferior to the 'properly artistic' epistemic engagement through plot, vivid description and characters: Tolstoy's digressions on

¹⁹ Outside of analytic philosophy, this topic has been explored, for example by Martin, 2006; Grootenboer, 2011; Bull, 2013.

the nature of history in *War and Peace* and the moral homilies in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* being two popular examples.²⁰ As the movement towards heteronomy in works of contemporary art suggests, such 'impurities', such slippages between the artistic and the discursive, should precisely be of interest to us, rather than something to be pushed aside. The strategies of continuity and confrontation, as these have been applied to literature, can perhaps be boosted by comparisons with those works of contemporary art that likewise incorporate abstract reflection into their artistic practice.

Thirdly, there is an emerging field of artistic research, the idea that art—and especially contemporary visual art—constitutes a kind of research, comparable to the work done in the humanities faculties. Rather than make art in the studio and display it in a gallery, artists now commonly create work as residential researchers in museums, archives, scientific laboratories and university departments; at the same time, there has also been an explosion of PhD programmes in the visual arts (over 40 in the UK), such as the one at the Ruskin. While there has been both resistance to and optimism about art as research,²¹ the idea merits further scrutiny. The debate about epistemic value, and especially the notions of continuity or confrontation between art and disciplines like philosophy, should be relevant here.

Lastly, and most speculatively, thinking about the epistemic value of art in relation to the turbulent, sometimes embarrassingly botched and sometimes puzzlingly satisfying experiments of contemporary artists, must lead to a degree of self-reflection about the form that critical thought takes in philosophy and in other academic disciplines. I am not intent on any kind of defection to art here; there is something

²⁰ Gaskin, 2013: 67. Cf. Lamarque and Olsen, 1994: 148.

²¹ See, e.g. Elkins, 2014.

extremely satisfying, and inherently good about the rigorous, regimented exercise of reason in philosophy, and the community of minds that sustains it. Sometimes however, late at night in the library, one may feel like the university professor Franz in Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, who with some horror imagined how universities produce research papers and dissertations like factories and how '[s]heets of paper covered with words pile up in archives, which are sadder than cemeteries, because no one ever visits them, not even on All Souls' Day.'²² Well, I do not suggest we all despair and do something silly like Franz, who fell in love with an artist, and perished in pursuit of a more exciting life. But perhaps reflecting on the more philosophical and discursive forms within art may lead us to occasionally dip our toes into the more artistic, or just more experimental, forms of writing philosophy too.

²² Kundera, 2001: 98.

Figures

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Figure 1: Grayson Perry's exhibition; installation shots and an example of a juxtaposition of Perry's work and a historical craft object

Above: Grayson Perry, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, 2011-2012. Installation shots.
Source: *The British Museum website*,
http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/past_exhibitions/2012/grayson_perry.aspx
Accessed 19 April 2013.

Below left: Grayson Perry, *Shrine to Alan and Claire* (2011), glazed ceramic.
Below right: Triptych, Spanish (1500-1600?), silver, wood and feathers. British Museum.
Scanned from: *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* catalogue (Perry, 2011).

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Figure 2: Perry's appropriation of a Fante company flag design. Such company flags were originally used to (humorously) depict victory over rival companies.

Above: Grayson Perry, *Hold Your Beliefs Lightly*, 2011. Computerized embroidery on cotton and silk. 32.5x45 cm.

Below: Asafa flag. Fante, Ghana, 1850-1927?. Silk and cotton, appliqué. 90 x 46 cm, British Museum. ©image The British Museum

Scanned from: *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* catalogue (Perry, 2011).

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Figure 3: Perry's large tapestry depicting modern truths and beliefs. Names of contemporary places of worship or interest are all mixed up.

Above: Grayson Perry, *Map of Truths and Beliefs*, 2011, Wool and Cotton, 290x6790 cm.

Below: *Map of Truths and Beliefs*, detail.

Scanned from: *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* catalogue (Perry, 2011)

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Figure 4: A German jug from C16 and Perry's take on it, incorporating his childhood vision of WW2.

Above: Grayson Perry, *A Family Tradition*, 2010. Glazed ceramic, 53x42cm.

Below: Jug; Germany, Rhineland; Cologne, c. 1520-45; Stoneware, salt-glazed, applied moulded ornament, 14x12cm, British Museum. © The British Museum.

Scanned from: *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* catalogue (Perry, 2011)

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Figure 5: Jenny Saville: *Trace*

Jenny Saville, *Trace*, 1993-94. Oil on canvas (213.5 x 165 cm)

Image source: Saatchi Gallery website, http://www.saatchigallery.com/aip/jenny_saville.htm (date accessed 19 December 2014).

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Figure 6: Ryan Trecartin: *P.opular S.ky (section ish)* (video still)

Ryan Trecartin, *P.opular S.ky (section ish)*, 2009. Online video.

Image source: the artist's Vimeo channel; <http://vimeo.com/8719269>
(date accessed: 1 September 2014).

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Figure 7: Kateřina Šedá: *There is nothing there* (video stills)

Kateřina Šedá, *There is nothing there*, 2003. Social action, documentation and video.

Image source: Franco Soffiantino Contemporary Art Productions, <http://www.francosoffiantino.com/> (date accessed: 1 September 2014).

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Figure 8: Joseph Kosuth: *One and Three Chairs*

Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs* (1965). Folding chair, two Photostats mounted on board. MoMA, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art.

Image source: MoMA http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/joseph-kosuth-one-and-three-chairs-1965 (date accessed: 1 September 2013)

Figure 9 : Sol LeWitt's serial art

Sol LeWitt, *I, II, III, IV* (1969). Ink and pencil on paper, framed. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. © [2011] Museum Associates / LACMA.

Image source: LACMA <http://collections.lacma.org/node/208709> (accessed: 12 March 2013).

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Figure 10: Adrian Piper: *Sixteen Permutations*

Adrian Piper, *Sixteen Permutations on the Planar Analysis of a Square* (1968). Collection of the artist. Detail. © Adrian Piper.

Scanned from: Adrian Piper: *Out of Order, Out of Sight* (Piper, 1996: I: 6).

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Figure 11: Conceptual Art, 40 years on

Above: Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing #1131, Whirls and Twirls* (2004). Acrylic on existing museum walls. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, U.S.A. Image © Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY

Image source:

<http://thewadsworth.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Lewitt960x320.jpg> (accessed 12 September 2012)

Bottom left: Mel Bochner, *Blah, Blah, Blah* (2011). Oil on velvet (ten panels). Installation view at Whitechapel Gallery, October 2012.

Image source: my own photograph of the exhibition (taken October 2012).

Bottom right: View of the exhibition “The Mind’s Image of Itself #3, a play of architecture and the mind” by Joseph Kosuth at Spürth Magers London, 2011.

Image source: Spürth Magers <http://www.spruethmagers.com/exhibitions/297> (accessed 12 September 2012).

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Figure 12: Adrian Piper: *Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems*

Adrian Piper, *Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems* (1980).

Installation views. ©Image John Weber Gallery, Collection Wexner Center of Ohio State University.

Scanned from: Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight* (Piper, 1996: I: 182).

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Figure 13: Adrian Piper: *Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma*

Adrian Piper, *Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma* (1978). Installation of a photograph, covered by reflective plexiglass and lightning illuminating the viewer's face in glass, monologue. Collection University of California Berkeley Art Museum.

Image source: The artist's website, http://www.adrianpiper.com/art/g_aspects-of-the-liberal-dilemma_3.shtml (date accessed: 15 October 2014).

Figure 14: Adrian Piper: *Cornered*

Adrian Piper, *Cornered* (1988) (Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Bernice and Kenneth Newberger Fund) © 1988 Adrian Piper. Installation view and video still.

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Text on the work reads:

Have you ever had a sexual relationship with a black person?

If yes, whom did you voluntarily inform about it?

1. your parents ____
2. your close friends ____
3. your colleagues ____
4. your acquaintances ____
5. none of the above ____

Do you feel uncomfortable at the thought of displaying such questions on your living room wall?

On the accompanying audio, which the audience can listen to through headphones, the artist speaks the following text:

Wait. Please.

Please don't turn away. I'm. I'm just asking. I, I'm not accusing you of anything, I, I just wanted to know.

I know these are difficult issues, and... And nobody's perfect.

Please don't be angry. I ... Please wait a minute. I, I didn't mean to antagonize you. I Please wait.

I don't mean to pry. I really didn't. I, I, I just I just wanted to know.

Please.

Please wait.

(Transcribed from the original tape (1987) at the Adrian Piper Research Archive, Berlin. 18 July 2013.)

Figure 15: Adrian Piper: *Close to Home*. The work is a part of a series with several other questionnaires in the series.

Adrian Piper, *Close to Home #IV.B*. (1987; detail). Photo by *Ebony* magazine. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. ©Adrian Piper, 1987.

Scanned from: Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight* (Piper, 1996: 250).

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Figure 16: Adrian Piper: *My Calling Card*

Adrian Piper, *My Calling Card* #1 and #2, 1968. Guerrilla performance and business cards.
Image source: Indiana University Museum,
http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/online_modules/aaa/artist.php?artist=8 accessed 10 April 2013.

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Figure 17: American modernism → Conceptual Art

Above: Morris Louis, *Theta*, 1961. Acrylic resin on canvas. 259 x 426.7 cm.

Photograph © 2007 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Image source: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (website accessed: 10 January 2013).

B: Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing #96*, 1971. Black pencil and blue crayon. Collection of Mimi and Peter Haas. Photograph © unknown.

Image source: Gary Garrels, ed. (2000) *Sol LeWitt*. Exhibition catalogue (Sol LeWitt at SFMOMA; 19 Feb to 30 May 2000). Yale University Press: New Haven and London, p. 193.

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Figure 18:

Olafur Eliasson's *Little Sun* had a stated impact of 85,000 lamps sold to off-grid areas as of 2014. Alfredo Moser is a Brazilian mechanic, credited with a simple bleach-based 'bottled light' invention, which has since swept the globe. It is estimated to have been installed within 140,000 below-poverty-line homes within the Philippines alone as of 2013. I could not locate a comprehensive study for either project.

Above: Olafur Eliasson, *Little Sun* (2013), solar-powered lamp. Photograph of one of the Tate Blackouts events at Tate Modern. Image source: <http://www.notcot.com/archives/2012/07/tate-blackout-little-sun.php> (accessed 1 October 2014) (photo by Justine Aw).

Middle: Olafur Eliasson, *Little Sun* (2013), solar-powered lamp. Image source: <http://littlesun.com/> (accessed 1 October 2014).

Below: Alfredo Moser's invention. Images source: 'Alfredo Moser: Bottle light inventor proud to be poor' in *BBC Magazine*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-23536914> (accessed 1 October 2014).

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Figure 19: Muniz's photograph sold as part of his community project in Rio de Janeiro

Vik Muniz, *Marat (Sebastião)*. *Pictures of Garbage* series (2008). Digital C print. Unframed: 231.2x180.4cm. Private collection.

Image source: Phillips auction house, <http://www.phillips.com/detail/VIK-MUNIZ/UK010308/272> (date accessed: 10 June 2012).

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Figure 20: Kac's petunia

Eduardo Kac, *Natural History of the Enigma* (2003/2008)

Transgenic flower with artist's own DNA expressed in the red veins. Collection Weisman Art Museum.

Images source: the artist's website, <http://www.ekac.org/nat.hist.enig.html> (date accessed: 16 August 2012). Photo: Rik Sferra.

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Figure 21: *Pig Wings*

The Tissue Culture and Art Project, *Pig Wings*, 2000-2001. Pig bone marrow tissue grown over a polymer support. Installation views.

Image source: the artists' website, <http://tcaproject.org/projects/pig-wings> (accessed 12 June 2013).

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Figure 22: Ears in bio art and in bioengineering

Above: Alexis Rockman, *The Farm*, 2000, oil & acrylic on wood panel, 96 x 120 in.

Image source: <http://alexisrockman.net/projects/wonderful-world> (accessed 10 June 2012).

Bottom left: Stelarc, *Ear on Arm*, 2007, body modification. Photo: Nina Sellars.

Image source: ABC <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/image/3903988-3x4-580x773.jpg> (accessed 6 November 2014).

Bottom right: The original 'Vacanti mouse' from the Vacanti lab experiment.

Image source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Vacanti_mouse.jpg (accessed 6 November 2014)

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