

The Single Artwork Theory of Conceptual Art

Zsolt Bátori

Budapest University of Technology and Economics

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest

ABSTRACT. In this paper I consider the account of conceptual art that regards such works as being unique and singular pieces of artworks that belong to a specific art form. I argue that The Art Form Theory of Conceptual Art is mistaken, for it fails to provide a sufficient explanation of the role of the specific contents (ideas) of what the theory considers to be unique and singular works belonging to the art form (conceptual art). After the explication and criticism of The Art Form Theory of Conceptual Art I will suggest a different account. The Single Artwork Theory of Conceptual Art I propose denies that conceptual art is an art form; instead, it considers conceptual art to be a single work of art with numerous token executions (performances) of the work as a type. The advantage of my proposal over The Art Form Theory will be that both the contents of specific execution tokens and the relation of these tokens to the unique and singular work as a type will be adequately explained, without the disadvantages of The Art Form Theory of Conceptual Art.

Conceptual art has been in the focus of attention ever since its first appearance, and it is still one of the prominent components of the contemporary art scene. Attention has come in the form of both fierce rejection and high praise, and anything between the two. Artists, critics, art historians, curators, collectors, art teachers and the public alike have tried to find ways of understanding, interpreting and appreciating these works. Philosophers have also had their fair share in this process in terms of analysing the new phenomenon as it emerged from, or better to say, against previous art practices. In this paper I will consider an apparent consensus about the status of conceptual art being an art form in some of the recent philosophical accounts of conceptual art.¹

¹ See Goldie and Schellekens, 2007 for an edited collection of recent papers, and Goldie and Schellekens, 2010 for a monograph on conceptual art.

Part of the reason for the attention that conceptual art has enjoyed lies in its elusive nature. Is conceptual art old art reloaded? It does not seem to be that, for it looks, sounds, etc. very different indeed. Can we use our usual interpretive strategies for understanding and appreciating these works? No, we cannot, because if we try just that, then we will not understand and appreciate much. Philosophical discussion, hence, concentrated on the analysis of the nature of conceptual art in the hope that understanding the nature of the phenomenon will also help us work out better interpretative strategies that enable or enhance appreciation. Understanding better what the phenomenon is, may certainly increase our ability to interpret and appreciate it, while misunderstanding it may simply block hopeful avenues of interpretation and appreciation.

In what follows I will argue that conceptual art has been misunderstood at its core, for philosophical (and other art historical, critical, etc.) discussions assumed or explicitly suggested that conceptual art is an art form. In this view individual works are considered to be unique and singular works of art belonging to this art form. I will call this (implicit or explicit) account The Art Form Theory of Conceptual Art. I will, however, argue that such works are not unique and singular artworks in their own right. I will suggest that there is only one original, unique and singular work of what we might consider conceptual art, and hence, individual works are token executions or performances of that single work. My view will be referred to as The Single Artwork Theory of Conceptual Art.

Let me first turn to the reasons why one might consider The Art Form Theory an appealing account. An explicit and detailed formulation of The Art Form Theory was provided by Dominic McIver Lopes.² According to Lopes, the root of the widespread appreciative failure lies in the mistaken categorization of conceptual art. It is not the case that conceptual art is merely new art, making it difficult to recognize, understand, define, and interpret these new works in terms of earlier theories and interpretive practices. New art is often easily recognized and appreciated in the context of its predecessors, even if new art introduces a radical divergence from earlier practices. There might be resistance to new art, but, so Lopes argues, we can easily recognize conceptual art as art. If this is so, then appreciative failure needs a better explanation than the mere resistance to something new and unusual. The explanation offered by Lopes appeals to an art-form hypothesis. Art-form hypotheses consist of implicit or explicit assumptions about what art forms are, and how belonging to a specific art form is relevant for appreciating the aesthetic properties of the

² Lopes, 2007.

works in question. One problem with conceptual art is that it clearly resists any traditional attempts of identifying it as an art form with a specific medium. Lopes argues that trying to understand conceptual art as belonging to the same art form as the plastic arts (painting and sculpture) has prevented an adequate understanding and appreciation of such works. It is reasonable to suggest that conceptual art defies the traditional identification of art forms with a specific medium, for conceptual artworks may come in a variety of media that we care to distinguish. One only needs to think of some of the paradigmatic examples of conceptual art, such as Duchamp's *Fountain*, Cage's *4''33'*, Kosuth's '*Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)*' [*Water*], and Warhol's *Brillo Box*, to realize that no unified account of the (physical) medium itself could support the view that conceptual art constitutes a single category in terms of being an art form.³

The solution seems to be (a) to provide an account of conceptual art as a new art form itself, without relying on traditional medium-specific theories of art forms, and (b) to correct the mistake of categorizing conceptual art as plastic art. Lopes, indeed takes this route; "We fail to appreciate Conceptual Art because we attempt to appreciate works of Conceptual Art as belonging to an art form to which they do not belong."⁴ He argues that conceptual art is not a plastic art, because it does not conform to what any formulation of the art-form hypothesis could reveal about the plastic art form (or forms).⁵ Lopes insists that conceptual art is a new art form (quite distinct from plastic art), for recognizing and appreciating works of conceptual art must diverge radically from the practices of recognition and appreciation of former, already know forms of art (including the plastic arts).

Our next question is how proponents of The Art Form Theory of Conceptual Art account for the specific characteristics of this new art form. Lopes' analysis does not include an elaborate answer to this further question, but others offered more specific answers. Goldie and Schellekens, for instance, argue that "... conceptual art has no physical medium: 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"⁶. Although Goldie and Schellekens also reject medium-specificity in terms of the traditional physical media, they identify ideas to be the unifying medium of conceptual art as a radically new art form. Hopkins also argues that the very

³ For arguments against defining and explaining art forms (in general, not only in case of conceptual art) in terms of their (physical) medium, see Carroll, 1985 and 1996a. Carroll argues that works belonging to different art forms can share the same medium, while works sharing the same medium may not belong to the same art form. Lopes (2007) shares this insight with Carroll, and his argument about conceptual art relies on the rejection of the medium-specific account of art forms.

⁴ Lopes, *ibid.*, p. 250.

⁵ Lopes, *ibid.*, pp. 250-252.

⁶ Goldie and Schellekens, 2010, p. 60.

conception of a conceptual work of art is itself sufficient for determining its artistic properties, as opposed to works belonging to other art forms, where the execution of the work is also necessary for determining its artistic properties.⁷ In other words, in case of conceptual art as an art form, execution in a particular medium is only the means of communicating the ideas of the artist. This is a suggestion along the lines with what Goldie and Schellekens proposed.⁸

Another way of explicating this point is arguing that works of conceptual art are dematerialized; the physical medium is not the determining, or even a relevant factor in understanding, interpreting, and appreciating these works.⁹ Schellekens also provides a categorization of the kinds of ideas in conceptual art. She argues that art-reflexive ideas, socio-political ideas, and philosophical ideas are the types of ideas that are the candidates for aesthetic value ascriptions.¹⁰

Conceptual art, so it seems, can be adequately identified as a new art form that diverges radically from other art forms with respect to its medium. Even if medium-specificity is rejected in terms of physical media, that is, even if we do not have good reasons for identifying art forms with specific kinds of media, nevertheless, we might identify conceptual art with a kind of non-physical or dematerialized medium, namely with ideas. If we can categorize the kinds of ideas in conceptual art, we may even find the proper subcategories of the art form. The Art Form Theory of Conceptual Art might be very appealing, indeed, but I think it is mistaken.

In order to see what the problem is with The Art Form Theory of Conceptual Art, we need to examine whether or not the specific content of the idea in a given work may be an artistically relevant property of a unique and singular work of conceptual art. As Carroll¹¹ argues, works of other art forms might differ from each other from the point of view of whether the artwork is a unique and singular work (such as paintings and sculptures) or the art form includes works that have multiple (for all relevant purposes) identical copies. Novels, plays, musical works, and movies belong to this latter category, for they may (and in most cases do) have numerous copies. In other words, there are numerous tokens of a unique and singular work that is a type, but only the type is considered a unique and singular work, not its

⁷ Hopkins, 2007, pp. 58-61.

⁸ Hopkins (*ibid.*) further argues that conceptual art diverges from other art forms by setting up and then frustrating our expectation of sensory fulfilment. That is, the perceptible properties of the work are not the aesthetically relevant ones. Our traditional interpretative methods break down if we try to understand and appreciate works of conceptual art by appreciating their perceptible properties,

⁹ See Matravers, 2007 and Schellekens, 2007 for arguments about dematerialization.

¹⁰ Schellekens, *ibid.*, pp. 76-79.

¹¹ Carroll, 1996b, pp. 66-70.

tokens. Tokens may be simple copies (printed books, musical scores, digital or analogue copies of movies, etc.) that are not objects of artistic evaluation, but tokens may also be performances (theatrical performances, concerts) that are considered artworks in their own right. Given that such performances interpret the type (play, music) they perform, the performances themselves are subject of interpretation and evaluation. In fact, we appreciate the type through its tokens. In other words, there are tokens that are not artworks, and there are tokens that are artworks in their own right. However, performance tokens are not unique and singular works, but tokens of a type (a play, a symphony, etc.), and only the type is considered as a unique and singular work similar in uniqueness and singularity to works of other art forms (paintings, sculptures, etc.) where the type/token distinction does not arise.¹²

Where do we place works of conceptual art in this framework? According to The Art Form Theory, conceptual artworks are unique and singular works themselves, and the type/token distinction may merely depend on the chosen medium and the specific kind of execution of the work. Some of them (e.g., Duchamp's *Fountain*) are unique and singular works (without type/token distinction), similar, in this respect, to sculptures and paintings. Other works of conceptual art (e.g., Cage's *4''33''*) are types with tokens, and they might have performances having the kind of status that theatrical and musical performances have. I think, however, that this understanding does not describe the nature and status of conceptual artworks adequately.

In order to see what is mistaken about The Art Form Theory, we also need to consider the relevance of the specific content (the specific idea) of conceptual works. As we saw above, the chosen medium and physical execution of conceptual works of art are accidental in the sense that they do not determine the artistic properties of the work. In other words, only the content (the idea) may be relevant for artistic interpretation and appreciation.

Do we consider conceptual artworks to be unique and singular works because of their specific content (ideas) then? I think we do not. The reason for this is that any specific content (whether or not it is categorized into one of the three types Schellekens suggests, or into other possible types) may also be the content of works belonging to other art forms (e.g., novels, plays, movies), or even the content of works that are not artworks (e.g., philosophical or political writings). Should such specific content (ideas) be sufficient for determining the unique and singular conceptual artwork status of any execution (performance), resulting in the communication of the specific ideas of conceptual works of art, then we would be left without

¹² The lower status of reproductions and forged works also clearly shows the status of the unique and singular works in these cases (paintings and sculptures).

an account of what distinguishes these conceptual artworks from other artworks and non-artworks with the same content (ideas). For instance, should the specific content (ideas) be sufficient for determining unique and singular conceptual artwork status, then this very paper may instantly gain such an artwork status, due to its philosophical and art-reflexive content.

I propose that conceptual artworks are not unique and singular works of art, but they are token executions (temporal or permanent performances) of one original, unique and singular work of art. The Single Artwork Theory of Conceptual Art explains the status of such works as follows. There is only one general content (idea), common in all tokens of conceptual art that has the role of determining a unique and singular conceptual artwork (which is a type). The specific (art-reflexive, socio-political, philosophical, or other) contents of the tokens of this type, however, have no such type-determining or artwork-determining role. The unique and singular conceptual work of art is a type in a way plays and symphonies are types. Its executions (performances) are tokens that are artworks in their own right, and are subject of artistic evaluation in a way theatrical performances and concerts are artworks in their own right, and are subject of such evaluation. Nevertheless, these token executions themselves (including the aforementioned examples, such as Duchamp's *Fountain*, Cage's *4''33'*, Kosuth's '*Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)*' [*Water*], Warhol's *Brillo Box*) are not unique and singular works of art, even though some of them (like Cage's *4''33'*) might themselves be types as well, with further possible token performances.

The advantage of The Single Artwork Theory of Conceptual Art over The Art Form Theory is that The Single Artwork Theory does not face the problem of ascribing an artwork-determining role to the specific (art-reflexive, socio-political, philosophical, or other) content of the executions (performances) of the unique and singular work of conceptual art. This is a clear advantage if we accept that the specific contents of conceptual works of art may be identical with the contents of other artworks or with the contents of works that are not artworks. Given the sufficiently relevant analogies with other works of art, the token executions (performances) of the type can also be explained and understood as we understand token performances of plays and musical compositions. We can also understand why and how these performances, being interpretations of the type as a unique and singular work of art, may also be the subject of interpretation and artistic evaluation in their own right. Nevertheless, we can also clearly understand their relationship to a unique and singular work in terms of being token executions (performances) of the type.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine in details the specific content of this unique and singular conceptual artwork. This content might very well be the (art-reflexive or

philosophical) idea that results in frustrating the expectations with which we approach other, non-conceptual works of art. It is not my task here either to identify the creator (artist) of this original, unique and singular work of art, that is, the artist who first executed or performed the type. It might be Duchamp, as his *Fountain* is regarded as the frontier example of conceptual art. I shall leave it to the art historians to agree on the original creator and on the first execution of the work. What I have argued here is that conceptual art is not an art form; there is only a single work of conceptual art, and we appreciate this work through the variety of its tokens executed in all sorts of media.

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