

Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens. *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?* London, New York: Routledge, 2010, viii + 152 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-42282-6

To be sure, the title of this book by Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens is meant to be catchy,¹ but the main reason it is used is its deeper connection to what the authors have to say here. One can read this work as an attempt to get a better understanding of why so many of us fear or mistrust conceptual art. This book is not just another historical survey of the cultural phenomenon that has come to be called *conceptual art*, another attempt to draw attention to conceptual art in general. What Goldie and Schellekens present here is a philosophical analysis of the highly controversial and obscure nature of conceptual art. Unlike art critics, art historians, and gallery curators, the authors do not take for granted the status of conceptual art as art proper. In fact, they prefer to pose the existence of conceptual art, first and foremost, as a challenge to the category of art. Their inquiry into the special nature of conceptual art thus calls for a re-examination of the most fundamental problems concerning art in general, including the question of what art is and what we expect from it.

Together with its philosophical accessibility, these more general aesthetic questions make *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art* a perfect introduction for beginners in the fields of philosophy, visual studies, and aesthetics. It is a good introduction not only to the theory of conceptual art but also to aesthetics in general. The exposition of Goldie and Schellekens's account of conceptual art and its appreciation gives the material a clear, firm structure. Every notion or view deployed here plays a specific role in Goldie and Schellekens's larger argument and clarifies their meanings where they are applied. This is an excellent way to introduce analytic thinking and its related terminology.

Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art? is not the first result of the collaboration between the two authors. Their theoretical interest in conceptual art was earlier

¹ The title is most likely a veiled reference to a quarrel that took place at the beginning of this century between Sir Nicholas Serota, Director of Tate, London, who has become famous as an advocate of conceptual art, and the Stuckists, an international art movement founded by the British artists Billy Childish and Charles Thomson. Rejecting conceptual art in favour of figurative painting, the Stuckists were criticizing Serota for his directorship and especially for the controversial Turner Prize, an annual British award for visual artists under the age of fifty, which is organized by Tate and is, in the eyes of the Stuckists, dominated by conceptual artists. In an open letter to Sir Nicholas, dated 26 February 2000, Childish and Thomson write: 'The idiocy of Post Modernism is its claim to be the apex of art history – whilst simultaneously denying the values that make art worth having in the first place (full text available at <http://www.stuckism.com/serotaletter.html>). Sir Nicholas struck back in November of that year in a lecture, 'Who's Afraid of Modern Art' (full text at http://web.archive.org/web/20010913055349/www.bbc.co.uk/arts/news_comment/dimbleby.shtml).

demonstrated at a conference, which they organized and which was held at King's College London, in June 2004, as the first result of a one-year research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Three years later the volume *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* was published.² Most of the papers in it were presented at that conference. Among the contributors are Peter Lamarque, Gregory Currie, Robert Hopkins, Diarmuid Costello, David Davies, and Dominic McIver Lopes. The arrangement of the papers in the volume suggests that the foundations of Goldie and Schellekens's most recent account of conceptual art had already been laid during their AHRC project.

Each paper in the volume appears in one of four thematic groups that loosely correspond to the chapters of the recent book. The first group is concerned with the question of what kind of art conceptual art is. The second focuses on the problem of the aesthetic value of conceptual artworks. The third comprises papers exploring the special role that knowledge plays in conceptual art. And the last group tries to puzzle out what should be appreciated when experiencing conceptual art and how. The five chapters of *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?* are thus ordered as follows: after the introductory chapter, 'The Challenge of Conceptual Art', which partly summarizes common-sense intuitions about conceptual art and partly explains why philosophical analysis is the right way to gain a better understanding of conceptual art and to appreciate it, comes 'The Definition and the Thing', which discusses ontological matters; the third chapter, 'Appreciating Conceptual Art', continues the ontological reflections of the previous section, but adds epistemological considerations (how to approach conceptual work, what to concentrate on, and what it presupposes). The crux of the whole exposition is in the fourth chapter, 'Aesthetics and Beyond', where the question of whether conceptual art can have any aesthetic value is considered. The authors' overall view is presented in the last chapter, 'What's Left Once Aesthetic Appreciation Has Gone', where the preliminary conclusions of the previous chapters are now brought together and the general question of the purpose of art is raised.

Why do we feel afraid or uncertain when confronted with *pieces* of conceptual art? Is it because of their subject matter and the new means of expressing it? Goldie and Schellekens believe the cause is something more than merely its novelty, something more fundamental. Even truly revolutionary art movements did not cause as much puzzlement and confusion as conceptual art has. Surely, each appearance of a genuinely innovative approach in art challenges the preceding tradition, demands to accommodate our attitude towards it, and

² Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens, *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

its reception is usually accompanied by mistrust and fear of the unfamiliar. The authors claim that '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' (2). But sooner or later we learn to appreciate it, the feeling of unfamiliarity disappears, and a previously revolutionary movement becomes just another part of our tradition. But the situation with conceptual art is different: its very existence depends on its resistance to assimilation into traditional art.

The authors admit that to make sense of this rejection of the previous tradition is by no means a trivial task. Not only has it been carried out in several ways, but also a lot of conceptual artists do not engage in this endeavour, under the banner of bringing art history as we know it to a stop. That is also why the authors start their inquiry by completing a list of the main characteristics usually associated with conceptual art.

Ironic self-reflectiveness is probably the most often recognized characteristic: many conceptual artworks draw our attention to the question of what a work of art should be. But Modernism already developed from this principle. What conceptual art adds is the ironic attitude towards our traditional idea of what art is. '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' (13). Closely related to ironic self-reflectiveness is another frequently mentioned characteristic – namely, that conceptual art defies any possibility to define art. It rejects the widely shared idea that there is a certain function all art should fulfil, and implies that the artist is to decide what art is. This brings us to the third and fourth specific features of conceptual art: these *pieces* exemplify that not only do works of art not need to be executed in any specific medium, but they can even be without any medium at all, that is, they can be physically disembodied. Goldie and Schellekens support the view of perceptual art's lacking any medium and the subsequent dematerialization of such artworks, by distinguishing a mere physical means from a physical medium. In traditional art the artistic medium plays a crucial role; the proper object of aesthetic appreciation is the medium. On the other hand, mere physical means is nothing unique; it is just a dispensable instrument, not what is supposed to be appreciated. The physical presence of a conceptual artwork is, Goldie and Schellekens argue, always merely the means, never the medium.

Next on the list of conceptual art's most typical features is its alleged contra-aesthetic tendency. This kind of artwork does not aspire to provide the type of experience we are used to having from traditional art. Consider, for example, what is generally regarded to be the very first piece of conceptual art,

Duchamp's *Fountain* (submitted for exhibition, and rejected, in 1916). '[A]dmittedly 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 [...] would be a serious mistake' (25–26, emphasis in the original). Duchamp's *Fountain* represents for the authors a paradigmatic case of conceptual art exhibiting all its most typical features, and serves as an illustration of the account throughout the book.

Last on the list is a point about the overall linguistic character of conceptual art. It is a matter not only of the crucial role played by the background discourse (the *narrative of the work*) in the reception of these artworks, but also of their ambition to present propositions of their own. These propositions, moreover, often have philosophical or generally intellectual pretensions. Hence, the verblatness of conceptual art is at least twofold: on the one hand it manifests itself in our having to be provided with some additional, background information (whether it be from the artist's own biography or more general knowledge related to the subject matter of a piece) before we can grasp the proper meaning of the work; and, on the other hand, the meaning of the work is of a propositional nature, a comment on an intellectual topic.

The individual items on the list are understood by Goldie and Schellekens as mere traits of what really makes conceptual art what it is. These items point in the right direction, but are neither sufficient nor necessary conditions. What, then, is at the heart of conceptual art? The *idea idea*, Goldie and Schellekens reply. The authors devote most of the book to explaining what exactly this means and to advocating its ability to account for all of our intuitions about conceptual art.

Basically, the *idea idea* account says that 'the medium of conceptual art is ideas, and any physical presence is *merely the means* by which the artist lets us gain access to his ideas' (60, emphasis in the original). If our traditional, common-sense understanding of what it is for a thing to be a work of art requires it to be physically embodied and this physical appearance is what is there to be appreciated, then it is no wonder that works of conceptual art seem to undermine this concept with irony. Having ideas as their only medium, conceptual artworks reject, the authors claim, the traditional definition based on the requirement of appearance in a physical medium, dematerialize the artwork, and hence deny that the only function that art can have is to bring us an aesthetic experience. This is, according to the authors, what makes conceptual art so radically different from what we have been used to.

Unfortunately, Goldie and Schellekens are not specific enough about their key concept of *idea*. In the book they rely on just several quotations of what conceptual artists (Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, and Lawrence Weiner) have said

about their own work (56) or on comments by art critics (for example, Roberta Smith; 90). In principle, ideas are introduced only negatively, as standing in opposition to appearances, physical presence, 'shapes, colours, and materials' (56). This is where I would expect a more subtle analysis. Are all ideas to be expressed in language? Must artists be fully aware of the ideas that present their works? Or is there room for variability? These and related questions go unnoticed.

The authors continue by asking what is left to be appreciated when one experiences a conceptual work of art; what does it offer instead of repudiated aesthetic value. Goldie and Schellekens describe three possible scenarios: *Contra Aesthetics*, *Aesthetic Traditionalism*, and *Aesthetic Idealism*. The first scenario comports with how conceptual artists themselves usually interpret what they are trying to achieve: there is something more than the mere aesthetic experience and aesthetic value that art can offer; 'the ideas that conceptual art evokes are *artistic* ideas, which have artistic value of a kind that doesn't depend on aesthetic value. In contrast, traditional art sets out to have *aesthetic* value as part of its artistic value' (87, emphasis in the original). This artistic idea, abstracted from all material and aesthetic value, is purely the intellectual, non-perceptual value of such an artwork/idea.

Whereas the first approach strives to keep conceptual art in the same category as traditional art (notwithstanding the fundamental rupture between them), *Aesthetic Traditionalism* expels it from that category immediately. Conceptual art, on this view, does not fulfil the defining function of art, which is to provide aesthetic experience, so it cannot be regarded as art.

The last and, according to the authors, most promising approach, *Aesthetic Idealism*, maintains that 'in spite of its manifestos, conceptual art does after all yield a kind of aesthetic experience' (88). This is the account Goldie and Schellekens advocate. Though they are not willing to endorse the view that conceptual art could be a source of aesthetic value in the traditional sense (recall the Duchamp example), they claim that ideas can have aesthetic qualities of a sort. How can this be? Goldie and Schellekens introduce a distinction between properties that are perceptible and those that are merely experiential. 'Experiential properties' is a broader category than 'perceptible properties'. Conceptual artworks, being identical with ideas, possess the aesthetic experiential properties that cannot be perceived. The authors mention, for example, the wittiness of a joke or the elegance of a mathematical argument that should illustrate aesthetic experiential properties familiar to us from outside art. If 'wittiness' and 'elegance', as used here, seemed only metaphorical to someone, the authors would reply that the line between the literal and the metaphorical is as blurred as the one between the perceptual and the merely experiential. Our initial understanding of a thing

gets modified when we start to consider it in terms of something else. It would be misleading to understand metaphors simply as extraneous illustrations. And this is why it makes sense to apply aesthetic terms to ideas.

This solution, on the one hand, takes into account all the intuitive features of conceptual art (such as the break with tradition, the lack of traditional aesthetic qualities, self-reflectiveness, the dematerialization of the medium, discourse dependence) while preserving the linkage between the values of traditional art and the values of conceptual art. But even this account has its flaws, as Goldie and Schellekens admit. For it raises the following question: if we accept Aesthetic Idealism, what exactly is the value of a conceptual artwork as a piece of art. We have already allowed that the same kind of aesthetic value (as provided by ideas within the boundaries of conceptual art) is available outside art as well. Why should we not take a philosophically laden conceptual artwork as a mere illustration of a philosophy lecture? Is there, after all, any particular human need that art is meant to fulfil, a need that makes a work distinct from other kinds of things when successful in satisfying it? '[A]rt helps us to appreciate our own humanity in a special way' (132), Goldie and Schellekens claim. For inspiration they turn to Kant (the only non-Anglo-American author in the book) and his notion of *second nature*. They argue that what 'art [...] presents to us, as "second nature", is human nature in all its varieties [...] [A]rt can give us a sense of our shared humanity in a special way, relating what is presented to us to our ethical lives, in the broadest possible sense of the word "ethical"' (133–34). Conceptual art, however, fails to satisfy this need, according to the authors. It is, they claim, not aesthetic enough (in the traditional sense). Its heavy dependence on background discourse, its overall verbal nature, its prevailing orientation to philosophical ideas or ideas about the nature of art, and its having purely intellectual contemplation as the almost exclusive source of aesthetic value all preclude conceptual art from being a place to share our specifically human experience readily and broadly enough.³ Because of what it requires from the recipient in terms not only of the prerequisite body of information, but of also one's intellectual inclinations, conceptual art seems to be too exclusive to become a channel through which to share our humanity. 'Whilst this is no reason to dismiss conceptual art out of hand as having *no* artistic value, nor is it a reason

³ Goldie and Schellekens do not fail to mention those conceptual artworks that do engage their recipients emotionally (for example, Santiago Sierra's *Space Closed by Corrugated Metal* [2002]; this piece was meant to invoke in the audience feelings similar to that of the frustration from being shut out of a certain space for political or economic reasons). Though such artworks are not primarily concerned with the intellectual appreciation of an idea, they are as dependent on the background narrative as any conceptual work.

to be afraid of it,' the authors conclude, 'its lacking aesthetic value in this traditional sense might nonetheless be a reason why conceptual art – even good conceptual art – is not wholly successful *as art*' (137, emphasis in the original).

The publication *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?* exhibits all the virtues one would expect from a well-written piece of analytic philosophy: clarity of account and precision of argument. The authors' reasoning proceeds carefully, bearing on interpretations of several conceptual pieces, which reveal the authors' genuine interest in the topic. Goldie and Schellekens' declared aim is to examine 'the way we should go about evaluating conceptual art, and more widely the way we should think about it' (108) and it is fair to say that in this they have succeeded. They have asked the right questions. Their basic intuitions and insights are profound, and their central thesis, the *idea idea*, that is to say, the idea is the existence of a work of conceptual art and hence the only thing of any value, rings true, at least to this reviewer. I agree with the authors that this value is of an aesthetic nature. The main achievement of their book is therefore its ability to reveal the structure of the problem and to highlight the cornerstones of the controversy about conceptual art. Nonetheless, I hesitate to accept some of the concepts and arguments that Goldie and Schellekens employ to support their view, nor do I accept all the conclusions they arrive at.

The main weakness of their account consists, in my view, in their overly narrow understanding of the aesthetic, that is, their claim that the traditional notion of the aesthetic simply equals a perceptual experience. Recalling Duchamp's *Fountain* once more, to appreciate 'the sheen of the porcelain, the smoothness of the lines, and so on' (99) would mean appreciating it aesthetically in the traditional sense (and that would be a mistake here). Otherwise, we are dealing with non-aesthetic experience and values.

The way they reach this concept of the aesthetic is revealed in the authors' explanation of the notion of the *phenomenology* of experience (as understood in analytic philosophy): 'To consider the phenomenology of a certain kind of experience is, roughly, to consider what it is like to have thoughts, feelings and impressions that one is subject to when one undergoes that experience' (86). So, this method should help us to get to grips with what it means to experience something aesthetically as well.

Thus, Goldie and Schellekens appeal to the reader to recall the last experience that he or she would call aesthetic. Unfortunately, what the authors consider to be the basis of the evidence of what aesthetic experience might be is confined solely to experience with the plastic arts and music. No wonder, then, that the resulting, traditional, notion of the aesthetic comports with perceptual experience. Taking literature into account as well would change the picture dramatically. The authors almost tackle this problem at one point. When discussing

the difference between the medium and the mere means, the example they use is a scroll with writing on it (69–70), which can be appreciated as either a piece of calligraphy or a poem. In the first case, the scroll itself, the paint used, and the way the marks are written do matter; they are the medium of this piece of calligraphy. If appreciated as a poem, however, these turn into the mere means. Is there any difference between literature and conceptual art then? What is the bearer of value in the piece of poetry as a work of art? Why not ideas – as in a conceptual work of art? What would be the quality that would draw the line between conceptual and literary artworks? And if we agree that literature, as one of the most traditional arts, can have aesthetic value (in the traditional sense), why should conceptual art – where one aesthetically appreciates nonphysical ideas – matter that much? Curiously enough, the authors actually show a tendency to include literature among the arts that are aesthetic in the traditional sense: there is, significantly, only one remark in the whole book, which puts us in mind of the aesthetic affinity between literature (the novel) and other traditional arts (painting, sculpture, and music) that are to be appreciated in the traditional manner (109). It seems to me that Goldie and Schellekens struggle with the dilemma of either abandoning their traditional notion of the aesthetic experience (as being basically perceptual), and preserving literature in the category of arts that are commonly understood as providing aesthetic experience, or else removing literature from that category and sticking with the traditional notion of the aesthetic. But they seem to do everything they possibly can to avoid such a choice and to keep both the traditional notion of the aesthetic and to preserve literature among arts traditionally providing aesthetic experience. Hence, unfortunately, they do contradict themselves.

We could go further, and ask, if, in the light of these considerations, the theory about ideas being linked with the aesthetic in the traditional sense (as understood by Goldie and Schellekens), by means of the metaphor, is not superfluous. Could a joke that would illustrate a metaphorical transfer of aesthetic quality to ideas outside art not be considered a piece of literature and its wittiness an aesthetic quality? Does it really make sense to divorce the aesthetic value of an artwork in its own right from, for example, the ‘pleasure which arises [...] when one finally grasps the meaning of a work of art [...] perhaps after a lot of research into its background’ (97) and call the latter intellectual pleasure? If we define the aesthetic as Goldie and Schellekens do, then perhaps there is no other way out. But I am not convinced that we need, or even should, accept that definition. Identifying the aesthetic with the perceptual seems, at least to me, to be as mistaken as equating the *idea idea* account of conceptual art with the list of its mere characteristics – in both cases, to substitute a contingent attribute for the core of a phenomenon results in an untenable theoretical picture.

It would be fair to add, however, that this is no theoretical idiosyncrasy of Goldie and Schellekens. The authors are deploying a conception of the aesthetic which remains standard in Anglo-American philosophy.⁴ When discussing a case as extreme as conceptual art, our understanding of the aesthetic is, no doubt, being pushed to the limits. That is when its explanatory power is put to the test. And if the conception preferred by analytically oriented aestheticians brings some rather unwelcome results, it is reasonable to blame the conception, not the conceptual art.

Before I conclude, I would mention two more points. When reading this publication not only as an essay on conceptual art but also as an introduction to aesthetics, one appreciates the many explanatory passages where basic philosophical and aesthetic concepts are elucidated. For example, in the first chapter we are told what philosophical analysis is and how it works, what common-sense intuition is, and what ontology and epistemology are. Each chapter includes a brief introduction and summary ('Introduction' and 'Where We've Been and Where We're Going'). These help to keep the structure of the account transparent enough even for a newcomer to philosophy. The greatest virtue of this book as an introduction, however, is that it spontaneously opens a new theoretical field for the reader, while dealing with a single problem. As the account proceeds, more and more notions are introduced and new methods are applied. This makes *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art* a highly recommendable introductory textbook on aesthetics, indeed, one of the best introductions to analytic aesthetics currently available.

All in all, whether read as a philosophical essay on a particularly controversial and therefore highly interesting cultural phenomenon or just as an introduction to aesthetics, Goldie and Schellekens's *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art* is remarkable. Pinpointing the right questions to be examined is always the first step, and often the most difficult and creative, on the road to a satisfactory theoretical view of a topic. And that is precisely what Goldie and Schellekens have managed to do.

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⁴ This has most recently become evident in a discussion concerning the aesthetic potential of the 'lower senses' (smell, taste, touch) and the availability of aesthetic experience in domains other than art and nature. Among the participants in the debate are Carolyn Korsmeyer, Elizabeth Telfer, Dominic Mclver Lopes, Robert Hopkins, and Sherri Irvin.