

Conceptual art, evaluative experience and second nature

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What can be said of conceptual artworks is that their adequate appreciation does not turn on the exact nature of their perceptible properties, but rather on the nature of the ideas or conceptions they convey. That is, at least, what Peter Goldie and Elizabeth Schellekens, claim about conceptual art and what they call the idea idea: 'The idea idea [...] is that conceptual art works with ideas, or with concepts, as the medium [of appreciation], and not with shapes, colours, or materials. This, we think, is what marks out conceptual art as *radically* different from traditional art.' (Goldie & Schellekens 2010, p. 60) According to Goldie & Schellekens (G&S), while the meaning of traditional visual art is embodied in its form (as its *medium*, which becomes inseparable from its meaning), conceptual art uses its form only as a *means* to its meaning (ibid., pp. 23–24, 60–61, 69–70, 92–93).

As far as I know, the means/medium distinction was introduced in relation to conceptual art by Robert Hopkins in his essay 'Speaking Through Silence: Conceptual Art and Conversational Implicature'.¹ He describes what he means by 'medium of appreciation' thus:

Where sense experience is the medium of our appreciation, that experience is altered by our awareness of the feature we appreciate. When, for example, I appreciate the muscularity of Caravaggio's style, my awareness of that feature is part of what constitutes my experience of his work: had I not been aware of it, my experience would have had a different phenomenology. In contrast, when sense experience merely provides a means of access to the work's nature, that nature, via my awareness of it, does not permeate the experience itself. (Hopkins 2007, pp. 56–57)

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¹ Unlike G&S, he does not identify medium/means with properties of an artwork, but with an experience of those, but not much hinges on the difference, not for my purposes anyway.

According to Hopkins, traditional art is appreciated in sense experience, whereas conceptual art, if it provides any sense experience at all, uses its perceptible 'base properties' only as a means to its appreciation. In traditional art, the actual experience of the artwork is constitutive of the value and meaning of it, it *mediates* it, whereas the experience of conceptual artworks' perceptible properties is not constitutive of their meaning. This is so, because constitutive features of a conceptual work are determined already by their intellectual conception. The particular aspects of the execution of the idea are irrelevant to its meaning (they are just *means* to it, *ibid.*, p. 59).

Although in their recent book, G&S present a philosophical defence of conceptual art as a legitimate art practice with its own merits, in the concluding chapter called 'What's Left Once Aesthetic Appreciation Has Gone?', they acknowledge that conceptual art, despite its achievements, 'is not wholly successful *as art*' (Goldie and Schellekens 2010, p. 137, emphasis in the original; significantly, these are the very last words of the book). In 'good traditional art' we find its content presented to us in such a way that we experience it as imbued with intrinsic meaning that is felt as something relevant not only to our individual condition, but to a condition shared or potentially shareable by our peers across time and space. What art can give us is '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"' (*ibid.*, p.134). 'Art, then, presents to us human life and the world in which we live in this special way – as "second nature"' (*ibid.*, p. 133) For Goldie & Schellekens second nature, i.e. world presented as imbued with meaning that relates to our ways of life, cannot be properly conveyed if procedures generally associated with conceptual art are applied, since these do not use perceptible means as media of appreciation. In the following, I will try to convince you that whatever (if any) good reasons we might have to deny conceptual art the status of a fully successful art, it cannot be that it fails as art because it cannot generally convey the world as second nature *due to* its divorcing artistic means from the medium of appreciation.

But what exactly is meant by second nature here? Goldie and Schellekens borrow the term from Anthony Savile's recent article 'Imagination and Aesthetic Value' (2006). In it, Savile points to a passage in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, where Kant uses the term *andere Natur* to explain human aesthetic creativity. Kant credits imagination with the ability to transform material acquired through perceptual experience into something (an aesthetic idea) that 'steps beyond nature' ('*was die Natur übertrifft*'), thus becoming a second nature (Kant 2000, pp.192; AA 5:314). For him, aesthetic ideas are like second nature in that they consist of the material that first nature provides imagination with, only they are filled with meaning that first nature necessarily lacks, i.e. meaning that has as its source the supersensible realm of reason. For Kant, art is the material realization of aesthetic ideas and thus, as Savile suggests, is the embodiment of second nature. Moving beyond Kant, Savile thinks that to present our environment and our lives as 'naturally' endowed with intrinsic and perceivable significance is one of

the essential functions of art that meets a basic psychological need, a drive to constitute whole objects (Savile 2006, pp. 252, 256).² And what's more, when artworks understood as 'images of significance' are internalized (something again facilitated by the pleasurable nature of the experience), they 'enable us better to lead our lives'. Any practice that aspires to be classified as art and does not at the same time aspire to convey the world as replete with meaning, as a meaningful whole is not art proper. Art proper, however, can exist and have its practical impact on our lives only if we have grown responsive to it. As Savile realizes, in order to appreciate the external second nature mediated by artworks, we must have already acquired an inner second nature, a confidence about our ability to appreciate the richness of meaning presented in aesthetic experience. This confidence is in turn boosted by our aesthetic experiences: 'the sense of self [...] could hardly find sustenance except in relation to a well-internalized, rich second nature, as fostered by a cultivated openness to beauty' (ibid., p. 225). According to Savile, there are therefore two closely interconnected goals art should aim at: a) make us see the world around us as a meaningful whole, a second, humanized nature, and b) bolster a sense of self-confidence in us as its inhabitants, an inner second nature without which we could not appreciate the richness of meaning presented by art in the first place. Notice that the content artworks actually convey is in the end less important than *that* and *how* it gets across to us. The metaphysical significance of art is that it makes us palpably feel what could not be expressed otherwise, that there is no abyss between us, our peers and our world.

What we find stated in Savile's philosophical arguments is a pattern recently described by Sebastian Gardner as 'philosophical aestheticism'. Gardner calls by this name a strategy developed early on in reaction to Kant's transcendental philosophy and which ascribes a 'philosophically cognitive' contribution to aesthetic phenomena. These are supposed to mediate philosophical cognition, which philosophy as a discursive thought is unable to attain:

Making Aestheticism plausible involves a complex hermeneutical movement in which philosophical reason, dissatisfied with itself, looks outside to discover elements with the aid of which it can restore itself to equilibrium, and reaches a point where it recognizes that what it needs, but cannot generate from its own discursive resources, is presented in art and affect. (Gardner 2007, p. 83)

Thus, for example, another British philosopher, David Bell, in an aestheticist vein, suggests that pure reflective judgement of taste, which is subjective and yet universal, provides us with a basic confidence that the phenomenal world is open to our cognitive and practical capacities without the involvement of a subsumption under concepts.³ Without this *a priori* confidence, which is not known, but felt,

² This drive is one of the two psychic drives art is generally supposed to meet (the other being the reparative drive). Savile is developing a suggestion made by Richard Wollheim (1980, pp. 121–124). What exactly is the significance art makes us sensitive to, is a difficult question, but it seems to have a lot to do with our feeling at home in the world, more on that below.

³ Bell uses the example of experiencing a Jackson Pollock.

'the understanding could not find itself in [nature]' (Kant 2000, 5:193), which Bell renders: 'without which the understanding could not feel at home in nature' and comments:

That one should spontaneously 'feel at home in nature' is a necessary, though, indeed, subjective condition of the possibility of objective knowledge; for it is only if I feel at home in this sense that I come into contact with phenomena that are not, so to speak, opaque or problematic for me [...]. That the regressive infinity of judgements on judgements, of rules for the following of rules, can be stopped, without thereby making a mystery of my ability to judge at all, is due to the fact that at a certain point I am directly aware of an intrinsic coherence, or unity, or significance in my experience. (Bell 1987, p. 239)

This unity or significance of my experience cannot be constructed by philosophical means, it is something to be experienced.

Though Savile does not quote John McDowell, who reintroduced the concept of second nature into philosophy, he has not been immune to McDowell's influence. In (2000), Savile drew heavily upon a version of value realism (or anti-anti-realism) developed by McDowell and his Oxford colleague, David Wiggins, in the 1980s. McDowell's and Wiggins's assumption was that if we take the phenomenal character of non-deliberative evaluations (i.e. such in which our value ascriptions seem to be non-volitional responses to circumstances), of which aesthetic judgements are prime examples, seriously enough, we will stop worrying about how our value ascriptions relate to the objects they are supposed to describe. According to McDowell and Wiggins, epistemology of value must be freed from the Humean way of seeing values as mere subjective projections onto the canvas of first nature. Their position may be described as both naturalist and realist because it is only *natural* in their view for us as human beings to take our common sense ascriptions of value to the objects of experience as matters of fact, as descriptions of a *real* state of things.⁴

Although most of the debate about value realism has been centred on the example of moral evaluations, Wiggins and McDowell independently singled out aesthetic values as particularly illuminating (Wiggins 1998a, 155; McDowell 1998, 117). They understood aesthetic judgements as belonging to the same group as moral evaluations in being both cognitive – in the sense of revelatory about the state of the world, immediate – in the sense of there being no gap between what we experience and what is real, and involuntary – to be understood as 'excluding any exercise of conscious deliberation'.⁵ The attractiveness of aesthetic valuation as an exemplary case in point rests on its being free from the suspicion that any volition accompanies it; it is exemplary in its immediate revelatory potential conveyed through mere feeling, as is apparent in the way McDowell (1998, p. 130)

⁴ For a similar position from roughly the same period see Strawson 1985.

⁵ On the distinction between evaluations and deliberative judgements see Wiggins 1998b, p. 95.

formulates the crucial question (for him) about aesthetic value: 'How can a mere *feeling* constitute an experience in which the world reveals itself?'

McDowell introduces the term 'second nature' in order to remind philosophers that responsiveness to reasons is part of nature, while remaining *sui generis*, autonomous. Philosophy must not be involved in constructing a bridge between mind and world, it must only point out that there is no abyss between them and therefore no need for any construction works. The only reason why philosophers feel uneasy about the claim that the source of our spontaneity is natural is that they think a 'default position' to explain nature is that of natural science. If we locate a position that would accommodate spontaneity in nature, there will be no uneasiness, no anxiety, and that will make this position default and the burden of proof will be on the side of scientific naturalism (McDowell 2007, pp. 396–397).

This argument is in line with his earlier proposal that the default understanding of our evaluative experience should be based on its phenomenology, and aesthetic valuation has been singled out by McDowell as an experience, in which the world manifestly reveals itself through mere feeling. In the last lecture of *Mind and World*, McDowell finds affinity with Karl Marx's vision, formulated in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*:

Marx says man is unique in producing "according to the laws of beauty", and the point he is making in that remark shows up also here, in a distinctive feature of our consciousness. Our very experience, in the aspect of its nature that constitutes it as experience of the world, partakes of a salient condition of art, its freedom from the need to be useful.' (McDowell 1996, 119)⁶

To be a human being is to be someone for whom her natural environment constitutes a world, a human second nature, whereas non-rational creatures only satisfy their existential needs and make use of the possibilities that the environment arbitrarily offers. To be free from these needs and pressures, is – among other things – the condition of art as aesthetic practice. Creating and experiencing art is conditioned by and also revelatory of a shared human second nature. This second nature forms a basis for the confidence of adjudicating subjects that their evaluations do justice to reality. It is not a confidence about getting their judgements always right, nor a confidence that their evaluative outlooks converge more and more, but rather a confidence that there *can* be a true evaluation of reality based solely on feeling.

I hope I have shed some light on the philosophical context behind G&S's denial to ascribe to conceptual art the status of a full-fledged art practice. The ability of art to reveal and make apparent our shared second nature is something conceptual art cannot achieve because by divorcing medium of appreciation from perceptible

⁶ McDowell refers to the following passage in the *Manuscripts*: 'An animal forms things in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, while man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard of the object. Man therefore also forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty.' (Karl Marx 1988, p. 77)

means it bars itself from mediating 'images of significance'. Let us, for the sake of argument, accept that the divorce of means and medium does capture what is of essence in conceptual art. The reason why G&S would deny that conceptual artworks can be fully successful as art lies in their understanding of what it means to reveal the world as second nature. The philosophical commitments they share with Savile divert them from entertaining the option that revealing the world as second nature does not have to amount only to making the commonality of feeling and evaluative attitudes palpable through embodiment of meaning, but also to bringing to our attention and questioning the various habitual practices and presuppositions that make up our second nature as historically and socially embedded human beings. They implicitly ascribe to art the role of boosting our 'transcendental self-confidence' so to speak, but leave out the important ability of art, at least of modernist art, to awaken us to and question the conditions and motivations of living in and interacting with and within a human environment. G&S do recognize that art can make us see 'that not only the beautiful things in life, but also the terrible (the violence, suffering, war and so on), are things to which we respond in ways that we can and do share with others' (G&S 2009, p. 133), but that is still a long stretch from acknowledging that art can engage us in imaginatively exploring these very responses we share. Of course, this also presupposes a shared sensibility which such art appeals to, but the effect is one of disenchantment rather than of 'partial re-enchantment' (to use McDowell's phrase).

Consider Vito Acconci's 1969 *Following Piece*, which is also discussed on several occasions by G&S. We see four rather low-quality pictures of a man apparently following another and we read a short caption: 'Activity, 23 days, varying durations. Choosing a person at random, in the street, any location, each day. Following him wherever he goes, however long or far he travels. (The activity ends when he enters a private place – his home, office etc.)' We also learn from the documentation provided that the artist sent reports of each of his followings to members of the art world. There is no question of any skill required for taking the pictures or indeed carrying out the actions themselves, and consequently there is no question of contemplating the style and technique applied. What is relevant for the appreciation is to get a grasp of the plan for a series of actions supposedly carried out that we gain access to by means of the photograph, the caption and the documentation the artist made available. If it is to succeed as art, according to G&S, it will have shed light on some aspects of our shared responses and habits constituting our second nature. My modest point is that there is no reason why this piece could not achieve just that (although in a different sense than G&S envisaged). If it succeeds as art, it will make you in a striking way aware of or set you thinking about things you have already internalized as your second nature: what are the dividing lines between what is private and what is public, what is the nature of your everyday rituals that make up large parts of your urban lives, etc., and it will do it in an imaginative and striking way. I do not see any reason why the divorce of means and media should fatally prevent conceptual

works from opening our eyes to our shared second nature in a very vivid and plastic way.

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