

**WHAT'S FORM GOT TO DO WITH IT?
A DISCUSSION OF THE ROLE PLAYED BY FORM IN OUR EXPERIENCE OF
ART, VIEWED THROUGH THE LENS OF MODERNIST FORMALISM AND
CONCEPTUAL ART**

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Head of the Department of Philosophy
University of Saskatchewan
9 Campus Drive
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
S7N 5A5
Canada

Abstract

My thesis explores the role played by form in our experience of objects of consciousness as art. In doing so, I look at the concept of form as it was understood by prominent philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, as well as form in Immanuel Kant's aesthetics in *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*. My method is phenomenological and rooted in my experience of making and writing about art, as a student of studio art and of philosophy. To connect philosophical understandings of form to the experience of art in a way reflective of my experience, I show the connection between and influence on art critical understandings of form by philosophical understandings of form. In particular, I focus on Modernist formalism as Clive Bell, Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg articulated it. Modernist formalism played a role in the teaching style and content of art studio classes I attended. The role of form in our experience of art was problematized by Conceptual Art, which movement also deeply impacted the teaching style and content of my studio art classes. The tension I experienced between these two movements in art and its criticism led to my interest in this topic and informed my choice to limit the scope of my investigation to Modernist formalism and Conceptual Art. In particular, I focus on philosophically trained Conceptual Artists such as Adrian Piper and Joseph Kosuth. Changes in the way art was made and understood impacted the understanding of the concept of form not only for art critics, but also for philosophers. I include contemporary philosophical discussions of form by Bernard Freydberg and Rudolphe Gasché to show the movement and interrelatedness between art and philosophy about the concept of form. The conclusion I reach is that form in our experience of art is constructive of that experience if our consciousness of art objects is conceived of as an engaged, rather than disinterested. My rejection of disinterest in favour of engagement is adapted from Arnold Berleant's account of the aesthetic experience. I retain a place for the object as it is given, using H.J. Gadamer's terms "changing" and "unchanging aspects." The object's properties are its unchanging aspects while the shifting contextual ground on which art as an experience is built is the changing aspect. I conclude that form is a way of seeing that requires both of these aspects.

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Introduction

My thesis explores the role played by form in our experience of visual art from my perspective as a student of philosophy and as a visual artist. From my perspective, form brings together two aspects of our experience of art: the role of the viewing subject in the experience of an object as art, an experience which is contextual, and the more general phenomenal experience of an object of consciousness. In art criticism, understandings of the concept of form contribute to the context in which art objects are made, experienced and interpreted. The understanding of the concept of form in art criticism on which I focus in this thesis underpins the formalist theory of art critic Clement Greenberg, who was deeply influenced by Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. I contrast this Modernist formalist concept of form with the anti-formal and anti-aesthetic art made by Conceptual artists in the mid 1960s, a period during which Modernist formalism as an art movement began to lose its appeal to the art critical audience.

From my perspective, an art object's form is what is given to consciousness as its object in our experience of art. The form of an art object is also constructed by our consciousness; form in this sense is given as an act of consciousness. As an act of consciousness, art is conditioned by the life-world of the artist, which includes her understanding of art criticism and the art historical context in which her art practice is situated. The art object does not directly represent an artist's life-world, but rather the object gains meaning through the viewer's life-world. So, we may have an understanding of the context and the set of rules that guided an art object's making, but we cannot move from this understanding to an experience of the artist's life-world or intent. We are left with the unchanging aspects of the art object itself as an object of consciousness and with our experience of the object as art that contains the possibility of meaning.

While examining the role form plays in our experience of art, I look at the impact of the Conceptual art movement on the concept of form, since this movement challenged assumptions made by Modernist formalists in ways that relate directly to our experience of art and to my own understanding of the concept of form. One of the primary assumptions that underpin Modernist formalism is that we may experience art simply with a naked eye. The works of Conceptual artists challenge this assumption because these works are not primarily perceptual. This is to say, conceptual art relies (often very heavily) on some knowledge or understanding on the part of the spectator. Conceptual art, therefore, relies less on our ability to perceive the object and

experience its formal properties than it does on the intelligible context that allows us to experience an installation or exhibit as art. From my perspective, Conceptual art shows us that the viewer plays an active role in forming her experience of an object as that of an object of art. If the viewer plays an active rather than a passive role in this experience, then Conceptual art also shows us something about consciousness and what it is required if we are to see actively, rather than passively through naked eyes. I take the position that consciousness is what Arnold Berleant calls "engaged"¹ and that it is because we actively form our experience of objects of consciousness that we experience art. Form in art, from this perspective, is the form of an object's unchanging aspects as well as the changing aspects that characterize our own life-world.

To make my position clear, I include in the present study a discussion of both the art historical and the philosophical elements of the problem. In chapter one, I first present a historical overview of Modernist formalism and its proponents, followed by a short historical account of Conceptual art as a movement that challenged some of the assumptions that underpinned formalism. I then discuss the ways in which the concept of form as it was used in philosophy influenced the art critical use of the concept of form. Conceptual art's rejection of form demonstrates the impact of formalism on art making, and an analysis of the art produced by Conceptualism shows that form persists as a key element in our experience of Conceptual art despite the fact that its makers (often) deny its presence. My aim, then, is to show that form should not be the sole starting point of our experience of art, nor should it be thought of as the condition that makes the experience of art possible. I wish to show that Modernist formalism failed precisely because it sought to reduce art and our experience of it to form. On the other hand, the theoretical assumptions of Conceptual art reduced our experience of art to that of the idea, embodied by objects, installations and performance. In both cases, reductionism leads to an account of our experience that neglects the complexities of art and the reasons we experience art objects as different from other objects. My intention is to rehabilitate form in art from the damage done by the rigidity and reductionism of Modernist formalism, on the one hand, and by Conceptual art's wholesale rejection of it, on the other.

¹ "[T]he argument of this book rests on such an account of aesthetic experience, and on appreciation as engaged, not disinterested." – Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World*, on pg. 61.

The first chapter is a condensed treatment of form in philosophy and art criticism, showing the ways in which the concept of form in the former influenced theory and practice in the latter. My goal in chapter one is to show the continuity of the philosophical discussion of form from Plato, Aristotle and Kant to the primary assumptions of Modernist formalism and the art that was made during the period generally referred to as Modernism (late 1800s – late 1960s), particularly during Clement Greenberg’s Modernism. I build my own position on accounts of form in Aristotle, Plato and Kant’s work as Rudolphe Gasché, Bernard Freydberg and Theodore Edward Uehling interpret it, focusing on the ways that form has been drawn from a general philosophical context into art criticism, from Modernism to contemporary art. Each of these authors interprets the concept of form in convergent ways, drawing primarily from Kant, in the case of Gasché and Uehling, and from Plato and Aristotle (as well as Kant) in Freydberg’s case.

The importance of Kantian aesthetics to contemporary art is, Gasché argues, due to the fact that Kant was interested in beauty and in providing an account of aesthetic judgment, rather than an account of artistic judgment or beauty of, specifically, art objects. “One may wonder,” Gasché asks, “whether it is not precisely because Kant’s aesthetics is an aesthetics of natural beauty, rather than of artwork, that it is important for the understanding of the fine arts, and particularly of modern and postmodern art, which are the exclusive concern of post-Kantian aesthetics” (Gasché, 2003, p. 3). Gasché’s interpretation of form in his book *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Aesthetics* is informed by a specific reading of the *Critique of Judgement* that is, although not explicitly, connected to the unique theoretical climate of contemporary art. Thus, Gasché’s reading of the *Third Critique* and of the concept of form greatly influenced my own interpretation of form in visual art.

Freydberg’s *Provocative Form in Plato, Kant, Nietzsche (and Others)*, although it ultimately makes a case for the author’s own unique interpretation of form as "provocative," provides an account and interpretation of the meaning of form throughout the history of philosophy. I have restricted my use of Freydberg to the sections on Plato, Aristotle and Kant. He claims at the outset, “This notion of form reflects the experience of striving to know that which is fixed and immutable” (Freydberg, 2000, p. 15), which aligns with my own initial impression of what it is that both art critics and philosophers are after when they talk about form.

Theodore E. Uehling's *The Notion of Form in Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* provides an accessible and coherent account of form that is widely referenced by Kant scholars. The notion of form that Uehling defends is an understanding of the form of a sensible object, about which Uehling writes, "The form of an object of sense is those spatial and temporal relationships exhibited by a synthesized manifold." (Uehling, 1971, p. 58). The notion of objective form is the theoretical foundation of Modernist formalism. My interest in Uehling's account of form in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is the clarity it brings to the close relationship between the art critical notion of objective form and Kantian form. The notion of form as objective underpinned Modernist formalism as an art critical movement. Objective form as a concept played an implicit role in the instruction of art classes I took as a student, in that we were taught that certain rules of design held as objective, not subjective. Modernist formalism also developed from two very Kantian assumptions about art: 1) art is autonomous 2) art is fundamentally aesthetic.² Kantian aesthetics and the concept of form as objective justify the position that art is autonomous from social and political concerns, so that an art object need not represent something to be beautiful. If the beauty of art is not in the scenes it represents, then the disinterested pleasure felt by its viewer is in response to an art object's form.

In chapter two, I shift focus from the historical and theoretical context of form in visual art to our experience of art as an object of consciousness that embodies meaning. As an object of consciousness, art exists as the appearance of a material form. For Kant, the forms of nature could be judged aesthetically because they were not purposive, so our intuitions of natural form were not immediately subsumed by the concepts of the understanding. Objects that are made by a person satisfy a purpose and, as such, are guided by the conceptual understanding of what an object is or should be. To perceive art as though it were nature, so that it is not seen as purposive, one must adopt a disinterested disposition toward the art object. In studio art classes (at least in my own studio drawing classes) students are taught to distance themselves from, or to adopt a disposition of disinterest toward, the object they are drawing. For instance, by viewing an object such as a chair disinterestedly, the artist may see the form – the line and shape – of the object rather than its concept, or how one would expect a chair to appear. I found this technique particularly effective when creating loosely representational work that had an effortless and

² I am drawing from Section III of Noël Carroll's *Art in Three Dimensions*, particularly the discussion in this section called "The Artworld Declares its Independence," on p. 145.

semi-abstracted appearance. The experience of making art while directed by disinterest rather than by an interest in representational accuracy involves the same act of bracketing conceptual associations as the experience of perceiving art disinterestedly.

As a student of philosophy, I was initially drawn to formalism because I experienced the distance between the consciousness of an object and its concept while drawing in the way I was taught during studio art classes. The experience of drawing in this way taught me that, by creating a distance between the object I saw and the concept I would normally associate with it, I could come close to a perceptual experience that felt naked and direct. I have since come to see this distance as less a measure of objectivity than a sort of cultured blindness that is learned and requires the purposive bracketing of specific concerns from one's consciousness. The implications of this realization on form and its place in our experience of art left me pessimistic, if I were to uphold my initial position on form in art. Chapter two is devoted, therefore, to making sense of the relationship between our experience of art and our consciousness of objects, the latter being affected by our conceptual understandings, if true disinterest cannot be achieved.

While exploring perspectives on our experience of art that address form, even if indirectly, yet reject disinterest, I studied (parts of) of H.G. Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, and Arnold Berleant's *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* and *The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*. Gadamer claims an unchanging aspect of any art object persists, meaning "the aesthetic quality of a work of art is based on structural laws and on a level of embodied form and shape that ultimately transcend all the limitations of its historical origin or cultural context" (Gadamer, 1998, p. xxx). Gadamer did, however, leave room for those changing aspects that are determined by context and the viewing subject. In conjunction with Gadamer's account of an aesthetic experience, Arnold Berleant's aesthetics, and his view of consciousness as engaged rather than disinterested, provide a model for understanding form in the experience of art without rejecting the subjectively determined aspects of our experience of an object as art.

In chapter three, I focus on strengthening my case for the position according to which our experience of art can be reduced neither to changing nor to unchanging aspects of the art object. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer claimed that the autonomy of art allowed persons to encounter themselves in the world through the experience of a universal whole rather than the experience of uniformity (Gadamer, 1998, p. 49, 66-68). Yet, Modernist formalists were interested in

achieving uniformity in our experience of art making and viewing. The belief that uniformity could be achieved at all required not only formalism's founding assumptions of art's autonomy and purely aesthetic purpose (Carroll, 2010, p. 145-163), but also required that we be able to perceive objects in isolation from context, knowledge or understanding. Conceptual Art as a movement challenged the assumptions underpinning Modernist formalism by showing that the art object could be dematerialized and thereby essentially reduced to an idea. The dematerialized art object culminated in exhibits that consisted of an empty art gallery such as Yves Klein's 1958 exhibit *Le Vide*, which consisted of an empty gallery, and Art and Language's 1972 *Air Conditioning Show*, which consisted of an empty, air-conditioned gallery³. In such installations the idea that is intended to be taken as art cannot be communicated, and certainly cannot be experienced, in the absence of a contextual frame, which I argue includes the physical space and any of the material aspects that are present during the exhibit.

In chapter three, I discuss in greater depth the Conceptual artists I introduced in the historical overview of chapter one; Joseph Kosuth, Adrian Piper and Sol Le Witt. The challenges posed to formalist assumptions about our experience of art by philosophically trained Conceptual artists like Joseph Kosuth and Adrian Piper are the focus of this chapter and underpin my project as a whole. The Conceptual Art movement is unique as a point of connection between art and philosophy in part because the artists I consider in my thesis were trained philosophers: Adrian Piper received a PhD from Harvard under the supervision of John Rawls,⁴ and Joseph Kosuth studied philosophy at the New School.⁵ By making explicit the challenges posed to formalist assumptions about our experience of art, I am interested primarily in showing that form cannot be so easily dismissed from our experience of even an empty gallery, since form remains encountered through its absence. I also explore the possibility of experiencing an installation through only its theoretical artist's or curatorial statement, then discuss what we can learn from the empty gallery and the absence of form. The connection between form and the absence of

³ A series of photos from Klein's *Le Vide* can be viewed here:

http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/works/works13_us.html

while Art & Language's *Air Conditioning Show* has become difficult to find online (its former home on the Tate's site has had the images stripped - <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/art-language-terry-atkinson-born-1939-michael-baldwin-born-1945-air-conditioning-show--p80069>), an archive of photos from similar empty gallery shows, including one photo of *Air Conditioning Show* can be viewed here: <http://search.it.online.fr/covers/?m=1958>

⁴ <http://adrianpiper.com/biography.shtml>

⁵ <http://www.skny.com/artists/joseph-kosuth/>

form is important to establish if I want to show that form may have any role at all in the experience of art – an experience that can be seen as largely detached from the physical.

Chapter One – Historical Overview

1.1 Modernist Formalism

Modernist art critical formalism developed during the late 19th and early 20th century through the writing of Clive Bell and Roger Fry of the Bloomsbury group, the two primary authors of Modernist formalism. In his influential work *Art*, published in 1914, Bell proposed a theory of art that posited a work's internal structure, which he called "significant form," as the determining ground of any aesthetic judgment of art. An art object such as a painting or sculpture may have either representational content or be entirely abstract, but it must possess significant form if it is to be called art. Bell applied the concept of significant form as a means of establishing the necessary conditions for an ontology of art, as well as developing a theory of aesthetic appreciation and judgment that centered on the idea of significant form. By "significant form," Bell meant; the properties of an art object that do not refer to anything outside the frame, e.g. representational content, authorial intentions, or art historical context. Bell did not bother to elucidate why significant form should differ from mere, or even insignificant, form, nor did he discuss why only art objects contain significant form, since he took this type of form and its necessity to the judgment of art as a self-evident foundation on which he could build his theory. Bell wanted to show that art could be judged objectively if we look only at those properties of a work that are aesthetic and formal. Significant form is the property of an object that can be experienced as art and nothing else: In his book *Since Cezanne*, Bell claimed that, "A rose is not beautiful because it is like something else. Neither is a work of art" (Bell, 1929, p. 40).

Bell's conception of significant form was important to the development of a modernism in visual art insofar as it provided theoretical grounds to justify the appreciation of the "primitive" crafts of Non-European and in most cases colonized peoples, thereby expanding the Western gaze and devaluing popular representational styles of painting. Formalism at this stage was not only a theory of art but also a social and political reaction against the ideal of inevitable stages of progress and colonial hubris.⁶ The Bloomsbury group thought that the visual culture of its time, which was exemplified by the work of representational painters like William Powell Frith, was stagnant and pandered to an audience that wanted art objects to reflect its own vision

⁶ Bloomsbury formalism was taken "up ... to neutralize two contemporary poisons: Germanic notions of historical progress and Enlightenment denigrations of "the savage" (Jones, 2005, p. 129).

of civilization. The art made by non-Western cultures was, at this time, an artifact to be studied scientifically but not appreciated aesthetically because, to the Western eye, such art lacked the sort of representational sophistication that was required by a culture that had evolved beyond making decorative and utilitarian objects. By seeking what was essential to the aesthetic value of art in compositional structure and form, rather than in the meaningful and representational content of a work, the Bloomsbury formalists transcended the politics of representation, supplanting it with a visual plane on which all cultures and all ways of seeing could be unified.

While Bell's account of formalism was primarily ontological, Roger Fry's interpretation of formalism in *Vision and Design* focused on the response of the viewer to art objects, and the experience of making art. Fry was a well-trained, prolific and accomplished painter, as well as an author and art critic. Fry's interpretation of formalism is less a theory of art that requires significant form, than it is an analysis of consciousness and perception. Fry posits a distinction between two ways of seeing; the actual and imaginary. The former demands a set of responsive actions, the carrying out of which enables our survival, while the latter creates a distance between an event and the responsive action in that event we envision ourselves taking. The distance between an event and our imagined act leads us to "that disinterested intensity of contemplation" (Fry, 1961, p. 32), which is characteristic of both the act of making and of viewing art. That the intensity of contemplation in the imaginary way of seeing is characteristic of our experience of art means, Fry claimed, "Art, then, is an expression and a stimulus of this imaginative life, which is separated from actual life by the absence of responsive action" (Fry, 1961, p. 26). As an artist, Fry was not a formalist who aimed to produce an objective, significant form but to stimulate in the audience the imaginative life and disinterested contemplation that accompanies a separation from the actual.

Fry appears, at this point, to have little in common with Bell at all. This appearance is lost past the starting point of each version of Bloomsbury formalism. Fry moves toward the same theory of aesthetic judgment as Bell, because he relies on similar assumptions about the experience of art. Both Fry and Bell, although not entirely dismissive of representational content, were dismissive of representational norms, about which Fry claimed, "So long as representation was regarded as the end of art, the skill of the artist and his proficiency in this particular feat of representation was regarded with an admiration which was in fact mainly non-aesthetic" (Fry, 1961, p. 20). If the true aesthetic properties of art objects were to become apparent, art must be

liberated from social norms governing its representational content. Once liberated, art objects could become autonomous rather than serving communicative, or representational, ends. Autonomous art would not engage the actual but rather the imaginary, so that the person making or viewing art would be drawn into the contemplative intensity of the piece. The formalist movement in which Fry and Bell participated had, claimed Fry, “render[ed] the artist intensely conscious of the aesthetic unity of the work of art, but singularly naïve and simple as regards other considerations” (Fry, 1961, p. 20). By "other considerations," Fry meant the representational content of an art object. The problem of mistaking naïveté for disinterested contemplation is that the Bloomsbury group was, then, blind to its own ethnocentrism,⁷ which contributed to the Bloomsbury formalists’ failure to cope with later challenges to their theory of art.

After Bell and Fry, influential art critic Clement Greenberg developed a more theoretically sophisticated and philosophically informed formalist theory of art, influenced by Marxism and Kantian aesthetics, which I refer to throughout as Modernist formalism. Greenberg was an active art critic in New York during the mid 1900s and was one of the first critics to take the work of Jackson Pollock seriously. Through his critical engagement with the artistic avant-garde of his time, he effectively curated Modernist painting as an art movement. While the Bloomsbury group reacted against the notion that history had a set, linear path guided by progress, Greenberg embraced this notion, perhaps due to the influence of Marxism on his writing. Bell’s formalism, although likewise perfectionist and reductionist, did not declare itself the end of art history, while this tone is evident in the later, modernist version championed by Greenberg. Greenberg also proposed the idea of medium specificity,⁸ which stated that each

⁷ The Bloomsbury formalists championed African sculpture for the reasons I claim, but they did not succeed in neutralizing what Caroline Jones referred to as the “two contemporary poisons,” one of which is the notion of progress by which some civilizations may be considered more advanced than others (Jones, 2006, p. 127-144). The bizarre reverence of Bell’s essay “Negro Sculpture” reveals the core of his beliefs about non-Western art. In this essay, Bell moves from extolling the artistic virtues of African sculpture, as “so rich in artistic qualities that it is entitled to a place beside (“the capital achievements of the greatest schools” of fine art) (Bell, 1929, p. 115), to declaring that “The savage gift is precarious because it is unconscious,” and, further: “At the root of this artistic self-consciousness lies the defect which accounts for the essential inferiority of Negro to the very greatest art. Savages lack self-consciousness and the critical sense because they lack intelligence. And because they lack intelligence they are incapable of profound conceptions. Beauty, taste, quality, and skill, all are here; but profundity of vision is not. And because they cannot grasp complicated ideas they fail generally to create organic wholes. ... Also, they lack originality.” (Bell, 1929, p. 116-117)

⁸ In *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (Greenberg, *The Partisan Review*, 1939) Greenberg writes that abstraction in visual art is the result of medium specificity: “In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft.”

artistic medium must become internally critical of its own use. This is to say that a work rendered in any particular medium must refer to only itself. A painting must only be about paint. For Greenberg, the final goal of art was to become self-critical and inward looking; to remove its dependence on the outside world and become a self-perpetuating creator of visual culture that need be neither supported by a moneyed elite nor consumed by an uninitiated public.⁹

As a philosophically informed critique of the value and ontological status of art, Modernist formalism is open to two criticisms that Greenberg did not adequately address and that relate to my project as a whole. First, Greenberg applied Modernist formalism as a theoretical guide to the production of art and to the process of identifying the formal properties of art objects, on the assumption that only the formal properties of an object can be experienced as art. Such an experience would be uniform, which is a requirement that Greenberg adapted from Kant's concept of *sensus communis*, and the experience should be objective. To achieve uniformity, a subject's apprehension of an art object must be the pure perception of its formal properties, with no consideration given to any peripheral concerns such as context or representational content. Grounding the judgment of art in objective form, while assuming the purity of perception, does not allow for difference in taste, since this would amount to a subject's having either perceived a different object, or the same object incorrectly. This is a simplistic and reductive notion of judgment and the role played by perception in the apprehension of art objects. The reductionist notion of form gained a foothold in art criticism through the work of formalist critics and the art associated with it. From my perspective, Greenberg abstracted the notion of an objective form and allowed it to be representative of something pure, both in production and perception, which affirmed the purity of an artist's vision, while steadfastly avoiding any examination of the validity of formalism's assumptions with respect to the experience of art.

A second problem is that the extremes demanded by formalist theory, as the manifesto of Modernism, are identified closest with abstract expressionist painting. Ironically, the art that submitted to these demands can be understood as the product of social and historical forces that

⁹ "Retiring from the public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. "Art for art's sake" and "pure poetry" appear, and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague" (Greenberg, 1939, p. 3).

allowed and encouraged formalists to pursue Modernist formalism to its logical conclusion. A gentler interpretation of modernist formalism attempted to show that, if art is autonomous and fundamentally aesthetic, and the experience of the aesthetic is not entirely subjective, then our experience of art must be in some sense universal because it would be – if not entirely, at least primarily – the objective experience of a universally apprehensible form. Form in a less extreme and more flexible Modernist formalism might have provided a means of understanding our experience of art as an experience¹⁰ of its object, not by strictly identifying the experience of art with the object's form, but by recognizing the role of form as universalizing and as tied to the irreducibility of art to its concept.

The two problems I have introduced are grounded in the fundamental assumptions of Modernist formalism: first, art is autonomous and, second, art is fundamentally aesthetic (Carroll 2010, p. 145-163). Both assumptions are required by Greenbergian formalism since art that is not kitsch is art that is free from market forces and cannot be easily subsumed by interests that are not aesthetic. Art that is good is, therefore, autonomous from its social and historical conditions and, because of this freedom, fundamentally aesthetic. The contemporary and historical viewer should apprehend the same form and experience the work uniformly if these two conditions are met. The uniformity of experience is, however, not of the formal properties, many of which require knowledge of composition to see at all. The art that Greenberg championed was no more autonomous than any of its representational predecessors. The abstracted pure form of art objects, e.g. abstract expressionist paintings, relies on a purity of vision that is, in actuality rather than theory, neither simplistic nor reductive, but is tied to a hierarchy of cultural considerations. Visual purity, as a formalist concept, depends on knowledge of what is and is not kitsch or avant-garde. It is attached not only to perception, but to knowledge and understanding.

Art's autonomy from market, social, and other contextual concerns, draws an implicit equivocation between a sort of Platonic Form and the Avant-garde art object, as representing nothing but itself and existing, therefore, as a copy of nothing. The problem of Bloomsbury formalism's blind ethnocentrism is present in a more sophisticated package in Greenbergian formalism. Greenberg assumed that the autonomy of an art object from concerns of intent, context, and content, left it pure and able to exist as a medium specific and internally self-critical

¹⁰ “By excluding nothing on principle, by adopting no pre-determined limits, any thing or any situation may become an occasion for aesthetic experience. ... Universality, however, does not imply uniformity.” (Berleant, 2010, p. 46)

whole. The self-referential purity of autonomous art meant that it had shaken the mimetic curse and become the form of which all representational art had been but a copy. The mistake in this rested, as Plato would have seen, in the assumption that purity of this type can exist in an object. Greenberg's autonomy of art was not the autonomy or purity of the art object, but the autonomy and purity of the critical eye.

1.2 *Conceptual Art*

Conceptual art as a movement gained momentum in the 1960s,¹¹ and produced largely anti-aesthetic and anti-formal art. Conceptual art can be read as reacting against the restrictions which Modernist formalist art critics and practitioners placed on making and experiencing art. Art theorist Caroline Jones (2005, p. 305) claims "Artist-writers emerging in the mid-1960s cut their teeth on Greenbergian formalism quite literally, if only to surface its conundrums." These artists included, as Jones puts it, "an entire "post-*Art and Culture*" [a collection of Greenberg's essays] generation that put Greenberg's ideas to the test" and practiced a "maddeningly logical pursuit of Greenberg's systemic and structural modernism [that] had the ultimate effect of radically undermining his tyranny of the eye." The tyranny of the Modernist formalist's eye requires that art be fundamentally aesthetic and autonomous of any consideration beyond what is perceived. Conceptual art demonstrated, through our experience of art, the necessity of the idea to our experience of an object as art. By revealing that the formalist eye was in fact theoretically informed rather than pure, artists of this generation exposed both the limits placed on the experience of art by constraints of medium specificity and gallery space, and the indefensibility of the formalist assumption of perceptual purity. As both a critical and productive art movement, Conceptual art put forward two primary, and anti-formalist, assumptions: first, art as a concept is fundamentally tied to its social and historical conditions, and, second, the relevant properties of art as an object are not aesthetic.¹² Alexander Alberro, in the introduction to *Art after Conceptual art* (2006, p. 14), claimed "Conceptualism was pivotal in breaking art from the constraints of self-containment ... [which] allowed art to intersect with an expanded range of social life." Conceptual art pushed against definitions of art, its value and judgment, and its relationship with art criticism and philosophy. Peter Osborne said Conceptual art as a movement:

¹¹ Marcel Duchamp can be credited with having created the first piece of Conceptual art with *Fountain* in 1917, Conceptual art as a movement did not truly begin till much later.

¹² These are assumptions that I am drawing from the work, written and otherwise, of Conceptual artists Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt and Adrian Piper.

“is not just another particular kind of art, in the sense of a further specification of an existing genus, but an attempt at a fundamental redefinition of art as such, a transformation in the relationship of sensuousness to conceptuality within the ontology of the artwork which challenges its definition as the object of a specifically ‘aesthetic’ (that is, ‘non-conceptual’) or quintessentially ‘visual’ experience” (Osborne in Newman and Bird, 1999, p. 48).

If the aesthetic properties and the conceptual content of an art object are mutually exclusive, and the aesthetic properties of art are sensible properties of the object, then Conceptual art, at its most extreme, need no longer be a physical object at all without surrendering its status as art (with only conceptual content). The project to reject the aesthetic properties of art, if those properties are identical to the object that allows us a “quintessentially ‘visual’ experience,” must conclude with dematerialization of art, for Conceptual art as a movement to have reached its logical conclusion. If this conclusion can be reached, Conceptual art will have shown that any assumptions made about our experience of art as perceptual cannot be supported. However, from my perspective, the impact of Conceptual art has been not the substantiation of anti-aesthetic, anti-formal and immaterial art, but rather it has made possible a form of rematerialized art, represented by practices that expand art as a human endeavour beyond its sanctioned gallery space and modes of production. As rematerialized, the form of an art object becomes located in the distance between the object’s unchanging aspects and those changing and contextual aspects that are brought to the experience of art by us. In addition to expanding the practice of art beyond its Modernist boundaries, Conceptual artists attempted to make use of their philosophical understanding of and, in several cases, formal training in philosophy as an artistic medium of sorts.

Conceptual artist and writer Joseph Kosuth studied philosophy and was influenced by the work of A.J. Ayer. Kosuth uses language, as the raw material of his ideas, to make art. In writing about art, Kosuth advocated an extreme dematerialization of the art object, to reveal more completely the concept that is the art. He claimed, as quoted by Osborne (in Newman and Bird, 1999, p. 56), “All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.” I interpret Kosuth to mean that we do not experience art as an object of perception but as the intelligible form of an idea that we understand to be subsumed under the concept of art. I do not see art as either perceptual or conceptual. From my perspective, Kosuth is right

about our experience of art as conceptual only if the perceptual aspects of his work are also considered valuable, indeed essential to his practice.

From my perspective, taking into consideration the perspectives of Modernist formalism, Conceptual art and my own art training, art is a human endeavour, the making of which requires us to exercise our full range of human ability; the manipulation of material in response to a sense that we have of its possible shape, a reflective awareness of one's self and one's place in the world and how this may be communicated; art allows us the ability to realize that we can have a subjective experience of an object. An art object is, however, apprehended as such only because we accept that there is a relationship between the material object, and, as Picasso claimed, the idea that art exists as "a living creature, undergoing the changes that daily life imposes upon us," and is a creature that "lives only through him who looks at it."¹³ The life of an art object requires a subject for whom it exists as an object that is about something just as the experience of art requires both the perceptual and contextual aspects.

Kosuth's installations are an example of Conceptual art as a reaction to Modernist formalism. Appreciation of an installation by Kosuth, such as the *One and Three*¹⁴ series, requires not a pure and formal, but a philosophically informed eye. The idea and the language associated with its communication are, in a narrow sense, identical to both the mode of production and end product of Kosuth's work. As anti-formal and anti-aesthetic, the success of Kosuth's art is its ability to communicate an idea. Since the majority of his installations can be literally read, they could hardly fail to communicate unless the viewer is not literate in the language used. It remains the case, however, that Kosuth's austere installations are objects of perception and open to experience in the absence of the idea he intends that they show. From my perspective, the mobility of thought in art making does not lead determinately from a concept to an art object for the artist. In the making of art, thought and material become fused: The form of an art object is the skeletal structure of its experience by others, in conjunction with the meaning that is part of a picture's life through a viewer's subjective intervention. The idea, as intended by

¹³ "The picture is not thought out and determined beforehand; rather while it is being made it follows the mobility of thought. Finished, it changes further, according to the condition of him who looks at it. A picture lives its life like a living creature, undergoing the changes that daily life imposes upon us. That is natural, since a picture lives only through him who looks at it" - Pablo Picasso (Berleant, 1970, p. 97).

¹⁴ *One and Three Chairs* by Joseph Kosuth, 1965, can be seen here: http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3228&page_number=1&template_id=1&sort_order=1

the artist, cannot be communicated as a determinate concept to the viewer, nor need it be for the experience of Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* to be one of art.

Performance artist Adrian Piper became interested in Conceptual art during the late 1960's under the tutelage of Sol LeWitt.¹⁵ In addition to learning from LeWitt, Piper's interest in thought, ideas, and the conceptual side of her art practice led her to study philosophy. She became a professional philosopher in 1981, after earning a PhD from Harvard, supervised by John Rawls.¹⁶ As her philosophical interests developed and eventually became the focus of her work, her practise of making art ceased to be consumed by a vision of Conceptual art as a means of communicating an idea and she began to use art as a means of critically engaging audiences in experiences of racial identity and social hierarchy using a variety of media.¹⁷ Piper's Conceptual art was not bound by the same austere and ideological constraints as the work of Kosuth and other linguistic artists. Piper's work illustrates a way through the dogmatism of making art dictated by theoretical manifestos. As Peter Osborne points out, in Piper's "LeWittian strand of Conceptualism, it is the infinite plurality of media that the idea of Conceptual art opens up which is the point, not the exploration of the idea itself, directly, as art."¹⁸ The starting point of experience in Piper's work, although the ideas it embodies are integral to our understanding of it's meaning, is the materiality of the work itself. Even in the case of her performance pieces,¹⁹ Piper's work, in its use of visual points of entry and a plurality of media, goes beyond what would otherwise be the trivial idea that all real objects have form. Her work showed that our experience of art is bound to form in ways that cannot be undone by isolating the concept, but can be deepened by the inclusion and direct address of concept and meaning in the making of form.

¹⁵ www.adrianpiper.com/art/sol.shtml

¹⁶ www.adrianpiper.com/biography.shtml

¹⁷ "Adrian Piper, a staunch defender of an inclusive LeWittian Conceptualism, not only went on to study analytic philosophy, but became a professional philosopher, while continuing her career as an artist. ... For while she used (and continues to use) her philosophical work in her art – often making work directly about her philosophical reflections – her philosophical interests are not in the concept of art itself, but in the broader metaphysical notions of space, time and selfhood, the experience of which her art explores." (Osborne in Newman and Bird, 1999, p. 54-55)

¹⁸ Osborne in Newman and Bird, 1999, 54-55

¹⁹ Image of *Catalysis IV* in which Piper appeared in public with a wet towel stuffed in her mouth.
<http://www.artperformance.org/article-30223190.html>

Piper's mentor, Sol LeWitt,²⁰ rejected language as the starting point of our experience of art. LeWitt's approach to making art was to move beyond the material or linguistic confines of the known to bring a different order of thinking and being to light:

“For LeWitt, ... art was a privileged means of access to this other order of facts which cannot be accessed directly in the same way. This explains the limited role attributed by the text (Paragraphs on Conceptual art) to philosophy: "Conceptual art doesn't really have much to do with mathematics, philosophy or any other mental discipline ... The philosophy of the work is implicit in the work and is not an illustration of any system of philosophy"” (Osborne in Newman and Bird, 1999, p. 53).

By the implicit "philosophy of the work," LeWitt is referring to the structure he called an art object's "grammar"²¹ and Carroll calls an art object's (not explicitly material) form²². In *Paragraphs*, LeWitt claims, “The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless.”²³ LeWitt's assertion that Conceptual art is intuitive, not theoretical, and purposeless, sounds resoundingly Kantian and reveals a perspective on Conceptual art that is not entirely at odds with the Modernist formalist account of our experience of art. The similarity between a Conceptual artist like LeWitt and a Modernist formalist (Kosuth and friends are easier to bracket off from the modernists), stems from, I believe, the assumption of art as autonomous. In Conceptual art, as Osborne points out, of the “two elements hitherto conjoined in the founding conflation of formalist Modernism: aestheticism and autonomy,” the aestheticism is rejected while autonomy is retained (Osborne in Newman and Bird, 1999, p. 57).

In our experience of Conceptual art, the distance between the art object and the viewer is complicated because, as Picasso pointed out, the picture lives through the eyes of a viewing subject, yet cannot be viewed unless it exists as an object of consciousness. In the experience of Conceptual art, the distinction between art as it is experienced and art as an object is collapsed,

²⁰ Sol LeWitt passed away in 2007. He still has an active artist's page, including exhibition photos, here: <http://www.lissongallery.com/#!/artists/sol-lewitt/works/>

²¹ “When an artist uses a multiple modular method he usually chooses a simple and readily available form. The form itself is of very limited importance; it becomes the grammar for the total work. In fact, it is best that the basic unit be deliberately uninteresting so that it may more easily become an intrinsic part of the entire work. Using complex basic forms only disrupts the unity of the whole. Using a simple form repeatedly narrows the field of the work and concentrates the intensity to the arrangement of the form. This arrangement becomes the end while the form becomes the means.” LeWitt, Sol. *Paragraphs on Conceptual art*, Art Forum, June, 1967.

²² An art object's form is the “ensemble of choices intended to realize the point or purpose of an artwork” (Carroll, Ed. Kieran, p. 78)

²³ LeWitt, Sol. *Paragraphs on Conceptual art*, Art Forum, June, 1967.

not because the two are indistinct but because Conceptual art does not require that the concept and the art object bear any necessary relation to one another. There is, then, the object that occupies physical space, and the separate idea that is art. Because its assumptions about our experience of art are reductive, Conceptual art requires no object of consciousness to represent the idea. The work created during this time by artists like Joseph Kosuth and, in particular, Beuys and Piper, was both anti-aesthetic and anti-formal because of either its performative transience and formlessness,²⁴ or because of its banal and dissociative abstraction, which I find is the case in Kosuth's work. From my perspective as an artist, considering art anti-formal and anti-aesthetic can produce two different outcomes in practice: art that is to be experienced as an idea, in the absence of an object, through the artist's statement, or art that is to be experienced as an idea that is represented by any, and perhaps every, possible object. Neither outcome affirms the primary assumption that an idea can be experienced as art, but they do challenge the relevance of the object to art's experience and, therefore, what definition of and role for form we might find in art.

Conceptual art is underpinned by the primary assumption that our experience of art is the experience of an idea. From the perspective of an artist, there is no singular and distinct meaning of what it is to make or experience art as an idea. The idea experienced as art is of the idea as, Sol Le Witt claimed, "a machine that makes the art." The idea is a machine that leads to an art object's completion; it guides the material decisions made by the artist as a sort of logic or, as Le Witt would have said, grammar. This is to say, the idea is a proposition, the truth of which is represented by and realized in the art object's form. From my perspective, we experience art as an idea that is indeterminate and in a state of free play, in Kant's sense. If the experience of art is of both its material and intelligible form, and the idea that is an art object's intelligible form remains indeterminate, then our experience of art cannot be reduced to either its perceptual or conceptual aspects. Arnold Berleant claims, "In speaking of aesthetics, we must therefore go beyond beauty, we must go beyond objects that are pleasing, and focus on our experience of such objects, since only through experience can we grasp them" (Berleant, 2010, p. 30). The experience of conceptual art challenged the two primary assumptions made by Modernist formalists art is fundamentally aesthetic and autonomous) by requiring that we examine the

²⁴ I am thinking specifically of performance pieces such as Adrian Piper's *Catalysis III*, 1970, and Joseph Beuys' *I like America and America likes me*, 1974.

experience itself as contextual rather than examining the formal properties of an art object. The form of an art object, whether we call that object conceptual or, as LeWitt proposed, “perceptual,”²⁵ is what we experience as an object of consciousness that is about something. Modernist formalism’s assumptions include the necessity of an object to the experience of art, which is what LeWitt refers to as perceptual art. To challenge the assumptions made by Modernist formalism is also to challenge the necessity of the object. A fully dematerialized exhibit that could not be experienced perceptually would demonstrate the successful defeat of Modernist formalism’s assumptions. In 1972, the Conceptual art group Art and Language put on the *Air Conditioning Show*, which consisted of an empty, air-conditioned gallery. Prior to this exhibit, in 1958, Yves Klein hosted a similarly empty show, *Le Vide*, about which he claimed: “My paintings are now invisible and I would like to show them in a clear and positive manner.”²⁶ The boundaries of form can hardly be pushed further, without dissolving the gallery space. The space beyond the gallery walls into which this internal space would collapse does not do away with form but, rather, reintroduces it. The empty gallery does not challenge form as a starting point of our experience of art, it challenges the limits of an audience’s ability to comprehend increasingly subtle and specifically contextual signals about the nature and experience of art as it is understood by artists. Although the elimination of the art object to reveal a pure concept as art was not achieved by A&L or Klein, the possibilities of what constituted an art object were expanded by these Conceptual artists’ attempts to do away with the material necessity of art objects. The form of any possible object of experience was expanded beyond that of the object into the form of an art object’s life, as Picasso understood it, so that our experience of art was no longer the disinterested apprehension of visual space within the frame of a work.

In Modernist formalism, the conjoined elements of aestheticism and autonomy confined art to a specific theoretical space that justified the sort of material and compositional constraints associated with Greenberg’s formalism, which is primarily represented by the abstract expressionists. In contrast, autonomy in Conceptual art refers to the artwork’s freedom from the demands of perception and beauty, such that art need not be seen as aesthetic at all. If this logic is pushed to its extreme, Conceptual art is free from the constraints of material object-hood. Conceptual artists who advocate for or assume this kind of autonomy reduce art’s material

²⁵ LeWitt, Sol. *Paragraphs on Conceptual art*, Art Forum, June, 1967.

²⁶ Stich, Sidra. Yves Klein. Hayward Gallery. London, 1994.

existence to an idea. Modernist formalists used the assumption of art's autonomy to bracket the experience of art from the social and historical world that is part of a viewing subject's engaged consciousness. This modernist position according to which an art object has autonomy, material or contextual, is predicated upon a conception of a disinterested viewing subject.²⁷ Autonomy in modernism could leave the matter, as it were, intact, while liberating form from it. Conceptual art went further and dissolved the material presence of an art object which was a barrier to a viewing subject's direct apprehension of the idea. Autonomy in both Modernist formalism and Conceptual art movements reduced our experience of art to either an art object's perceptual or conceptual properties.

After modernism lost its hold on the making of art that was directed by its own theoretical concerns, the breadth of objects that could be actively considered art by artists, art critics and audiences widened. Natural and found objects, for instance, could be looked at as art if they were presented as such. That the collapse of a theory of art, Modernist formalism, could have an impact on the material forms presented as art, which is shown by the work made by Conceptual artists, demonstrates what Picasso called the art object's "life." The life of an art object can only exist in and through the presence of a viewing subject; it is that part of her experience that is conditioned by context and open to the influence of theory. It is my position that the subject who experiences an art object experiences the life of a picture as an inextricable part of the object. Berleant refers to this as "experienced meaning," which he claims "is both complex and indistinct. It harbors feeling, tones, bodily stance, mnemonic resonances, associations, and intimations that cannot be articulated except, in their own ways, by the arts" (Berleant, 2010, p. 30).

As I have shown, Modernist formalism and Conceptual art adopted opposing positions about our experience of art. The assumptions that underpin Conceptual art as a practice imply that art exists as an idea so that the presence of an object in the experience of art becomes essentially irrelevant, while those underpinning Modernist formalism concern the formal properties of an art object, which require the presence of an object that presents these properties. Although both art movements adopted opposing assumptions, both also reduce our experience of

²⁷ "Using precisely that classicist distinction between a normative idea and the ideal of beauty Kant destroys the grounds on which the aesthetics of perfection finds everything's unique, incomparable beauty in its complete presence to the senses. Only now can "art" become an autonomous phenomenon. Its task is no longer to represent the ideals of nature, but to enable man to encounter himself in nature and in the human, historical world" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 49)

art to a single aspect, either the formal properties or the idea. Although both Modernist formalism and Conceptual art provide inspiration for the making of art and inform our experience of it, whether we call ourselves formalists, conceptualists or neither, I take the position that both movements failed as theories of art because they were reductive. I agree with Arnold Berleant that the experience of art is irreducible. He asserts, “Art is not like experience, it is not a reflection or an imitation of real life, but it is that very experience in its most direct, forceful presence” (Berleant, 1970, p. 114). In considering the experience of art irreducible, starting from what Berleant calls an “engaged consciousness” of art objects that embody meaning, the object of consciousness need not be separated into the opposing properties of its physical presence and its meaning or intent. The engaged consciousness allows us to experience an object as art, be it abstract expressionism or Conceptual art, as “that very experience” of the object’s life in which we encounter ourselves.²⁸ We may, then, encounter ourselves in the life of a later Picasso, one of Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings*, or Craig-Martin’s *An Oak Tree*²⁹ without diminishing our experience by reducing it to any single aspect.

In Modernist formalism, form served as a foundational and universalizing source of the theoretical stability in a changing environment. Form became central to the work of modernist art critics following art’s relatively new status as autonomous and worthy of appreciation for its own sake. The loss of control by various authorities (primarily related to church and state) over cultural production and interpretation, a process that occurred gradually and was accompanied by political, economic and technological developments during the Renaissance, the Reformation and the discovery of New World civilizations, and later during the enlightenment and beyond provides a historical parallel background argument for art’s social and political autonomy. The implications of viewing art as detached from its social and political context expanded into the practice of making and criticizing art through the influence of groups like the Bloomsbury

²⁸ As Gadamer claimed, “life objectifies itself in structures of meaning,” the understanding of which consists in “translating the objectifications of life back into” that from which they emerged. Our knowledge of the object cannot consist only of the sensible and entirely disinterested physical form of the object. It must also consist of our ability to experience the unique and particular alignment between that object and the forms of life in which we are engaged generally. The particular expression of that engagement is experienced through the consciousness of an object as art, and as a unique and isolated, singularly occurrent event in time and space. This instance of the particular is not of a sort that is subsumable under a universal concept in the Kantian schema: “the relationship of life to experience is not that of a universal to a particular. Rather, the unity of experience as determined by its intentional content stands in an immediate relationship to the whole, to the totality of life.” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 68) The totality of life includes the mess of intuitions that are conditioned by our intentional relationship with objects that mean something, as is the case with objects that we experience as art.

²⁹ A clear glass of water, sitting on a clear glass shelf, anchored to the wall above a text panel.

formalists, as art became seen as a source of individual experience. As we have seen, the approach adopted by Modernist formalism relied on two central assumptions about art: first, that art was autonomous and, second, that the value of art was fundamentally aesthetic (Carroll, 2010, p. 145-163). Modernist formalism developed out of philosophical theories of form that began with Plato and Aristotle. In an attempt to provide theoretical coherence between art objects and the critics' literary work, art critics harnessed philosophical notions of form, from Aristotle and Plato to the formalism of Kant's aesthetics. Kantian disinterest was used to construct a theory of art that considered little beyond the compositional form of art objects within a specific material and theoretical frame. For art to fulfil its purpose, knowledge was not required of the artist's intentions, nor was there any reason to privilege a work's explicit reference to things or events in the world external to that aesthetic experience. The art object's only aesthetically relevant properties were its formal properties. Philosophical notions of form justified formalism's assumptions and provided a theoretical framework for a normative theory of art production, which contributed to a shift in our view of art.

That theory and criticism could affect our understanding of art's ontological status, among other things, had been brought to light, most obviously, by conversations that followed the introduction of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* to The Society of Independent Artists.³⁰ Modernist formalism, in the hands of Clement Greenberg, demonstrated that a theory could change not only the way we make art, but also the way we see art. The tenets of formalist theory became embedded in the art critical landscape³¹ and provided a map of the visual terrain that consisted of, at the height of formalism's art critical reign, abstract expressionist painting. Formalism and its proponents were, however, ill equipped by their own theoretical commitments to the purity of visual perception to see the impact of theory on visual culture and, subsequently, on the viewing subject's experience of art.

Artists who came after Greenberg considered neither themselves nor their art practice beholden to his theoretical commitments and so took up the less rigid implications of Modernist formalism, such as the impact of theory and an idea on the experience of art by a viewing

³⁰ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3671180/Duchamps-Fountain-The-practical-joke-that-launched-an-artistic-revolution.html>

³¹ I am pointing to the impact had on the institution of art, through the introduction and critical validation of artists like Jackson Pollock, as well as the art that appears to have been made possible, through the articulation of a theory of art by Greenberg that could be applied as a productive manifesto, as well as the impact of introducing philosophy rather than religion as a source of artistic inspiration.

subject. This idea, unintentionally demonstrated by formalism, became a method that emerging Conceptual artists employed in their use of theory as both content and material in the making of art.³² Art Historian John Bowles notes that, “While formalist artists and critics feigned ignorance of such supposedly extra-aesthetic information, Conceptual artists, in their artwork, acknowledged their interest in them. ...” (Bowles, 2011, p. 35-36). The challenges posed by Conceptual art put pressure on the art critical interpretation of form as the only source of an art object’s value, to which all other features of art could be reduced. This pressure collapsed formalism as a viable theoretical guide to making art and made room for the Conceptual art movement.

1.3 Form in Philosophy

The development of formalist theory in art criticism leaned heavily on the philosophical understanding of the concept of form, following the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions. The sections that follow trace the philosophical roots of formalism in modernist art criticism.

1.3.1 Form in Plato and Aristotle

The common usage of the term “form” varies in ways similar to its more nuanced applications. Form is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a “Shape, arrangement of parts (n),”³³ and “To give form or shape to; to put into or reduce to shape; to fashion, mould” (v).³⁴ In common usage, as well as in philosophy and art criticism, form is both a perceptual thing and an idea. In both visual art and the physical world around us, form makes possible one object’s differentiation from another. The philosophical understanding of form can be schematized into two streams; one of which can be attributed to Plato, the other to Aristotle. In each, form can be either the visible shape of an object or it can refer to what makes the appearance of an object possible. In the platonic theory of Forms, objects in the world are imperfect copies of abstract and perfect forms. The Forms allow us to see that variations in the changing material world belong to a single and unchanging concept. Artists, in Plato’s *Republic*,

³² “If the artist carries through his idea and makes it into visible form, then all the steps in the process are of importance. The idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product. All intervening steps –scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed works, models, studies, thoughts, conversations– are of interest. Those that show the thought process of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product.” (Sol Le Witt, *Paragraphs*) http://www.tufts.edu/programs/mma/fah188/sol_lewitt/paragraphs%20on%20conceptual%20art.htm

³³ <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/73421>

³⁴ <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/73422>

Book 10, are unable to access the true forms, and therefore unable to have access to knowledge and truth. They are able only to create copies of imperfect copies: “To make such an image requires no genuine knowledge: no knowledge of the real things of which one makes an image” (Gaut & Lopes, 2005, p. 5).

Modernist formalism, although also a theory concerned with form, was in part underpinned by the assumption that art objects are autonomous of contextual concerns. The assumption that art is autonomous in this way frees it from performing a social or political function such as the communication of civic virtue in historical events. If art is autonomous, it is not mimetic because a painting or sculpture need not be about anything other than paint or sculptural material. Each instance of art, by this account, is not a copy of some form, it is a particular and individual instantiation of formal properties that are to be experienced as aesthetic. Bracketing the concerns of representational or communicative purpose means a viewer is not distracted by some imperfect copy but would connect with the pure form of the work itself. However, in the context of Modernist formalism, beauty is not something that can exist in separation from a work if beauty has anything to do with the aesthetic experience, which is the end result of a work that demonstrates formal properties.

For Aristotle, form cannot be so neatly separated from material things in the world. Aristotelian form is not an archetypal and conceptual entity, as it is in Plato’s theory of Forms. Modernist formalism involves structures which can be compared to the emphasis Aristotle places on the importance of plot over character in the *Poetics*. (Gaut & Lopes, 2005, p. 21) When viewing visual art from a perspective informed by Modernist formalism, this means that representational content is unimportant and perhaps even unnecessary, as is the case in abstract expressionist paintings. The aesthetic properties are found only in the work itself, which is to say the work’s internal composition and, as Bell claimed, its “significant form.” The form of an art object in this perspective is the plot and is regulative of the work as a whole so that it need not refer to anything outside of itself. If the formal properties of an art object are the only properties that hold aesthetic value, what can be said of works art that have both formal properties and representational content? The Modernist formalist who is skeptical of the use of content might appeal to something like Plato’s argument that art is misleading because it is mimetic, although the formalist would say that art lacks value not because it is mimetic but if it attempts to replicate something in the world, such as Clive Bell’s statement, according to which “A rose is not

beautiful because it is like something else. Neither is a work of art” (Bell, 1929, p. 40). For Plato, mimesis fails to capture the truth of the abstract form and remains an imperfect copy of a copy. Aristotle is more generous and allows mimesis a place in the process of acquiring knowledge. As in the *Poetics* and its discussion of dramatic tragedy, what is imitated is not an abstract truth or Platonic Form, but a tangible experience that can be communicated through its generalization, as something that is universal and accessible to all, by virtue of its form. Of central importance to the success of this means of communication is the faculty of imagination, which allows an audience access to an experience that is not directly lived, but is presented as a possibility that is entered as though it were lived.

Many artists and art critics remain committed, if not explicitly, to models which could be traced back to Plato and Aristotle. One such model, which influenced Clive Bell’s formalism, is a romantic notion of form that, as Freydberg claims, “reflects the experience of striving to know that which is fixed and immutable” (Freydberg, 2000, p. 15). As a theory of art, Modernist formalism is informed by philosophical understandings of form as fixed and immutable. It is also informed by the formal as regulative and grounded in a universal sense of pleasure in the beautiful, which was adapted from Kantian aesthetics by Clement Greenberg.

1.3.2 Immanuel Kant and Form

Clement Greenberg developed his influential theory of Modernist formalism on the basis of his interpretation of Immanuel Kant’s aesthetics. Greenberg was certainly not the first to draw heavily on Kant to support his art critical theory. Kant’s work on aesthetics influenced art critics beginning as early as Madame de Stael’s 1813 interpretation of the *Critique of Judgment* in her book *De Àllemagne* (Prettejohn, 2005, p. 68-72). The introduction of Kantian aesthetics through early art critical interpretations such as *De Àllemagne* influenced the way art was seen, valued and made. In contrast to critics like Winckelmann, who provided highly subjective accounts of the beautiful that were grounded in stylistic conventions, appeals to emotion through the representation of historical events, or erotically depicted human bodies, Kant did not seek a set of rules that would validate specific judgments of beauty between works of art. Kant’s notions of free and dependent beauty, his notion of disinterest, and his suggestion that no human form represented in art could ever be viewed disinterestedly (Prettejohn, 2005, p. 68-72), contributed immensely to a view of art that emphasized depoliticization, dissociation from representational content and, at the core, autonomy from non-aesthetic concerns.

Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*³⁵ shifted the art critical gaze from a measure of art's successful communication of normative social values, to a critique of the internal relationships between elements of composition and the depoliticized relationship of spectator to art object. Kant wanted to show that our aesthetic judgment and pleasure in response to beauty are not culturally determined. If our aesthetic judgments can be made in a way that is subjectively universal, yet not determined by our understanding, then the aesthetic value of art can be judged without referring to its representational content, or the extent to which it pleases the spectator on the grounds of her desires and interests. It is this premise that allows art's autonomy in Modernist formalism.

Our judgment of the aesthetic differs from an interpretation of visual art because we require a general concept to make sense of art, which is not required by us to arrive at an aesthetic judgment. There can be no universal interpretation of a work because there need not be. Our interpretation of visual art relies on knowledge we have acquired about properties that are not aesthetic. The aesthetic judgment can be arrived at not only in response to an object of art but also in response to the beautiful in nature. There must be something universal in our experience of the aesthetic that is not dependent on knowledge we may have about the object of our aesthetic experience. For Kant, the potential for universal experience had to follow from forms of cognition that allow us to arrive at a synthesis of understanding and the sensible, through the forms of cognition that we bring to our experience of the world around us. Without these forms of cognition, we would lack the ability to synthesize the sensible with our understanding, leaving us adrift in an ocean of particulars for which we possess no means of subsuming under a general category.

The autonomy of art is tied to a condition of universality that cannot be met by non-aesthetic properties, since these are determined by concepts, which require a cultural and linguistic frame. The aesthetic, although we may articulate our experience of it in terms that are rooted in culture, must be universal in the sense that humanity as a whole must have access to its experience, regardless of the frame in which they stand. As stated in my introduction, the art object is experienced as an object of consciousness and as structured by consciousness. Bernard Freyberg, in *Provocative Form in Plato, Kant, Nietzsche (and Others)*, discusses what he calls

³⁵ *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: CoPJ*. Ed. Guyer, Paul. Tr. Guyer, Paul and Eric Matthews. 2000.

“a re-enactment of the twofold presence of form” which is, in Freydberg’s words, “(1) as inhabiting a purely intelligible region and (2) as perched provocatively at the cusp of the visible” (Freydberg, 2000, p. 69). The first fold of Kantian form exists independently of an object’s being. Its independence is not, however, the same as the way in which the form of an oak tree inheres in an acorn. Kantian form is not inherent in the object; it is inherent in the a priori capacity of our minds to identify an idea with objects in the world. The second fold of Kantian form identified by Freydberg is Platonic, as the form that sits on the cusp of the visible is the form that does manifest itself as an object. It is this fold of Kantian form that appealed most to Modernist formalists. The constructive role played by the formal elements of cognition in Kantian formalism became played instead by the formal elements of an art object’s composition in Modernist formalism. The art object remains reliant on a synthesis of understanding and intuition, but only insofar as the experience of the object requires the form on the cusp of the visible to provide the a priori readiness for judgment as well as the object that is intuited. Rodolpho Gasché claims form in art criticism is understood “as a surface phenomenon of things – their shape and the arrangement of their parts into a whole – the aestheticist approach fails to see that in the transcendental perspective of Kant’s investigation, form is tied to the formation of a representation of objects of nature that are cognitively unaccounted for” (Gasché, 2003, p. 6). Kantian form, notes Gasché, “concerns the how of an object’s appearing. It is what remains if an object is stripped of all its determinations – that is, determinations of what it is” (Gasché, 2003, p. 68). For an object to be stripped of its determinations, it must be judged reflectively, rather than as a particular instance of a universal concept. Form concerns the how of an object’s appearing because form allows the reflective judgment to be about something; a thing that exists in the world and can be sensed, yet need not be objectively purposive.

If pictorial representation in art is not its defining characteristic, critical attention shifts away from an art object’s representational success. Success in pictorial representation is determined by the extent to which an art object resembles life, which is a standard of success that is not consistent with the Modernist formalist assumption of art’s autonomy. Art that represents objects or events in life belong to stylistic conventions and socially normative expectations of what it is to experience art that are neither autonomous nor fundamentally aesthetic. The importance of Kantian aesthetics to contemporary art, Gasché argues, lies in Kant’s interest in beauty and in providing an account of aesthetic judgment, rather than in his account of artistic

judgment. He asks, “whether it is not precisely because Kant’s aesthetics is an aesthetics of natural beauty, rather than of artwork, that it is important for the understanding of the fine arts, and particularly of modern and postmodern art, which are the exclusive concern of post-Kantian aesthetics” (Gasché, 2003, p. 3). Postmodern art tends to be amorphous and difficult to sort into neat categories, since, motivated in part by an emphasis on originality, it often aims precisely to breach the material and institutional. This emphasis on originality can be traced to Kant’s use of “genius” as a means of connecting our experience of nature’s beauty to that of art. The artistic genius could produce for others the raw beauty that we experience when confronted by the forms of nature, Kant said, which “gives the rule to art” *CoPJ*, §46 (Tr. Guyer & Matthews, 2000, p. 186). Yet Kant’s artistic genius is not able to put into words the rule that led to an art object’s making. Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth thought that art would inherit the ground once occupied by philosophy for reasons that I think are related to Kant’s account of genius. According to Kosuth art could transcend the limits of philosophy because, after the decline of representation and the abandonment of modernism’s obsession with physical form, ideas would be the only material left to artists, and concepts could only be explored if they became indeterminate by becoming art, since becoming art would widen the possibility for multiple interpretations. Kosuth’s own approach to making art was more literal than this, but other artists created transformative experiences that were open to multiple interpretations not only using art objects, but objects in the everyday world around us, through performative acts, such as those performed by Joseph Beuys and Adrian Piper.³⁶

From my perspective, form in Modernist formalism is phenomenal; it is the object we perceive as either literally an art object’s shape or the composition within the frame of a work. However, several of the theoretical implications of formalism appear to rely on an understanding of form that is intelligible, even conceptual, rather than phenomenal. The tension between the apparent and the implicit understandings of form might be attributable to Kant’s own writing on form, which influenced the work of both Bell and Greenberg. I will attempt to provide a concise, and hopefully accurate portrait of form in Kant’s aesthetics, making reference to Kant’s *Third Critique* and the work of Gasché, Freyberg, and Uehling, to make these art critical tensions explicit, which will support and put into context my own understanding of the concept of form in

³⁶ For instance, *I like America and America likes me*, 1974 by Joseph Beuys and Adrian Piper’s *Catalysis Series* in 1970. Both performances were interactive with a living audience, a coyote in Beuys’ case and people on the street who did not understand or know of Piper’s intent.

art criticism. For Kant, form allows an object to be given as an object of perception through the formal structures that are space and time (Gasché, 2003, p. 68). Formal structures are aspects of the objects we perceive by way of the intuition, which allows phenomenal attributes of an object to be apprehended as spatially and temporally determined. Gasché reasons that, “Because form in the aesthetic reflective sense relates to empirically given things, it is not the one form of phenomenality in general, but always necessarily manifold” (Gasché, 2003, p. 71). The manifold form is not only that of the object itself, but also that which allows the viewer to experience objects of perception as about something, since the intuition provides formal structures that allow the possibility of a unified yet manifold form rather than a flood of particulars. The relationship, then, between the formal structures of consciousness and the form of the object of perception is such that, in Gasché’s words “the empirical manifold gives rise to reflective judgments if this manifold of ““the aggregate of particular experiences” presents itself in such a manner as to reveal some order” so that, continues Gasché, “reflection can proceed on the heuristic assumption that it is a lawful whole, that is, that the aggregate has the “form” of a system” (Gasché, 2003, p. 76). The form that presents itself in Kant’s account is, from my perspective, the phenomenal form that is composed by an “aggregate of particular experiences.”

Just as Kant distinguished beauty in nature from beauty in art, Gasché draws a similar distinction between objects that are art and objects that are the result of art (Gasché, 2003, p. 78). The first can be objects of the aesthetic reflective judgment, “in the absence of determinate concepts of the understanding” (Gasché, 2003, p. 78). The second cannot be objects of the aesthetic judgment because an object that is the result of a determinate concept, art, cannot be apprehended in the absence of its concept (Gasché, 2003, p. 78). There is a problem here, not least of which is the implication that only objects not created by man can be objects of a reflective, aesthetic judgment, and therefore art, which seems counterintuitive. If the problem of connecting the beauty of art to that of nature can be solved by something other than Kant’s artistic genius, while retaining the formalism distinct to Kantian aesthetics, it cannot be made, as Gasché seems to propose, by moving the distinction between forms of nature and forms of art into one between forms of art itself. What, then, are we to say about ready-mades, or more indeterminate, postmodern forms of art, in which the concept behind an object’s creation exists (close to) independently of its object? Are the objects art while the ideas, and the statements meant to accompany them, stand as the art object? Or is, as Kosuth suggested would become the

case, the concept, in its own formless indeterminacy, the art, while the work that results from that idea the art object. A further problem is our inability to explain the search for meaning in art. Part of the search is reliant on artistic intention, but that does not go far enough. If discerning the authorial intentions was the goal of the search for meaning in art, interpretation would stop at the statement, and curatorial interpretations would consist of a reiteration of the artist's statement. The problem of interpretation is that the search for meaning implies it must be sought in the heuristic assumption of a system that leads to Gasché's version of Kantian form, rather than meaning in the form of a determinate and unifying concept.

Form cannot be neatly reduced to either a set of shapes that objects take, or a set of conditions in the observing subject. Form is manifold and complex, involving both the objects and their viewing subject. To commit entirely to only one portion of the manifold as definitive of form would be to make the same error made by modernist art critics, in their attempt to identify modern art directly with a reductive and ultimately unsuccessful formalist theory of art. Gasché notes that "‘Mere form’, ... is the pre-objective and pre-predicative condition under which empirical manifolds of intuition can be gathered into figures of objectivity, in the absence of determined concepts" (Gasché, 2003, p. 87). The conditions in which "mere form" exists belong to our cognitive faculties that allow us to intuit objects as existing in time and space. The figure of objectivity is the phenomenal form of an object, the intuition of which is made possible by "mere form" as a condition. The unity of the phenomenal form and the formal condition that allows synthesis in the absence of a determined concept makes the reflective judgment possible, and thereby enables the aesthetic experience.

It seems odd that one could claim the absence of a determined concept in the face of phenomenal form, since we can say that we possess the concept of shape, line, etc. In the case of modernist painting, are we experiencing the concept of shape and line within the concept of a frame, under the concept painting, rather than the form of an object in a manifold sense? One response to this question can be provided by Freydberg, who would claim: "There is no form of "man" nor of "beauty," but merely the form of any possible object of experience. ... Rather, the Kantian object can be said to let itself be determined by the way it shows itself" (Freydberg, 2000, p. 75). The way that an object is determined by the way that it shows itself, rather than as what it is known to be, limits the possibilities of our intuition by the phenomenal form of the object itself, yet also limits the possibilities of our apprehension of the object by the form of our

own intuition of the object as both subjectively available to experience and as an object that is limited by spatial and temporal constraints. For the experience of form in art to be an experience of beauty, the judgment made must have been a reflective judgment. Freydberg argues that the reflective judgment involves the subjective relation of the “apprehender to what is apprehended with regard to the subject’s feeling” (Freydberg, 2000, p. 80). Further to this, “form seems to be a mere abstraction from the concept of purpose, which is located neither in the realm of nature (visible) nor the realm of freedom (intelligible)” (Freydberg, 2000, p. 80). I argue that form, even if it is considered an abstraction of the concept of purpose, exists in both the visible and intelligible realms. Form as exhibited by a synthesized manifold belongs to the object as it has been directly apprehended, in conjunction with the subject’s reflective judgment of that object.

Chapter Two – Form, Engaged Consciousness and context

2.1 Consciousness as Engaged – Arnold Berleant

Arnold Berleant's claims an aesthetic experience "is more a perspective or phase of experience than a kind of experience" (Berleant, 1970, p. 94). A kind of experience would require a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that set it apart from other kinds of experience, while understanding the aesthetic as a phase allows differing attributes of experience to overlap. When Berleant refers to art, he is not referring to specific objects of art, he is addressing the phenomenon of making and experiencing art as continuous with the whole of human life, as an activity that is both constructive and representative of our cumulative social and historical experience. Therefore, although his object of analysis is art as a human endeavour rather than a naturally and spontaneously occurring object, he is denying that our experience of art refers to anything but itself. So, to claim that art IS experience, he must allow art to exist as a concept that can be dissociated from the world of objects. Art that is not an object but merely a concept is, from my perspective what is referred to when we speak of art as a practice. In our experience of art objects, the facticity of a specific art object's form is undeniable, since we are conscious of art objects as objects that are given, rather than ideas that we construct. Addressing art as a concept appears to conflict with Berleant's claim that engagement as a state of consciousness is neither definite nor completely conceptual.

Berleant presents a view of consciousness as engaged and aesthetics as embedded in experience, rather than constituting an experience. For Berleant, a conversation about aesthetic phenomena must not focus on a specific style of art lest we be limited prior to beginning by the theoretical constraints embedded therein, e.g. abstract expressionist painting as exemplar of Modernist formalism. If we limit a conversation about art to certain styles, then we are approaching the experience of art as something that is determined by the object. We must, rather, as Berleant claims, "determine the objects of art by the experience of art" (Berleant, 1970, p. 7). What Berleant means by this is that we beg the question "of what is indeed artistic" (Berleant, 1970, p. 7) if we decide what objects can be experienced as art based on the specific properties that an art object must have. I agree with Berleant's claim that the experience of art determines the object, so long as the conditions that allow us to experience art at all are included in an account of what it is for experience to determine the art object. Styles of art, if they are considered to present the properties of an object that are necessary for an experience of the object

as art are certainly problematic. I limit my conversation in this chapter to two styles of art and the theoretical claims which support these styles, but I do not present them as determining our experience of art. I think that Modernist formalism and Conceptual art, in both their stark contrast and odd similarity, inform an account of what role form plays in our experience of an object as art.

As we have seen in the first chapter, Modernist formalism as a theory of art went both too far and not far enough, in what it was able to show about art. It went too far in attempting to show that art could be defined and judged by materially specific formal properties in the object and it did not go far enough by failing to situate these formal properties socially and historically. Berleant claims, “There are connections with experience beyond the perception of form alone that may be aesthetically relevant. The art object does not exist in a world by itself” (Berleant, 1970, p. 37). By limiting the aesthetically relevant properties of an art object, formalism is a variety of what Berleant calls a surrogate theory that “replaces the full scope of the social origins, experience, and the relevance of art with a sacrosanct object, protected by the hallowed walls of the museum and nurtured in the sensitive soul of the esthete” (Berleant, 1970, p. 38). Like Berleant, I believe that there may be, in his words, “an intimate connection that art has, not necessarily with the appearances of things, but rather with our experiences of them” (Berleant, 1970, p. 39). I do, however, maintain that our experience of art remains connected to its appearance. This is not to say that the experience of art requires merely that we are able to perceive, which is the case if we view art through a simplified Modernist formalist lens. The core assumptions of Modernist formalism, that art is autonomous and fundamentally aesthetic, mean that the experience of art through the lens of Modernist formalism cannot include the “full scope of the social origins” of any art object. As a surrogate theory in Berleant’s sense, Modernist formalism considers the formal properties of an art object “sacrosanct,” as the only properties that are essential to our experience of art. The viewer’s experience of art, if Berleant is right about an object of art being determined as such by our experience of it, cannot be connected to the object of art in a way that is passive. Determining the experience of art as such by its appearance means that the viewer is passively receiving what is given.

In Conceptual art, the viewer plays an active role in constructing her experience of art. From my perspective, allowing or in some cases demanding that the viewer become actively involved in constructing her experience of art represents a challenge to Modernists formalist

assumptions that art is autonomous and fundamentally aesthetic. My position is that the experience of art is actively constructed by the subject in conjunction with what is given as the appearance of an art object. So, to say that art is connected to our experience of things is not to say that it is disconnected from the appearance of things. The appearance of things we call art plays a role in determining why we experience a thing as art rather than as any other thing. This is not, however, the role given to form by Modernist formalists, which is that the form, as a property of the appearance of an art object, determines the experience of that object to be an experience of art. Conceptual art presents a case in which it is not the properties, formal or otherwise, of an object that determine our experience of it as art, although we may associate certain properties of objects with what we would expect or choose to call art. By rejecting Modernist formalist assumptions about art and assuming, instead, that art is fully connected to its social origins, Conceptual art changed what we understand to be properties that denote an art object; that determine how and in response to what we experience art. From the perspective of an artist, the implication of granting art a sort of freedom from the constraint of material and formal properties is that, now, any object can be experience as art so long as someone is willing to make, and hopefully justify, that claim.³⁷

The freedom from material constraint introduced a problem: if any object can be experienced as art, there can be no determination of an object of art that is not in some way arbitrary. In my practice as an artist, formalism provided a means of determining what made sense, both in terms of what role an idea could reasonably play in the experience of art and what, if any, properties of an art object would indeed determine the experience of something I made to be an experience of art. The decisions I made about how and what to make formed the foundation not only of art objects, but a way of making art objects, referred to as an “art practice.” An art practice consists of, primarily, a set of commitments about the nature and experience of art that guide its making. The view of art as a practice that requires ideas and justifications is, from my perspective, heavily influenced by the way early Conceptual artists made their work. Art as a practice has no appearance and can exist independently of the art objects made following the logic of a given practice.

³⁷Such as *Art and Languages Air Conditioning Show*, or Kelly Mark’s performance pieces that involve working - <http://kellymark.com/StaffSecurity1.html>

It is difficult, but certainly not impossible, to find a role for form in the experience of art as a practice if the form is given by the practice's conceptual content. Noël Carroll defends content-based formalism,³⁸ which I think offers a philosophical response, analogous to my own art practice, to the challenge of Conceptual art's indeterminacy by claiming that we can have equivalently aesthetic experiences of Conceptual art by hearing it described to us as by seeing it ourselves (Carroll, 2010, p. 87). Carroll claims we experience the aesthetic in objects, and that our experience is determined by the form of the content, which includes the choices made by the artist in creating that content (the artist's practice). For this to be the case, an experience that is aesthetic must be distinguished from one that is not on the basis of its form. So, while Carroll's content-formalism can accommodate the difficulty presented by Conceptual art as anti-formal because of its material indeterminacy, Carroll is still allowing our experience to be determined by the object. While Berleant claims our experience of art is distinct from other "phases" of experience,³⁹ he does not think that this unique experience is necessarily aesthetic since he identifies the aesthetic experience with the experience of art,⁴⁰ which leads him to reverse on Kant's attachment of beauty to nature: only art can be experienced in this unique way. Berleant's reversal means the difference between our experience of art and that of other objects is, if we experience a phenomenon as aesthetic, then we think of that phenomenon as an art object, so that the experience determines the nature of the object, rather than the form of the object determining our experience of it⁴¹ (Berleant, 1970, p. 7). I see Berleant pushing too hard in the opposite direction from Kant, yet arriving at a very similar point, by replacing disinterest with engagement, and grounding the aesthetic experience in art rather than nature. He is not claiming that we cannot experience nature aesthetically rather he claims, if we experience nature aesthetically, we experience nature as art.

³⁸ "The form of an artwork is the ensemble of choices intended to realize the point or purpose of an artwork" (Carroll, 2010, p. 87).

³⁹ "while aesthetic experience has an identity, it is not set off from other modes of experience by some unique attribute. (It is an) ... experience qualified by the presence of characteristics which make it aesthetic. ... It is more a perspective or *phase* of experience than a *kind* of experience." (Berleant, 1970, p. 93-94)

⁴⁰ I am reaching somewhat here, since I am not including any of Berleant's work on environmental aesthetics. He sees the aesthetic as deeply embedded in the experience of being human, so that the environment is constructed through our being part of it. This remains a reversal of Kantian aesthetics, since it means that the genius of man as a conscious being renders nature artistic.

⁴¹ "We must, however, determine the objects of art by the experience of art, not the experience by the objects. For the latter begs the question of what is indeed artistic." (Berleant, 1970, p. 7) This is directly connected to the issue I want to raise about intentionality and the placement of context in form through experience of the aesthetic as an object of consciousness.

2.2 *Making art*

Rules of art making in the past included constraints on production in accordance with conventions of media, style and content.⁴² It remains common for artists to work within a set of rules that determine visual aspects of art making such as composition, use of colour and presentation, regardless of the media in which they tend to work. In my own visual art training, instructors referred to both contextual and objective elements of design, which encouraged students to develop a set of rules, called an art practice, that guide the material production and conceptual content of their work. Training in visual art also involved regular critiques of each student's work. Studio critiques⁴³ affirmed both a common sense of taste regarding design and a set of norms used to judge the degree of alignment between an artist's intent and the object created in the spirit of that intent. Discussions about how well aligned an art object is with the artist's intent are underpinned by assumptions about our experience of art that are philosophically interesting. The tension between Modernist formalism and Conceptual art is located in the experience of art. Each movement adopted a set of opposing assumptions about art and our experience of it: in Modernist formalism, the experience of art is aesthetic in a more or less Kantian sense, and in Conceptual art it is conceptual rather than aesthetic. As an art student, my experience of art and art making was deeply influenced by both Modernism and Conceptual art⁴⁴ as reaction against formalism.⁴⁵

As a philosophy student, I was troubled by the assumptions made by other students and by my professors during studio art critiques: some of these assumptions concerned our ability to perceive ideas or, rather, the objective conditions that must obtain for us to perceive an idea, while others were about the commonality of our experience of art. As an art student, I found it difficult to make art that satisfied the largely conceptual requirements of studio art assignments. Making art for a studio class taught by a professor whose own art practice can be described as

⁴² I am generalizing broadly, with the knowledge that contemporary artists might say the same about art making today. Technical training in the use of art media has, anecdotally, been left behind at most art schools (not all) in favour of an approach that I think is highly influenced by Conceptual art.

⁴³ A studio critique is an essential part of assessment in most art classes at the college and university level. Students present their assigned artwork to the class. The efficacy of each work is discussed by the instructor and all students, and defended by the artist.

⁴⁴ Art historical convention denotes 'Conceptual art' as a movement, most active and easily distinguished from other ways of making and talking about art during the late 1960s and 1970s (Wood, 2002, p. 2)

⁴⁵ Osborne argues that "philosophy was *the means* for [Conceptual art's] usurpation of critical power [from Modernism] by a new generation of artistic intentionality in a radically new, critically discursive guise" (Newman and Bird, p. 49)

conceptual means making art that must effectively represent the idea or set of ideas presented as the problem of a given assignment. When making art that represents an idea, I begin by assuming that the idea informs all stages of the art object's material production.⁴⁶ This is to say that the representation must be total, so that if the materials were changed, so too would the meaning of the finished piece change. In studio art critiques, students discuss ways to bring composition, and the choice of colour or material of an art object into closer alignment with the idea intended by the artist. I found these discussions interesting, but I also found the connection between the appearance of the object and the idea represented to be one that required discussion rather than perception. The starting point of the experience of art as an idea did not ever seem to truly be the art object itself, if an idea had been defined in advance of perceiving the object. Roman Ingarden said of the aesthetic experience that: "It is, namely, true that in cases similar to those described (the *Venus of Milo*) we begin with the perception of a real object. But the question is, first, whether, when starting from a real object, we remain within its limits while an aesthetic perception is taking place in ourselves, and, secondly, whether the starting from a real object is indispensable in every case of aesthetic perception" (Ingarden 1961, p. 290). Ingarden claims, if it is the case that we can have an aesthetic experience in response to an object that is not real, then we need not start from a real object. This is to say that the starting point of an aesthetic experience does not need to remain within the (perceptual) limits of a real object since those limits are no longer set by the percept but rather by the concept. That our experience can begin with an object that is not real, however, entails neither that we must start from an object that is not real, nor that we cannot start from a real object. From my perspective, Conceptual art as a reaction to formalism begins with the idea that art is not a real object. In seeking a starting point beyond the experience of an art object itself, the role played by consciousness and the objects of which we are conscious can only be considered through a limited and reductive lens.

The experience of making art is distinct from the experience of viewing art as an activity, but I do not experience a separation between the making and viewing of art at a more

⁴⁶ I take this assumption to be the strongest remaining characteristic of Conceptual art's approach, which made it distinct as a movement and which continues to play a role in contemporary artist's practices. Peter Osborne's essay *Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy* identifies this characteristic, which distinguished Conceptual art from other art practices in its early days, as the "immanent logic of an object-producing, though not object-based, practice which evolved, primarily, through the exploration of the effects of self-regulating series and systems of rules for decision-making ..." Osborne attributes the first articulation of Conceptual art in this way to Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," published in *Artforum* in 1967. (Newman and Bird, p. 52)

fundamental level of what it is like to experience what we call the aesthetic. An art object, once it is no longer being made, becomes free from the ideas and intent of the artist, so that it gains a sort of autonomy as an object. The interpretation of an art object on the basis of an artist's intent is not justifiable if the apprehension of an art objects is autonomous from context and artistic intent. In the case of contemporary, Conceptual art, the artist's statements that accompany most exhibits undermine the autonomy of an art object because they make explicit the relationship between the object's appearance to a viewer and the act of its making by an artist. An art object, interpreted through the lens of a theoretically dense artist's statement, may become the physical embodiment of a specific theory, rather than an autonomous object that is capable of holding multiple interpretations. The form of the art object becomes, as Carroll claimed, the cumulative set of decisions made by the artist, to which I would add the viewer's experience. Through Carroll's content-based formalism, Conceptual art can then be experienced as an idea as well as an object, the form of which need not be perceived for it is to be experienced as art. Although this appears almost self-evident in Conceptual art, particularly in the case of pieces like Walter de Maria's 1977 *Vertical Earth Kilometer* (a set of two inch thick brass rods, sunk one kilometre into the earth, leaving only the top of each visible, flush with the surface of the earth), there is a problem in locating the form of art in purely conceptual terms of reference. The connection between the appearance of art and our experience of it is undone if art can be experienced exclusively as an idea. The experience of art is itself not connected merely to the idea of art, but also to the physical presence of an art object through which we are able to encounter the unchanging aspects of our own existence and the spatial and temporal limits within which we may exist as free.

From a studio art perspective, the distinction between making and viewing art as an activity is stark, but I found that there remained some fundamental sense in which the experience of making art remained indistinct. The experience of being deeply engaged in an activity such as drawing is not unlike that of being deeply engrossed in the experience of viewing an art object. Although there are many ways to make art, I wish to focus on the technique of drawing from life. Drawing from life is a meditation on the sensory experience of an object as it is given, immediately and pre-conceptually. For example, to draw a tree, one must bracket the story that can be told about trees, particularly the stories that tell us how trees appear; they have branches, they are usually green and brown, and they tend to grow upward. The lines that one draws are

aligned with, but need not be representationally identical to, what the artist is seeing. The two-dimensional rendering of a thing that can be identified as a tree, using this method, is not the aim of the exercise. If I do not bracket concept of tree, it is the concept – or what I think a tree looks like, that I draw, rather than the particular object. The act of drawing as a meditation on direct perception can be described as an exercise in Kantian disinterest since the student practicing this activity is focused on nothing other than the physical form of the object. All other concerns are dismissed, including of what use the object may be, whether it is desirable or not, and what it should look like relative to other objects of its kind. I make the case, however, that even in this state of disinterested meditation on an object of consciousness, the artist, or a viewing subject, must also be engaged in the way Berleant described. That is, the method I am describing is taught in studio drawing classes as a means of allowing students to see an object as it is given, and then recall that perception accurately enough to reproduce it in two dimensions. The students are taught that their knowledge and understanding of an object bias their perception of it, so that the ability to accurately draw from life is impaired. If a student who is learning to draw from life meditates on the object as it is given to her senses, and she bracket her knowledge of what the object is and what interests of her own it might satisfy, then her consciousness of the object is abstracted. The drawing she then produces of that abstraction is not a representation of the object but of her experience of it.

From my perspective, the two primary assumptions made by Modernist formalism are evident in the method as I just described it. First of all the assumption that perception can be pure and direct is obviously at work. But the assumption that art is autonomous is also at work. That is, when one approaches drawing as a meditation, on an object as it is given by direct perception, one works in accordance with assumptions made by Modernist formalists about our experience of art. I think that the assumptions made, that art is fundamentally aesthetic and autonomous, and that perception can be pure and direct are useful in exactly the way that they were used in studio art classes – as a meditation on perception and representation.

However, the fundamental problems with Modernist formalism are also evident in the very method of drawing from life. What seems at first to be an exercise in liberation from dogmatic ways of thinking about the visual can in turn become a dogma. Gadamer claims, then, that, “Pure seeing and pure hearing are dogmatic abstractions that artificially reduce phenomena” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 92). When drawing from life, the properties of an object of perception that

are relevant to the exercise are those that can be reduced to only the visual and, in most cases, only the lines that define shape and contour. If what is appropriate to a method is taken as the foundation of a theory of art, however, the constraints imposed on the artist fail to adequately do justice to wider practices in art and to the challenges that contemporary artists pose for themselves, such as Conceptual art which, as I have pointed out many times, is not fundamentally aesthetic or autonomous in the sense which is central in the drawing from life method.

From my perspective, there remains a sense in which the experience itself of being engaged in the activity of drawing from life using the method I describe is liberating. This is the case only if the experience of being so engaged is viewed in light of Gadamer's position that pure seeing is a dogmatic abstraction. The experience of drawing from life reveals not the pure form of an object of perception, but a possible form in the drawing itself that originates not only in perception, but also in the very experience of the act of drawing. In contrast to Gadamer's position on pure perception, Freydberg claims "Pure understanding and pure intuition provide formal elements. But only by means of imagination can there be any forming. Even our awareness of form is dependent upon the work of imagination, through whose forming activity form becomes manifest to us at all" (Freydberg, 2000, p. 75). During the act of drawing from life, the form of the object that emerges on paper is, in a sense, the form that, through the imagination, becomes manifest to the one engaged in the act of drawing. The actual drawing itself does not represent the pure form of an object; rather, it is a form that manifests through an act that depends on the imagination. Freydberg also claims there is no form of a concept, but only "the form of any possible object of experience" (Freydberg, 2000, p. 75).⁴⁷ The experience of an object as art is not of art as autonomous, if art is considered in this case the form of a possible object of experience and if form need not manifest by an act of pure perception. Freydberg's position supports my view that the form of art is not to be located in the object simply speaking, as a pure form that is given but not itself formed by the viewer, without losing sight, as it were, of form in the art object as would be the case in Gadamer's position. I aim, in the next section, to reveal that part of formalism that is not dogmatic and that plays a

⁴⁷ To be clear, Freydberg is, in these passages, putting forward how view of form in Kant's *CoPJ*, although this is fundamental to Freydberg's own position on the concept of form, which he refers to as "provocative form".

constructive role in the experience of art, particularly in that of making art, as I have described the act from my perspective as a studio artist.

2.3 *Ways of Seeing - Art*

When we turn our gaze toward a tree, we do so in several different ways, each of which is distinct yet dependent on the other. We must not only encounter, through the senses, an object of consciousness for apprehension, but we must form a consciousness of that object that can be synthesized. The absence of an intuition that can be the focus of our gaze leaves us with no consciousness of an object to experience. This is not to say that we cannot experience a recollection, or an imagined object, but that our ability to do so depends on our knowing that objects exist for us to be conscious of, and that we can, with the exception of unusual circumstances, tell the difference between what we sense, and what we imagine or remember. The understanding synthesizes our intuition, the manifold of intuition that we gain from our senses, with a concept. As we look at the tree, we intuit those features that not only can be synthesized into the knowledge that the object on which we are focussed is a tree, but we also intuit the specific details that, when synthesized by the understanding, signify this tree as a type of conifer, suffering from a minor case of oversaturation caused by recent heavy rainfall, or something like that. We can tell a story like this about the tree because we have the ability to match the appearance of an object with what we know about the concept to which that particular set of intuitions belong. Our ability to tell this story relies on the synthesis of intuition and understanding.

The concepts we employ allow us to construct a story about what is given in the world around us, in a way that is coherent and communicable. Concepts, because they are universalizing, provide us with justifiable claims to knowledge that we rely on to communicate with others who possess similar concepts. The story that we tell must not only be internally coherent, but its intuitions and concepts and must be available to others. For us to say that we experienced the story is a very different claim than to say that we understood the story, or even that we know what the story meant.⁴⁸ The same difference holds in the experience of the art. We can experience our consciousness of an art object with no knowledge of the concepts that were employed in its making. Knowing the material choices and the art historical context in which the

object is situated may, however, impact our experience. This possibility implies that consciousness and experience are distinct but related, and that their relationship is one of necessity. Consciousness is required for a subject's experience of anything, whether the experience is of a thought, memory or hallucination, or a sensory intuition of an object in the world. If consciousness and experience are distinct, they must be so in a way that respects this relationship and the ways in which both are impacted by our apprehension of phenomena and how we construct a story from sensory intuitions. If we must be conscious of an object in order to have some experience of it, how direct is our experience of any phenomenon and what is added or removed from the consciousness of an object for us to have an experience? We can have good or bad experiences, but we cannot say the same about our consciousness of an object.

The distance separating consciousness from experience is qualitative and the aesthetic experience sits closest to our sense of value as it relates to our consciousness of objects and, in the case that interests me most, objects that we perceive visually and experience as art. If the distance between the aesthetic experience and consciousness consists of value, which is subjectively determined, how can the form of an object provide the grounds for an experience that is common across multiple subjects? The consciousness of an object can be universal under obvious requisite conditions, but the conditions of a common experience, particularly in the case of art objects that embody meaning, are far less obvious. This difficulty is due primarily to the notion that a common experience of art is equivalent to a uniform judgment of taste or interpretation of meaning. Although the distance between our consciousness and our experience of an art object may consist of our forming a subjective sense, feeling or emotion, uniformity in the response is not required for the experience to have been of art. In the case of an art object, Berleant's engaged subject is an active participant who exercises the freedom of her imagination, so that the proper concept is detached not because we are disinterested, but because we can bracket that knowledge, thereby applying it in a way that uses the free play of the imagination rather than applying the rule of the understanding.

The aesthetic experience is cast by Berleant as the most authentic means of engaging the world around us (Berleant, 2010, p. 44). I see this as meaning that the aesthetic experience is the authentic engagement with, but not the pure perception of an object of consciousness. An experience is authentic, in Berleant's account, if it is of an engaged, rather than a disinterested consciousness. By claiming that our consciousness of an object must be engaged, Berleant means

that our intuitions need not remain pre-conceptual for us to have an aesthetic experience. The knowledge we have of the world conditions our experience of it, although it neither structures nor categorizes the content of our experience, but rather expands that content. To accept the assumption of consciousness as engaged is to reject the Kantian idea of a disinterested distance between experience and consciousness that is barren and consists of only the manifold of intuition, unsynthesized and uncategorized.

Disinterest in the aesthetic experience requires us to be directly aware of an object. I see the concept of disinterest as not only a lack of desire, but also a state in which consciousness must be freed from the concepts that would typically fulfill our practical need to make timely judgments about the objects of our consciousness. Direct awareness in Kantian terms is the pre-reflective consciousness and, although it is plausible that an experience could also be direct, such an experience would remain the direct experience of our pre-reflective consciousness; experience remains always the experience of consciousness. Experience does not, even as disinterested and pre-reflective, precede consciousness, nor is it identical with consciousness. Disinterest is also the bracketing of our consciousness of an object from concerns of an object's use or the role that an object plays in relation to others. From my perspective, we experience the aesthetic when we isolate our consciousness of an object to a moment in time in which the object is uniquely apprehended. In this sense, I think that both Kant and Berleant had it right: the aesthetic experience of pre-reflective consciousness is disinterested in that it need not be contained by concepts of the understanding for us to perceive the object, or experience our consciousness of that object, but it is also engaged in that, absent of the conceptual ordering of our experience, we are engaged with the experience in all its complexity as a whole, rather than as a delineable series of parts that must fit determinate concepts. We have, in the aesthetic experience, access to a complex and contextually dependent mix of beliefs, ideas and peripheral concerns but we are not constrained by it. The aesthetic experience is our connection between an object and our consciousness of that object, as temporally and spatially unique. But is not truly direct, in temporal nor spatial terms.

2.4 Ways of Seeing - Meaning

The art object can of course only be experienced as art by a conscious being. As stated in the preceding section, there can be no pure perception, and experience is always the experience of consciousness. The experience of Conceptual art is of an object that embodies meaning, which

requires concepts. The experience of Conceptual art, then, seems to require some knowledge that an object can be meaningful and that the primary source of that meaning is the object's status as art. The experience of a bowl as meaningful is not necessarily an experience of the bowl as art. However, an experience of the bowl as art means that the meaning attached to the object shifts in accord with the viewing subject's understanding of what it is like to experience an object as art. In what account of the experience of Conceptual Art, which is about meaning, concepts and knowledge rather than the object, can the form of an object of perception play a role? In Kant's account, the forms of space and time allow us to organize the manifold of intuition into a spatially structured and temporally sequenced whole. The whole into which our intuitions are organized, the synthesis of apprehension, must result in a whole that is not greatly different from that which other conscious beings obtain through their own acts of synthesis. Kant's discussion about the possibility of experience is directed at the person in a global sense, not the person as an individual. The universality of the whole is arrived at by a synthesis of the understanding and the intuition in this account because the act of synthesis, if globally rather than individually determined, guarantees the a priori universality of a whole that is structured in the same way and of the same intuitions from one individual to another. It is simply not possible to isolate a moment if it did not occur within a sequence, nor to locate a thing in space if there is no way to differentiate one point in space from any other point. The structures of time and space are the grounds of any possible experience and cannot be deduced from experience. I take this account to be true of experience in general and of our experience of art specifically. The challenges posed by Conceptual art weaken a dogmatic formalist account of our experience of art, but a viable account of the role played by form in our experience of art, even Conceptual art, can be built of Kant's account of experience in general in conjunction with Berleant's account of the engaged consciousness and Gadamer's rejection of pure seeing and pure understanding.

If this kind of universality that Kant identifies in his *Critique of Pure Reason* and exploits in the second and third *Critiques*, explains how it is that there is a certain universal basis for experience, it cannot be developed as a fully normative theory in art criticism. As mentioned earlier, Gadamer claims pure seeing and pure understanding are dogmatic abstractions that artificially reduce phenomena. We may, however, still share an experience with others in terms of its general character, even if we do not apprehend in some pure and therefore undeniable universal sense, an object of consciousness. "To distance oneself from oneself and from one's

private purposes means to look at these in the way that others see them. This universality is by no means a universality of the concept or understanding. This is not a case of a particular being determined by a universal..." (Gadamer, 1998, p. 17). Distance from private purposes leads to the disinterest that Kant required for us to experience beauty. Private purposes cannot, however, become so distant as to remove those parts of an individual's experience that lead to variations in taste. This point is foundational for Berleant who favours an engaged rather than a disinterested state.

What is, then, required to see an art object in a way that can be said to be part of a universal way of seeing in an engaged rather than disinterested state? To distance oneself from oneself need not lead to a state of disinterestedness in the Kantian sense, nor need it be the experience of a concept as universal, which means, as Gadamer claims, it is "not the application of the universal but internal coherence is what matters" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 31). Internal coherence aligns with Berleant's notion of engagement, if it is interpreted as including those elements of past and private experience that cannot be removed from our present experiences. Internal coherence permits structural and sequential universality without rejecting the possibility of differences in outcome. Like form, internal coherence can be understood in more than one way: the visual and compositional coherence that, in Passmore's terms (1951, p. 333), causes an art object to "hang together," and the conceptual coherence of our collection of past experiences and existing ideas, as they come together in our understanding of what an art object means. The latter reading of coherence implies that the experience of art is of a connection between ideas within the frame of an art object and a viewing subject who gets it, via her understanding of the object's art historical position.

Does this understanding of coherence, which fits the way we experience some objects of Conceptual art, mean that we require some knowledge of the object's art historical situation to understand art? If so, how would our need to know how an art object is situated impact the role played by form in our experience of art? I do not think that such knowledge is essential to coherence generally although it may be essential to a specific and antiformalist understanding of art. A Modernist formalist would argue for the understanding of coherence in which knowledge is inessential and it is merely the formal properties of a piece that must "hang together." This position draws support from Kant since, as Gadamer points out, "Kant's main concern ... was to give aesthetics an autonomous basis freed from the criterion of the concept, and not to raise the

question of truth in the sphere of art, but to base aesthetic judgment on the subjective a priori of our feeling of life, the harmony of our capacity for “knowledge in general,” which is the essence of both taste and genius” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 59-60).

From my perspective, the understanding of coherence that applies to both conceptual and perceptual art is one that connects the art object not to the truth or knowledge of a specific art historical situation, but to our capacity for knowledge in general of the world as it is given to perception. My position is supported by the work of Berleant, who does not seek to derive an objective truth or some foundational knowledge from the aesthetic any more than Kant did. For Berleant, we experience the aesthetic because we are connected to it through our experience of an engaged rather than a disinterested consciousness. For Berleant, that we experience the aesthetic when “engaged” requires some connection to our capacity for knowledge of our own subjective, social and historical place in the world. The social and historical forces that create what Berleant calls our “filters”⁴⁹ condition the experience that we have of any object. These filters allow us to experience objects of what Berleant calls the engaged consciousness. Since the distance between the aesthetic experience and our consciousness of an object, as I claimed earlier, consists of value, the filters that allow our consciousness to be experienced as engaged are themselves deeply connected to value and meaning. Gadamer claims “life objectifies itself in structures of meaning,” the understanding of which comes from “translating the objectifications of life back into”⁵⁰ that from which they emerged. The objectifications of life are, from my perspective, the concepts we employ to make sense or use of what we intuit in the world around us. From my perspective, in Conceptual art, the structures of meaning are represented by the context while the art objects, or implied art objects, represent the objectifications of life. I believe that seeing Conceptual art in this way, as connected to experience through both the given and the structures of meaning, shows us the filters through which we experience our consciousness of objects. By this I mean that Conceptual art need not be reduced to conceptual properties, nor

⁴⁹ “Acknowledging that the aesthetic begins and ends in sense experience, we can at least on principle consider aesthetically any object and any experience that can be sensed. (next para) At the same time it is essential to recognize that there is no such thing as pure perception. All sensory perception passes inevitably through the multiple filters of culture and meaning: the concepts and structures supplied by language and the meanings instilled by culture.” (Berleant, 2010, p. 27)

⁵⁰ Gadamer, quoting Dilthey claims: “Since life objectifies itself in structures of meaning, all understanding of meaning consists in “translating the objectifications of life back into the spiritual life from which they emerged.” Thus the concept of experience is the epistemological basis for all knowledge of the objective” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 66).

Modernist art reduced to perceptual properties, if the sense of coherence we refer to is coherence between an art object and the forms of life with which we are engaged, rather than between the art object and a particular set of formal properties. The forms of life with which we are engaged are, in this sense of coherence, experienced through our consciousness of an object as art, but also as a unique and isolated, singularly occurrent event in time and space. This instance of the particular is not of a sort that is subsumable under a universal concept in the Kantian schema: “the relationship of life to experience is not that of a universal to a particular. Rather, the unity of experience as determined by its intentional content stands in an immediate relationship to the whole, to the totality of life” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 68). The totality of life includes the mess of intuitions that are conditioned by our intentional relationship with objects that are about something, as is the case with objects that we experience as art.

As I claimed earlier, it is inaccurate to ground any understanding of the aesthetic experience in a theory of pure perception, according to both Gadamer and Berleant.⁵¹ Neither author sees pure perception, stripped of considerations concerning meaning, as realizable. The problem, for those like myself who wish to show that unity or coherence, rather than the separation, of meaning and form in the aesthetic experience is possible, involves reconciling what makes it possible to experience anything at all with what it is to experience an object of perception in a way that is, admittedly, as materially indeterminate and contextually dependent as objects of art. For Berleant, the answer is simple: “All sensory perception passes inevitably through the multiple filters of culture and meaning: the concepts and structures supplied by language and the meanings instilled by culture” (Berleant, 2010, p. 27). If we cannot perceive an object in the absence of these filters, then we are in the constant possession of an infrastructure of which we need not have a determinate conceptual understanding but of which we can be, presumably to varying degrees, aware. We would have no means of effecting change or acting freely were we not capable of the sort of cultural self-reflexive awareness that includes the infrastructural filters Berleant is interested in. We would likely not be making or experiencing art in the complex and varied ways that we have throughout history and across cultures were we unable to see some, although perhaps not a complete picture, of our own filters.

⁵¹ “it is essential to recognize that there is no such thing as pure perception.” (Berleant, 2010, p. 27)

2.5 *The Aboutness of Form*

From a Modernist formalist perspective the aboutness of form in art is restricted to an object's frame, materiality and composition. If art can only be about its formal properties, our experience of the art object cannot include the filters that characterize what Berleant calls an engaged consciousness. From my perspective, we can never fully disengage our consciousness because, as Gadamer rightly claims, pure perception is merely an artificially reductive abstraction.⁵² We cannot, then, apprehend an object as art without the filters of language, culture and context. If this is the case, which I believe it is, the two primary assumptions on which Modernist formalism is built, that art is, first, fundamentally aesthetic and, second, autonomous from any contextual concerns, are not consistent with what it is like to experience art. By the Modernist account, we experience the aesthetic only in those instances when the object we apprehend is particular rather than general, so that our experience is not of the associations or concepts bound up with the art object. Such an experience requires that we have a direct, immediate and pre-conceptual apprehension of the object. For this to be the case, perception must be naked, and we must bring nothing with us apart from our intuition of an object's form. This approach restricts our understanding and experience of art to a set of autonomous and formal properties while requiring that consciousness be disinterested and unconditioned by the desires of the viewing subject.

The experience of an object as art, after Modernism, is a distinct response to our consciousness of an object that is abstracted from its customary purpose⁵³ and that embodies meaning. Form as an intentional object can be experienced aesthetically rather than as a determinate concept precisely because of the distance between our consciousness and our experience of that same object. Viewing form as an intentional object rather than following the art critical path of a reductive interpretation of form retains the connection between our consciousness of an object that embodies meaning, and the experience of an object as art. The experience of art, if we accept it as non-referential, is inclusive of the various elements of the object of that experience. The experience of art in both Modernist formalism and Conceptual art, in so far as both movements can be generalized into sets of theoretical assumptions that underpin

⁵² "Pure seeing and pure hearing are dogmatic abstractions that artificially reduce phenomena" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 92)

⁵³ "form seems to be a mere abstraction from the concept of purpose, which is located neither in the realm of nature (visible) nor the realm of freedom (intelligible)." (Freydberg, 2000, p. 80)

both their related bodies of criticism and art objects, is entirely referential. The experience of art is incidental to that of form in the case of the former and of the idea in the latter.

Art objects embody meaning because they come into being through a process of decision-making, in terms of both conceptual content and material form. As embodied meaning, art objects show the intent of an artist to make something visible and create an experience, which Gasché called the conceptual blueprint⁵⁴ that art shows and nature does not. The presence of a conceptual blueprint need not justify an art object's judgment or even interpretation by its intent, although such criteria often underpinned judgments and interpretations made during studio art critiques I attended. I agree with Gadamer who claimed, "The mensauctoris is not admissible as a yardstick for the meaning of a work of art. Even the idea of a work-in-itself, divorced from its constantly renewed reality in being experienced, always has something abstract about it" (Gadamer, 1998, p. xxxi). I take this to mean that an artist's intent cannot help us determine the correct meaning of an art object. This is to say that the artist has no greater monopoly on the meaning of an art object than the viewer because meaning is ever changing and cannot be determined, but can only be experienced.⁵⁵ What is always abstract about the work-in-itself, by which I take Gadamer to mean a truly autonomous art object that does not live through the eyes of a viewing subject, is the indeterminacy of the form of an object that is about something.⁵⁶ Since there remains something always abstract about an art object, it can never be a complete or total embodiment of an artist's intent. Once created, the object becomes embodied meaning and autonomous object, so that the former cannot be neatly separated from the latter, although both Conceptual art and Modernist formalism attempted to separate embodied meaning from autonomous object.⁵⁷

The acknowledgement that intent plays a role in the making of art objects can help us to understand our experience of art if we think of art objects as embodying meaning. However, knowledge of an artist's specific intent ultimately, does little to help us understand what it is like

⁵⁴ The difference between art and nature, and the reason that art cannot be the object of a reflective aesthetic judgment as nature can, is the finality and determining end required for "the "doing" of art" ... "unlike the effects of works of art, those of nature do not evidence any conceptual blueprint." (Gasché, 2003, p. 181-182)

⁵⁵ "the aesthetics of genius has done important preparatory work in showing that the experience of the work of art always fundamentally surpasses any subjective horizon." (Gadamer, 1998, p. xxxi)

⁵⁶ What Gadamer means by "abstract" is far more complicated than is relevant to explore here. I am interested in Gadamer's avoidance of a representational or conceptual account of what lies beyond the given and our apprehension of it, which contrasts with Kant's aesthetics and aligns with Berleant's engaged consciousness.

⁵⁷ "I go so far as to assert that the act of understanding, including the experience of the work of art, surpasses all historicism in the sphere of aesthetic experience" (Gadamer, 1998, p. xxx).

to experience art as embodying meaning. We are not helped by knowing the specific intent of an artist because meaning in art involves a set of complex, contextually dependent conditions, out of which an art object is crafted and from the perspective of which it is viewed. The specific intent of an artist may be included in the conditions that are involved in an art object's meaning, but intent is not significant to our understanding of the experience of art in and of itself. What is of significance is that we apprehend an art object as about something and, therefore, as an object that embodies meaning. For the Modernist formalists, art could only be about its material and composition, so that representational content was aesthetically insignificant. Meaning, particularly if our apprehension of meaning relies on knowledge of context and the shared recognition of representational content, is distinct from form in the Modernist formalist view. From my perspective, however, we may better understand our experience of art by looking at the ways in which form and meaning are conjoined. One of the ways an art object's material form remains connected to meaning is through art's conceptual blueprint. The connection, from my perspective, is that form, as a structural part of our consciousness of objects, is itself an intentional object. The form of an art object, unlike the knowledge we may have of an art object's origins or context, is not subsumed under a universal concept, yet must still be apprehended as the form of something. So, it is not the specific intent that is significant, but the aboutness of form – its connection to intentionality, which lends itself to our experience of art objects as embodying meaning.

Intentionality, as the aboutness or directedness of conscious states, requires the presence of an object of which we may be conscious and to which we may attribute some belief or other mental phenomena. Brentano claims “intentionality defines the distinction between the mental and the physical; all and only mental phenomena exhibit intentionality.”⁵⁸ The form of an art object exhibits intentionality since it can only exist to us as the form of something. The form of something is not, from my perspective, merely the form of an object's material boundaries, in the case of art. Art itself exists as a result of human effort and ideas; states that exhibit intentionality and that are not material things in the world. From my perspective, art is neither explicitly mental nor physical – it occupies a space inclusive of the two in which we perceive an object that we may apprehend as about something. Our consciousness is directed at both the perceptual (the object itself) and conceptual (the idea) art object. This is to say that art as an object of perception

⁵⁸ Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 2nd Edition, 2006

cannot be apprehended in isolation from its embodied meaning, and the form of the art object cannot be found by reducing its properties to either the idea or the autonomous object. Our experience of art, then, allows us to perceive an object that embodies meaning about the human world that exists not as a representation of polished and final concepts or, in the case of formalism, as an object of disinterested perception, but as an expanded range of possible experiences.

Chapter Three – Form and its detractors

3.1 *The Absence of Form*

Modernist formalism was too rigid to respond to changes in the making and material manifestation of art, some of which came as a response by artists to formalism's own theoretical implications. As a result of Modernist formalism's lack of theoretical viability in response to new ways of making art, the art critical conversation shifted from the form of abstract expressionism to the formlessness of Conceptual art. Form was, however, not lost in the adoption of formlessness by Conceptual artists, since the making of formless or anti-formal art cannot be done without reference to the form that is negated or denied. The work of artists like Joseph Kosuth appears to deny form any role in our perception or apprehension of art while other artists, particularly Adrian Piper and Sol LeWitt, rejected formalist assumptions about our experience of art, but were nevertheless open to making art that, from my perspective, retained and acknowledged the form of an art object.

The art installations put together by Joseph Kosuth can be considered conceptual rather than perceptual because they rely far less on the presence of what an audience would generally understand to be art objects than they do on text and purposive objects that appear to represent nothing other than their definition.⁵⁹ An example of this is Kosuth's *One and Three* series, which consists of household objects (such as chairs) next to life-sized photos and a text panel with a definition of each object. In the case of such an installation, our experience of art is not an experience of the object. LeWitt and Piper also used language and text in making their art, less so LeWitt than Piper. In contrast to Kosuth, neither Le Witt nor Piper made art that was experienced through the literal meaning of the text used in an installation. In *One and Three*, the object is demonstrative of the text, so that its inclusion is, from my perspective, incidental to the installation rather than representative of the text or integral to our perceptual experience of the installation.

Whereas Kosuth uses language and text to remove the form of an art object from our experience of art, which is one reason Conceptual art can be described as anti-formal, the work of LeWitt and Piper uses language to draw us into the experience of experiencing an art object as about something. In this way, from my perspective, the work of Conceptual artists like LeWitt and Piper show us the connection between the perceptual and conceptual forms of art through

⁵⁹ <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/joseph-kosuth/one-and-three-lamps>

our conjoined experience of both. In fact, Freydberg claims, because every object is constituted by form, the negation of form is necessary for the appearance of any object: “Since a relation to darkness and unconsciousness belong to the very nature of imagination, all forming is connected with anti-form. Thus the appearance of any object requires darkness and withdrawal in order to take place at all” (Freydberg, 2000, p. 76). The process of forming, which is an unavoidable part of the experience of form in the visual arts, Freydberg claims, “involves an intertwining of reason and unreason. Even as form structures and orders, an indispensable element which is non-structure and dis-order is at play” (Freydberg, 2000, p. 77). From my perspective, Conceptual artists like LeWitt and Piper, made art that not only reacted against Modernist formalism, but also represents the idea that form requires its antithesis to exist at all, although I do not think this was their intent.

In fact, the idea that a certain kind of negativity is constitutive of positive reality goes back at least to Hegel and is very important in 20th century phenomenology. For instance, Jean Paul Sartre connects the idea of negation with representation. In his book *The Imaginary*, Sartre points out that the image of an object or a person known to exist is precisely the absence or negation of that thing’s or person’s presence, rather than an absolute state of nonexistence.⁶⁰ A thing that cannot exist can neither be conceived of nor imagined as existing, which means that we must have some point of reference at which we may start if we are to imagine either the lack or the presence of a thing that is given to our senses. Certain advocates of anti-formal and anti-aesthetic Conceptual art understand the absence of form uncritically. Anti-formalism becomes elevated to dogma, just as the visual purity of Modernist Formalists had been taken as a creed. Both Conceptual artists and formalists failed to perceive how form and absence of form are interwoven to create experience and how absence is important to indicate presence.

⁶⁰ I am referring to Section I. Consciousness and Imagination, p. 79-188 of Sartre’s *The imaginary : a phenomenological psychology of the imagination* (2004), but primarily to p. 183 and the passage concerning the image of Charles VIII: “It is in the very nature of consciousness to be intentional and a consciousness that ceased to be consciousness of something would thereby cease to exist. But consciousness must be able to form and posit objects affected by a certain character of nothingness in relation to the totality of reality. One can recall, in fact, that the imaginary object can be posited as nonexistent or as absent or as existing elsewhere or not be posited as existent. ... We therefore see that in order to produce the object ‘Charles VIII’ as imaged, consciousness must be able to deny the reality of the picture, and that it could deny this reality only by standing back from reality grasped in its totality. To posit an image is to constitute an object in the margin of the totality of the real, it is therefore to hold the real at a distance, to be freed from it, in a word, to deny it.”

Freydberg provides a more satisfying account of the respective roles of form and anti-form. He sees a connection between not only the presence of an object of consciousness and its absence, but between absence of form and presence of form as a way of seeing. He claims:

“Absence “belongs” to form insofar as the images are simply present as mere images. Whether it is thought as the absence of direct originality in the apprehension of things, or as the merely partial determination of a thing by its means, or (more radically) as the lurking presence of a dark element in all apprehension which nevertheless allows the thing to show itself from itself as it conceals its inner essence, form always occurs as juxtaposed with its other, with anti-form. Without the abiding presence of this other-than-form, no forming could take place at all” (Freydberg, 2000, p. 85).

The ability to fill an absence with the presence of an image allows us to escape the limitations of what is immediately given to our senses, so that we may be capable of imagining, remembering, and constructing that part of our encounter with the world that is meaningful and can become art. Because an imagining, a memory, or a hallucination is impoverished in the absence of its actual object, we cannot fully experience art without an object for our consciousness to confront.

In our experience of art, absence belongs to form in Freydberg’s sense. Absence allows us to construct the presence of what is not immediately given to the senses. The act of forming in the presence of what Freydberg calls other-than-form is at work when we experience art that requires some understanding of context. From the perspective of a Modernist formalist, the experience of representational paintings is not aesthetic because it is not the experience of an object we perceive, but rather of the thing represented. In the case of an abstract expressionist painting like *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, 1950, by Jackson Pollock, the Modernist formalist would say that we experience what is immediately given to the senses and nothing else, which distinguishes our experience of the aesthetic from any other sort of experience. However, I take the position that, since we cannot perceive an object of art as pure and immediately present form, we must allow form to play a role that is not limited to what we perceive as present, and that incorporates our understanding of context and meaning in art.

The notion of anti-form was not included in the Modernist formalist account of our experience of art, which contributed to its proponents’ inability to find the connection between meaning and form, and cope with the strain placed on the theory’s claims by Conceptual art. The experience of Conceptual art begins with an idea that guides the making, selecting or designating of a material object yet remains absent from our perception. Regardless of whether an installation is considered conceptual, the experience of an object as art, from my perspective,

requires both the “abiding presence of this other-than-form” and our perception of the object. The form of art, if it consists also of absence in Freyberg’s sense, allows us access to a fleeting understanding of what it is to be human and to experience meaning in the world around us. From my perspective, we experience form in art through our apprehension of an object in the absence of a concept, with the recognition that we are beings for whom “pure” perception is not achievable, and who apprehend the world through an engaged consciousness. This is to say; the social and historical conditions that lend an art object its form of life are present in the consciousness of a subject who experiences an object as art.

The connection of form to anti-form, and the act of forming that follows from this connection, is consistent with Berleant’s view of consciousness as engaged. The world we inhabit is not such that we are passive viewers who only perceive the presence of what is given to the senses. From my perspective, our experience of art is paradigmatic of the act of forming our consciousness of objects in a way that is not pure in its perception, but is engaged. If our consciousness of objects is engaged, the act of forming that takes place in our experience of art is an act that connects the loosely associated and less determinate concepts we have accumulated (which is constitutive of context) to our apprehension of an art object. Modernist formalists were right in noting that art objects do have unchanging aspects that can be seen in a specific way even if they are connected to a specific meaning, and I agree that the physical aspects of an art object come to life in ways that cannot be fully contained by the artist’s original idea. However, our experience of an art object and the meaning that emerges from this experience is formed not only by our perception of the object but also by the context in which we as viewing subjects are situated. It is here, the point at which context and object are experienced as a unified whole, that the form of an art object is most closely tied to anti-form.

The experience of form in art is not the singular experience of our pure perception of a Jackson Pollock nor is it the experience of precisely the idea of a text as art, for instance, intended by a Conceptual artist. In forming our consciousness of an object as art, we experience form and anti-form as unified but not universal. Since the object cannot determine the conditions of its own forming, yet remains an object that consists of unchanging (unless altered or damaged) physical aspects, variation in the particular meaning formed by a viewing subject does not lead to, as Gadamer claims, a disintegration of the work “into the changing aspects of itself so that it would lose all identity, but it is there in them all. ... Thus we have the task of interpreting the

work of art in terms of time” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 121). From my perspective, to interpret an art object in terms of time, is to acknowledge the context in which we and the art object are situated and through which our consciousness of an object as art is formed. The fluid relationship between the form and the conditions that connect an object to its life as art remain intact, without an artificial reduction of an art object to either its changing aspects (for instance, Kosuth’s view of our experience of art as only conceptual), or unchanging aspects (the Modernist formalist view of our experience of art as purely aesthetic and about only the object we perceive).

In this section, I have shown that form is not simply the form of something as it is given to the senses, but also its absence as anti-form. Form and anti-form are connected, and the connection of the two is consistent with a view of consciousness that is engaged rather than disinterested. By including absence in my account, form in our experience of art remains present even if we are presented with an art installation that is intended to be anti-formal or immaterial. Neither Modernist formalists nor Conceptual artists considered the connection between form and anti-form in their accounts of our experience of art, which, from my perspective, weakens both accounts. In the next section, I will explain why this is the case and give examples of installations that have attempted to create an immaterial experience of art.

3.2 *Form in the Empty Gallery*

The meaning of a Conceptual art installation can, conceivably, be experienced without ever viewing the art object or installation itself, particularly in the case of exhibits that are curated through the lens of philosophically informed theory.⁶¹ One can, therefore, enter a gallery space, read the curatorial statement, and leave with the impression that one experienced the exhibit as art without seeing it. The experience of a curatorial statement as art is, from my perspective, the experience of an absence that lacks a corresponding presence. The experience of an art exhibit, in the case I described, is of what Gasché referred to as a conceptual blueprint (Gasché, 2003, p. 181-182). I think a Conceptual artist like Joseph Kosuth would say that the experience of art is only ever the experience of an idea, so the exhibit itself becomes vestigial since it is no longer

⁶¹ An excellent example of a exhibit that could be described as curated through such a lens is “*And Another Thing*,” 2011, curated by Katherine Behar and Emmy Mikelson. The curatorial statement claims, “Anthropocentrism is the name for this ontological lynchpin that binds together centuries of art, philosophy, social theory, and scientific inquiry. The current exhibition, *And Another Thing*, is part of an alternate movement toward non-anthropocentrism, an effort to dislodge the human from the center of discussion, to enrich the concept of being, and to open the very world itself to all things that comprise it.” The full statement can be read online here: <http://andanotherthingexhibition.wordpress.com/curatorial-statement/> .

required. If this is the case, it is because the curatorial statement makes explicit the conceptual blueprint of an art exhibit so that knowledge of the blueprint replaces, or at least becomes a necessary part of what it is like, to experience an art installation. It is my position, however, that the curatorial statement cannot replace the physical presence of the installation as the object of our experience of art. Even our experience of an empty gallery as art is of the gallery itself, since the absence of objects in the presence of the space plays a role in forming that experience. This is to say that, as Gasché claims, “Form is always the form of something, and, in principle, cannot be thought independently” (Gasché, 2003, p. 8). In the case of the 1972 installation *Air Conditioning Show*,⁶² by Art & Language, which consisted of precisely the absence of a form that could readily be understood as art, absence becomes the form of the installation manifest in the blank walls, cool temperature and visually empty gallery space.

The conjunction of a theoretical statement and a physically present object experienced as art is a unified experience such that, even in response to something like the *Air Conditioning Show*, is of the installation as a phenomenal whole. The experience is of a whole in two senses: it is the unification of an art object’s conceptual blue print with its sensible form, and it is the connection between the object and the subject who is experiencing it as art. To separate the object from the conceptual blueprint leads to a reductive account of what it is like to experience an object as art. The experience of art as a phenomenal whole gets at what it is like to experience form in art as both present and absent, in Freydberg’s sense. Freydberg claims, “the form of the whole represents a notion beyond any possible experience and beyond any show of being bound up with possible experience” (Freydberg, 2000, p. 99). The form of art, in this sense, is inclusive of an absence that cannot be directly or immediately experienced and is essentially indeterminate. For Freydberg, absence is the “provocative form”, which relies on the notion that, as he claims, “the forms are ways of seeing, residing on the cusp of the visible” (Freydberg, 2000, p. 23). From my perspective, form in our experience of art sits on the cusp of the visible in so far as it includes not only what is given to the senses but also what is absent. So, form in our experience of art is, as Freydberg claims, a way of seeing an object as both what it is and what it is not.

⁶² Art & Language, *The Air Conditioning Show* (1972) consisted of an empty gallery space kept at a controlled room temperature.

For the engaged consciousness, form as a way of seeing is not our immediate apprehension of the appearance of an object. Form is, in this sense, a combination of what was referred to earlier as the unchanging aspects and changing aspects of an object. Freyberg claims: “Even granting the view that the forms are purely intelligible objects, they have their importance not as isolated supersensible beings but in their relation to human knowing” (Freyberg 19). So, if form is important in relation to human knowing, it must be so in relation to a consciousness that is engaged. The experience of an art installation as art requires the apprehension of both the conditions of an engaged consciousness, which relate the form of the installation to human knowing, and the physical presence of the art itself. As Gadamer claimed,⁶³ the art object itself does not lose its identity to shifts in human knowing that change its aspects. There remains a need for some sensuous anchor in our experience of art that cannot be entirely taken up or filled out by a curatorial or artist’s statement. The proponents of Modernist formalism, specifically Bell and Greenberg, failed to see that, as Gasché claims, “formalism cannot account for the formation of form” (Gasché, 2003, p. 61). The formation of form in experience requires an engaged consciousness that can intuit both the sensible forms of objects in the world and the conditioning of perception and consciousness by the social and historical situation of a viewing subject.⁶⁴

In this section, I have shown that form is a way of seeing, rather than the reductive set of an object’s physical properties or the equally reductive form of the idea. I have also shown that the subject is engaged in the act of forming her experience of an object as art. Taking the position that form is a way of seeing shows how it is that we may experience, for instance, an empty gallery space as art. In addition, positing form as a way of seeing is consistent with the position that we are actively engaged in the forming of our experience. The assumptions that underpin Modernist formalism imply that our experience of art is only of what we directly and passively perceive. Alternatively, a Conceptual artist like Joseph Kosuth might say that we need perceive nothing at all to experience art since “art only exists conceptually.” Both the positions that form is a way of seeing and that we are actively engage in forming our experience contrast

⁶³ “into the changing aspects of itself so that it would lose all identity, but it is there in them all. ... Thus we have the task of interpreting the work of art in terms of time” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 121)

⁶⁴ This is not to say that only those who can see, hear, feel, and smell are able to experience the aesthetic, or experience art as such. The sensible is, through consciousness and experience, available to a subject in ways that can transcend limits imposed by the body through our understanding of the information deliverable by the senses. The person who has developed in abject social isolation may, then, be less able to see than the person without sight.

with Modernist formalist's and early Conceptual artists' reductive accounts of our experience of art.

3.3 *Form and Appearance*

In chapter one, I discussed the impact of Modernist formalism's curator Clement Greenberg on art criticism and art making. For Greenberg, the formal properties of an art object provided the grounds for an objective judgment of taste. Greenberg's formalist theory of art relied heavily on his interpretation of Kantian aesthetics; in particular, Greenberg was interested in Kant's idea that we must view art with disinterest if we are to experience it aesthetically. By disinterest, Kant meant that our disposition when viewing art must be such that we have no desire for the object or what it may do for us. My position is that Modernist formalism as a theory of art adopted a view of disinterest that included not only a lack of desire but also the lack of a concept associated with an object. Modernist formalism as a theory was underpinned by the assumption that the experience of art can be reduced to that of an object's formal properties in isolation of other considerations. So, the assumption is that we can perceive an object as only that: an isolated percept with no associated concept. For such a stark perceptual experience to be possible, our consciousness of an object must be passive. I reject disinterest in art and, therefore, what role form may play in our experience of an object as art if form is only the phenomenal form of the object's unchanging aspects. It is my position that the experience of art cannot be entirely removed from the subjective conditions that enabled its forming. My position is not consistent with Modernist formalist assumptions about art as fundamentally aesthetic and autonomous, and I have shown in the former sections of this chapter that I can reject the Modernist formalists' assumptions about our experience of art without rejecting form as impactful on our experience of an object as art. I have done so by showing that the question of what role is played by form in our experience of art is not a question of the role played by formal properties but is, rather, what is the role played by form as a way of seeing in our experience of art. To shift the question, I needed to reject the position that we can perceive art with a naked eye as passive subjects and adopt the position that consciousness is, as Berleant claims, engaged and active.

As mentioned earlier, we experience both the changing and unchanging aspects of an object as art. The art object's unchanging aspects are those that have been acted on the least by the intervention of a viewing subject. The active intervention by the subject on an art object cannot be subtracted, which is to say that the formation of form cannot be undone, without losing

sight of form itself. As Rockmore points out, “It is simply not possible to subtract what the subject adds to reveal the object prior to any action to it” (Rockmore, 2011, p. 50). Modernist formalists such as Greenberg did think it was possible to subtract what the subject added to her consciousness of an object, so that her perception of an art object was disinterested, or not impinged upon by any interest or conceptual association. Both Bell and Greenberg assumed that the only significant, and therefore aesthetically valuable, form that could be found in art must be that which refers to nothing but itself. Kantian disinterested pleasure, in which the aesthetic judgment is grounded, is experienced in the absence of the interests or desires of the viewing subject, contrasts with Berleant’s view of an engaged consciousness as the grounds of an aesthetic experience. Disinterest, as a requirement of aesthetic judgment, is a way of recognising the extent to which any intuition is intervened on by, as Berleant claims, a subject’s “multiple filters of culture and meaning” (Berleant, 2010, 27). To say that consciousness is engaged, however, is not to say that it is interested. To take an interest in things in the world, we must form a set of assumptions that we arrive at prior to making decisions about how to react to objects in the world. We must take a specific interest in certain types of things, and arrive at similar decisions about their use and their nature quickly if we are to achieve even the basic end of surviving. We can do all of this, however, while remaining aware of the possibility of other experiences than the purposive and expedient. Other experiences include what we can refer to as aesthetic, and what it is to experience an object as art.

The active subject apprehends objects in the world as containing the possibility for meaning. Art objects, because they are created as objects that are about something, in that they refer to some framework of understanding outside of themselves, present a unique case for the conscious subject. An art object need not be understood as conforming to a general category in which it exists as a particular instance, other than, perhaps, a particular instance of art, for it to be about something. The way that an art object appears to us is through the cultural and historical filter that allows us to identify an object as art. The art object’s form reveals to us not only what it is that we experience as the object of consciousness but also its possibilities for being about something. This is not to say, however, that we experience only the possibility of meaning in art in a way that is purely conceptual, as Kosuth would say is the case when we experience art. As Berleant claims, the experience of art determines an object’s existence as an art object. The experience of art, particularly in the case of Conceptual art objects that challenge our definitions

of art, is an experience of an object's appearing as it is, stripped of all its determinations. These determinations cannot, however, be entirely removed, which is the position I take on what it is to experience art. That we experience an object of consciousness as art because consciousness is engaged, rather than taking a disinterested pleasure in the beautiful, from my perspective, more accurately captures what it is like to experience art.

Conclusion

The experience of an object as art is of the object and its social and historical context. From my perspective, we do not experience an object as art in the absence of these contextual conditions that make art possible. This is not to say that the object is irrelevant, or that the concept of form plays no role in our experience of art. I maintain that we experience an object as art, which is to say the full set of conditions that allow us to experience art include the object and the physical space in which it may be situated. However, a reductionist approach to explaining the role played by form in our experience of art, which was the approach taken by Modernist formalists like Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg, claims only the formal properties of an art object are significant. In contrast, Conceptual artists such as Adrian Piper, Joseph Kosuth and others made art that was not about formal properties but, rather, about the idea behind the art. It is my position that the form of an art object, whether the object is a Jackson Pollock or a performance by Conceptual artist Joseph Beuys, can be isolated to neither the formal properties nor the idea behind a work. Gadamer claims “it is not at all a question of mere subjective variety of conceptions, but of the work’s own possibilities of being that emerge as the work explicates itself, as it were, in the variety of its aspects” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 118). The experience of an object as art exposes the variety of its aspects as they are determined by our experience, which is to say the unchanging aspects of the object come together through our experience with the changing aspects of the object’s social and historical situation to form what we experience as art. Our experience of an object as art is limited by what is perceptually and contextually available to us at any particular time. The perceptual and contextual limits, in conjunction with the work’s own possibilities of being, compose the form of the object that we experience as art.

We typically encounter art as existing in both the physical space that is occupied by the object itself - the space within the object’s frame, and the institutional space that imposes constraints on our interaction with that object. Each of these spaces determines some part of our experience of the object. This notion of space within a frame can be extended to the writings of Paul Crowther who claims, “Pictorial space intervenes on [ordinary visual perception] by creating immobile figures which are isomorphic with selected aspects of the shape and mass of the subject-matter. In this way, the subject-matter is referred to, but is also, in symbolic terms, as it were bracketed off from the phenomenal flow of real time” (Crowther, 2009, p. 43). The art object, as Crowther describes it here, stands for those parts of experience that depend on a

physical presence. As “bracketed off” from the phenomenal flow of real time,” the subject matter reveals to us the changing aspects of our own existence. The unchanging aspects are experienced by a subject who is bound to her physical body and connected to an inner life, which cannot be removed from her perception, in Berleant’s sense of the engaged consciousness. The art object’s unchanging aspects point to the resilience of its physical presence. This is to say, as Gadamer claimed, that an art object does “not disintegrate into the changing aspects of itself so that it would lose all identity, but it is there in them all” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 121). The varieties of an art object’s aspects include the range of experience that is made possible by a viewing subject’s engaged consciousness. The life-world that conditions the subject’s engaged consciousness of an object that we experience as art shows itself in the object’s form as the conjunction of changing and unchanging aspects. Although our consciousness of the object can be bracketed from the phenomenal flow of life that would determine what an object is to us, we cannot separate our experience of it as art from the conditions that make consciousness and the construction of a life-world possible. This is to say that we cannot experience an object as art if our consciousness is not active or, as Berleant claims, engaged.

We require a way of being conscious of the world that can find the point at which the changing and unchanging aspects of an art object converge since, as Crowther claims, “the image not only represents its content but at the same time exemplifies something of the most general structure of the human condition itself – namely consciousness’s correlation with, and emergence from, a physical body” (Crowther, 2009, p. 27). Our consciousness emerges from a physical body, and this relationship is an irreducible part of the way we experience the objects given in the world around us. This is part of the reason that our experience of Conceptual art - as being about an idea, remains connected to our experience of an object as art. Just as our understanding of conscious experience is diminished by the absence of an account of the role played by our own physical existence, focusing exclusively on the concept or intended meaning of an art object impoverishes our experience by failing to account for the role played by the unchanging aspects of physical presence. No single aspect of our experience of art can be cut away without undoing the whole. Crowther expresses the same point by claiming, “For if a context of theory is taken to be the main determinant of artistic meaning and value, this does not explain what makes art worth theorizing about in the first place” (Crowther, 2009, p. 120, italicized in original). One part of what makes art worth theorizing about at all is the way in

which our experience of it can be, or perhaps simply is, bracketed from our experience of other objects in the world. Objects that we may quickly subsume under a general concept can, but often do not, lend themselves to such an experience, unless we are presented with a sort of intervention in the way that we typically experience purposive objects.

The gallery as a cultural institution, and such social and historical contexts that condition our consciousness of art objects, provide such an intervention. Art as revealing the unseen - the “absence” of ideas and ways of being that do not present themselves as determinate and purposive - has become, I argue, a normative institutional presentation since Conceptual art began as a movement. For the viewing subject, the art object, as a created or chosen object that is understood to embody meaning, is experienced in ways that are not exclusively conceptual because the object is itself a physical presence. The object’s presence cannot be reduced to the idea behind its making without breaking the connection between our consciousness of the object and what it, as Crowther claims above, “exemplifies of the most general structure of the human condition itself.” Our experience of art is, as Gadamer claims, “no longer just something that flows past quickly in the stream of conscious life; it is meant as a unity and thus attains a new mode of being one” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 66, italics original). Form in art is the conjunction of the changing aspects of art, on which the subject intervenes, with the unchanging aspects of the object we experience as art. Form allows us to experience art as bracketed from the regular flow of phenomenal space and time, which is why we experience art at all, regardless of its style.

To experience an object as art, we must be able to apprehend, in Berleant’s sense, through an act of engaged consciousness, both the changing and unchanging aspects of the object. Our engaged consciousness is conditioned by the social and historical context in which we are situated and through which we apprehend an object’s changing and unchanging aspects. The conjunction of changing and unchanging aspects is the form of an object we experience as art. It is, then, my conclusion that form plays the role of enabling our experience of that object as art. Form is the meeting point between what we bring with us to our experience of objects in the world and what is given to our senses by those objects in the world. Without an account of the role played by form, we would experience only the objects as they are given and not as art.

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