Experience and Testimony in the Criticism of Conceptual Art

Matthew Rowe*
City and Guilds of London Art School

Abstract. The paper begins with suggesting that offering critical views on artworks that one has not directly experienced is generally seen as illegitimate, critical practice. It's then remarked that criticism based exclusively on experience is not generally viewed as being similarly illegitimate. This prompts the questions why? And whether this is justified? The 'problem' for this model of conceptual art is then raised: The paper argues that for such works, experience alone may not be sufficient, and may in fact be as unwarranted and as unreliable and/or illegitimate as the critic writing about a film he has not seen. It's argued that this is because for such works experience is a less reliable source of good critical judgments than a theoretical engagement. For conceptual works, cognitive understanding of the artwork and its context of production and presentation might be the optimum basis of our critical remarks. This is described as a dispute about the source of valuable testimony for artworks. The conclusion is drawn that the basis of our critical testimony needs to be indexed to individual artworks, and reflective of their ontology. Finally it is suggested that ontological disputes or uncertainties will cause critical disputes and uncertainties, because all critical judgements presuppose ontological commitments. Moreover, it's suggested that the process of building a consensus about the appropriate basis of criticism for a work can function to fix its ontology where this might be unclear or in dispute. Some problems with this are outlined. The conclusion is that a varied model of critical engagement is needed for criticism.

1. Introduction – Legitimate Critical Practice

A film critic who writes a negative review of a film without having seen it, a theatre critic who writes a review of a play without having experienced a production, an art critic who reviews a show she has not attended, or the

* Email: m.rowe@cityandguildsartschool.ac.uk

literary critic who dismisses a work without reading it. Each are examples which would attract our disapproval, and cause us to say that the critics had derelicted their duty *as* critics. Perhaps rightly so: Perhaps because it would indicate bad critical practice. Bad critical practice because reviewing and opining *without* experience is not a reliable basis upon which to offer judgements.

This remains the case when the critic did not experience the work but nevertheless based her opinion on *some* form of evidence, or testimony or background knowledge not able to be gained through experience and where that form of evidence or testimony had previously been a reliable guide to critical, evaluative, or aesthetic judgements. Such bases of opinion might be their knowledge of an author's or director's previous style and subject preoccupations - this might work as a reliable guide and factually be a source of reliable evidence.

Even in these cases, despite the fact that our critic would most likely be right, we would still say that the practice of reviewing or criticising without experiencing remains illegitimate. This is perhaps because we need to retain the possibility of a director, playwright or artist surprising us. It's a privilege that retains to the idea of creative authorship that someone can surprise and shock us with each new offering.

At a fundamental level we need a critic to form a view and report that view based on their first-hand experience of an artwork, not simply as a shield against illegitimacy, but also because it strikes at the honesty of critics and the authority of the judgements they make.

We feel, when we read a piece of criticism that we're reading a report of another's *encounter* with an art work, an encounter of a relatively sophisticated consciousness aiming to report on a relatively complex artefact which should draw out, or suggest, aspects of a similar encounter we could have with that same artefact. That encounter is usually not one we consider ourselves to have had, or could generate ourselves, if we have not *ourselves* appropriately experienced the artwork. Thus we look to the critic to speak from a *more* informed viewpoint than we ourselves occupy and to learn, or at least be informed, by the insights they generate from, and as a result of, their honest encounter with an artwork so that we might be encouraged or discouraged from having a similar encounter with that artwork. Without an experience the critic is placed in the same position as

us, as a person willing to offer an opinion on an artwork they have not encountered. And why should their opinion be worth any more than ours?

Of course, this is not the only reason why we might read criticism - but it is one key reason why we do. The point remains that the critic speaks on the basis of an encounter with the artwork and that this is the basis of their authority to opine.

These thoughts suggest that *not* basing opinions on personal experience will not amount to an appropriate encounter with an artwork and will undermine the critic's claim to authority. The thoughts further suggest that, both for us and the critic, any claim of an appropriate encounter would be dishonest if it did not include having experienced an artwork. Hence, the opprobrium we heap on those that judge without knowing, or who at the very least have a secure basis for their critical judgements: It suggests disrespect for the possibilities of creative authorship, and the exercise of *prejudice* rather than the exercise of *judgement*, and worse, of prejudice *disguised* as judgement.

Given this, let us now consider a critic that bases their opinion exclusively on their experience of an artwork, without recourse to other any other forms of background evidence or testimony, such as the author's previous works, or some general or applied theoretical approach. All this critic uses for judgement is his experience of this work, within a general knowledge about other artworks, artistic genres etc.

2. The Necessity of Experience?

The exclusive use of experience as a basis for criticism is *not* subject to a similar level or kind of opprobrium as the non-experiencing critic. In fact, a critic simply reporting their experience of an artwork, taking what she is presented with on its own terms as an artwork of a certain sort, is considered to be a legitimate form of critical practice, with a legitimate basis. It often generates a certain sceptical, gruff, no nonsense "I refute it thus" viewpoint in the face of supposed artistic innovation. Conversely, there is also the thought that a sufficiently skilled and perceptive critic has become such a connoisseur of their domain of expertise that experience will suffice to generate a valuable encounter.

Indeed, the interactive web is full of people offering their opinions about whatever they like. There, reports that range from "I didn't like it – it bored me" to long (and sometimes sophisticated) critiques sit side by side on the page and this interactivity is valued, in part, for its ability to bring together reports of different subjective experiences and opinions on a single topic. However, these sources remain regarded in the mainstream as unreliable locations for quality critical judgements about artworks, no matter what the quality of individual submission precisely *because* the comments in the main remain locked in to the subjective experience of the commentator: They provide what amounts only to an account or report of the commentator's experience and their assessment of that experience. The comments do not, in general, inform *me* about the work or provide an account of what it would be for me to have an encounter with the artwork, both of which I suggest are minimum requirements of a critic purporting to convey an encounter with an artwork. In short, they are reports that are more about the comment author than they are about the work commented on and so provide a guide to the commentator's taste and opinions rather than the work's character and quality. Usually, moreover, I have no reason to trust their reports of their experiences, let alone the judgements they make – there is no presumed authority.

Nevertheless, the *fact* of experiencing an artwork can provide a legitimate basis to offer critical comment on a work, no matter how minimal that criticism might be in terms of critical engagement. None of the online commentators are acting illegitimately, they're simply acting without authority. In terms of critical practice, the most basic opinion offered on the basis of experience is more legitimate than the greatest insight formed without experience. In fact, a review based exclusively on experience is only definitely illegitimate if the person's opinion and experience has proved to be consistently unreliable as a source of testimony so that we literally think they do not know what they are talking about – because they make category mistakes of the order of mistaking a fiction for a documentary etc. Anything more than that and a person remains someone with a legitimate critical practice, but just a really bad critic.

There is a similar disparity in the weight and legitimacy allocated within sophisticated critical responses between sense-based testimony from experience and testimony from non-sensual or background sources, such

as descriptions of the artwork, aesthetics, artistic or critical theory. Where reactions to artworks based on the stand-alone testimony of sense-experience can potentially be legitimate, those based on secondary sources that lack any aspect of sense experience cannot be legitimate.

There are obviously some wrinkles in this, but broadly, there is a basic cleavage here: Criticism based on experience is legitimate, whereas criticism without experience is illegitimate. Remember, this is not about the *quality* of the insights but the *legitimacy* of the process.

It appears therefore that an experience of an artwork is *necessary* (and possibly sufficient) for a critic to legitimately claim an encounter with an artwork, whereas the sole reliance on descriptions, theory or some other kind of background knowledge is *not* necessary and *cannot* be sufficient for a claim of an encounter with an artwork that grounds a legitimate critical judgement.

Why might this be? One reason might be an underlying aestheticism in what we want from criticism, so a critic highlights, notices and conveys to us the *aesthetic* import of an artwork, so that we in turn, get an idea of what *we* might experience should we experience the artwork the critic is describing and judging. In other words that communicating the features and value of an *experience* of an artwork is what is important in conveying an encounter with an artwork. This, in turn, may be due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of artworks across most art forms have been designed to be experienced within an aesthetic framework. If true then this apparent reliance upon a basis of experiential testimony as a basis for critical judgement may be warranted and unproblematic.

However, we have to consider whether this is an appropriate approach for the criticism of *all* forms or genres of artwork and whether experience is necessary for the criticism of all forms of art or rather whether it simply reflects where we happen to be in art's unwinding history. I talk of course, of conceptual art and those works for which, in Timothy Binkley's words (Binkley, 1977, 266) "The description tells you what the work of art is, you now know the piece without having seen it" or for which "We do not have to experience the work to fully grasp its import".[1]

[1] Binkley (1977) is only one such text that points this out and is used as an example of a continued tradition of thought.

3. The 'Problem' of Conceptual Art

Binkley's comments would apply to both work for which the aesthetic is an afterthought or a seemingly unimportant feature but which nevertheless has a focus that is a material object of some sort (such as Duchamp's ready-mades) and those works which are *purely* conceptual – i.e. instructions or descriptions of states of affairs. Both kinds of artwork have of course been made within our actual art history and made *as* those kinds of artworks. In some cases, of course, which category a work falls into, and precisely which artworks fall within each category, might be unclear – but I will discuss this below.

The basic questions I want to address are: (I) Is it *necessary* for a critical engagement of one of these kinds of artworks to be based on, or include, an account of a first-hand experience? (II) Does a critical engagement based exclusively on a critic's experience of one of these kinds of work suffice as a critical approach? (III) Could an engagement with one of these kinds of works that did not include an element of experience be legitimate or warranted?

The cases I will make in answer to these questions are: (I) No, experience may not be necessary for an adequate critical engagement with some of these kinds of work. (II) Experience alone may not be sufficient, and may in fact be an unwarranted and unreliable basis for a critical practice in respect of these works. (III) Given (I) and (II) that a profound critical engagement with such artworks may be possible solely through recourse to a cognitive understanding of them through descriptions, background information and theory.

As an aside at this point, I should clarify that I am not talking about, in a coded way, the merits, scope or necessity of the 'acquaintance principle'.[2] The discussion here is about the questions of the basis of criticism of different kinds of artworks, which is thicker than the basis of making aesthetic judgements about artworks. It is possible to argue that we should retain the idea the necessity of acquaintance for aesthetic judgements, but

[2] The classic reference for the 'acquaintance principle' is Wollheim (1980, 233) where it is stated thus: "...judgements of aesthetic value, unlike, judgements of moral knowledge, must be based on first-hand experience or their objects and are not, except within very narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another". Konigsberg (2012, 155) contains a good genealogy of subsequent articles.

to limit its scope to certain kinds of work, or certain kinds of judgement. Alternatively it's possible to argue that acquaintance with certain kinds of work is achieved through, for example, reading about them (this is true of a novel of course).

It's here that the distinction between artworks for which the aesthetic is a minor component and those that are purely conceptual comes into its own. For the latter, it could be argued that if a work is a set of instructions, or a specification of conditions, then reading those instructions or conditions in a book gives an acquaintance to the work and I would agree with that. This is a question however, that relies on the critic having a secure knowledge of the work's ontology, which may not always be the case, or indeed, may not be easy to secure. Indeed, the claim that without a secure ontology for an artwork it's hard for critics to know how to go about criticising artworks *is* a topic of this essay that I will address below. Therefore, since what might count as acquaintance in each case may remain up for grabs until ontology is secured, I will not be substantively discussing the merits or otherwise of the acquaintance principle here.

To return to the main thrust of the paper, an idea of the proper appreciation of artworks that includes experience as a necessary component stands revealed as problematic, if not downright inappropriate, in some cases. For those works for which their aesthetic value is incidental to their artistic value and the pure conceptual works, the presumptions of our critical practice should be different, with the relationship between experience and theory reversed so that there is a presumption *against* the necessity of experience and *for* the necessity of theory in what counts as an adequate encounter with an artwork.

This is because legitimacy is ultimately connected to reliability and quality: For some kinds of artworks experience is a less reliable source of good critical judgements than is a thoroughgoing theoretical engagement. In fact, a purely experiential engagement with such works might actually focus on the wrong aspects of these artworks and provide a distorting guide as to what an engagement with them would be like and what is of value about that artwork. As an example of this potential risk I, slightly unfairly, point you towards the example of George Dickie's discussion (Dickie 1974, 42) of Duchamp's *Fontaine* which concentrates on the aesthetic qualities of the urinal as a material object, without mention-

ing its contextual, institutional or art historical properties, when it is of course, precisely those properties that make it seminal to the history of art and which differentiate *Fontaine* from all the other urinals in the world, whatever their individual aesthetic qualities as material objects.

A critical practice that relied wholly on experience, when focused on *Fontaine*, would, by focusing on it as an aesthetic object, almost completely fail to engage with it an artwork. The presumption of such an empirical sense-based foundation to the idea of how to encounter an artwork may be a contributing reason to the familiar journalistic outrage whenever public funds are spent on seemingly aesthetically meagre works and also perhaps why such works provide such slim pickings for the casual browser in their gallery context – since we cannot see, as we stroll the rooms, the machinations of theory that got the work into the gallery in the first place.

This discussion worries at a dispute about the source of valuable testimony for conceptual art. There are questions we can ask ourselves to test the appropriateness of our method of critical engagement. Do I need to have experienced any of these works in order to understand and appreciate them as artworks? Will experiencing any of these works enhance my thinking about any of them as an artwork? Do I think that it could even contribute to my understanding and appreciation of them as much as reading a whole bunch of art history and art theory? Would being able to say things about such works when faced with them as objects alone give me kudos about my sensitivity and the profundity of my pallet? For *Fontaine* et al, the answer is a repeated 'no!'.

4. The Indexical Model of Criticism

So far I have tried to show that an exclusive focus on experience will not provide fruitful testimony for critical opinions about this particular kind of art. The next question to ask is whether a critical response which was based solely on background knowledge and/or theory, could possibly provide a legitimate basis for an encounter with an artwork.

I suggest that it could. The converse of the Dickie example – in which the purely sensory approach runs the risk of concentrating on critically unimportant aspects of the artwork – may be true too: That a purely *cog-*

nitive, conceptual and theoretical engagement with an artwork could be sufficient:[3] It's not implausible to imagine a critical essay full of relevant art and aesthetic theory that explained why a particular conceptual work might be good and what work it was doing as an artwork, that was purely based on desk research and which was completely unaffected and unimproved by the author's pilgrimage to see, take in and respond to, some piece of documentation about its original presentation in some obscure archive. So, in these circumstances it would be legitimate for a critic to state: "This is an essay about an artwork I've never seen" and for this to have *no* negative impact on either the worth of the judgement she comes to, or the quality of the encounter with a work she puts forward, or her honesty and authority as a critic for that matter. Indeed, I contend, that it could demonstrate a critical acumen that would heighten the reader's trust in her authority.

What this in effect proposes it that the notion of an encounter with an artwork can come about for some works exclusively via descriptive, non-sensory cognitive knowledge and background theory. So, I suggest, for conceptual works proper, and those where the aesthetic object may of incidental import, knowing the concept, understanding the documentation, understanding any cognitive work the artwork is doing (including the perhaps allusive and suggestive philosophical ideas put forward), the context in which it was produced and presented might be the *optimum* basis of our critical remarks. It might be *that* which provides the basis for a description of an encounter with an artwork of this sort. For these works it's this kind of engagement that stands in the position that experience does for most other artworks.

This point can be widened to a discussion of how to decide the legitimate basis of our criticism, in terms both of what that basis should be in general and what it should be in individual cases. The question is what do we need to *do* to make our criticism at least potentially legitimate and to provide reasons why our pronouncements might *not* be legitimate?

This prompts a suggestion: We now cannot have a single model for good critical practice based on prescribed or established ways of engaging with artworks. Rather, what counts as a legitimate basis for critical testimony needs to be indexed to individual artworks, and reflect the ontology

[3] Indeed, this is the point that Binkley (1977) is making at the beginning of his essay.

of individual artworks. We need a thoroughly indexical and contextualized view of what counts as legitimate basis for critical judgements, where experience is not the only source of valid testimony, where knowledge and theory can come in too and in some cases can be given more weight than experience and sometimes used exclusively with experience discarded altogether.

We need to recognize varied bases of critical testimony arising from the varied kinds of artworks that have been, and are being made. Moreover, as I shall now set out, we need an idea of a critical encounter that is indexed to individual artworks and, in order to reflect some artwork's peculiar ontological circumstances, for what actually counts as an encounter with an artwork to be constantly subject to challenge and revision.

5. The Relationships Between Criticism and Ontology

There are some works for which deciding the basis of an appropriate critical encounter will be difficult because there are ontological disputes or uncertainties about their identity. We may not know, or at least have a secure basis for knowing, what of the cultural artefact and information presented to us is the artwork and what is documentation about the artwork. Alternatively, we may not yet have a settled view about what it is we are supposed to be focusing on or what kind of artwork something is.

These will cause *critical* disputes and uncertainties *because* their ontology is in dispute or uncertain, or because of their uncertain identity conditions as a certain kind of artwork. This is because until we know *what* an artwork actually is and *what* it does, we cannot know which aspects of the work we ought to examine to make critical judgements about it as an artwork or as an artwork within a definite art form. We could all too easily fall into the 'pretty urinal' trap without knowing it, and mistake an aesthetically uninteresting object for an artistically interesting one.

Such critical disputes might happen at various levels. One is an ontological uncertainty at the level of category[4], where confusion can arise about what sort of artwork a particular work is. The other is within a category, in which although we know what sort of artwork it is, we are unsure

[4] Here, of course, by 'category' I mean to refer to (Walton 1971, 334-367)

of the identity conditions of the artwork, so confusion can arise about what aspects presented actually constitute the artwork. Indeed, some artworks might so be radically underdetermined by their context of presentation and so indeterminate at both ontology and identity levels that the first question to ask is if it is even an artwork at all? Indeed for some artworks, confusions and ambiguities at any and all these levels might in fact be their point *as* artworks.

Let us assume we know that we are dealing with things we know are artworks. Even then, once the certainty of category is lost there are myriad routes to dispute. So for example, one could mistake a visual artwork about literature for a literary work, a lecture for a performance, or an installation for a sculpture, or mistake a particular instance for a timeless specification. In terms of identity, examples of mistake might include mistaking documentation for the work itself, (or vice-versa), or mistake the circumstances of one presentation of the work as an integral part of the work.

So, in all sorts of ways we might do what was deemed illegitimate at the beginning of this talk – try to provide a critical engagement with an artwork that requires a certain foundation without that foundation – and it's that which undermines *any* project of criticism we might engage in. So, it's as true for conceptual works or incidentally aesthetic works as it is for all works - that what can be said about a work *depends* upon what it is taken to be. All critical judgements presuppose ontological judgements, in that they assume knowledge of the object of judgement and the correct method for judging, given that ontology. Some works however, It's just that these works make this problem explicit and pressing in ways that most other artworks do not.

However, there is a deeper mutual relationship between criticism and ontology. This is because what an artwork is taken to *be* also depends on what gets said about it through our encounters with it. We are used to thinking that classifying something within a *genre* guides appreciation but, I argue that the basis of *appreciation* of a work can help guide category, form, or genre ascriptions as well so that the two projects reflect and inflect each other. This means that criticism can go so far as determining genre membership and in some cases actually create new genres or subgenres of artwork as well as helping determine what parts of an artwork are, or become, the appropriate focus of critical attention. For artworks

for which their ontology and/or identity are uncertain, underdetermined, or indeterminate then, I claim, this approach of ontologically constitutive criticism will be the primary, if not only, route towards consensus about what those works are *and* how they should be approached critically.

This mutual dependence between criticism and ontology will result in (and requires) a consensus to build up around works emerging from on a kind of reflective equilibrium between the two projects. This will gradually hone in on an accepted basis of critical enquiry for a particular work and simultaneously provide it with some determinate identity conditions that once settled get used as the basis for the ongoing critical debate about that work– similar to that which has grown around *Fontaine* to show that it's *not* a sculpture of a urinal but rather a 'readymade' where that category has been ascribed to that artwork (and others like it), retrospectively, on the basis of fecundity of criticism. This means that category membership, or genre ascriptions, are judgements of art history, or judgements at least that have an art historical slant, made on a narrative basis, rather than reports of non-institutional facts. In this case, and others like it, consensus has been reached through a process of critical engagement with *Fontaine* in the time since it was originally made. *Fontaine* was made as a dismissive comment on the pretensions of sculpture of the day but has been *interpreted* into a readymade. What's interesting about *Fontaine* as an artwork is that it forces us to engage in this explicitly constitutive critical project.

However, until this kind of consensus has been established then it's not clear *how* we could say *which* kind of critical approach might work and what the precise critical approach should be so that we can form a view of what's necessary for an encounter with any particular work. It would not be surprising to see disagreements among critics about (i) whether this consensus creating project required a grounding in the experience of the aesthetic object, or (ii) only required an atmosphere of general and applied knowledge and theory, or (iii) precisely how the mixture of the two (the approach that is appropriate for the vast majority of pieces) should be applied. This is because that before this consensus is established every judgement about the work is also a claim about what kind of artwork it is and its precise identity conditions. For the vast majority of works we do not notice this because, by virtue of their formal presentation to us as a definite artwork thing within a settled category their ontology is settled

and with it the method of critically engaging with them is settled too, so they do not force this project on us. For some works this is not the case, and established methods of critical engagement may not be appropriate, and disputes can rage and the project is forced upon us.

When the project is forced upon us, it requires a host of practical decisions focused on the particularities of specific artworks: For instance, if a work is, or appears to be, documents and specifications, then engaging with it means reading and understanding these documents, but this of course in itself requires an exercise of judgement and a comparison perhaps between different critical approaches that concentrate on different aspects, or give different weightings, to what is actually presented to us. The work may contain words, but these may not need to be understood as language, they may be visual representations only – and then of course, they may not even be an integral part of the work. So we ask questions such as: If the work is the concept or the proposition, then how come the documentation or record of it looks so damn pretty? Have the documents been designed to compliment anything else? What happens when an attempt to fabricate or enact a specification given 30 years ago? Can anyone make their own version of this? Are the works it uses of literary value etc, etc? For a specification of conditions to apply, is it a particular utterance of those conditions by a person at a time in a place? Or are simply the instructions on how to construct an instance of the work? Is it the utterer's utterance or simply the utterance?

Indeed, we can expect emperor's new clothes type approaches and purely theoretical approaches that end up lost in theory, both failing to provide any kind of account of an encounter with the work at hand. It's up to the critic and to the cumulative project of criticism to find a consensus about where and how the greatest encounter with an artwork comes.

So, this project – of using judgements about the legitimate basis of critical testimony to indicate genre whilst using presumptions about genre to underpin that basis of criticism - needs us to be open to revisionist theories about what artworks are and to weigh these against the work theories are doing. On occasion there will be a period of battle between ontology or identity and criticism about what we might call the soul of a work - it's point, what work it is doing, the artistic project it is involved in, the lineage it might be able to claim - and this battle will go into substan-

tive questions of whether we interpret to maximise the value of a work to extent of changing the presumed kind of work it is, or whether we say that some critical efforts simply overbear a rather uninspiring work with spurious levels of supposed theoretical interest. What is crucial to realise is that these critical discussions will be making, implicitly or explicitly, claims about the ontology of these works.

As it stands there is a danger of circularity in this project of consensus building between criticism and ontology: The legitimacy of criticism is that which generates and determines the thoughts about artwork ontology and identity and the judgement of the fecundity of critical judgement will depend on the presumed identity of the work and the appropriate focus of critical appreciation. However, the ability for critics over time to change their view not only about the quality of an artwork *as* an artwork of some certain kind but also about what kind of artwork it actually is and the weights they give these perhaps competing claims, should avoid a circle. The battle does not happen in the abstract, it happens through history and each time a critic makes a point of criticism and presumes an encounter with an artwork of a certain sort, that critic is committed to a firm position and can be challenged from another firm position by someone else who says – "no looked at *this* way, as a work that does *this*, gives us *this* kind of result, and it's better."

6. Conclusion

Embracing this method of critical engagement that is indexed to particular artworks, means we can provide bespoke weightings of theory and experience for each artwork as we come across them, in all the different genres and forms of art and provide a way to think about *all* artworks within a single rubric derived from the basis of legitimate criticism. One upshot might be that the basis of reliable critical testimony can be used as a tool to begin to provide a pragmatics of a functional philosophical definition of a conceptual artwork couched in terms of the valid bases of its criticism, when there is genuine confusion or uncertainty about its ontology. On this account an artwork is a conceptual artwork if the testimony with the exclusive or primary weight in critical judgements are cognitive, and

based on descriptions, background knowledge and theory, rather than aesthetic and based in an experience; where a theoretical and cognitive engagement with the work is *necessary* and where a sufficient encounter with it as an artwork does not require testimony from a first-hand experience of something other than the descriptions (indeed, this may count as 'acquaintance'). If it does not meet these conditions then we could say that qua philosophical discussion of it, it's *not* a conceptual work.

So for instance, some performances or happenings, or curated instances that appear in the chronologies of Conceptual Art it *would* make a qualitative difference to their appreciation to include first hand testimony about what they were like to attend and participate in at the time and place of their original presentation: An indication perhaps for us philosophers that these works are somewhat like a theatre performance – an event in a definite space time location - rather than like a script, that gives instructions for staging a performance. That's not say of course, that it wouldn't be mightily interesting if subsequent artists or curators or galleries or museums didn't try to treat it as if it were like a script and re-present it under different conditions.

There's some difficulty to see how some art forms could contain purely conceptual works where experience simply was not germane to a critical engagement and so fell out of the picture – the immersive nature of film for instance might mean that no matter how minimal or absent the content, the experience itself would add to the artistic qualities of the work and be required to convey an engagement with that film. As with performance art pieces, there's clearly something in sitting in a cinema staring at 20 minutes of blank screen that make experiencing such works akin to Cage's 4' 33" - an artwork that's actually *very* dependent on experience, and in fact, in true minimalist style, making problematic the idea of the audience's contextual experience of a work.

What this paper may ultimately have been about is the point of criticism itself. The project of criticism I've sketched out includes many different methodological models and sources of testimony and evidence – sometimes looking and thinking, sometimes looking, reading and thinking, sometimes reading and thinking, but maybe not looking – what we need for criticism is the commitment to a varied model of engagement of artworks and to be aware of what methods aid us and what methods mis-

lead us – and moreover, what the overall project is that they are aiding or misleading us in. Underlying much of the discussion has been the thought that the point of criticism is to demonstrate a thoroughgoing engagement with artworks that illuminates what those artworks are, tells us how and why they do the art work they do, and tells us why they are valuable *as* art and *to* us. Engagement with the artwork is finally what we want testimony of and what we think the critic's duty is to provide. How critics achieve this however, is up for grabs every time an artwork is made. Very occasionally in discharging this duty a critic may tell us more than how to appreciate the work, it also provides clues about what the work is and force us all to reflect on whether we have been approaching it correctly, or indeed whether we know what it is and what it's doing. We are always left with the challenge of the work.[5]

References

Binkley, Timothy (1977) "Piece: Contra Aesthetics", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, pp. 265-277.

Dickie, George, (1974) *Art & the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press.

Konigsberg, Amir (2012) "The Acquaintance Principle, Aesthetic Autonomy, and Aesthetic Appreciation", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 52, pp. 153-168

Russell, Bertrand (1974) *Satan in the Suburbs & Other Stories,* Guild Books.

Walton, Kendall (1970) "Categories of Art", *Philosophical Review*, vol. 79, pp. 334-367.

Wollheim, Richard, (1980) *Art & Its Objects*, 2 Ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[5] I'm grateful for the comments of the audience at the European Society of Aesthetics conference in June 2013, in particular Robert Stecker and Diarmuid Costello, for improvements they made to this paper.