

## **The Paradoxical Transcendence and Aesthetic Connections of Conceptual Art**

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Conceptual art is idea-oriented and does not aim to elicit sensory pleasure. Many conceptual artworks appear plain, lacking in virtuosity, minimal, and difficult to interpret. They generate confusing messages and ask questions instead of delivering answers. Traditionally, according to Tony Godfrey, conceptual art is a distinctive movement in art history associated with the 1960s and '70s.<sup>1</sup> After the 1970s, the movement declined. Yet its characteristics have been discernible throughout the twentieth century and into the present time. Now, the definitions of conceptual art are diverse with greater acceptance of the role of artistic materials. Nevertheless, the most important quality is its idea-orientation.

This paper considers the nature and aesthetic value of conceptual art, arguing that the ideas expressed in a work of conceptual art play the most significant role in aesthetic appreciation of it. The materials and medium used by conceptual artists serve merely as a means to express and present ideas. One way to develop the necessary intellectual approach is to consider philosophical and art-historical accounts that facilitate deeper understanding of the value of idea-oriented artworks.

If we accept that the aesthetic quality of a work can come partly from the ideas it expresses, two points need to be considered. First, successful aesthetic appreciation of a work of conceptual art occurs at the conceptual level, transcending any sensory pleasure from the artwork's appearance. Second, understanding the ideas conveyed in such a work requires attention to its context, a process that links the work and its appreciators to the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 6.

To clarify these two points, in the first section, I analyze the notion of transcending the artistic medium by comparison with Plato's theory of Forms, concluding that ultimate beauty can be conceptual and can be apprehended by intellectual effort. In the second section, I consider the paradoxical status of conceptual art: although it elevates itself to the higher plane of ideas, individual works develop essential connections with their contexts. Understanding these two points will help us recognize the essence and significance of idea-oriented art.

Before we start, let's talk about the meaning and scope of conceptual art in this paper. In this essay, rather than limiting considerations to any historical timeframe, I aim to consider a wider characterization that includes various artistic presentations of ideas. For me, an artwork qualifies as conceptual art if it meets the two conditions that will be discussed in this paper: (1) transcending the physical level of the artistic medium and (2) drawing attention to a context by expressing ideas that result from a process of thought and effort. I regard as conceptual art any artwork expressing ideas that activate emotional and intellectual processes in its appreciators. As a case study, I will analyze the work of conceptual artists Hans Haacke and a work of Joseph Kosuth because of the depth of thought evident in their works.

### **Section I: Transcending the Physical Level of Conceptual Art**

I will relate the nature of conceptual art to Plato's theory of Forms. Conceptual art challenges the common idea that beauty stems from physical appearance, suggesting that a work's ultimate aesthetic value is independent of its physical appearance (including the artistic medium and materials used). Conceptual art's emphasis on independence from its medium aligns with Plato's theory of Forms.

Firstly, let us briefly review Plato's theory that the attributes of Forms are purely ideal, conceptual, abstract, and timeless. For Plato, to grasp the Forms, it is necessary to use the intellect. In the world of Forms, all Forms are perfect and eternal, while all material things in the physical world are imperfect copies of Forms. All beautiful things share a single quality, which can be understood only through the intellect.<sup>2</sup> The beauty of any body is an impetus to a transcendent understanding of the Form of beauty, which is purely conceptual. Plato's word for *beauty* in Greek is *kalon*, which means more than physical beauty, representing rather a kind of beauty that combines with goodness, dignity, and wisdom. The word entails simple, eternal, conceptual, moral, and intellectual qualities. Aesthetic value is stripped away from the sensory level and located at a higher level accessible through intellectual efforts. Conceptual art provokes us to activate our intellectual capacity for interpretation. It enriches our intellect and leads us to intuit beauty beyond appearances.

Plato's views suggest an answer to the puzzle of why a work lacking in artistic craftsmanship may nevertheless be of high aesthetic quality: *kalon* is independent of physical appearance. All beautiful things share the same quality of beauty, which is purely conceptual. We have access to it only through our intellectual competence: "[H]e should realize that the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of any other and that if he is to pursue beauty of form, he'd be very foolish not to think that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same."<sup>3</sup>

On the physical level, the beauty of one thing looks different from the beauty of another, like the beauty of a flower is different from the beauty of a sunset. But exercising the intellect to

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Plato on Love: Lysis, Symposium, Phaedrus, Alcibiades, with Selections from Republic and Laws*, trans C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2006), 210b.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Plato on Love*, 210b–c.

apprehend the essence of ultimate beauty reveals that all beautiful things in the physical world share in the same beauty as ultimate beauty in the world of Forms, which transcends any one particular understanding. Plato called beauty at this level “the great sea of beauty,”<sup>4</sup> the common beauty that appears in every beautiful thing. “The result is that he will see the beauty of knowledge and be looking mainly not at beauty in a single example... but the lover is turned to the great sea of beauty...”<sup>5</sup>

The same is true every time we look at a meaningful artwork: we know it has meanings go beyond mere virtuosity, evoking ideas that spur appreciators to contemplation and deeper thought. We tend to search actively for any meanings of the work. The connection we form to the artwork as we seek to interpret its meaning is an intellectual connection. This is because the ultimate level of beauty is conceptual, on a level with the conceptions and ideas that such artworks challenge us to engage. The beauty of a conceptual artworks goes beyond beautiful appearances. It is *Kalon*—the ultimate beauty—that appreciators actively exercise one’s intellect to engage and interpret the meanings of the artwork’s ideas which are the source of aesthetic appreciation. It is the same that appreciators use the intellect to transcend to the conceptual level of the Form of beauty.

Still, transcendence to the conceptual level constitutes only one point of overlap between conceptual art and Forms. It does *not* mean that conceptual art’s physical or general qualities are perfectly ideal, like the qualities of Forms. Although the ideas that conceptual artworks express may be timeless, such as ideas about love, courage, or happiness, the art objects themselves, which exist in the world of things, are neither perfect nor unchangeable. Furthermore, some

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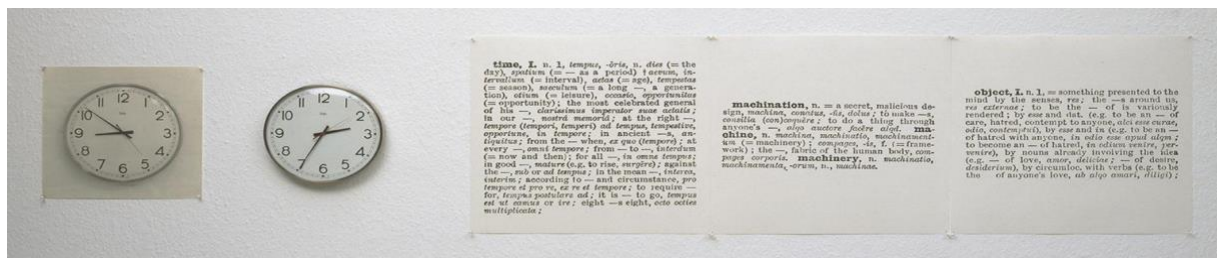
<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Plato on Love*, 210d.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Plato on Love*, 210d.

conceptual artists set out to present ideas about fragility, imperfection, cowardice, bodily appetites, or other negative attributes of real human life. While the essence of these works exists in something like Plato's ideal realm, their content relates to issues in the real world.

This leads to a further respect in which conceptual art diverges from Plato's account: Platonic Forms distinctively alienate themselves from the physical world, with implications of segregation. In contrast, despite reaching in its essence beyond the material level, conceptual art develops strong connections with its context in the minds of its audiences. The meanings it points to are not isolated like pure abstract qualities. Hence, the ontology of conceptual art is itself a paradox, transcending to the conceptual level yet related to matters in the material world. Conceptual art thus embraces the contradictory relationship between ideality and materiality. It does so, in many cases, by expressing ideas that are not mere ideal concepts but narrate real-world matters or stories. When, as appreciators, we engage intellectually with an artwork, we consider the ideas it presents as subject matter relating to phenomena in the world. Conceptual art connects the ideas it delivers to the very physical world it transcends, thus descending from the ideal back to the material.

To illustrate, let's consider Joseph Kosuth's work *Clock (One and Five), English/Latin version* (1965). This work presents one idea about time but consists of five objects: a picture of a clock, the actual clock, the definition of time in English and Latin, the definition of machination, and the definition of object. The concept of time is rigid and ideal, yet, at the same time, time is always related to phenomena in the world and to humans. A clock is just an indicator of time; we can recognize time from the machine, or object, that is the clock. This artwork shows the imitation, the object itself, and its definitions, which articulate representations of *time* and *clock* from many perspectives.



Joseph Kosuth, *Clock (One and Five)*, English/Latin version, 1965

Here, the relation of the work to the world is obvious. The photograph of the clock and the clock itself are ordinary objects, which are considered imperfect copies according to Plato's account, yet facilitate our understanding of the concept of time. The languages, too—used here to express relevant concepts—are related to people and societies. Changing languages by switching between English and Latin can change our feelings or our understanding of the concepts explored by the work. The contribution of this paradoxical juxtaposition of ideality and materiality is to lead appreciators to think more deeply about the concepts and their verisimilitude.

## Section II: The Analysis of Conceptual Art and its Context

In this section, I will develop the two issues of the context-relatedness of conceptual art and the kind of process through which its ideas emerge. This development of context-relatedness will provide a better understanding of the paradoxical transcendence. Let us begin with the impact of contextual relations: shifting attention from materials to ideas has a significance beyond moving our focus from art objects to concepts. It also changes our attitude toward art itself and the role of artists. Artists are not only creators of artistic objects but also explorers and developers of ideas. Perceiving art can shape our attitudes toward the world; *specifically*, when perceiving conceptual art, appreciators primarily feel fascinated by ideas:

what the artist's idea inspires or contributes, the presentation or representation of the ideas, and how the artwork quickens or deepens our thought about certain ideas. Joseph Kosuth, Gabriele Guercio, and Jean François Lyotard explains:

What makes an artist, or other thinker, important is what he has contributed to the history of ideas. The issue itself isn't radicality, since that's only a value judgement, but it is how much one has enlarged the scope of our understanding of the area of endeavor—that is what a contribution consists of.<sup>6</sup>

Extending this line of thought, Kosuth, Guercio, and Lyotard also analyze A. J. Ayer's assertion that artists have no particular involvement with physical properties.<sup>7</sup> The two issues they engage with are 1) the way art can provide “conceptual growth”<sup>8</sup> and 2) the capacity of propositions to follow this growth logically. This highlights how, beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, art became able to serve a new function, motivating appreciators to engage with it intellectually, linguistically, and logically. Here, the term “conceptual growth” relates to the ideas or concepts an artwork expresses, the meanings and presentations of which can be appreciated through considered interpretation.

Furthermore, the paradoxical nature of conceptual art, descending to the world, shows that art cannot be autonomous: appreciating art is not just perceiving its forms but relating to its idea to its contexts. Benjamin Buchloh explains how crucial it is that the character of conceptual art transgresses the dominance of visual appreciation and the belief that aesthetic experience is autonomous and self-sufficient.<sup>9</sup> This new invitation to appreciate artworks in relation to external

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Kosuth, Gabriele Guercio, and Jean François Lyotard. *Art After Philosophy and After* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991), 84.

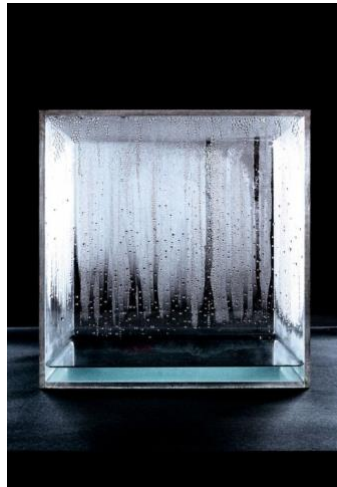
<sup>7</sup> Kosuth, Guercio, and Lyotard, *Art After Philosophy and After*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Kosuth, Guercio, and Lyotard, *Art After Philosophy and After*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (1990): 128, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778941>.

ideas or background opens more space for art to engage freely with the backgrounds and personal experiences of artists and appreciators alike. This development also changes the role of appreciators from mere receptors to co-creators of artworks' meanings. Recognizing the inevitable involvement of ideas with contexts means denying the autonomy of art because every artwork makes reference to some information about the world.

To illustrate, let us consider Haacke's *Condensation Cube* (1963–1968), in which water condenses and evaporates inside a cube. This deceptively simple work appears autonomous and minimalist, yet by incorporating the continuously unfolding water cycle, it challenges our traditional assumptions that a statue is solid and unchanging, capturing a single moment. The aesthetic experience comes not from the visual beauty of the cycle but from the interpretive work involved in contemplating that cycle and the emancipation from our expectations of a statue.



Hans Haacke, *Condensation Cube*, 1963–1968

For greater clarification, let us consider Haacke's own explanation of this artwork: “[t]he conditions are comparable to a living organism which reacts in a flexible manner to its surroundings. The image of condensation cannot be precisely predicted. It is changing freely,



bound only by statistical limits. I like this freedom.”<sup>10</sup> The artist intentionally created a system of the water cycle with its own unpredictable internal freedom. No one can control the cycle occurring inside the work.

Buchloh further finds that *Condensation Cube* does not merely represent an object; instead, it demonstrates a “bio-physical system”<sup>11</sup> connecting the spectator, the art object, and the architectural box. It also shifts attention from the sensory pleasure of a visual experience to an established *system*. Haacke subverts our usual relationship to it by placing it within a limiting cuboid. When appreciators look at it, they cannot help observing the dynamic system within the cube, turning their attention to a phenomenon that is normally overlooked. In the limited space of the cube, the gradual change within the system is unusually evident. This leads to contemplation and interpretation of natural phenomena of water.

The role of a system in this artwork is not accidental; systems are crucially significant for Haacke. In creating his artworks, Haacke uses a concept he calls “systems analysis.”<sup>12</sup> As he explains: “I use the word ‘systems’ exclusively for things that are not systems in terms of perception but are physical, biological, or social entities which, I believe, are more real than perceptual titillation.”<sup>13</sup> This sheds light on the thoughtful, complex nature of his artistic inspiration. For him, the term “systems” refers not to mechanical systems but to groups of things or entities he sees as interconnected. The creative process behind his works is deep and

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<sup>10</sup> The Art Story Foundation. “Hans Haacke German Conceptual and Multimedia Artist,” accessed April 6, 2023, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/haacke-hans>.

<sup>11</sup> Buchloh, “Conceptual Art,” 134.

<sup>12</sup> Jeanne Siegel, “An Interview with Hans Haacke,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, 242–747 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), 243.

<sup>13</sup> Jeanne Siegel, “Interview,” 243.

systematic—an illustration of how conceptual art communicates, not random ideas, but consequential ones that emerge from a substantial thought process.

Haacke so deeply internalizes his systematic framework that he need not refer to it consciously during his creative process for it to inform his creations. The conceptions or ideas that shape an artist's work appear to produce a flow leading to the completion of the creative process. These meaningful thoughts and cognitive value can be linked to conceptual art's transcendence beyond its medium to the realm of ideas: the aesthetic experience of such art involves a process of complex feelings and conceptual development. *Kalon* embraces not just perceivable beauty but also intellectual fruitfulness. *Kalon* can be grasped when we exercise our intellectual capacity. Yet, from the top of the ladder, Haacke's work descends back into the world by reflecting the life we are living.

To illustrate the descendance to worldly contexts, let's consider Haacke's *A Breed Apart* (1978), seven photographs modified from advertisements by the former car manufacturer British Leyland. The dignified advertisements and the added depictions of the South African apartheid system in which the company participated provide a contrast between the artificial splendor of marketing and an uncomfortable reality. This work of art evokes phenomena in the world that the artist has studied, in this case unveiling contradictory perspectives on the company.



Hans Haacke, *A Breed Apart*, 1978

There are at least two possible interpretations here. First, the work is asking us which perspective on British Leyland we should primarily adopt. Should we see it as a luxury automobile company or a group of immoral international capitalists? Second, the piece straightforwardly reflects the unethical practices behind the feelings of grandeur that the brand sought to represent. A further interesting point is that all the photos of real circumstances are black and white, while the advertising photos are in color. This contrast meaningfully represents the contradistinction between the inconvenient truth and the company's colorful, splendid untruths. Artificial settings can be beautiful while the reality behind them is ugly. This work stimulates us to consider a broadly applicable scenario from many different angles. The work's representational approach sharpens the appreciator's thoughts in a fascinating way: its presentation of the contrast motivates reflection about the underlying insight.

## **Conclusion**

The Platonic account of transcendence facilitates clearer comprehension of the higher dimension or level of aesthetic appreciation opened up by conceptual art. Despite its setting aside of the physical level of expression, conceptual art is remarkable in the paradoxical nature of the transcendence it catalyzes, reminding appreciators of their fundamental relationships to worldly issues even as it takes them beyond sensory experience. The paradoxical transcendence of conceptual art highlights the impossibility of its own self-sufficiency. The artist's role is to forge a pathway of ideas. The artists set up their own conceptions or systematic frameworks for creating their art. They invest effort and thoughts in their works in order to express substantial ideas to their audiences in meaningful ways.

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