

# John Dewey's Philosophical Naturalism and a Pragmatist Approach to Conceptual Art

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## Abstract

The emergence of conceptual art is one of the most profound changes that has ever taken place within the cultural sphere of artistic practices. Naturally, the deviation of conceptual art from traditional art forms has been intensely debated. However, pragmatist art theory and aesthetics has placed relatively scarce emphasis upon this significant divergence. Hence, the aim of this paper is to introduce a coherent pragmatist approach to conceptual art; one that explains the emotionalized expression of meaning through conceptual art objects which, on the face of it, appear to lack the potential for conducting such experiential functions. The main discussion concerns the relation between the constitutive parts and the whole of a work of art. In particular, I highlight the peculiar role of contextual information in the process of interpreting and experiencing conceptual art objects. The ideas put forward are based on John Dewey's philosophical naturalism, which also comprises the broad theoretical framework for this study.

## Key Words

philosophical naturalism, philosophical pragmatism, conceptual art, aesthetic experience, John Dewey, Felix Gonzalez-Torres

## Introduction

The emergence of conceptual art was one of the most important developments in the cultural sphere of the twentieth century. According to Marcel Duchamp, “[e]verything was becoming conceptual, that is, it depended on things other than the retina” (Cabanne 1971, 39). Through sensory channels, a color, for example, can lend its unconscious associative meanings to new perceptual wholes. Indeed, the colors of a rose, a bridal dress, a state flag, or a painting are not arbitrary, but carefully chosen to

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evoke the desired type of emotional tone in the experiences of audiences. It is precisely this potential of colors—as well as a wide range of other perceptual materials—to automatically lace human experience with specific accents that was being renounced in the shift towards the conceptual described by Duchamp. The most profound aspect of this transformative period is not the introduction of ready-made objects but the abandonment of ready-made meanings; conceptual art exhibits an ambition to expand the role of the artist from a creative modifier of meanings to a creative inventor of meanings. Consequently, automatic and general sensory cues have increasingly given way to personally acquired specific knowledge in the constitution of experiences of art. This turn from the appearance to the idea has carried over into the twenty-first century. Today, a considerable proportion of contemporary art is focused on conceptual content.

Naturally, such a dramatic, as well as enduring, deviation from traditional artistic practices has been intensely debated in academic journals and elsewhere. A common attitude in these debates is articulated in, for example, Goldie and Schellekens's *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* (2007), an edited collection of analytic philosophy, in which it is stated that “there is one artistic movement which has claimed that art should invariably aim to engage its audience intellectually, and, moreover, that it need not do so aesthetically or emotionally” (ix).

In this paper, however, I take an alternative approach with regard to both the philosophical orientation as well as the description of conceptual art as highlighted above. The main difference concerns the separation of the intellectual, the aesthetic, and the emotional from one another—a common distinction in philosophy, as evinced by the quotation from Goldie and Schellekens above. Admittedly, language does render it possible to analyze these aspects of experience individually. Yet, such a rigid partition is not how the experiencing human mind—as a dynamic unitary structure of nature—functions in practice. For instance, the ever-present emotional incentives are constantly needed to dispel total apathy—a state of being which is hostile to the emergence of both intelligence and the aesthetic quality of experience.

Hence, instead of segregation, an integral interconnectedness of experiential features comprises a key premise for this paper. The unitary structure of human experience described above fits into the broad field of philosophical naturalism and, especially, the more specific framework of philosophical pragmatism. It is crucial to note that the latter, in particular, makes a fundamental departure from all classic accounts of philosophy. The historical line, as well as the modern-day derivatives, of classic philosophy are predominantly focused on introducing ways of combining men-

tal features after an initial, and often a priori, separation of these features into various enclosed categories. In contrast, the founders of philosophical pragmatism, including John Dewey, argued that following the discoveries of Charles Darwin such detours were neither necessary nor tenable; human ontology and cognition could thereafter be understood on the model of interactions occurring in nature. Consequently, many traditional philosophical doctrines, such as mind–body dualism, were deemed insupportable.

Today, the validity of these pragmatist premises is reinforced by a multitude of modern natural scientific ventures into the psychophysical constitution of human beings (see Franks 2010, 10, 86–88, 204; see also Popp, 2007)—although we should be cautious of oversimplifying the matter by treating it as purely biological or physical: as Dewey insists, the natural sciences alone are insufficient in explaining the entirety of human activity: “We cannot direct a course of interactions without counting and measuring, but the interactions are more than numbers, spaces and velocities” (Dewey [1925] 1981, 216). For example, culturally motivated and teleologically driven behavior tends to escape exact mathematical definitions and predictions. On that account, the humanities do belong among the sciences, as long as transcendent or any other supernatural premises and explanations are avoided. As such, philosophical pragmatism, whose main premises are that the experience of art is a natural phenomenon and that the one and only reality of nature consists of a continuum of interactions (from the subatomic to the social and cultural), offers a productive basis for discussing conceptual art.

On the whole, as a study within the framework of philosophical pragmatism, neither the contents nor the goals of this paper pertain to eternal truths or immutable transcendent realities. Rather, the approach of this paper reflects Dewey’s call ([1920] 1982, 151) for a change in the philosophical agenda from the “vain metaphysics and idle epistemology” to a more active guidance for modern civilization. In other words, Dewey maintains that philosophical undertakings should focus—even if indirectly—on concrete improvements of human life as it unfolds in physical, cultural, and social environments. Furthermore, Dewey holds that art, too, possesses a considerable role in rendering life more meaningful, worthwhile, and also communal. He views works of art as potentially “marvelous aids in the creation of such a life” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 87). Hence, in this paper, I discuss the particular ways in which conceptual art, and its profound shift in emphasis from the appearance to the idea, furthers the attainment of modes of desirable living—an issue possessing considerable relevance in the field of philosophical pragmatism.

Accordingly, I put forward a pragmatist approach to the psychophysical constitution of an aesthetic experience in the context of conceptual art. The suggested approach is based upon Dewey's view of the experiencing human mind as a complex—but nonetheless unitary—natural whole. Within this frame of reference, I examine specific cognitive modes of preparing this wholeness for experiencing conceptually oriented art objects in a consummatory fashion. In particular, I disclose mechanisms through which primarily intellectual works of art can potentially fulfil the aesthetic condition set by Dewey, according to which “no intellectual activity is an integral event (is *an* experience), unless it is rounded out with this quality” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 45; emphasis in original). For this purpose, I use a specific case example; namely, a conceptual artwork by Felix Gonzalez-Torres entitled “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*). This particular work of art—discussed in the latter half of this paper—highlights the difficulties as well as the benefits of the conceptual approach to artistic endeavors. However, prior to this case study, it is imperative to state the reasons for discussing conceptual art within a specifically Deweyan framework and, also, to provide an overview of the relevant key points of Dewey's philosophical program. The latter includes, in the following order, the unique characteristics of human experience, the constitution of concepts, and the relation between the aesthetic quality of experience and artistic practices.

## John Dewey and Philosophical Pragmatism

Of the founders of American pragmatism, John Dewey provides the most comprehensive and coherent theory on art and aesthetics. In his *Art as Experience* ([1934] 1987)—one of his principal works—Dewey puts forth a generally applicable pragmatist theory of art and aesthetics. As the title suggests, Dewey holds that art should be understood, first and foremost, as concerning experiences. Of course, the concrete material objects that audiences interact with in order to evoke the experiences of art matter too, but the artistic value of material objects of any kind stems from their influence on human experience: without the capacity to bring about aesthetic quality in the experiences of audiences, a material object cannot be deemed an art object. In short, Dewey defines a work of art as an experience evoked in, and through, an interaction with a material object. Accordingly, the unifying link that connects all domains of fine art to one another is to be found in the similarity of experienced qualities rather than of material features of physical objects.

Dewey's theory takes into account an unusually wide range of aspects that play a part in the constitution of an aesthetic experience of art—including, but not limited to, material objects, laws of physics, human cognition, the social sphere, natural and cultural evolutions, and situational particularities. All of the above, as inherently connected to each other, affect the phenomenon of art in the broadest sense of the term; taken individually, they are insufficient in determining fine art or explaining experiences of it.

Moreover, Dewey's voluminous writings extend beyond the comprehensive theorization on art and aesthetics. For example, in his treatise *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* ([1938] 1986), he scrutinizes intellectual operations, including the formation of concepts, in an equally systematic fashion. However, Dewey does not develop a consistent theory on the possibilities of combining these two areas of his philosophical undertaking—that is, not beyond their common foundation in the general human constitution, which, as stated above, he examines meticulously.

In his discussion of aesthetic modes of thinking, Dewey does, indeed, briefly refer to intellectual art. He opines that “the strictly intellectual art will never be popular as music is popular” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 45). In addition, Dewey incidentally ponders the possible future convergence of the subject matters of fine art and mathematical sciences. He states that

it is possible that there may come a day in which subject-matter that now exists only for laborious reflection, that appeals only to those who are trained to interpret that which to sense are only hieroglyphics, will become the substance of poetry, and thereby be the matter of enjoyed perception.

Dewey ([1934] 1987), 154

Yet, neither of the two themes are developed to a conclusion in Dewey's writings. This paper is a continuation of these discussions in the context of contemporary artistic procedures, thus augmenting Dewey's pragmatist theory of art and aesthetics.

Of course, a significant body of literature about art and aesthetics already exists in the pragmatist tradition. For example, Richard Shusterman, Joseph Margolis, and Arnold Berleant each provide substantial input (see Shusterman 1992, Margolis 2009, Berleant 1991). Yet, pragmatist scholars have not engaged in a systematic and continuous Deweyan discourse on conceptual art, although the relationship between Dewey and conceptual art is occasionally brought up (see Stroud 2007 and Sullivan 2002). Admittedly, no fundamental contradiction between conceptual art and more traditional artistic forms arises directly from Dewey's theorization. Hence, an argument can be made that from a Deweyan standpoint, the

specifics of this divergence are not relevant enough to warrant extensive investigations. However, with this paper, I support the view that even if the differences between the artistic modes are not foundational, they are not trivial either, especially with regard to Dewey's view of the role of art in the efforts to render human life more enjoyable and meaningful through aesthetic experiences. Overall, this paper contributes to the somewhat neglected area of pragmatist aesthetics and art theory that concerns conceptual art.

## Dewey on Human Experience and the Constitution of Emotionalized Meanings

The human experience defined as a natural phenomenon within the continuum of animal experience is the leitmotif of Dewey's entire philosophical project. (His book titles *Art as Experience* and *Experience and Nature* attest to this.) For Dewey, the continuous human experience is always based upon various forms of interaction. Moreover, this dynamic process incorporates physical as well as sociocultural dimensions; the latter emerges from and functions through the former.

In addition, Dewey uses a distinctly italicized "an" to demarcate an occurrence of *an* experience from other broader notions, such as accumulated life experience. This emphasized "*an*" denotes a marked break from life's predictable routines, whether they be sensory, social, artistic, athletic, mathematical, or the like. For example, as Dewey mentions, in any area of life a person may utter "that was an experience" after undergoing circumstances which defy habitual expectations and occupy one's attention for a definable timeframe (Dewey [1934] 1987, 43). Importantly, this interruption of the ordinary course of living has to be dominated by a single unifying quality, which pervades, and in doing so defines, the experienced total situation (*ibid.*, 44). For example, an extraordinary taste may establish "that dessert" as *an* experience.

In this example, the experience is, to a considerable degree, based upon a concrete fulfilment of a vital need; this particular satisfying response to sensory stimulation evolved in environmental conditions where sugars and fats were hard to come by. The experience conjoins the intake of specific nutrients and the continuity of life into a coherent meaning, the value of which is unconsciously estimated but nonetheless emotionally felt in conscious awareness. In general, an emotion reports an instinctual initial estimate about the encountered situation and its presumed consequences. That is, an emotion performs the function of an automatic guide for

grasping the meaning of perceived objects, events, and affordances based on the value or harm they supposedly bring to the process of overcoming various challenges of life. This applies to most organisms and most problems—from the primitive and sensory to the enculturated and conceptual. Of course, cultural beliefs and personal peculiarities sometimes affect the specific relations between meanings and emotions instituted through natural evolution. For example, the emotions arising from a conscious recognition of the long-term risks posed by obesity to the continuity of life may directly contradict the emotions induced by a high calorie intake. Appreciation of slowly cumulating health hazards does not as such sour the taste of delicacies, but conscious awareness of far-reaching consequences may at times impair the overall experience of having a dessert due to the conflicting value assessments that feature in that overall experience.

In addition to an explicit discord, human enculturation may also bring about intentional transmutations to embodied meanings. In an artistic context, the experienced effects of physical materials are often intentionally transformed and repurposed (Dewey [1934] 1987, 69–70, 205). Especially in the fine arts, audiences have been conditioned to respond to stimuli in ways that partly diverge from the inborn reactions brought about by the embodied background of human evolutionary history. For example, in the wilderness, sudden loud sounds nearby generally indicate that an immediate threat is unfolding. However, in some contemporary situations the visceral response of escape has been nullified through cultural upbringing; the bodily excitement remains but no longer leads to fear and anxiety, which have been replaced with aesthetic enjoyment. For instance, people attending a rock concert do not instinctively try to escape from the venue when the first chords are struck. Encultured audiences have learned to enhance the enjoyment of perceptual objects of their liking—such as melodies and harmonies—with the experienced intensity of exceptionally loud sounds that would otherwise indicate impending harm. A musical performance is not a matter of actual life and death, but it bears experiential resemblance to such matters—especially in the intensity of the experience, even if not always in other ways.

Traditionally, mastering the ability to control organic value assignments in the context of material objects defines the technical competence of an artist, and this applies to conceptually oriented art practices as well. However, for the most part, the conceptual approach to art does not arouse what meaningfulness of an experience of art it arouses through modes of extraordinary sensory stimulation. Conceptual art is predominantly devoid of explicitly personified skillful ordering of sensory mate-

rials, whether they be paints applied to canvas, notes of music as motion of air molecules, or the movements and gestures of actors or dancers on stage. In conceptual art, meanings can—and often do—function more in the manner of an awareness of obesity than they do in the manner of a strong sensory impact such as a distinct taste. This type of approach to artistic practices is something of a double-edged sword. Arguably, the renouncement of overt use of tacit meanings—even in their artistically transfigured incarnations—helps artists to increasingly step outside the confinements of a meaning-formation mechanism that derives from evolutionary pressures. As a consequence, wholly new possibilities for directing the experiences of audiences open up. On the other hand, though, if culturally—or sometimes even situationally—instituted conventional meanings are not conjoined with deep-rooted tacit ones, the characteristic intensity of a genuine experience of art tends to remain elusive. Manipulation of exclusively conventional, rather than mostly tacit, meanings handicaps efforts to bring about exceptionally meaningful aesthetic experience in audiences.

In order to attain the passionate vigor of art, conceptually oriented artists tend to emphasize highly meaningful—as in emotional—ideas, instead of emphasizing vivid sensory stimulation and material objects explicitly marked by personal touch. Sometimes the latter two might even be considered as obstructing the clarity of the idea; thus, many conceptual artists gravitate towards some form of sensory minimalism. In an experience of conceptual art the full emotional intensity hits primarily after—and only through—conscious interpretation of the substance of the work. This contrasts with the more traditional methods of art, in which the unconscious—even if culturally transformed—emotionalization renders the process of interpretation *itself* intense, and commonly from the very outset. Carried to an extreme, a traditional artist may, within limits, ignore the significance of *what* is expressed and focus solely on *how* the subject matter is expressed. In principle, this is totally acceptable for all artists, even if not necessarily practically feasible for the conceptually oriented, for whom the incubation phase of interpretation does not hold particular aesthetic relevance without the consummate idea.

In the latter half of this paper, I scrutinize certain key peculiarities of this switch to emphasizing the fruits of long-term thought in the context of fine art. But first, it is necessary to briefly examine the foundations of human cognition that enable the extension of, and shift in, the focus of human awareness from the immediate sensory surroundings towards the generalized and the conceptual. Also, the topic warrants an overview of

the general ways in which these cognitive structures relate to aesthetic experiencing and artistic endeavors.

## Extension of the Human Perceptual Horizon

As discussed above, human beings and the majority of other advanced animals possess an experiential capacity for an almost immediate assessment of the direct benefit or harm effected by present tactile circumstances. In addition, both have developed an ability to imaginatively (or proto-imaginatively in the case of animals with less developed cognitive capacities) experience potential outcomes of activity in a somewhat similar, as in emotionally meaningful, fashion. For example, the delight from expected future benefit motivates and the fear of future harm deters. In short, the survival of an organism is rendered more probable when emotional guidance is applied not only reactively but also proactively. It should be noted that the majority of advanced species share a common base of sensory capabilities. Yet, the mutually reinforcing combination of cognitive evolution and progressive enculturation has rendered human beings by far the most capable of forming spatiotemporally distant, generally complex, and increasingly abstract expectations.

In Dewey's philosophical program, the scope of perceptions, and consequently that of experiences, extends from verified relations to propositional "if-then" relations. The emotional intensity of the latter is a sensory derivative of the assumed consequences that the imagined "then" would bear upon life, if ever actualized in the concrete. For example, imagining an upcoming wedding can match, or even surpass, the actual ceremony in emotional excitement.

Nevertheless, whether a taste of a wedding cake or a ceremonial dance, an imagined occurrence is always vaguer than a concrete occurrence. The former is always more or less of a hypothetical generalization based on previous contacts with similar materials and combinations. This detachment from direct interaction is a first step towards conceptualization. However, the loss of visceral details does not—necessarily—amount to a confusion or a decrease in emotionalized meanings.

A generalization is constituted upon a discovery of a specific unifying thread among particulars—a type of "meaning-concentrate" prepared in thought. With such a distinct and verified coherence in meaning comes an emotional clarity in bodily experience, as the two are integrally linked (Määttänen 2015b, 72). Furthermore, the relationship between meanings and emotions carries through to the practice of devising operations on

the basis of generalizations; that is to say, the linkage persists through the constitution of concepts.

Importantly, as planning relates to hypothetical outcomes, it, too, is a form of emotionally guided activity. Hence, the establishment of a specific relation between a generalization and a planned goal—as in the constitution of a concept—provides an opportunity for an artistic intervention. Conjoining two different catalysts of emotional response is open to a diversity of creative combinations. And so no fundamental principle prevents the implementation of concepts—long since established or more recent in origin—as definite parts in the constitution of experiences of art.

## Concepts as Ideational

Dewey describes a concept as an idea tested and, consequently, defined by a set of practical or abstract operations (Dewey [1929] 1984, 89). For example, the concept of sweetness is derived from numerous instances of experiencing particular sweet tastes. The former is a well-founded estimate about a specific type of experiential quality as an outcome of an interaction between certain environmental materials and bodily organs. This particular hypothesis about the tone of future experiences guides the choice of procedures, for example, in the act of baking. In short, Dewey's definition of a concept is somewhat akin to a template; its main function is to aid in responding to specific types of challenges. Moreover, as the problems of human life range from the physical to the social, and sometimes even to the wholly abstract, so too do conceptualizations.

Furthermore, in Dewey's philosophical pragmatism, action is an integral constitutive part in the formation of both perceptions and conceptions, which develop in a "functional correlativity with each other" (Dewey [1938] 1986, 115). The former discovers problems and the latter suggests solutions (*ibid.*). However, certain restrictions apply. For example, in a neuroscientific discussion about the priority of action, David Franks emphasizes that "[o]ur senses and the nature of our brains impose strict limits as to how and what we can conceptualize and categorize" (Franks 2010, 206). Even highly abstract as well as emphatically social concepts arise from bodily activity and embodied reasoning, and all of these invariably manifest in continuous human intercourse with the surrounding environment and other living beings.

In the end, it is repeatability in attaining specific goals of human life that determines the tenability of any concept. However, as discussed above, not only achievements and failures after the concrete fact, but also

achievements and failures as predictively entertained and expected in imagination, emotionalize experienced value. On this account, any tool—even a conceptual one—that is perceived as embodying means for overcoming problems possesses aesthetic potential.

## Constitution of an Aesthetic Experience

Discussing Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience requires forgoing definitions of the aesthetic put forth in traditional philosophy. Of course, Dewey theorizes terms such as beauty or the sublime, staples of conversation in classical aesthetics. However, his description of an aesthetic experience is neither based upon nor defined by such terms.

For Dewey, an aesthetic experience relates to the encountered resistances of life and, more specifically, perceptions of overcoming them in a consummatory fashion. That is, the aesthetic quality emerges in accordance with experiencing an anticipated solution to a problem. On that account, “[e]sthetic experience is imaginative” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 276). Furthermore, sometimes even the consciously held expectations are based on unconscious detection of possibilities, as in intuition. In any case, the emphasis is on the prospective, because the aesthetic quality relates to the hypothetical outcomes, as does the conceptual by its suggestive nature. An actualization of an outcome in the concrete may very well be emotionally satisfying. However, experiencing a satisfactory concrete outcome introduces aesthetic quality primarily in its perceived relation to overcoming unresolved challenges, the probability of which the factual outcome renders more likely in imaginary estimates. For example, tasting raw cookie dough may very well be a satisfying experience in the present moment. Yet, in order for this experience to incorporate aesthetic quality, the concrete present taste has to be perceived as indicative of, for example, a hypothetical future taste of a desired kind; the latter, of course, a potential outcome of eating finished cookies baked from the dough. In short, the taste of dough is experienced as a promise of delicious cookies. As Pentti Määttä summarizes the Deweyan disposition, “an aesthetic experience is a promise of consummation, and this promise is enjoyable in itself” (Määttä 2015a, 97).

However, any final consummation in absolute sense is neither achievable nor desirable. Life consists of a rhythmic alteration of tension and release, as various balances needed for upholding psychophysical existence and well-being are continuously lost and restored. This dynamic takes place on, as well as joins together, multiple levels of cognition. The phys-

iological, the social, and the mathematical are examples of human capabilities that may be entrusted a leading, a supporting, or an equal role in overcoming an encountered resistance—depending on the requirements of the situation.

Moreover, as problems vary in their relevance for a human being, so does the intensity of the aesthetic quality of experience. The aesthetic arises as the defining quality over other qualities only when the challenging situation and, especially, the mode of overcoming it are perceived as highly significant for the experiencing individual. Otherwise, the aesthetic as a part of total experience is shallow, transient, and quickly forgotten. In the latter case, the aesthetic quality does not substantially affect personal growth or communal life.

## Dewey on Art and Expression

Dewey bases his theory of art on the aesthetic quality of experience. In fine art, an aesthetic experience is idealized. However, Dewey does not mean “ideal” in the sense of absolute perfection or anything transcendent. The term “extraction” captures the gist of his theory regarding the expression of the ideal in art. Dewey states that “[e]tymologically, an act of expression is a squeezing out, a pressing forth” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 70). He mentions the mechanics of a wine press as an example. He does not discuss thirst specifically, but the purpose of a wine press is to convert raw materials of nature, in this case grapes, to a more ideal form. It is not that grapes cannot be enjoyed raw, but in certain situations extracted juice, as such or as further developed into wine, provides a heightened emotional response of satisfaction. In other words, bodily experience verifies that thirst is more effectively quenched with juice than with grapes. For a person experiencing thirst—an emotional indication of a life-threatening imbalance—the seeds and the pulp are obstructions to the satisfaction of a need. Therefore, extracted juice, as material *expressed* through a filter, is a more ideal way to overcome the problem of restoring a balanced hydration, and, consequently, removing thirst from the present experiential whole.

In most situations in life, the desirable is often entangled with the irrelevant and the obstructing. This applies not only to grapes but to social and cultural objects as well. For example, in real life even the most loving relationship is saturated with constant distractions and tediums of daily living. And from time to time, even individuals who are in a loving relationship want to experience the satisfaction of “ideal” love through some-

thing like fictional romantic films. This is not to say that fantasy love is more satisfactory than actual love. The issue is that the great majority of encultured individuals have emergent needs that no amount of nutrition or concrete love can satisfy. Such are the needs of imaginative perception, which comprises the domain of fine art.

Unlike physiological needs, the fulfilment of which requires specific molecules, the criteria for satisfying the needs of imagination are more psychological and, consequently, more flexible. Nonetheless, competent artists recognize—sometimes unconsciously—certain general conditions for producing especially satisfying outcomes in imagination, first in their own imagination and, subsequently, also in the imaginations of audiences with experiential backgrounds that overlap with the artists’.

For example, storytellers are well aware of the fact that audiences do not want to hear about every single step undertaken by the main characters, as the narrative would be saturated with trivialities and dull monotonies. Storytellers have to focus on those parts that crystallize the essence of the described journey; that is, an alluring narrative should strongly emphasize the most relevant aspects of overcoming the primary problem encountered by the protagonists. Only through such intentional discrimination, even if it means gross exaggeration, is it possible to effectively satisfy the needs of the audience’s imagination.

In a similar fashion, all artists strive to extract from conscious and unconscious personal materials that which aesthetically inspires imaginative perception. This takes place in conceptually oriented art too, because, as Dewey notes, “an experience of thinking has its own esthetic quality” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 45)—from which it is, of course, possible to extract further artistic outcomes. Henceforth, I will use the term “scenario” to describe these distilled objects and events that play out in imagination. In addition to scenes upheld in visual imagination, the term “scenario” also captures a diversity of conceivable eventualities, including, but not limited to, intangible relations and social schemata.

In an artistic context, the constitution of these imagined aesthetic scenarios is initiated and directed through a proper interaction with physical objects of art. Importantly, in distinctively artistic instances the emerging imaginary objects, situations, and events unfold only in the experiences of artists and audiences, not in the surrounding environment. For example, *Spring* from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* does not bloom in anyone’s garden, but in the minds of audiences, which is the sole locus for experiencing such an abstract scenario of fine art. Accordingly, artistic scenarios can be extremely inarticulate, as is the case with this particular example of instrumental music. Yet, they are, whenever successful, especially poignant;

more so than the suggestive associations evoked by sounds or sights of common everyday situations. Artworks pinpoint meaning and arouse emotion in an unadulterated fashion, as they are designed solely for this particular purpose. For example, a joyful tune is a constitution devoid of any unnecessary elements or potential distractions; instead of dispersive rivalry for attention, every part and detail contributes to the same distinct, unified, and consummatory experiential goal. Even when artists want to confuse their audiences, they usually aim for a specific type of confusion that fits particularly well within a particular rhythmic alteration of resistance and relief. And the full aesthetic depth of art has to do with the question of whether undergoing such an experience, as a whole, aligns with the broader rhythms of the overall life of an individual member of an audience—that is, whether a work of art fits one’s life in a way that renders the experience especially worthwhile and memorable, whether it is intimate and touching rather than exogenous and distant.

## The Problem of Expressiveness in Conceptual Art

In Dewey’s philosophical framework expressiveness is the crux of fine art (Dewey [1934] 1987, 277). It is defined as the use of some material medium in such a way that it constitutes “the meaning not of what it physically is, but of what it expresses” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 205). That is to say, the experienced effects of physical materials are repurposed, traditionally more or less in the manner described by the example of a loud rock concert, or in the way that a red rose may be an expression of love even if the flower as a physical object is not isomorphic with the particular experiential state of an individual human being. This type of embodiment of emotion-alized meaning is the hallmark of traditional art objects. The overall composition may be novel and culturally motivated, but the constitutive parts rely heavily upon widely shared meanings established during natural evolution.

The great difficulty of conceptual art resides precisely in the fact that it does not always rely on commonly used operational rules or shared meanings. In conceptual art, the tools of interpretation, as in meanings, may be established for each individual art object separately—not as general guidelines for the entire field. Thus, conceptual art takes to the extreme the Deweyan idea according to which “every authentic new work of art is in some degree itself the birth of a new art” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 233).

The lack of instantly felt expressiveness in the physical objects of conceptual art remains a problem for some, and perhaps most, audiences.



FIGURE 1. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (*Perfect Lovers*), 1991. Wall clocks and paint on wall. Overall dimensions vary with installation; original clock size: 14 inches diameter each. Photographer: Peter Muscato. © Estate of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Image courtesy of The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

Arguably, the majority of people have become used to using their evolutionary background as well as their cultural upbringing—both embedded in the structure of a human being—to effortlessly initiate, carry, and direct the interaction with an art object towards an imaginative aesthetic experience of art. Hence the irresistible, but nonetheless enjoyable, ease with which an instantly expressive traditional masterpiece seizes an audience and evokes emotionally intense aesthetic scenarios in imagination seems unrivalled. In contrast, conceptual art relies on the more conscious and, thus, more laborious cognitive functions in the process of constituting a work of art as an experience. Consequently, conceptual art can appear unnecessarily cumbersome and arid in comparison.

## Constitution of an Expressive Conceptual Work of Art

The main difference between the conceptual and the more traditional approach to the constitution of art objects can be summarized as follows: Within traditional artistic practices the material art objects take unprecedented forms marked by personal touch, but the mediated meanings—even as artistically transfigured—tend to be more or less familiar and widely shared; whereas in the conceptual orientation it is somewhat the opposite: the physical features of art objects are predominantly familiar to the point of being mundane, but their meanings are highly unusual and extremely contextual.

In general, conceptual art objects commonly provide ordinary cultural symbols or objects in various arrangements that the audience is expected to interpret primarily in conscious thought. For example, the conceptual artwork “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) (1991), by Felix Gonzalez-Torres (fig. 1), consists of two identical circular clocks, placed on a wall next to each other. Of course, in the context of an art gallery or museum the commonplace meaning of a clock does not apply anyway. Nevertheless, no unconscious sensory response, cultural convention, or combination thereof renders ordinary clocks expressive in the traditional sense.

Initially, the clocks show the same time. However, as batteries are exhausted the clocks inevitably fall out of synchronization—a key feature of the art object. Thus, a proper interaction with the art object of “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) is exceptionally difficult, as it may require several encounters with the clocks at different times. Yet, even if audiences managed to “fully” interact with Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s art object over long periods of time, this alone would not assure a marked consistency in the ensuing experiences.

Unlike traditionally expressive art objects, an interpretation of conceptual art objects usually necessitates a considerable amount of contextual background knowledge. Not even an extensive general education ensures that an interaction with a conceptual art object is experienced in a way that resembles the experience of the artist. For instance, in the case of “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) it is probable that without any audience knowledge about Gonzalez-Torres’s life, the experiences of the artist and the audience remain disparate. The experiences may align on the level of sense perception but not on the level of imaginative perception, where works of art are constituted as aesthetic scenarios. Without the latter, the communicative aspect of genuine art remains unrealized.

The bare cues embedded in the art object “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) do not make it instinctual or effortless to arrive at an experience that re-

sembles in meaning and emotional tone the experience undergone by Gonzalez-Torres himself. In order for a member of an audience to direct her personal experience towards that of Gonzalez-Torres's, it is necessary to resort to resources outside the physical art object and general psychophysical preparedness. Learning that Gonzalez-Torres lost his partner Ross Laycock to AIDS, a condition that would later consume the artist as well, gives the dual composition of clocks a whole new meaning. With this additional information, which may require conscious effort to acquire, it is possible to interact with "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*) in a more comprehensive manner. The extra information renders it possible for the minimal material cues to express the general idea of gradually diverging life paths as an emotionally intense imaginative scenario. Due to the fact that the main emphasis is on concepts of asynchrony and death *in general*, it is apparent that the artist is not looking for the sympathy of his audience—neither for himself nor for his social group. The intensity as well as the consequent emotional appreciation of Gonzalez-Torres's work arise mainly from the significant implications of the presented scenario; these will, with time and in one way or another, come to touch the lives of the members of the audiences themselves.

Commonly, an increase in the uniformity of experiential backgrounds within a group results in improved possibilities for communication and mediation of ideas. Shared enjoyments, sufferings, consummations, and knowledge all increase the depth of meanings. This applies to culture in general and to a work of art in particular. Sometimes acquiring an adequate knowledge-base may require considerable personal effort. However, once a person obtains the necessary cognitive tools—even if only on a case by case basis—a whole new world opens up to experience. Hence, in addition to possibly satisfying existing needs of imaginative perception, conceptual art may also offer the possibility of discovering novel modes of perceiving imaginatively.

Within the realm of conceptual art, the conditions for inclusion into a social group capable of experiencing a conceptual art object as expressive are most peculiar. They are increasingly set by the artist and less by a combination of collective cultural structures and organic bodily functions. Of course, the latter two will always play a part, since no meaning—no matter how conventional, abstract, or idiosyncratic—is totally cut off from the composite substratum of nature and culture. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize the fact that conceptual works of art, as experiences, often incorporate situationally specific meanings constituted—and sometimes even embodied—by the artist.

In the context of conceptual art, the embodiment of meaning by the artist is sometimes quite literal but not necessarily overt, as in situated in the concrete art object. With regard to the latter, Dewey emphasizes the “local habitation” of common emotions and meanings in expressive artistic treatment (Dewey [1934] 1987, 96). In other words, according to Dewey, in *traditional* aesthetic portrayal the manifested emotion is individualized (*ibid.*). An expression of grief, for example, is the grief of a distinct individual in a particular situation—not a direct general statement, as in the phrase “a person is sad” (*ibid.*).

On this account of local habitation, a traditional rendition of “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) could have depicted actual people instead of generic clocks; perhaps Gonzalez-Torres himself and his companion in specific situations exhibiting explicit gestures and facial expressions. In an individualized form, the idea of slowly losing a companion would be effortlessly grasped with the resources most audiences already possess. However, in such a case, the work would not be as much about the concept of death, but more about “a death” or “the death of.”

Becoming consciously aware of mortality as a general aspect of human reality differs cognitively, experientially, and emotionally from perceiving a particular death of a particular being. Depending on the situation, the former can be more intimate: its implications pose a more direct—even if not necessarily more urgent—challenge to the continuity of one’s own life, the primal goal embedded in all organisms during natural evolution. On this account, it is possible to position the concept of death in thought as the main obstacle to be imaginatively overcome, as in a genuinely aesthetic experience of fine art.

Of course, death can be imaginatively overcome in a multitude of ways and in various contexts. One direct approach would be to entertain the decidedly hypothetical concept of immortality: a total solution to a most persistent of problems. The mere idea of personal existence beyond natural limits commonly generates high degrees of aesthetic quality in experience. Consequently, imaginative scenarios regarding afterlife carry the allure of most religions and certain technological sciences alike.

However, “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) does not rely upon the concept of immortality in restoring the mental balance disrupted by the notion of one’s own mortality. Rather, the work, as an experience, compels cherishing and valuing the finite moments—precisely because human lifetime is limited. In other words, death is not overcome in a literal sense; its daunting inevitability is counterbalanced by the emotionalized consummatory experience of finding value in temporally restricted existences, such as shared moments with loved ones. This key aspect of “*Untitled*” (*Perfect*

*Lovers*) makes it especially suitable for the general role that Dewey sees fine art as possessing in human life. That is, the work renders everyday being more meaningful and enjoyable.

Furthermore, Gonzalez-Torres's work performs this function of fine art in a way that aligns with the specific characteristics of a modern enculturated mind; it pushes the focus of awareness beyond the immediately present and tangibly distinct towards the temporally distant and spatially dispersed. Of course, the sciences, too, generalize and conceptualize from the cognitive scatter. But in science, the value of a concept is measured according to its degree of benefit for further inquiries and predictions. As aesthetic as the scientific problem–solution dynamic may be, in such instances the felt significance arises primarily from objectivity instead of intimacy. In contrast, it is precisely the latter that comprises the emotionalized value and meaningfulness of fine art—even if conceptual art, in particular, introduces this connection to innate human affairs through peculiar channels and, often, at a comparatively late phase in the process of constituting an experience of art. Nevertheless, as is the case with most artworks, even the conceptually oriented tend to provide value for individual and communal life rather than for any specific inquiry; conceptual artworks do not commonly intend to articulate unambiguous conclusive answers for the purpose of advancing a predetermined research. On this account, the conceptual approach to art appears to align with the sciences more in the means and less so in the ends. Hence, for the time being, the convergence between the subject-matters of art and science anticipated by Dewey remains only partial.

## Summary

Gonzalez-Torres's conceptual artwork "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*) reshuffles the time-honored constitutive principles exhibited by traditional artworks. Firstly, the local habitation of emotionalized meanings is relocated from the art object to external contextual information—perhaps even to the personal life and character of the artist. Of course, universal human capacities are still needed, but their "coming together" in an experienced artistic whole is no longer primarily directed by the unique features of a concrete art object. Rather, the uniqueness of constitutive elements is now primarily a matter of an audience's preparation.

Secondly, the imaginative scenario, towards which the particularized supplementary information directs the audience's experience, is usually of the generalized type. In Gonzalez-Torres's work, the clocks dampen the

particularity arising from the special contextual material used to interpret the art object. Knowledge about the artist's life does provide meaning to the relation of the clocks, but the clocks are not experienced as the life of the artist. The impersonality of the clocks compels audiences to emphasize the concept of gradually growing asynchrony between individuals as a common feature of life in general, not just in the life of Gonzalez-Torres.

Overall, in the context of *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)* the general concepts of asynchrony and death are unified into a coherent experiential whole. Even without highly individualized and unconsciously impactful features in the concrete structure of the art object, the emergent *total* scenario is imaginatively compelling and, once attentively constituted, perhaps even expressive. The relation of life paths, time, and the inevitable end are organized into a unified imaginative vision that vividly expresses certain significant aspects of the reality to which all living beings are subject to. That is to say, relations in Gonzalez-Torres's work are not established only in the midst of conceptual matters, but also between the conceptual elements and the concrete life of a member of an audience. In short, despite the impersonal outer appearance of the art object, in its experiential entirety *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)* can become a personally affecting consummatory whole—just as can any genuine work of art.

## Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate one possible way that conceptual artworks can be explained within the framework of John Dewey's pragmatist theory of art. This study is not an all-encompassing or exhaustive analysis of conceptual art as a whole. Works, artists, and audiences that defy the approach I outline in this paper do exist. Overall, the above examination of conceptual art relates primarily to a key condition of fine art defined by Dewey. According to him, "[t]he abiding struggle of art is thus to convert materials that are stammering or dumb in ordinary experience into eloquent media" (Dewey [1934] 1987, 233).

Furthermore, Dewey maintains that it is possible to approach this transformation of materials with a distinctly conscious mindset. That is to say, artistic processes may exhibit a "deliberate awareness," which contrasts with the more intuitive method of "sympathetic vibration" (Dewey [1925] 1981, 293). In this paper I have highlighted both modes, but prioritized the former, as conceptual art often tends to be "analytic," that is, to rely on "deliberate awareness." Considering emphatically analytic art products, Dewey notes that "[a]t their worst, these products are 'scien-

tific' rather than artistic; technical exercises, sterile and of a new kind of pedantry" (*ibid.*). With this statement in mind, I present means for overcoming such pitfalls in the context of conceptual art. In the end, the pragmatist approach to conceptual art that I put forward establishes a path towards the realization of the aesthetic potential of these analytically constituted art productions. As Dewey also proclaims: "At their best, they assist in ushering in new modes of art and by education of the organs of perception in new modes of consummatory objects; they enlarge and enrich the world of human vision" (*ibid.*).

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