

project at King's College London on conceptual art, during which the seeds of this book were sewn. We also would like to thank all those who attended the lectures and seminars that we gave on conceptual art at King's College London, and since then at The University of Manchester and Durham University. Many thanks too to Routledge's anonymous referees, and to all our other colleagues working in philosophy of art whose comments have proved invaluable to us – both specifically on the contents of this book, and, over the years, on all the many complex issues that conceptual art gets us thinking about. And finally, thanks to Tony Bruce and Adam Johnson of Routledge for their support and encouragement.

One

INTRODUCTION

The very thought that conceptual art is something that we could possibly be frightened of, as the title of this book suggests, might initially seem strange. Surely artworks are hardly going to leap out from their frames and attack you (although see Ad Reinhardt's *What do you represent?* (Figure 1.1), nor are they going to follow you home without your knowing about it (although see Vito Acconci's *Following Piece*, Figure 1.2). But a moment's reflection reveals that some kinds of art can, in fact, be genuinely threatening, and a threat is something that calls for at least a cautious approach. For conceptual art, rather like the products of many other kinds of ideas or intellectual processes, may well bring into question something that you believe in or are committed to. After all, the financier might quite rightly be afraid of Marxism, the Catholic Church of the writings of Martin Luther, or the literary conservative of the modernist writing of Virginia Woolf.

The last example is perhaps the most useful for our purposes. One reason why the reader of literature might be afraid of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is that it threatens some deeply entrenched views about what literature is and should be. In other words, the threat is not simply that the work is new (after all, the latest book by Tom Clancy is new, yet hardly a threat), but that it is radically different from what we are familiar with: different in a way that seems to imply that the 'received' ideas about what constitutes good literature have to be substantially revised or even rejected. In some cases,

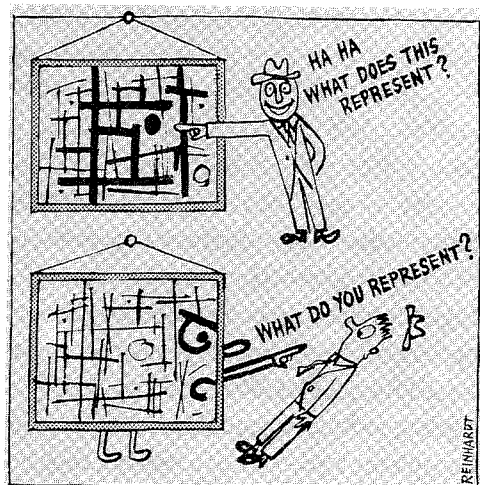


Figure 1.1 Ad Reinhardt, *What do you represent?*

(as provided by family)

ART COMIC by Ad Reinhardt

What Do You Represent

Courtesy Ad Reinhardt Foundation / Copyright Anna Reinhardt (provided by DACS)

Reinhardt: © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2009

then, we are afraid of art because it forces us to change our ideas so as to be able to make room for some different and unfamiliar aspect of our experience.

Of course there is another way of responding to this threat, namely by arguing that it isn't really a source of concern at all. According to this line of thought, one should stick by the canons (and the cannons) of the old ideas, and not feel obliged to accommodate new ones. One might, then, want to argue that the product of Virginia Woolf's pen isn't even literature to begin with *precisely because* it doesn't fit the traditional, familiar mould of what fiction is and should be. This approach need not be like that of the Ancien Régime in France before the revolution, of whom it was famously



Figure 1.2 Vito Acconci, *Following Piece*.

Courtesy of Acconci Studio

remarked that they have forgotten nothing and learned nothing. Rather, the refusal to let in new ideas and revise one's old conceptions might be based on a proper and principled understanding of what art, for example, truly is.

It is important for our purposes that the mere fact that something is new is neither necessary nor sufficient for its being a threat to 'received' views in this way. After all, the Clancy example shows that newness on its own isn't sufficient for something to be a threat. What is more, Laurence Sterne's wonderfully zany *Tristram Shandy* (1759) reveals that newness is not a necessary condition to being a threat either. For one might feel equally threatened by this work – a work which

was, as the Shandy character in the film based on the book (*Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*, 2005) remarked, post-modern before modernism – as one might by Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, a paradigm of post-modern writing and published more than two centuries later. All that really counts for ideas to be threatening in the way we are interested in is that they be radically different from some more or less entrenched or received set of views. Either these views have to be revised or abandoned; or they have to be defended in the face of the onslaught from 'the different'.

How do these worries and concerns apply to the case of conceptual art? Before we can begin to see why one might be afraid of conceptual art in the sense just described, we must get a reasonable grip on what conceptual art is, for conceptual art is not the same as new or contemporary art. Once we have done that, we will be well placed to consider the many challenges that conceptual art poses to art in general and our conceptions of it. For there are several challenges that might explain why we often feel discomfort, doubt, fear, scepticism, aversion or even disgust in the presence of works of conceptual art.

Of course it is hardly the first time that innovative art has been considered profoundly challenging. Surrealism, Futurism and even Impressionism were all once thought of as deeply threatening. Let's take Impressionism for example, and remind ourselves of just how extreme some of the criticisms of it once were. Here is an extract from an article that appeared in *La Presse* on April 29, 1874:

This school does away with two things: line, without which it is impossible to reproduce any form, animate or inanimate, and colour, which gives the form the appearance of reality.

Dirty three-quarters of a canvas with black and white, rub the rest with yellow, dot it with red and blue blobs at random, and you will have an *impression* of spring before which the initiates will swoon in ecstasy.

Smear a panel with grey, plonk some black and yellow lines across it, and the enlightened few, the visionaries, exclaim: Isn't that a perfect impression of the bois de Meudon?

When the human figure is involved, it is another matter entirely: the aim is not to render its form, its relief, its expression – it is enough to give an impression with no definite line, no colour, light or shadow; in the implementation of so extravagant a theory, artists fall into hopeless, grotesque confusion, happily without precedent in art, for it is quite simply the negation of the most elementary rules of drawing and painting. The scribbles of a child have a naivety, a sincerity which make one smile, but the excesses of this school sicken or disgust.

The famous Salon des Refusés, whose very name brings a smile to the lips – with its nut-brown women on yellow horses in forests of blue trees – that salon was a veritable Louvre in comparison with the Exhibition on the boulevard des Capucines.

In examining the works exhibited [...] one wonders whether one is seeing the fruit either of a process of mystification which is highly unsuitable for the public, or the result of mental derangement which one could not but regret. In this latter case, this exhibition would no longer be the concern of the critics, but of Dr. Blanche.

Despite the outrage provoked by new art movements such as Impressionism, most art is eventually absorbed into the fold

of what we now think of as traditional art. Once we've come to understand what is being expressed in these new works, and the methods being used, we more often than not come to accept and even like them – as is the case, of course, with Impressionism. If conceptual art is different from other art movements in this respect, we'll need to find out why the challenges posed by this kind of art are radical in a manner that makes it resist assimilation into the history of (more or less) traditional art.

Some of these challenges, and our discussion of them, are quite complex and might not be completely transparent on a first reading. What we recommend, though, is to press on, for our approach in this book is to return to the same ideas on more than one occasion from different perspectives. The approach, in other words, is cumulative. But before we turn to the main task of this chapter, namely of asking what conceptual art is, there is one more preliminary thing to consider, the implications of which will resonate throughout the book. This is the question of the relation between conceptual art, common sense and philosophy.

CONCEPTUAL ART, COMMON SENSE AND PHILOSOPHY

Expressions such as 'traditional' or 'received' ideas might give the impression that the target of our investigation is merely the old-fashioned, died-in-the-wool thinking of a small minority who systematically refuse to move with the times, forgetting nothing and learning nothing. But this impression would be misleading. For what we're trying to get at are the ideas embedded in our *everyday common sense way of thinking* of art and of works of art. In other words, the traditional ideas about art that we have in mind here are the ideas that most of us share, whether we know it or not, and not just the ideas of the

died-in-the-wool reactionary. This is what we mean by 'common sense'.

What, you may ask, has common sense to do with philosophy? Some readers might think that these two things have about as much to do with each other as fairness and the starvation of the poor. But this would be wrong. Common sense can play a very important role in philosophy, for it often serves as the starting-point of our examinations, a starting-point to which we apply *conceptual analysis*. Analysing the concepts that figure in our everyday common sense ideas about some notion or other enables us to gain a reflective understanding of that notion, and this is one of philosophy's main aims.

It might be helpful to illustrate this point by considering an example from outside literature and the arts, namely the notion of consciousness. This is as tricky a notion as you can imagine, and many philosophers and scientists despair of ever properly getting to grips with just what consciousness is. Nevertheless, consciousness is a notion of which we have a reasonable commonsense grasp, at least in what are sometimes called the 'central' cases. We can be quite sure, for example, that sticks and stones are not conscious and that you, reader, are conscious. However, when it comes to the more peripheral cases, our intuitions become less clear. For example, we might want to say that some animals such as cats and dogs are conscious but that others, such as jellyfish and lobsters, are not. Similarly, we might disagree about whether or not computers or robots ever could be conscious in any significant sense.

Let us dwell for a moment on this last question, whether or not things such as computers or robots could ever be conscious. To be interesting, it shouldn't be about any particular

existing computer or robot; it should rather be about any possible such thing, of any degree of complexity. In short, you are being asked to think of a robot, as complex as you like – the robots of your favourite science fiction such as the Nexus 6 replicants in Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner* (1982) – and then to consider whether it is conceivable that such a thing could be conscious. Obviously this isn't the place to discuss what the right answer to this question might be. The point, rather, is that this kind of question is meat and drink to conceptual analysis. First, we get a grasp of what we're talking about, in this case roughly what we mean by the term 'consciousness', through thinking about the central cases. Then we set up a *thought experiment* to test the concept in order to come to grips with our intuitions about whether or not the concept has any application in the context of the particular thought experiment at issue. This is an essential part of philosophy, and it shows that doing philosophy isn't just something done by professional academics and students: to ask whether a Nexus 6 replicant could be conscious is to ask a philosophically loaded question whoever is doing the asking.

Philosophical examination, through this process of conceptual analysis and using thought experiments, deepens our understanding of our commonsense notions, testing our intuitions about their application not only at the heart, but also at the boundaries, of the concept. It may well be that science will throw considerable light on what consciousness, say, really is, but we have to start with what we think – with our everyday commonsense notions – otherwise we won't even have a starting-point. As the British philosopher J. L. Austin said in another context:

Certainly ordinary language has no claim to be the last word, if there is such a thing. It embodies, indeed, something

better than the metaphysics of the Stone Age, namely . . . the inherited experience and acumen of many generations of men, [which] has been derived only from the sources available to ordinary men throughout most of civilised history: it has not been fed from the resources of the microscope and its successors [. . .] Certainly, then, ordinary language is *not* the last word: in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded. Only remember, it is the *first* word.¹

What, you might ask, does all this have to do with conceptual art? Well, we have already seen that conceptual art challenges our traditional, commonsense, views about art. In this sense, one way of thinking of the challenges of much conceptual art, we will suggest, is in terms of what might be called *enacted thought experiments*. Analysing our everyday concepts about art is, then, not just about finding out what our ideas and views about art are. It is also about testing whether those ideas stand up to scrutiny, pushing the boundaries of our concept of what art is, what it should be, and how we can and should appreciate what is new and different. To see what we mean, and to see why the challenges from conceptual art are especially radical, let's now turn to a consideration of what conceptual art is.

WHAT IS CONCEPTUAL ART?

The trouble with trying to get a grip on conceptual art is that it's rather like trying to get a grip on a wet bar of soap in the shower: the more you try to tighten the grip, the more prone the soap is to slip out of your grasp. There is, in other words, something elusive about the very nature of conceptual art that seems to resist being summarised in one precise definition. It is even sometimes claimed that there are as many definitions of conceptual art as there are conceptual artists.

One approach to gaining an understanding of what conceptual art is would be to consider it in its historical context, as an art movement that took place at a certain time in a certain part of the world. Seen from this perspective, conceptual art – once referred to as ‘modernism’s nervous breakdown’² – is best grasped in relation to the movements that came before it and the sociopolitical background of the time. However, the problem that arises for this kind of historical narrative is that it runs the risk of paying too much attention to conceptual art’s particular historical context, that is to say, roughly, the period between 1966 and 1972 and to the setting of New York, which we might think of as the period and place of high conceptual art (or what we’ll capitalise as Conceptual Art).³ This would involve the risk of missing out on much fascinating conceptual art that has been created outside that period, such as Marcel Duchamp’s ‘readymades’ of the early 1910s, which encapsulate most or all of conceptual art’s central characteristics, and which we will spend some time discussing. For perhaps, rather like *Tristram Shandy* which we described as post-modern before modernism, Duchamp’s work can be described as conceptual before conceptualism. And perhaps there is also much conceptual art that has emerged since the time of high Conceptual Art. As the art critic Roberta Smith put it in her article ‘Conceptual Art: Over and Yet Everywhere’ in the *New York Times* of April 29, 1999: ‘it’s hard to think of a supposedly past art movement that feels more present . . . it is the shifting *terra infirma* on which nearly all contemporary art is built’. As we’ll see, conceptual art does indeed go beyond the boundaries of the place and time of Conceptual Art.

Instead of the historical approach, the approach we will adopt will begin by considering some of the features or

characteristics that are often taken to be associated with, or typical of, conceptual art, even if they are not definitive of it. As we progress, some of these characteristics will turn out to be more superficial than others, and getting to the heart of what conceptual art is, and what really makes conceptual art profoundly different from other kinds of art, will take us a considerable way past the end this chapter.

In spite of our earlier cautionary words about placing conceptual art in its historical context, let’s begin with a bit of history, and with the most famous readymade of all, namely Duchamp’s *Fountain* (Figure 1.3). The story is simple in its

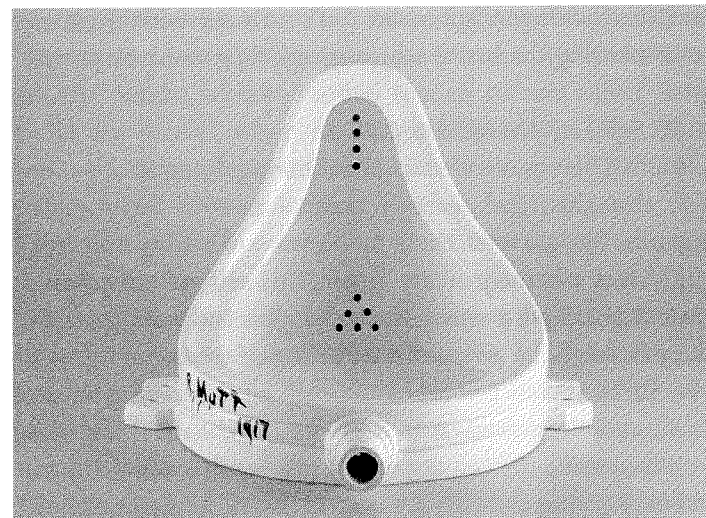


Figure 1.3 Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*.

[artwork]

Duchamp: © Succession Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2009

[photo]

Fountain, 1917/64 (ceramic) by Duchamp, Marcel (1887–1968)

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel/ Vera & Arturo Schwarz Collection of Dada and Surrealist Art/ The Bridgeman Art Library

essential features.⁴ In New York in 1916, the Society of Independent Artists, of which Duchamp himself was one of the Directors, put on an exhibition. The only criterion for entering an exhibit was that the artist had to pay an entry fee of six dollars. What Duchamp submitted as an entry, with the required fee, was a urinal that he had bought from a plumber's showroom. He had turned it upside down, titled it *Fountain*, and then signed it 'R. Mutt' (thus assuring anonymity) with the date 1917. The Directors of the exhibition, acting against their own criterion, refused it on the grounds that it was 'by no definition a work of art'.⁵

Fountain encapsulates many of the characteristics that are associated with conceptual art. Let's now see what these are. Remembering the bar of soap analogy, they won't be precise.

SELF-REFLECTIVENESS AND IRONY

As human beings, we are capable of having thoughts about our own thoughts, and feelings about our own feelings. For example, I might wish that I didn't want to eat big cakes, or I might feel ashamed of my anger. This self-reflectiveness is more than simply awareness of my thoughts and feelings, rather like you might be aware of the feeling of the carpet on your feet, for it involves some additional mental state over and above, and directed towards, the first mental state. This is quite an intricate mental activity, and it may be that other animals and very young children are not capable of it; dogs might be capable of shame and of anger but not capable of being ashamed of their anger, or being angry at their shame.

In a somewhat similar way, an artist, and derivatively a work of art, can be self-reflective, just as a comedian might make jokes about the difficulties he experiences in making jokes. Again, and as we have already seen, a novel might be

reflective about what a novel is or should be, and about the activity and traditions of reading or writing a novel. This kind of self-reflectiveness is sometimes taken to be a mark of modernism, and is well exemplified by the novels of Virginia Woolf.⁶

Self-reflectiveness which is ironic goes one step further. It not only acknowledges its own activity, but also in some sense playfully pokes fun at it, teases it, or in some way undermines it. This ironic self-reflectiveness is exemplified by Duchamp's *Fountain*. Part of Duchamp's aim in his artistic statement was to challenge the definition of art and the role of the artist in art-making, and he did this in a highly self-reflective and playful manner. His work intentionally raises challenges such as these: 'How can something like a urinal be a work of art?', and 'How can the person who submitted this to an exhibition claim to be the "artist" when he has participated so little in its making?'. We might speculate that Duchamp would have been disappointed if the Society of Independent Artists had willingly accepted his entry to their exhibition. And we might also speculate that, in 1991, the British artist Gavin Turk would have been disappointed if his examiners at the Royal College of Art had accepted his submission for his final degree, consisting of a simple blue plaque of the kind seen all over London (such as 'Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, Prime Minister, lived in this house, 1872–1886'). Turk's plaque contained the words, 'Borough of Kensington: Gavin Turk, Sculptor, worked here 1989–1991'. Gratifyingly for him, it was rejected by his examiners, and then swiftly snapped up by the art market. Again what we see here is the ironic self-reflectiveness about art – and about art-making – that is characteristic of much conceptual art. Turk was making fun of his examiners, pointing towards how much they will

disagree with the claim 'worked here' on the plaque, given that this is all he has to offer as evidence of his years of study.

Ironical self-reflectiveness, whilst characteristic of much of what we take to be conceptual art, isn't, however, going to be definitive of this kind of art. For some works that we take to be conceptual, such as Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (Figure 1.4), about which we'll have more to say later, don't have this feature. And other artworks that are ironically self-reflective are intuitively not conceptual. For example, Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* shows the artist in the picture painting the Muse of History, and yet, according to recent research, the work itself may well have been painted using the camera obscura; so in this painting Vermeer is arguably reflecting ironically on the art of painting.⁷

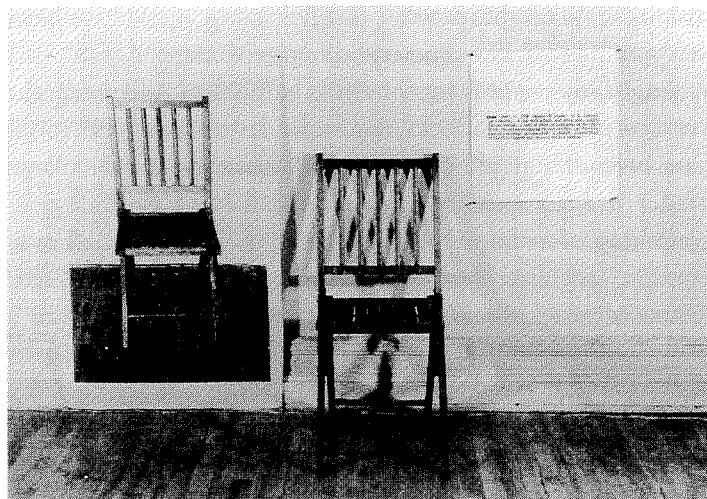


Figure 1.4 Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*.

Kosuth: © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2009.

AGAINST DEFINITION

As we've seen, one manifestation of the self-reflectiveness of conceptual art lies in the way that it challenges our traditional ideas about what art is. In this sense, much conceptual art can be thought of as 'anti-definition', or against what people have traditionally taken to be the commonsense definition of art. Having said that, the worrying idea now begins to press in on us that perhaps anything could be art (which is not the same as the idea that everything is art), because all the artist has to do to create an artwork, it seems, is to submit it to an exhibition, or, even less, just to dub it art. Perhaps we will have to accept what the conceptual artist Donald Judd reputedly said: 'If someone calls it art, it's art'.⁸

The question of the definition of art will occupy us in Chapter two. However, we can already see one of the ways in which a conceptual artwork can be conceived as an enacted thought experiment, set up to challenge the accepted boundaries of the concept of art. Self-reflectiveness comes in again here. Something might arise that challenges the boundaries of a concept, but it could do so in a way that lacked this property of self-reflectiveness. For example, scientists might develop a method of cloning sheep that raises deep questions about the identity conditions of animals, but the scientists wouldn't be doing this in order to raise challenges to the concept of animal identity (at least let's hope that this would be no part of their intention). Or a heavenly body might be discovered whose existence challenges our concept of what a planet is. Similarly, perhaps, 'art' produced by a toddler, and early cave 'art', raise questions about whether such things really are art as we understand it. But raising these questions wasn't part of the aim of the toddler or the cave painter, and the questions aren't posed in the work itself in the

self-reflective way we're interested in. In contrast, this goal was very much part of Duchamp's project when he submitted *Fountain* to the Society of Independent Artists. In another example (Figure 1.5), the wonderfully witty conceptual artist Piero Manzoni simply signed and dated a woman's arm. Was the arm now a work of art? And had Manzoni somehow sequestered the arm as his work through the gesture of signing it? Enacted thought experiments such as these raise, in a self-reflective and self-conscious way, challenges to our traditional notions of art and art-making.

One interesting implication that follows from the fact that much conceptual art has these two characteristics (ironic self-reflectiveness and anti-definition) is that it seems that to be a conceptual artist you must be *knowing* (in the meaning of the word when we talk of a 'knowing remark' or a 'knowing gesture'). For although there is a question of whether toddler 'art' or Neolithic cave 'art' really is art, one thing that a toddler and a Neolithic caveman couldn't be is a conceptual artist. For a toddler and a Neolithic caveman lack (we can safely assume) the required degree of self-reflectiveness about their practices of artmaking and about the art world that we would want to ascribe to a conceptual artist. As we'll see in many of the examples of conceptual art that we are going to examine in greater depth this sense of awareness and understanding will also involve knowing about philosophy, and about the relation between philosophy and conceptual art.

Again, though, this characteristic isn't going to be definitive of conceptual art. Whilst many works of conceptual art are anti-definition in the way we have been discussing, others, as we will see progressively in this book, are not concerned to challenge our ideas of what art is. So we must delve deeper to get to the heart of conceptual art.



Figure 1.5 Piero Manzoni, Signed and dated a woman's arm.

Manzoni: © DACS 2009

Courtesy of Heart Herning Museum of Contemporary Art

Photographer Ole Bagger

AGAINST MEDIUM

The third characteristic of conceptual art that we want to consider is, like the second, a kind of self-reflective reaction against what has preceded it. Traditionally, art, as part of our commonsense thinking, has always been understood as being in a physical medium, with each particular art form employing a physical medium appropriate to it. So, for example, the art of painting is generally performed through working oils on canvases, acrylics on wood, and so on, with the 'and so on' limited in virtue of the art form being what it is. Similarly for sculpture and the other art forms: each one has its particular physical medium which is 'proper' to it. The term that we'll sometimes use to convey this idea is *medium-specificity*.

Let's consider painting in particular. A view considered characteristic of modernist painting was that flatness was one essential and unique feature of the medium of painting (whereas, clearly, this would not be a feature of the medium of sculpture or of architecture). This idea is found especially in the writings of the modernist critic Clement Greenberg. He considered flatness not to be a constraint on what painting can achieve, but a merit, something to be actively developed and finally taken to its limits. Here is a famous expression of this view by Greenberg in an essay of his called 'Modernist Painting':

Realistic, naturalistic art has dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting – the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment – were treated by the old masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Under Modernism these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors. . . . It was the stressing of the

ineluctable flatness of the surface that remained . . . more fundamental than anything else to the processes by which pictorial art criticised and defined itself under Modernism. For flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art.⁹

Greenberg's idea, then, is that naturalistic art 'concealed' art by presenting us with an image of a scene – a landscape, for example – that would be very much like the image we would be presented with if we were actually looking at the landscape itself, and the role of the medium was simply to achieve that effect. In contrast, Greenberg says, in modernism, the medium (paint on canvas and so on) became not just a medium, but also essentially bound up with the aim of art: what became known as *medium-purity* was what art was itself about. The whole idea is brilliantly mocked in Tom Wolfe's wonderful book *The Painted Word*:

The business of flatness became quite an issue; an obsession, one might say. The question of what an artist could or could not do without violating the principle of Flatness – "the integrity of the picture plane," as it became known – inspired such subtle distinctions, such exquisitely miniaturized hypotheses, such stereotactic microelectrode needle-implant hostilities, such brilliant if ever-decreasing tighter-turning spirals of logic . . . that it compares admirably with the most famous of all questions that remain from the debates of the Scholastics: "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?"¹⁰

So where can painting go from here? How can it escape from collapsing into the vortex of its tighter-turning spirals? Tom Wolfe has some very amusing things to say about this, and we will come back to them later. But the response of conceptual art was, in approach and in effect, radical. It was to reject not

just flatness, but the whole idea of medium specificity and of the 'traditional' media of painting and of sculpture, in favour of new means of production that had not become so hide-bound by the theorising of modernism. For example, in conceptual art we find such diverse – and for the time modernising – means of production as photography, video, events or 'happenings', installations, bodies, mixed media . . . and, like *Fountain*, readymades.

Once there was even a 'chew-in'. In 1966, John Latham, a part-time Lecturer at St Martin's College of Art in London, withdrew a copy of Greenberg's *Art and Culture* from the library. He then invited artists and students to the chew-in, at which they were each invited to tear out a page of the book, chew it, and spit out the remains into a receptacle. Latham then added chemicals to the pulp and eventually presented the end product to the School, titled *Still and Chew*, claiming to have 'distilled' *Art and Culture*. He is no longer at the St Martin's College of Art.

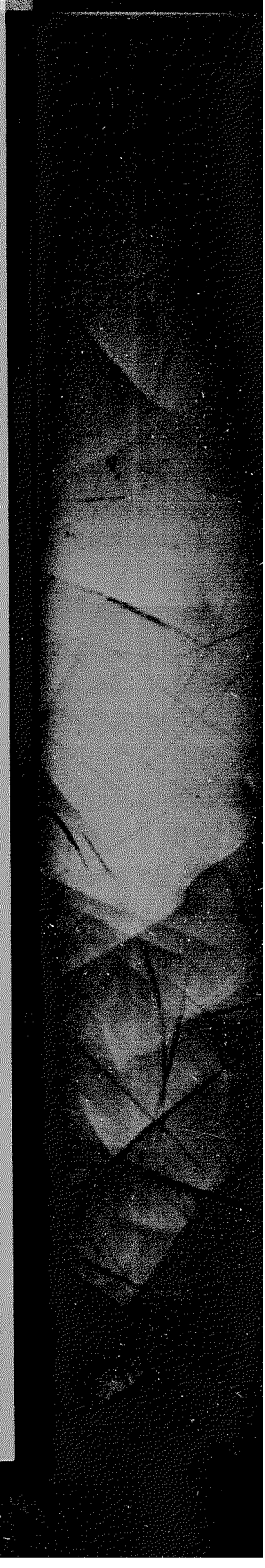
As we will soon see, the challenge of conceptual art to the traditional idea that art is in a physical medium has a wider scope than the kinds of diversity which we have just been considering. But even at this stage, the challenge is very significant to our commonsense way of thinking about art. It is, in the sense we discussed earlier, a philosophical challenge. In particular, conceptual art raises two challenges which we need to consider at this stage (more will come later): first, *ontological* (from the Greek word for 'being') or concerned with existence, and, second, *epistemological* (from the Greek word for 'knowledge') or concerned with knowledge.

The ontological challenge raises questions about what a conceptual artwork is, not in the sense of seeking a definition, but in the sense, roughly speaking, of where a conceptual

artwork begins and ends. Gone are the easy times when art was to be found only in galleries and museums, and the physical bounds of a work were obvious for all to see.

The epistemological challenge is concerned with how we can tell whether something is an artwork or whether it is something else. When we study conceptual art, we see that it's no longer clear what is art and what is not. For example, one might wonder whether the pile of clothes in the corner of the room is part of the exhibition or just some workman's clothes put to one side for a moment, or whether the people marching with placards outside the White House are part of a political demonstration or a 'happening'. (A friend once asked a gallery curator where the exhibit was, and the curator replied 'You're in it, Sir'.)

An artwork that brings these two challenges together is Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*. The Brillo boxes made by Warhol look just like those things that you could find in the supermarket – they are (virtually) perceptually indistinguishable – they are *indiscernible* (to use the term we will adopt in Chapter two).¹¹ Nevertheless, Warhol's boxes are art, while the others are not. What Warhol's work has achieved is what the contemporary philosopher Arthur Danto called, in his book of this name, *the transfiguration of the commonplace*: the commonplace, in this case the Brillo boxes, have been transfigured into art, *Brillo Boxes*.¹² The ontological challenge, on the one hand, is concerned with what it is that makes *Brillo Boxes* art and the Brillo boxes not art, and how the commonplace can be transfigured into art. The epistemological question, on the other hand, is about how we can tell that one is art and the other isn't, given that they are indiscernible.



DEMATERIALIZATION OF THE ARTWORK

Let's turn now to an even more profound and radical challenge which conceptual art raises concerning the medium of art, and which will get us closer to the heart of what conceptual art is. This is a challenge to the very idea that an artwork has to be in a physical medium at all. As Lucy Lippard saw, conceptual art fundamentally 'dematerialises' the art object in so far as the artwork is no longer to be thought of as the material object that we can touch, see and feel in a gallery or museum.¹³

To help us grasp what dematerialisation really involves, let's consider a 'piece' (in some ways a less misleading term than 'work' which seems something of a practical contradiction as we will see later) which dates from the period of high conceptual art, or Conceptual Art. It is Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (Figure 1.2), which is described thus: 'Activity, 23 days, varying durations. Choosing a person at random, in the street, any location, each day. Following him wherever he goes, however long or far he travels. (The activity ends when he enters a private place – his home, office, etc.)'.

The central questions here are these. What – and where – is the artwork in this case? (These are ontological questions.) Moreover, how can we tell what the 'artwork' is, and how can we gain access to it in order to appreciate it? The event described in *Following Piece* took place in 1969. It is therefore long gone, and the only access that we have to it is documentation in the form of some not very good photographs – and surely these aren't what we are supposed to focus on in artistic appreciation; they are in fact staged photos taken after the event took place. (These are epistemological questions.) On the whole, traditional artworks can readily be individuated and accessed for appreciation by going to the gallery or to the

public place where the works are 'exhibited'. But with *Following Piece* not only do we not have an exhibition, we don't even have a physical object at all – there is no art work as such. Or at least so it seems.

Dematerialisation gets us closer to the heart of conceptual art. And this is so even though not all works of conceptual art completely lack a physical 'presence'. This must initially appear confusing, and it won't be until Chapter three that it will become clearer. But a few words here might be helpful to set the scene for later.

In a traditional work of art – an oil painting let's say – the painting's content (roughly speaking what it is about), and what it expresses, are appreciated through our appreciation of the physical medium: the oils on the canvas and the way that the oils have been worked by the artist. Moreover, this medium which we focus on is essential to our appreciation of the artwork. This is why the artist's skill matters so much in traditional art.

With conceptual art, even where there are physical objects present, or where there is a performance as in *Following Piece*, the skill of the artist doesn't seem to have the same kind of importance: the quality of the performance or of the photographs in *Following Piece*, for example, isn't a concern to us in at all the same way as the quality of the performance by the ballet dancer Agnes Oaks, or the quality of the photographs in the work of Bill Brandt.

One might just say dismissively that the conceptual artist is simply lazy or incompetent, or can't be bothered to learn the necessary skills and to take the time that artists and performers do in the traditional arts. But this, we think, is the wrong response. There is, we think, a *reason* why the physical material and the performance matter less. The reason is to be found in

a distinction which we will come to in Chapter two and Chapter three. This is the distinction between *medium* and *means*: what in traditional art would be the medium (the oils on the canvas worked by the artist) in conceptual art is merely the physical means; accordingly, it is not essential to our appreciation of the work in at all the same way. In conceptual art, the medium is the *idea*. This remark, bound to seem gnomic at this stage, will, we hope, become clearer as we progress. But it should already be apparent that conceptual art is anti-medium not in the sense of insisting that there is no medium at all by which the artist communicates his or her artistic statement; it is, rather, that conceptual art insists that there is no physical medium.

So conceptual art differs from traditional art in two ways here. First, it draws on a wide variety of means of production of artworks. And second, these means of production are mere means. They are not the artistic medium, and consequently, as we will see, they are not the proper objects of aesthetic appreciation.

These questions of definition, of ontology, and of epistemology aren't merely abstract questions for philosophers. They have very important implications for how, what and why we go about appreciating conceptual art, as compared with traditional art. For whereas with traditional art we know what to look out for, conceptual art gives us a whole new set of criteria by which to appreciate and assess art. This brings us to another of conceptual art's challenges – its challenge to the traditional idea of the aesthetic.

AGAINST THE AESTHETIC

Try to remember a recent occasion when you were in an art gallery, and found yourself particularly and very favourably

struck by one of the works on display – a picture in the Western European tradition, say, from the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Now try to remember what your experience was like whilst you were looking at the picture. Pleasurable or delightful, perhaps, but a special kind of pleasure or delight, one which is directed towards, and derived from, certain features of the picture – its elegance, for example, or its harmony, or the subtle way in which the artist has captured the play of light on the pearl earrings worn by the girl portrayed in the picture. This activity of grasping, through perception, these kinds of features and properties and of undergoing this kind of experience is part of what we call the *aesthetic*.¹⁴

Even with only this rough idea of the aesthetic in place, whatever the answers might be to the definitional, ontological and epistemological questions that we have been considering so far, it seems that, in works of conceptual art such as *Following Piece*, there is no suitable physical object or performance which might even *aspire* to give rise to this sort of feeling. (As we have discussed, it is surely not the photographs, which are mere documentation; and the action, the 'performance' is in the past and cannot be perceived in the required way.) So the traditional idea of the aesthetic, as involving a perceptual encounter with a physical object's or performance's perceptible aesthetic properties seems to be in difficulty. And this leads us to question what it is we are looking for and what we aspire to when we experience art.

Yet again, Duchamp seems to have set the agenda for conceptual art. Admittedly, with *Fountain* we do have a physical object, and admittedly the urinal does have a rather sleek and shiny appearance that can be pleasurable to look at. But to think that the urinal itself is an object intended to be contemplated for its aesthetic properties, specifically for its beauty,

and that Duchamp was in effect trying to reveal to us this beauty, otherwise hidden from us in its very everydayness (for men at least), would be a serious mistake.

To back this up, let's see what Duchamp himself writes on the subject, about another of his readymades:

In New York in 1915, I bought at a hardware store a snow shovel on which I wrote 'In advance of a broken arm'. It was around that time that the word 'Readymade' came to mind to designate this form of manifestation. A point which I want very much to establish is that the choice of these 'Readymades' was never dictated by an aesthetic delectation. This choice was based on a reaction of *visual* indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste . . . In fact a complete anaesthesia. One important characteristic was the short sentence which I occasionally inscribed on the 'readymade'. That sentence instead of describing the object like a title was meant to carry the mind of the spectator towards other regions more verbal'.¹⁵

This apparent rejection of the traditional notion of the aesthetic, found in different ways in *Following Piece*, in the pile of clothes in the corner, and in Duchamp's readymades, will be a major concern of the rest of this book. What do we expect in our experiences of art? Does conceptual art's rejection of the aesthetic explain our adverse responses to it as art? How is the rejection of the aesthetic connected with our contrast between physical medium and mere means? And what can conceptual art offer us if it doesn't offer aesthetic pleasure? Or perhaps conceptual art doesn't really reject the aesthetic altogether; perhaps it's only 'anti' the traditional notion of the aesthetic? We must wait and see.

FROM WORDS TO THE IDEA IDEA

It seems almost banal to point out that traditional art – pictures and sculptures in particular – centres on illustrative representations. It reserves words for the title, which would typically convey what the picture, for example, is a picture of. A picture of a person in robes and ermine, holding a sceptre and orb, might be titled 'George IV' so that the viewer can appreciate that it is George IV who is depicted.

But conceptual art is different. Consider in contrast to the picture of George IV a work by Joseph Kosuth of 1966, '(Titled Art as Idea as Idea), [Water]' Figure 1.6. Here we have a simple negative photostat of a dictionary definition of the word 'water'. Again, surely the mere photostat is not the work of art, but just its 'documentation' (not medium but means). Kosuth himself is on record as saying 'I never wanted anyone to think that I was presenting a photostat as a work of art'.¹⁶ So here not only do we have the definitional, ontological, epistemological and aesthetic challenges of much the same

wa-ter (wâ'têr), *n.* [AS. *water* = D. *water* = G. *wasser*, akin to Icel. *væn*, Goth. *watō*, water, also to Gr. *ὕδωρ*, Skt. *udan*, water, L. *unda*, a wave, water; all from the same root as E. *wet*: cf. *hydra*, *otter*¹, *undine*, and *wash*.] The liquid which in a more or less impure state constitutes rain, oceans, lakes, rivers, etc., and which in a pure state is a transparent, inodorous, tasteless liquid, a compound of hydrogen and oxygen, H₂O, freezing at 32° F. or 0° C., and boiling at 212° F. or 100° C.; a special form or variety of this liquid, as rain, or (often in *pl.*) as the liquid ('mineral water') obtained from a mineral spring (as, "the waters of Aix-la-Chapelle").

Figure 1.6 Joseph Kosuth, '(Titled Art as Idea as Idea), [Water]'

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum © 2007 Joseph Kosuth/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Kosuth: © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2009.

kind as works like *Following Piece* raise. We also have this phenomenon of words being at the heart of the work – reminding us of Duchamp's comment on his work which we have just seen, about his aim 'to carry the mind of the spectator towards other regions more verbal'.

Let's consider now Rosemarie Trockel's *Cogito Ergo Sum* (Figure 1.7). The Latin words in front of us as we look at the piece 'I am thinking, therefore I exist' are the words used by Descartes as an expression of a kind of self-guarantee of his own existence. His very act of thinking 'cogito' or 'I am

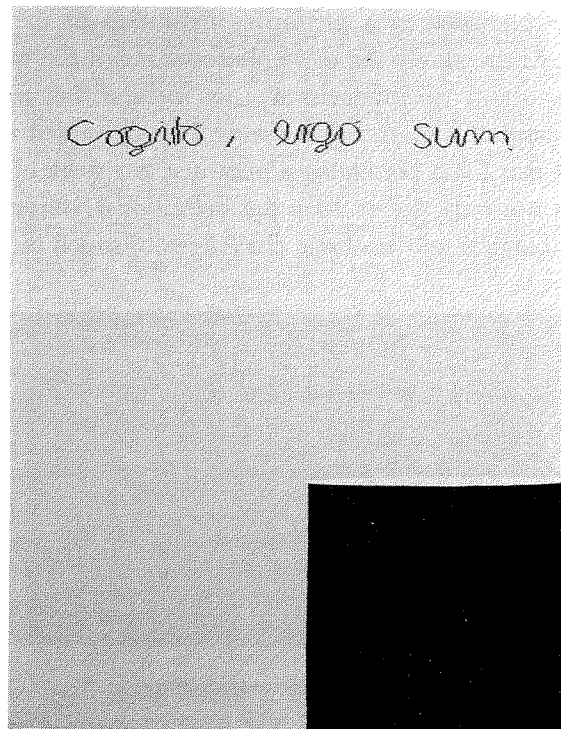


Figure 1.7 Rosemarie Trockel, *Cogito Ergo Sum*.

thinking' and thus being able verbally to express those words, enabled him, he believed, to reach the conclusion that he could know that he existed (*ergo sum*). What is curious about this Trockel piece is that it is made of wool and the words are knitted into the wool. But more curious still is the fact that the words are machine knitted. This is a rather nice philosophical joke: of course, the knitting machine's producing the words 'cogito' doesn't in any way show that the machine *thinks*, or that it can reach the conclusion that it exists, any more than would your computer have been shown to think if you programmed it to come up with the words 'cogito ergo sum' every time you turned it on.¹⁷

There is another issue that Trockel's piece brings to the fore: the fact that the words were machine-knitted is not evident from the piece itself; for all we know, the words might have been hand-knitted. So her *Cogito Ergo Sum* depends on language not only in the sense that it contains words as part of the work. It also depends on language in the sense that knowledge of facts, such as the fact that it was machine-knitted, is essential for appreciation of the piece – you wouldn't get the philosophical joke otherwise. We will call these facts *background discourse*. Now, when knowledge of background discourse like this – background knowledge – is essential for appreciation of the piece, we will say that appreciation of this work is *discourse dependent*.

Furthermore, the background discourse of Trockel's piece is what we will call *esoteric*, in the sense that the required background knowledge isn't available to a generally well-informed viewer from direct experience of the work, or even from the title of the work, which says nothing about its having been machine knitted. This might seem to present a real problem in the appreciation of conceptual art when compared

with traditional art – the expectation of esoteric background knowledge seems somehow *unreasonable* or *unfair*. After all, one doesn't need any esoteric background knowledge to appreciate a Canova sculpture of a naked woman. All one needs is the physical object and a bit of knowledge about the contours of the human body. We'll see in Chapter five whether this really is something special about conceptual art as compared to traditional art, and whether it really is such a hamper to its proper appreciation.

Conceptual art's background discourse is sometimes esoteric in another way – in the sense of being about the artist, or *autobiographical*. Of course, there is nothing esoteric about autobiographies as such, nor is there any problem with an artist's revealing something about herself in her work, in the way that, for example, Jane Austen reveals her ironic stance towards society in her novels. The issue here is different though, and in Chapter five we'll also be discussing whether this esotericism is part of the explanation of why so many people feel frustration and resentment at conceptual art: 'The art world talking to the art world', as some would have it.¹⁸ To put it bluntly, we might feel left out.

There is yet one more point concerning conceptual art's being discourse-dependent that we would like to raise here, for this too could be a source of frustration and resentment, namely the philosophical ambitions of conceptual art. These ambitions, as we'll see, will turn out to be highly relevant not only because philosophy will help us better to understand why our commonsense views about art seem to be threatened by conceptual art. They will also be highly relevant because philosophy will help us better to understand the content of many particular pieces, where the intentions behind the piece are in some way philosophical.

Trockel's *Cogito* is one such piece – it is philosophically *knowing* and it requires philosophical background knowledge in the sense we've just been discussing. But there is also another piece that we want to mention, especially since it will come up again a number of times as we proceed in our examination. The piece is Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (Figure 1.4). The intentions behind this piece are principally philosophical, pointing towards a discussion in metaphysics as old as Plato's, namely the relation between the three 'things' in the work: an ordinary chair, a photograph of a chair, and a dictionary definition of 'chair'. Is the 'real' chair still a chair as such, now that it is part of an artwork? Is the 'real' chair (if that is what it still is) more 'real' than the photograph of the chair, when both are equally part of the artwork? And what about the dictionary definition of 'chair': is that 'real' – eternal perhaps – in a way than neither the chair nor the photograph is? Kosuth is *saying something* to us, something philosophical, and he is doing so in a way that is quite different from the way that, for example, one of Chardin's still lives says something to us. (And, again, note the self-conscious lack of artistry or skill; the photograph wasn't even taken by Kosuth.) To cite Kosuth himself, 'The very stuff of art is indeed greatly related to "creating" propositions'.¹⁹

So it seems that the relationship that conceptual art has with philosophy is special. In the words of Arthur Danto in his *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*:

Art [has] itself evolved in such a way that the philosophical question of its status has almost become the very essence of art itself, so that the philosophy of art, instead of standing outside the subject and addressing it from an alien and external perspective, became instead the articulation of the

internal energies of the subject. It would today require a special kind of effort at times to distinguish art from its own philosophy . . . so that little if anything is left over for the pleasure of artlovers. . . . Art has re-enacted [a Hegelian] speculative course of history in the respect that it has turned into self-consciousness, the consciousness of art *being* art in a reflexive way that bears comparison with philosophy, which itself is consciousness of philosophy.²⁰

Danto's remarks suggest that conceptual art and philosophy are now more or less in the same business – and indeed many conceptual artists believe that to be the case. The whole emphasis on words, on the theory of art, on philosophy, either found in the work itself, or in some essential background discourse, is really the central target of Tom Wolfe's book, as evidenced by the title, *The Painted Word*. Returning to the metaphor he used in the citation above, Wolfe ends his book thus, nicely summing up what many people think is so threatening about our chosen characteristics of conceptual art:

So it was that in April of 1970 an artist named Lawrence Weiner typed up a work of art that appeared in *Arts Magazine* – as a work of art – with no visual experience before or after whatsoever, and to wit:

1. The artist may construct the piece
2. The piece may be fabricated
3. The piece may not be built

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.

Wolfe comments thus on this piece:

And there, at last, it was! No more realism, no more representational objects, no more lines, colors, forms, and contours, no more pigments, no more brushstrokes, no more evocations, no more frames, walls, galleries, museums, no more gnawing at the tortured face of the god Flatness, [. . .] and in that moment of absolutely dispassionate abdication, of insouciant withering away, Art made its final flight, climbed higher and higher in an ever-decreasing tighter-turning spiral until, with one last erg of freedom, one last dendritic synapse, it disappeared up its own fundamental aperture . . . and came out the other side as Art Theory! . . . Art Theory pure and simple, words on a page, literature undefiled by vision, flat, flatter, flattest, a vision invisible, even ineffable, as ineffable as the Angels and the Universal Souls.²¹

WHERE WE'VE BEEN AND WHERE WE'RE GOING

With roots as far back as Duchamp and branches reaching out to what is still being produced today, we've seen that conceptual art has certain characteristics that are typical of it: anti-definition, anti-medium, de-materialised, anti-aesthetic, linguistic, esoteric, ironic, and self-reflective.

But we think that what is at the heart of conceptual art, and what many of these characteristics point towards, is what we will call the *idea idea*. In traditional art such as painting, the medium for expressing the artist's vision – his or her artistic statement – is the physical medium: the oils on the canvas which have been worked in a special way. In conceptual art, there is *no physical medium: the medium is the idea*. This is, in essence, the 'idea idea'. In what is to come in the rest of this book we hope to make sense of the idea idea, to show in what ways it is definitive of what conceptual art is, and why understanding

the idea idea matters so much in our appreciation of conceptual art. As the American conceptual artist Sol LeWitt put it in the opening sentences of his famous 'Paragraphs on conceptual art' in *Artforum* 1967, '[i]n conceptual art the idea or the concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form in art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair'.²²

Aren't we right, then, to feel that our traditional commonsense notions of art are being threatened, and to feel resentment and frustration at what the art world is putting in front of us for our appreciation? Or are our everyday commonsense ideas about what art is, and what art ought to be, really so inviolable that we should dismiss all conceptual art outright, as failing to match up to what we expect? Perhaps what we've called the enacted thought experiments of conceptual art really ought to make us rethink some of our traditional ideas about art and about the aesthetic. Then perhaps we would be better able to understand and appreciate conceptual art for what it is, rather than constantly holding it up for comparison (unfavourable comparison) with traditional art. Perhaps this will help us to sort out what's good conceptual art from what's not so good with more confidence than we have in the past. And perhaps doing some philosophy will help us in facing up to these challenges. We shall see.

The Definition and the Thing Two

INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter we got a rough grasp of what we mean by conceptual art, at the heart of which, we suggested, is the *idea* idea. However, we were also left with a considerable amount of outstanding business: a plethora of questions and challenges that we need to examine if we are to understand conceptual art better. In particular, we are yet to address the issue of what we mean by 'art'. When we have tackled that concern, we can return to another set of questions that we touched on briefly in Chapter one but didn't explore in any detail, namely questions of ontology. This, you will recall, concerns what kind of thing an artwork is. Only once we have answers to these questions will we be in a position in Chapter three to consider the epistemology of conceptual art (questions to do with knowledge) and to form an assessment of particular pieces of conceptual art, be it of praise or condemnation. This method is in itself a controversial one, and we'll need to support it as we proceed.

Sometimes, of course, questions of this kind don't matter so much: in some spheres of activity we can just get on without worrying about the subtleties. For example, if you are with a group of friends, drinking and eating together in a convivial atmosphere, and someone asks whether your gathering meets the definition of a party or whether it is merely a gathering, and whether the party's boundaries extend into the corridor outside the apartment, or whether they are restricted to the space owned by the host, it would be with good reason

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PETER GOLDIE AND
ELISABETH SCHELLEKENS

'Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art? is a philosophically substantive guide through the controversies and values of conceptual art executed with wit and intellectual verve. Accessible to all it is a must read for anyone interested in the nature and significance of conceptual art.' – Matthew Kieran, University of Leeds, UK

'Conceptual art has perplexed and provoked philosophers and art lovers for decades. Armed with perfectly chosen examples, clear and engaging arguments, and a genuine sympathy for their subject, Goldie and Schellekens explain why we are right to be perplexed and then show us how to appreciate the ingenuity and sheer craftiness of some of the most infamous and yet captivating specimens of recent art.' – Dominic McIver Lopes, University of British Columbia, Canada

'This very lively and stimulating book is the perfect cure for those who suffer from an uneasiness, or even a phobia, concerning conceptual art. Goldie and Schellekens do a wonderful job in making the philosophical issues accessible to readers lacking a specialized background, while also providing much to interest the more initiated reader. The treatment of conceptual art is well-informed, sympathetic yet critical, and liberally illustrated with engaging discussion of challenging examples.' – David Davies, McGill University, Canada

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