

Can Kant's Aesthetics Accommodate Conceptual Art?

A Reply to Costello

IOANNIS TRISOKKAS*

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

Abstract

Diarmuid Costello has recently argued that, contra received opinion, Kant's aesthetics can accommodate conceptual art, as well as all other art. Costello offers an interpretation of Kant's art theory that demands from all art a minimal structure involving three basic "players" (the artist, the artwork, the artwork's recipient) and three basic "actions" corresponding to those "players." The article takes issue with the "action" assigned by Costello's Kant to the artwork's *recipient*, namely that her imagination generates a multitude of playful thoughts deriving from or in any other way relating to the concept or idea that the artist has instilled in the artwork and that the artwork transmits to the recipient. It is argued that the "proper" recipient of conceptual art may very well have a multitude of thoughts that are all *irrelevant* to the concept or idea the artist has instilled in the artwork, even if the artwork has transmitted that concept or idea to the recipient. This shows that Kant's art theory, as presented by Costello, cannot accommodate conceptual art. I conclude by suggesting that either one of two amendments to the theory's account of the recipient's experience could enable it to accommodate conceptual art.

Key words

Kant; conceptual art; ideality; kindred thoughts; aesthetics; Costello

* Ioannis Trisokkas is Assistant Professor (Chair of Kant and Hegel) in the Department of Philosophy of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in Greece. Email: i.d.trisokkas@gmail.com.

1. Introduction

Can Kant's aesthetics accommodate conceptual art? The standard view in the artworld, influenced by the work of the prolific art critic Clement Greenberg, is that it cannot (Greenberg 1986-1993, 1999). Greenberg presented Kantian aesthetics as an instance of *aesthetic formalism*, the view that an object is art *solely* because of the intuitable aesthetic attributes of its sensible form rather than because of any intellectual content or idea it might possess (Wood 2005, p. 158).¹ For the formalists "art is made [solely] to be looked at" (Wood 2002, p. 15) and its affect is the aesthetic *feeling*, which is an element opposed to thoughts or ideas.² Wood puts it well, when he writes that in aesthetic formalism there is an "exclusive focus on the aesthetic," to wit, on the artwork's sensible form (Wood 2002, p. 28). *Conceptual art*, by contrast, is usually understood as that kind of art that "foregrounds art's intellectual content, and the thought processes associated with that content over its form" (Costello 2007, p. 93). Historically, conceptual artists reacted against "claims that painting 'appealed to eyesight alone', that visual art's 'primordial condition' was that it is made to be looked at" (Wood 2002, p.28), and emphasized the *ideas* that come to the fore in artistic experience (without, of course, denying the existence of the artwork's sensible form). As Wood expresses it, in conceptual art "the Idea was king" (Wood, 2002, p. 33) - contrastingly, it may be said that in formalism "the sensible form (the aesthetic) was king" - and in the famous words of Kosuth (cited in Wood 2002, p. 35), "the actual works of art are the ideas." Lewitt, equally famously, writes that "in conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work" (Lewitt, 1967, p. 12). These characterizations of "aesthetic formalism" and "conceptual art" are incompatible, hence the deduction that Kantian aesthetics (which Greenberg takes to be an instance of aesthetic formalism) cannot accommodate conceptual art.

In a couple of essays published in the second half of the 2000s (Costello 2007, 2009), Diarmuid Costello made a convincing case *against* Greenberg's identification of Kant's aesthetics with modern aesthetic formalism. Indeed, that Kant understands the artwork as an aesthetic *idea* that "prompts much thought" (CJ 5, p. 314)³ or, again, "give[s] the imagination a momentum which makes it think" (CJ 5, p. 315) gives a decisive blow to that identification. It follows that the above "deduction" must be rejected and the question "can Kant's aesthetics accommodate conceptual art?" can be raised once again.

In those same essays Costello defends an affirmative answer to the question. He does this by providing an interpretation of Kant's art theory and arguing that this theory, so

¹ Consider here Ad Reinhardt's "formalist" assertions that "art as art" is "emptied and purified of all other-than-art meanings," that the less art relates to thought the better for it, and that "art as art" contains "no ideas" as its "essence" (Reinhardt 1953, 1962). This attitude goes back to Clive Bell's and Roger Fry's "formalism," who isolated the essential feature of art as "form," "significant form" for Bell, "expressive form" for Fry. As Wood observes, "for modernists, it is not too much to say that the aesthetic was the be-all and end-all of art, its unique and proper area of competence" (Wood 2002, p. 26)

² "[M]odernism [i.e. modern aesthetic formalism] had been an art of sensation, something that aspired to undercut learning and language at the level of the emotions" (Wood 2002, p. 33).

³ I cite Kant's *Critique of Judgment* using the standard Academy pagination and the abbreviation *CJ*. The translation is Pluhar's. I use the Pluhar (Hackett) instead of the standard Guyer and Matthews (Cambridge University Press) translation of the *Critique of Judgment* because it is the translation Costello uses.

interpreted, applies to conceptual art in the same way it applies to all other art. Despite the novelty of Costello's essays and their importance concerning the attempt to bring Kant's aesthetic theory in dialogue with modern art, there has not been, as far as I know, even a single discussion of them. In the present article I take issue with Costello's affirmative answer to the question and endeavor to convince the reader that Kant's art theory, as presented by Costello, applies neither to conceptual art nor to all other art. Nevertheless, I conclude by arguing that, if Costello's Kant accepts either one of two amendments to his art theory, the latter can be said to be able to accommodate all art, including conceptual art.

A number of things should be noted before I commence. First, it must be emphasized that I am not interested in judging the correctness of Costello's interpretation. So, I will not examine whether or not his interpretation survives scholarly scrutiny. My sole concern is whether Costello's interpretation, *accepted as it is*, justifies his affirmative answer to our question. So, the title question should be understood to mean, more precisely, "can Kant's aesthetics, *as interpreted by Costello*, accommodate conceptual art?"⁴

Second, as it will become apparent, Costello's Kant understands art as involving three basic "players": the artist, the artwork, and the artwork's recipient (spectator, listener, etc.). He also understands their basic "action" as follows:

- (a) the artist creates the artwork and instills therein an idea;
- (b) the artwork affects the recipient through the "aesthetic attributes" of its sensible form and thereby transmits the artist's idea to her mind;
- (c) the recipient "expands" that idea into a multitude of playful thoughts that are "kindred" or "related" with that idea.

Each of these "actions" is a *necessary condition* of art and therefore if an object is to be labelled an *artwork*, each of these "actions" must be satisfied. It is *not* stated that these "actions" are also sufficient conditions, so there may be also other elements that need to be materialized before one is able to label an object "art," according to Kant. However, an examination of the sufficient conditions of art in Kant's art theory will have to wait for another occasion.

Third, although the whole discussion is based on my understanding of Costello as suggesting or implying that the above conditions are necessary conditions of *art*, the objection I will raise against his position would undermine it even if he took those conditions to be necessary conditions of *beautiful* or *good* or *successful* art. This is so because the counterexamples I will provide are not threatened in any way by the supposition that Costello regards the paradigmatic examples he provides in support of his

⁴ Costello's interpretation of Kant's art theory is controversial (as pretty much everything is in Kant scholarship) in that it understands Kantian aesthetic ideas as concepts or ideas that are received first as images and then as thoughts via the artworks' sensible form. A similar interpretation can be found in Rogerson 2008. A contrasting interpretation is Wood's (Wood 2005, pp. 151-170), which takes Kantian aesthetic ideas as being images that are *completely* free of concepts. For an excellent discussion of the debate see Rogerson 2008, pp. 7-24.

argument as works of beautiful or good or successful art rather than simply as works of art.⁵

Fourth, to answer fully the question “can Kant’s aesthetics accommodate conceptual art?” one must examine *each* of the aforementioned three “actions” *in relation to conceptual art*. In the present article, though, I will take the first two “actions” as granted and focus solely on the third. Therefore, my critique of Kant’s art theory, as interpreted by Costello, targets neither Kant’s conception of the artist’s activity nor how he views the artwork’s affecting the recipient *but rather only how he understands the experience of the artwork’s recipient*. It follows that no objection to my argument can be raised that addresses either the thesis that the artist causes the presence of an idea in the artwork or the thesis that the recipient’s thoughts are caused by the artwork. It cannot be suggested, for example, that the recipient’s thoughts could have a different source than the artwork. These claims, which are by no means unproblematic, are simply taken for granted here and hence the reader should simply go along with them.

The focus of the paper is the “action” of the recipient of conceptual art. This “action” is that the recipient “expands” the idea she receives causally from the artwork into a multitude of playful (loose, not fully developed) thoughts that are “kindred” or “related” with that idea. The term “recipient” will throughout signify the recipient of art who pays full attention to her artistic experience and is not absent-minded or in an illusory or indifferent state of mind and, moreover, does not impose her own individual practical or theoretical interests on this experience, namely who is truly “disinterested” in the Kantian sense (CJ 5, pp. 204-205). This is a “proper recipient” of art (or, if you will, of beautiful or good or successful art). The reader should understand the term “recipient” to mean throughout “proper recipient” in the specific sense I have just explained. I am not interested in “improper recipients” and all specific recipients thematized in the paper will be “proper” ones.

I proceed as follows. Section 2 presents Costello’s interpretation of Kant’s art theory. It is stressed that for Costello’s Kant *any given* “proper” recipient of an artwork has a multitude of playful thoughts (caused by the artwork) that are *kindred* with the particular idea the artist has instilled in that artwork. Section 3 makes the point that there are “proper” recipients of art other than conceptual art whose imagination generates a multitude of playful thoughts that are *irrelevant* to the particular idea the artist has instilled in the artwork. Section 4 argues that conceptual art is no different from all other art on this issue: there are “proper” recipients of conceptual art whose imagination generates a multitude of thoughts that are *irrelevant* to - or, if you will, *not* “kindred” with - the artwork’s ideal content. Therefore, Costello is wrong: Kant’s aesthetics cannot accommodate conceptual art. Section 5 discusses a rejoinder Costello could offer to the conclusion of the previous section. It is argued that the rejoinder must be rejected. Finally, in section 6 I discuss two amendments to the Kantian art theory and claim that either one of them could enable it to accommodate conceptual art, as well as all other art.

⁵ This observation settles a worry raised by an anonymous reviewer of *Con-Textos Kantianos*. In relation to this see also footnote 9 in this paper.

2. Costello's Interpretation of Kant's Art Theory

In this section I present Costello's interpretation of Kant's art theory (Costello 2007, 2009). The basis of Kant's art theory, according to Costello, is the claim that artworks are "aesthetic ideas" (Costello 2007, p. 101; Costello 2009, p. 128). Kant defines "aesthetic idea" as follows:

[By] an aesthetic idea I mean a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought,⁶ but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no concept, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it. (CJ 5, p. 314)

The claim that the artwork is an aesthetic *idea* determines the artwork in a twofold manner, namely with respect to its content and with respect to the way it presents that content through its sensible form (Costello 2007, p. 101; Costello 2009, p. 128). (The adjective "aesthetic" in the term "aesthetic idea" refers to the *form* of the artwork (rather than to its content).) Let me discuss these two aspects in turn:

(i) With respect to its *content*, the artwork is determined either as a complete concept or as an idea. (a) A *complete concept* is an everyday concept whose objects can be presented in intuition but which, as soon as it becomes an artwork's content, acquires "a completeness that experience itself never affords" (Costello 2007, p. 101). At this juncture, Kant refers to the poet who ventures to give concepts such as death, envy, love and fame that *are* exemplified in experience "sensible expression in a way that goes beyond the limits of experience, namely with a completeness for which no example can be found in nature" (CJ 5, p. 314). (b) An *idea* is a mental element whose object cannot be presented in intuition, such as the idea of freedom (Costello 2007, p. 101; Costello 2009, p. 128). Kant writes that, when their content is an idea, artworks "do at least strive toward something that lies beyond the bounds of experience and hence try to approach an exhibition of rational concepts [i.e. ideas]" (CJ 5, p. 314). There is, then, a difference between complete concepts and ideas: while complete concepts have objects that are intuitable, ideas have objects that are not intuitable. There is also a similarity between them: they are both totalities or wholes, capturing everything there is to capture concerning something (e.g. death or freedom). It is this totality that is missed when complete concepts are presented in intuition. Ideas, in their turn, are never presented in intuition. The artwork has the ability to present to the mind an approximation of the totality of both complete concepts and ideas through the mediation of sensible form. This brings us to the issue of the presentation of the content of the aesthetic idea.

⁶ Wood goes from Kant's claim that an aesthetic idea is a mental presentation to which no concept is adequate to his own claim that an aesthetic idea is "free from any concept" (Wood 2005, p. 165). But how can a presentation that, as Kant here says, "prompts much thought" be "free from any concept?" Not surprisingly, Wood takes this claim back at the end of his chapter on art, writing that aesthetic ideas "give a kind of sensuous expression to moral or religious *ideas* that properly speaking transcend the capacity of our senses to represent them" (Wood 2005, p. 168, my emphasis).

(ii) With respect to *the way it presents its content* through its form, the artwork is determined as an object that “expands” the concept or the idea it has as its content “by virtue of the indirect means through which [it] embod[ies] [it] [i.e. the concept or idea] in sensible form” (Costello 2007, p. 101). In other words, the artwork, by means of its sensible form, “expands” the concept or the idea it has as its content. Crucially, this “expansion” refers to the relation the recipient has to the artwork’s content: the latter is “expanded” *in the recipient’s mind*. The “expanded” concept or idea is *not* identical with the complete concept or the idea that is the artwork’s content. It amounts only to a process of *approximating* it, hence Kant’s claim that no concept can be adequate to the aesthetic idea (the artwork). As noted, neither the complete concept (as *complete*) nor the idea can have a presence in intuition. Yet, what distinguishes the artwork regarding its content’s presentation is that through its “aesthetic attributes” (i.e. its sensible form) it leads the recipient’s imagination to generate a potentially endless series of thoughts (hence Kant’s claim that “an aesthetic idea [...] prompts much thought”) relating to the complete concept or the idea that is the artwork’s content. The phrase “expanded concept or idea” refers exactly to this “endless relating.” As Kant puts it, through its “aesthetic attributes” (sensible form) the artwork expresses its content’s “implications” and “kinship with other concepts” (CJ 5, p. 315). These characterizations are crucial for our forthcoming discussion. For Costello’s Kant, the endless series of thoughts the recipient’s imagination generates are (somehow) *implied* by the complete concept or the idea that is the artwork’s content and are *kindred* concepts. The important thing for us is that for Costello’s Kant the thoughts the recipient has - thoughts which have been caused by the artwork - have a “kinship” with the concept or the idea of the artwork. To say the least, what the recipient thinks when she is affected by the artwork *concerns* or is *about* - in one way or another - the particular concept or idea the artist has instilled in the artwork. This *aboutness* is peculiar to the art theory Costello ascribes to Kant.

Note here, also crucially, that when Costello’s Kant speaks of *the* recipient’s experience, he means *any given* recipient’s experience (Costello 2007, p. 103). “The recipient” is the general “proper” recipient, *any given* person who has “proper” experience of a real artwork. So, Kant’s art theory, as interpreted by Costello, contends that *any given* “proper” recipient’s imagination generates an endless series of thoughts which are kindred with the artwork’s conceptual or ideal content.

To clarify what it means for the artwork to be an aesthetic idea, Kant gives the example of an artistic depiction of “Jupiter’s eagle with the lightning in its claws” (CJ 5, p. 315). According to the above, this artwork must contain an idea, which is then “expanded” in the recipient’s mind when she experiences the artwork’s “aesthetic attributes.” This idea, Kant tells us, is the idea of God’s majesty (CJ 5, p. 315). The “expansion” is possible because the artwork’s “aesthetic attributes” (its form) have a certain *affinity* with what Kant calls the “logical attributes” of the complete concept or the idea which is the artwork’s content, in this case the idea of God’s majesty. This affinity has the specific character of “a *metaphorical* expression” of the logical attributes “through which [metaphor] we are encouraged to envisage God’s majesty in the light of the thoughts provoked by Jupiter’s

eagle, thereby opening up a rich seam of further associations” (Costello 2007, p. 102). Recall here that this “rich seam of further associations” is (somehow) implicated by or derived from the idea comprising the artwork’s content and, therefore, that the “associations” are “kindred” with one another *and with the idea*. The “associations” are *about* or *of* the particular idea the artist has instilled in the artwork. As Kant himself puts it,

aesthetic attributes [...] prompt the imagination to spread over a multitude of kindred presentations that arouse more thought than can be expressed in a concept determined by words. These aesthetic attributes yield an *aesthetic idea* [whose] proper function is to quicken [or enliven; *beleben*] the mind by opening up for it a view into an immense realm of kindred presentations. (CJ 5, p. 315)

Artworks, then, as aesthetic ideas, are distinguished from other things by their capacity to present complete concepts or ideas in intuition through their “aesthetic attributes” (sensible form) in such a way that, as noted in the above excerpt, “the imagination is spread over [an endless] multitude of kindred presentations.”

To clarify this even more, Costello adds another example to Kant’s own: a consideration of Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People to Victory* (1830) (Costello 2007, p. 102; Costello 2009, p. 129). The content of this well-known painting, Costello tells us, is the idea of freedom. Its “aesthetic attributes” bring forth – metaphorically – this idea in such a way that any given “proper” recipient’s mind initiates a potentially endless stream of thoughts *about freedom*. This is Costello’s own application of Kant’s theory to Delacroix’s painting:

[Delacroix’s painting] is a sensuous embodiment of the idea of freedom. The aesthetic attributes through which freedom is personified in the guise of “Liberty,” and shown leading her people to victory (fearlessness, spontaneity, resoluteness, leadership, all attributes of an active self-determining will) while holding a flag, symbol of freedom from oppression, aloft in one hand and clutching a musket in the other, serve to “aesthetically expand” the idea of freedom itself. By presenting freedom metaphorically in the guise of “Liberty” in this way, freedom is depicted concretely as something worth fighting for, indeed, as something requiring courage and fortitude to attain. Through the expression of ideas in this way, Kant claims, works of art “quicken the mind” [...]. [A]esthetic ideas stimulate the imagination to range freely and widely over an “immense realm of kindred presentations.” As such [aesthetic ideas], works of art stimulate the mind, albeit in a less structured way than determinate thought, by encouraging us to think *about such ideas* in a new light. (Costello 2007, pp. 102-103, my emphasis)

Costello specifies here that the “expansion” of the complete concept or the idea in the recipient’s mind is “less structured” than the development of a concept by means of philosophical or scientific thinking (cf. Wood 2005, p. 166). The mental “associations” that the recipient’s imagination generates are “freely” interconnected, that is, in a playful, interrupted, undeveloped or underdeveloped, loose manner. Yet, we should always

remember that this “free” relationality or interconnection is not as free as to ever break the relation or “kinship” (the *aboutness*) with the complete concept or the idea that is the artwork’s content. The “kind of free-wheeling, associative play in which the imagination moves freely and swiftly from one partial presentation of a concept to another” (Costello 2007, p. 103) remains always tied to the complete concept or the idea the artwork has been infused with. This is why Kant labels the “free play” generated by the artwork “the free play of imagination *and understanding*.” The understanding maintains a connection to the imagination’s “spread[ing] over a multitude of kindred presentations that arouse more thought than can be expressed in a concept” (CJ 5, p. 135) precisely by securing that the multitude of presentations the imagination generates is a multitude of *kindred* presentations or, as Costello puts it, “*partial* presentation[s] of a [i.e., *one*] concept” (Costello 2007, p. 103; for more on the “free play” understood in this way see Rogerson 2008, pp. 20-23). In the words of the above long quotation, artworks cause us to think “in a new light” but always “about *such* ideas.”

The “immense realm of kindred presentations” (CJ 5, p. 315) that the “free play of imagination and understanding” generates in any given “proper” recipient’s mind gives rise to a “feeling of life” in that recipient. This is a “feeling of mental vitality” that mirrors the feeling the artist had when she made the artwork, that is, when she created an aesthetic idea (Costello 2007, p. 103; Costello 2009, p. 131). What enabled the artist to create an aesthetic idea and thereby both acquire and pass on to the recipient “the feeling of life” is her “genius”. Genius is a faculty of the mind that, as Kant puts it, “discover[s] [aesthetic] ideas for a given concept” and “hit[s] upon a way of expressing these ideas that enables us to communicate to others [...] the mental attunement [...] those ideas produce” (CJ 5, p. 317). As Costello has it, “genius [...] is the ability to ‘communicate’ the free play of the faculties [...] and thereby occasion a similarly enlivening cognitive play in the work’s recipient” (Costello 2007, p. 103). It is also important, though, that genius “communicates” the free play of the faculties without getting out of the boundaries of the “given concept” for which it develops the aesthetic idea.

This, in a nutshell, is what Costello’s Kant thinks about art: the artwork is created by an artist who instills in it or maybe associates it with a particular concept or idea in such a way that its “aesthetic attributes” (i.e., its sensible form) cause any given “proper” recipient’s mind to generate an immense multitude of *kindred* thoughts, to wit, thoughts (somehow) deriving from or implied by that particular concept or idea and hence being *about* or *of* it. This account of art involves three basic “players”: the artist, the artwork, and the recipient; and three basic “actions”: the artist’s creating the artwork and instilling a particular idea in it, the artwork’s affecting the recipient aesthetically and transferring this idea to her mind, and the recipient’s “expanding” the idea into a multitude of playful thoughts that are kindred with (that are about or of) that particular idea.

Costello argues that Kant’s art theory, *so interpreted*, can accommodate conceptual art, as well as all other art (Costello 2007, 2009). This simply means that, like all other art (or beautiful or good or successful art) does, conceptual art involves minimally (and, therefore, necessarily) the aforementioned three basic “players” and three basic “actions.” In what

follows I grant Costello's Kant the claim that art (or good art etc.) minimally involves these "players." I also grant him the basic "actions" of the artist and the artwork (although they actually face several philosophical difficulties and objections [see Schellekens 2017]). I focus on the third basic "action" – the "action" of the *recipient* – and argue that Kant's account of it, as presented by Costello, can be challenged both as an account that supposedly applies to conceptual art and as an account that supposedly applies to all other art (or good art etc.).

3. Why the Kantian Art Theory cannot Accommodate *All Art other than Conceptual Art*

In the present section I argue that Kant's account of the recipient's experience, as presented by Costello, is false as an account that supposedly applies to *all* art other than conceptual art. Recall that for Costello's Kant the "proper" recipient's experience, consisting of kindred thoughts, is a necessary condition of art and is caused by the artwork. As seen, Costello supports his interpretation of Kant with two examples: any given "proper" recipient's experience of the artistic depiction of Jupiter's eagle and any given "proper" recipient's experience of Delacroix's *Liberty*. I will show that the examples do not hold and that this proves that Kant's account, as presented by Costello, cannot be said to apply to *all* art other than conceptual art.

Before I focus on the examples, let me note the important point that Costello himself acknowledges that the question what art fundamentally involves has very little to gain from answers given by the artists *qua* artists:

[T]he art world [...] [has the] unfortunate tendency to take works of art at their producer's word, when artists are about as interested, and hence potentially as *unreliable*, guides to their own artistic achievement as one could hope to find. (Costello 2007, p. 111, n. 43)

This means: what the artists say about what makes their work art (or beautiful or good or successful art) should not be accepted uncritically or as the final word on the matter. Costello does well to point this out, because if he did not, the Kantian art theory he proposes would immediately collapse. For the *formalist* artist claims that what makes an object art are *solely* its "aesthetic properties," its sensible form, rather than any conceptual or ideal content. Since Kant's art theory, as presented by Costello, (a) contradicts aesthetic formalism and (b) aesthetic formalism would be true, according to what "formalist" artists claim, the Kantian theory would not be universal, as it claims to be.

Costello's point regarding the value of the artists' statements is relevant here because it applies also to the issue of the recipient's experience. Whether Kant's account of this experience is true or false should be decided by considering, not the claims of the artists, but rather the logical or rational facts about such an experience. With this caveat in mind, let us now turn to Costello's examples.

Recall that Kant's art theory, as presented by Costello, demands that *any given* "proper" recipient has the specified experience. I will now refer to possible cases - in fact, *really*

possible cases (to use a Kantian notion), because they can be materialized in the present world without any alterations - that undermine the necessity of this demand.

First, let us posit a recipient called Doris. Doris observes and reflects on an artistic depiction of Jupiter's eagle with the lightning in its claws. She is not absent-minded, is very serious about artistic appreciation, and has absolutely no practical or theoretical interest that could cloud her judgment in this case. She is, therefore, fully "disinterested" (in the Kantian sense) and a "proper" recipient of art. Yet, while in this occasion Doris's imagination generates several thoughts, playfully connected with one another, *these thoughts are completely unrelated to the idea of God's majesty*. What she actually thinks of is the idea of the dominance of nature over man. She also thinks of the kingdom of birds and the endless variety of their species. This gives rise to her having multiple thoughts on the concept "bird" and the concept "flying." The important thing is that while Doris does indeed have a multitude of playfully interconnected thoughts, as the Kantian theory demands, these thoughts exhibit no relation whatsoever to the artwork's particular content. Since it cannot be denied that this is Doris's real experience of the depiction of Jupiter's eagle, does it follow that this depiction is not art, as the Kantian account would have us believe? (Recall that for Costello's Kant the "proper" recipient's experience is *caused* by the artwork and consists of thoughts that are *kindred* with the idea of the artwork. This is a necessary condition of art.) Yet, if Costello's Kant claimed this, there would be a contradiction, because the example has been used by him precisely in order to clarify what it means for an object to be art (or good art etc.): Costello's Kant would in this instance claim both that the depiction of Jupiter's eagle is art and that it is not art.

Second, let us posit another actual recipient called Steven. Steven is a historian of art and is therefore aware that when he experiences Delacroix's *Liberty*, he should think of freedom in a variety of ways. Yet, when Steven visits the museum this morning and comes face-to-face with Delacroix's masterpiece, his mind thinks of anything but freedom: he thinks of the nature and concept of colour, his childhood friends and the concept of friendship, the anatomy of the human body and the concept of body in general, and many other things *irrelevant to the idea of freedom*. Steven was in this occasion very focused on his artistic experience, was not absent-minded or in a state of illusion, and no practical or theoretical interest of his interfered with his experience in any way. He was, therefore, a "proper" recipient. Does this experience of a "really possible" recipient show, as Costello's Kant would have us believe, that Delacroix's painting is not art? Again, an affirmative answer would generate a contradiction, for Costello has used the example precisely in order to clarify what it means for an object to be art (or good art etc.): Costello's Kant would in this instance claim both that Delacroix's painting is art and that it is not art.

The above two cases are meant to show that the Kantian account of the recipient's experience, as presented by Costello, cannot accommodate *all* art other than conceptual art. Recall that for Costello's Kant the "proper" recipient's mind is caused by the artwork to have a stream of playful thoughts that are *kindred* with the complete concept or the idea the artist has instilled in the artwork. Such kinship (or "aboutness") is, moreover, a necessary condition of art. The above counterexamples have shown that there is art (or good art etc.)

affecting some recipients in such a way that they have a multitude of thoughts, playfully interconnected, that are *irrelevant* to the artwork's particular conceptual or ideal content. This result does not exclude the possibility of a positive answer to the question "can Kant's aesthetics accommodate *conceptual art*?". Yet, it has now been made clear that Kant's aesthetics, as interpreted by Costello, can be said to accommodate conceptual art *only* if there is something about conceptual art that *prevents* any given "proper" recipient's imagination from generating a multitude of playful thoughts *that are all irrelevant to the complete concept or the idea that is the conceptual artwork's content*. To this issue I now turn.

4. Why the Kantian Art Theory cannot Accommodate Conceptual Art

In the present section I argue that Kant's account of the recipient's experience, as presented by Costello, is false regarding conceptual art. To show that Kantian aesthetics *can* accommodate conceptual art, Costello considers *Index 01*, also known as *Documenta Index*, the most famous work of Art & Language, exhibited first in 1972 (Costello 2009, pp. 130-131). This is how Costello describes the artwork:

Documenta Index consists of a cross-referenced index of the group's writings on art to that date and of the relations between them. [It] originally took the form of eight small filing cabinets, displayed on four grey plinths, consisting of six tray-like drawers each, containing both published writings and unpublished writings [...]. These were hinged one on top of the other in a series of nested sequences determined alphabetically and subalphabetically in terms of their order and degree of completion. The cabinets and their contents were displayed together with an index listing their contents in terms of three logical relations (of compatibility, incompatibility, and incomparability) believed [by Art & Language] to obtain between them. The [index] was papered directly onto the walls of the room in which the cabinets were displayed [...]. (Costello 2009, p. 130)

Costello's point is that the basic requirements of Kant's art theory are satisfied by *Index 01* and the experience it gives rise to. Its content is the idea of an exhaustive catalogue, instilled in it by Art & Language, its creator (Costello 2009, p. 130). Its sensible form, namely the artwork's "aesthetic attributes," embodies that idea and causes the recipient's imagination to generate a multitude of playful thoughts *concerning or relating to the idea of an exhaustive catalogue* (Costello 2009, p. 130).⁷ The thoughts are *about* or *of* that particular idea. Costello stresses that this multitude of thoughts only approximates the idea of an exhaustive catalogue because, first, the logical relations between the exhibited writings are endless and, second, the production of writings by Art & Language continues after the exhibition (which means that *Index 01*, at any moment of its existence after the

⁷ Note that all conceptual artworks, according to Costello, exhibit aesthetic attributes (they are not sheer ideas). This is not undermined by the fact that *Index 01* was meant by Art & Language to involve *reading*; see Wood 2002, p. 49.

exhibition, does not present an exhaustive catalogue). This agrees with Kant's account of the artwork as an aesthetic idea.

For our purposes, the important thing in Costello's account of *Index 01* is that he insists, in accord with his interpretation of Kant's art theory, that the immense realm of thoughts generated in any given "proper" recipient's mind by the artwork consists of "kindred" thoughts, to wit, thoughts *concerning or relating to the idea of exhaustive cataloguing*. Here is how he characteristically puts it:

[By] bringing all this together in sensible form, this apparently austere work of art opens up a potentially limitless array of imaginative associations: to lists, taxonomies, and typologies; to attempts at self-documentation, self-reflexivity, and (ultimately) to ideals of complete self-knowledge or transparency; to conversation, collaboration, interaction, study, and learning; and, of course, to various regimes of archiving, cataloging, and the like. As such this work "expands" the idea it embodies in ways consonant with Kant's presentation of aesthetic ideas. (Costello 2009, p. 131)

The expression "and the like" Costello employs here is characteristic of how Costello's Kant would think of the "expansion" of the content of *Index 01* in any given "proper" recipient's mind: it would consist of a multitude of thoughts that are relevant to or derive from - that are about or of - the idea of exhaustive cataloguing. Costello's understanding of *Index 01* apparently relates to the actual historical motivation of Art & Language to make the artwork a manifestation of "the 'continuum', the system, the structure-as-whole," "a kind of generic work," rather than a static moment of a whole (Wood 2002, p. 29).

This view of the experience generated causally by *Index 01* to a "proper" recipient is undermined if we consider the case of Michelle, a "really possible" "proper" recipient of this artwork. Let us posit that Michelle, who is a true lover of all things art, was there at the original exhibition of *Documenta Index* in Kassel in 1972. She was immediately hooked and spent hours examining the work's various pieces and properties and reflecting on it as a whole. "This is great art," she told herself. Yet, all that time she spent observing the artwork she actually never entertained even a single thought about or relating to cataloguing. Her stream of thoughts developed in a direction altogether different from the one described by Costello. At the very beginning she thought about writing and the "everyday concepts" of a sentence, a word, a syllable, and a letter. "Why do capital letters exist anyway?" she wondered. She then suddenly thought that writing is futile and that humans would better spend their time swimming rather than writing. She started having visions of the deep blue of the ocean and the endless variety of its animal species. While opening one of the six drawers of one of the eight small metal filing cabinets, her mind wandered into the depths of the ocean, seeing a sea cave after a sea cave, sharp rocks emerging from copses of pale green seaweed. Every time Michelle threw her gaze at the index on the wall, she thought of the stars filling the sky dome above the ocean during starry nights. She found herself reflecting on the concept of matter and the idea of infinity. To make a long story short, Michelle's experience of *Index 01* supplied her with a multitude of thoughts about the ocean, its animal species, and its environment, as well as

about writing, humanity, and infinity, rather than about cataloguing. It should be emphasized that Michelle was, by all counts, a “proper” recipient of *Index 01*: she was not absent-minded or in an illusory state of mind, she was fully “disinterested,” focused, and immersed in the experience provided by this great piece of art.

Does Michelle’s experience of *Documenta Index* show, as Costello’s Kant would have us believe, that this work is not art? (Recall that for Costello’s Kant the artwork causes kindred thoughts to the “proper” recipient’s mind and that this is a necessary condition of art.) Again, there is a contradiction here: on the one hand, Kant’s art theory, as presented by Costello, suggests that, given Michelle’s experience, *Index 01* is not art; on the other hand, Costello employed this example in order to show that Kant’s art theory accommodates conceptual art. Similar contradictions would be generated with respect to *any* piece of conceptual art. For there is no conceptual artwork for which it can be said that no “really possible” “proper” recipient can experience it in such a way that her mind would generate a multitude of thoughts that are irrelevant to its conceptual or ideal content.⁸

In this section I have argued that Kant’s art theory, as interpreted by Costello, cannot accommodate conceptual art. The reason for this is that while that theory demands that the “proper” recipient of a conceptual artwork is led by it to have a multitude of thoughts concerning or relating to that artwork’s conceptual or ideal content (“kindred thoughts”), this recipient may very well have a multitude of thoughts that are irrelevant to that content.

5. A Rejoinder and its Rejection

In the present section I consider and reject a rejoinder Costello could offer. The rejoinder is that Michelle’s experience does not amount to an experience of conceptual art (or, simply, to an experience of art or good art etc.), but rather to an experience of aesthetic formalism (which, for Costello’s Kant, is not art or good art etc.). This is so because, the assumption would be, if we exclude non-causal explanations of thinking, the recipient’s mind could have a multitude of thoughts that are *irrelevant* to the artwork’s content *only* through its being affected by a concept-less or idea-less sensible form. That is to say, Costello would reject outright the suggestion that a person who is affected by a complete concept or an idea aesthetically and whose thoughts result from this affection could have a multitude of thoughts that have nothing at all to do with that concept or idea.

The following steps show why the rejoinder fails. *First*, Costello cannot deny that it is “really possible” for Michelle to have the experience we described or that Michelle is a “proper” recipient of conceptual art (or of art or of good art etc.), for there is nothing illogical or irrational regarding such stipulation. *Second*, since Costello himself labels

⁸ As I noted in the Introduction to this paper, the same contradictions would arise even if Costello’s Kant gave us necessary conditions of *beautiful* or *good* or *successful* art instead of simply necessary conditions of *art*. The problem would have to do with Costello’s own admission that *Index 01* is beautiful or good or successful art. That he would indeed admit this follows from his thesis that *Index 01* is accommodated by the Kantian art theory. So, if he thinks that the Kantian art theory concerns beautiful or good or successful art, he *must* think that *Index 01* is beautiful or good or successful art. Michelle’s example would then show that Costello’s Kant affirms both that *Index 01* is good etc. art and that *Index 01* is not good etc. art.

Index 01 art (or good art etc.), he must accept that it is its idea or concept (rather than solely its sensible form) that causes an array of thoughts in a “proper” recipient’s mind. *Third*, since Michelle is indisputably a “proper” recipient of *Index 01* and since *Index 01* is indeed art (or good art etc.), it is necessary that the idea or concept of *Index 01* has caused the thoughts that compose Michelle’s experience. *Fourth*, it follows that Michelle’s experience does amount to an experience of conceptual art (or to an experience of art or good art etc.) and, therefore, that the rejoinder fails.

These considerations show that the characterization of Michelle’s experience as a collapse into aesthetic formalism can be avoided and that, in general, conceptual art is compatible with the causal generation of a multitude of thoughts in the recipient’s mind that are irrelevant to the content of the artwork. Nevertheless, the rejoinder has been based on the assumption that if the recipient’s mind is affected by an idea or concept (the artwork’s content), it cannot - through this affection - develop thoughts that are absolutely irrelevant to that idea or concept. Michelle’s experience shows this to be possible, but no *explanation* has been offered as to how exactly it is possible. Until such an explanation is provided the rejoinder still has some force. I suggest an explanation in the next section.

Although Costello has told us that conceptual artists’ views about conceptual art are philosophically unreliable, it is interesting⁹ to note that there are conceptual artists who ask for a recipient’s experience of conceptual art that certainly can accommodate Michelle’s experience.¹⁰ I will briefly describe the relevant views of three “first-generation” conceptual artists: Helio Oiticica, Sol Lewitt, and Daniel Buren.

Oiticica describes conceptual art as exemplifying “a totally anarchic position,” in the sense that it allows the recipient’s thinking a maximum “degree of liberty” (Oiticica 1966). Such liberty amounts to the recipient’s being offered “innumerable possibilities” of thinking. Oiticica suggests that the idea included in the conceptual artwork does not hinder *in any way* the recipient’s thinking: it can take *any* direction *whatsoever*. As he notes, conceptual art does not seek “to impose upon him [i.e. the recipient] an ‘idea’ [...], but [only] to give him a simple opportunity to participate, so that he ‘finds’ there [i.e. in a conceptual artwork] something he may want to realize.” The aim of conceptual art, Oiticica insists, is not to make us think what the artist had in mind but rather to make “man” think “within himself and [realize] his vital creative possibilities.” It is *all* about “the freedom of ‘choosing’ of anyone to whom participation is proposed.”¹¹

⁹ I do not assign any argumentative value to these views, precisely because this would be considered as unacceptable by Costello. My argument against his interpretation would go through even if the artists’ views were missing. Nevertheless, there is some value to my mentioning them: it is shown that the experience I describe in the three counterexamples is not a fiction or even a rarity, but rather an experience that is well-known to conceptual artists and even accepted or promoted by some of them.

¹⁰ There are, however, also other conceptual artists who ask for an experience closer to Costello’s terms. See Costa, Escari, and Jacoby 1967 and Piper 1967.

¹¹ In another text from the same period, Oiticica suggests something different: “the individual to whom the work is addressed is invited to complete the meanings proposed by it – it is thus an open work” (Oiticica 1967, p. 41). Nevertheless, he immediately stresses that conceptual art does not deny the artwork’s *complete* “openness,” in the sense that the recipient becomes its creator, to wit, that she thinks through it *whatever* she likes. See Oiticica (1967, p. 41, my emphasis: “Experiences of both an individualized and a collective nature

Lewitt makes it clear that the conceptual artist must ensure that “the physical and emotive power of the form” does not overpower “the idea of the piece” (Lewitt 1967, p. 15). This “idea of the piece” has originated in the artist’s mind and has directed her in making the artwork. Yet, when he turns his attention to the recipient or “the viewer,” Lewitt states that

it doesn’t really matter if the viewer understands the concepts of the artist by seeing the art. Once out of his hand the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. (Lewitt 1967, p. 14)

So, Lewitt does not ask from the recipient of conceptual art to think *only* “the concepts of the artist” or even to think them *at all*: she is free to think *whatever*. What is important is *only* that “it is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator” (Lewitt 1967, p. 12) and that “conceptual art is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions” (Lewitt 1967, p. 15). *Pace Costello’s* understanding of the experience of conceptual art, Lewitt suggests that this “engagement of the mind” can be achieved even if the recipient of conceptual art does not understand “the concepts of the artists,” that is to say, even if the recipient follows a stream of thought that is irrelevant to the complete concept or the idea the artist has instilled in the artwork.

Finally, in an interview conducted by Georges Boudaille, Buren emphasizes that “the observer” has the power to “anonymize” or “neutralize” the artwork and thereby find and reflect on only herself in the artistic experience (Boudaille 1968, p. 69). In this case, “a fantasy would be projected, a personal view would take precedence over what is shown” (Boudaille 1968, p. 70) – that is, the fantasy and personal view of the recipient. In fact, when pressed by Boudaille’s relentless questioning, Buren clarifies that this is also the conceptual artist’s aim, to wit, to give the recipient the freedom to provide her own interpretation – *whatever* this is – of the artwork: “it is understood that the thing to be viewed must signify itself *without the help of the creator*, regardless of the relevance or the beauty of this individual’s [i.e. the creator’s] personal view” (Boudaille 1968, p. 70). To achieve this, Buren employed the technique of repetition, which can “depersonalize [...] the thing displayed” and turn it into something “neutral, anonymous, and [which] refers to nothing but itself” (Boudaille 1968, p. 70). The conceptual artist, Buren insists, “[does] not want to force the spectator” to think a particular idea (Boudaille 1968, p. 71) but only to force him “to reflect” (period!) (Boudaille 1968, p. 69). Indeed, when Boudaille expresses a view similar to Costello’s, namely that for conceptual art “the artist [...] obliges the spectator to adopt his thought patterns” and that “he leads, channels the spectator’s thoughts down the route that he wishes,” Buren describes such behaviour as “an attack on the mind of the individual” and complains that “it forces [the recipient] to have the same

tend towards increasingly more open propositions in the sense of this participation, *including those which tend to give the individual [i.e. the recipient] the opportunity to “create” his [own] work.*”

dream as [the artist]" (Boudaille 1968, pp. 72-73). Conceptual art behaves in an altogether different way, Buren concludes: it does not "insult" the recipient by imposing ideas on her. It rather presents her with "something neutral" so that she can become "free" and "choose" for herself (Boudaille 1968, pp. 74-75).

6. Two Amendments to the Kantian Art Theory

I end the article by suggesting that either one of two amendments to the Kantian art theory, as presented by Costello, would enable it to accommodate all art, including conceptual art. Note, however, that this would hold only under the condition that the artist's and the artwork's "actions" are as Costello's Kant says they are: the artist *causes* the idea in the artwork and the artwork *causes* the thoughts of the recipient. There are several philosophical problems associated with the way Costello's Kant determines these "actions," but the preceding discussion has been developed under the condition that those determinations are, in one way or another, true. We have thus been able to illuminate the question of whether Kant's aesthetics can accommodate conceptual art solely *from the perspective of the recipient's "action."* The discussion of the two amendments is meant to be sketchy and to function as a prelude to future work on this issue. One thing that needs to be examined but that, due to space limitations, will not be examined here is whether these amendments are compatible with other fundamental tenets of Kantian aesthetics. Having this caveat in mind, let us now see what the amendments are.

(1) The first amendment is that the Kantian art theory, instead of asking that *any given* "proper" recipient has multiple playful thoughts that are kindred with the particular conceptual or ideal content of the artwork, rather asks that *at least one* recipient has multiple thoughts in this way. With this amendment the Kantian theory can accommodate all art. This is so because in exactly the same logical way we posited a "really possible" recipient who has multiple thoughts that are irrelevant to the artwork's conceptual or ideal content, we can logically posit for *any given* artwork a "really possible" recipient who has multiple thoughts that are *kindred* with that artwork's conceptual or ideal content. This amendment changes the Kantian art theory from (a) a theory that assigns the title "art" (or, if you will, "beautiful" or "good" or "successful art") to an object only if *all* "proper" recipients of this object have multiple playful thoughts that are kindred with the conceptual or ideal content of the object to (b) a theory that assigns that title to an object even if *only one* "proper" recipient of this object has multiple thoughts in this way.

(2) The second amendment is more complicated and, therefore, more philosophically interesting than the first. It is that the Kantian art theory, instead of describing the content of the various artworks solely in terms of a variety of particular complete concepts or ideas, describes it also in terms of a single general idea or concept that encompasses *all* possible thoughts.¹² In this way, it would be established that, as the Kantian theory

¹² Compare this with Rogerson's description of the suggestion that "when Kant claims a 'free' harmony [of imagination and understanding] is a harmony without rules, perhaps he should really say that the manifold is rule governed but when we engage in aesthetic appreciation we do not care which rule it is" (Rogerson 2008, p. 10) or that "we can talk about a manifold being rule governed [...] and yet insist that the harmony of the

demands, *any given* “proper” recipient’s multitude of thoughts are *kindred* with the artwork’s conceptual or ideal content. I suggest that this idea or concept can be *the idea of idea* or *the concept of concept*.

Note that each artwork still contains a *particular* idea or concept. Delacroix’s *Liberty* does, under our current assumption, have the content of the idea of freedom. Nevertheless, besides being the idea of *freedom*, this idea is also the *idea* of freedom: embedded in it is the idea of idea or, if you will, its *ideality*. When the artist creates the artwork and thereby instills a complete concept or an idea in it, she *also* instills the most abstract idea or concept, the idea of idea or the concept of concept, ideality or conceptuality, therein. Since *all* thoughts are ideas or concepts, they are *all* kindred with the artwork’s conceptual or ideal content.¹³ In this way, the Kantian art theory avoids counterexamples such as Doris’s, Steven’s, and Michelle’s experience: it avoids the accusation that some “proper” recipients can have a multitude of playful thoughts that are *irrelevant* to the artwork’s content.¹⁴ With this amendment, *all* thoughts a “proper” recipient could have are *relevant* to that content.

Schellekens is baffled by the fact that

many conceptual artists make a point of putting all the interpretative onus on the spectator.¹⁵ How often are we told, after all, that a specific artwork’s meaning rests entirely in our hands; that “it means whatever you want it to mean?” (Schellekens 2017)

Schellekens is baffled because she thinks that if you claim, as conceptual artists do, that a conceptual artwork is fundamentally determined by “the idea central to the artwork” and that such artwork causes the thoughts of the “proper” recipient, there has to be only one appropriate interpretation of it, namely that which captures that “central” idea (Schellekens 2017). That is to say, a state of “indeterminacy,” as she calls it, namely a state in which recipients have different interpretations of the work and even interpretations that assign a meaning to the artwork that is completely different from the one the artist has assigned to it, is foreign to the essential determination of conceptual art in terms of its content being an idea that is transmitted to the recipient. As she puts it,

faculties is free in the sense that aesthetic judging abstracts from the specific rule employed to unify the manifold” (Rogerson 2008, p. 11).

¹³ It is because there should be a *kindred relation* between the concept or idea the artist has instilled in the artwork and the stream of thoughts the recipient’s mind generates that what Guyer has called the “multicognitive” interpretation of the recipient’s experience in the Kantian art theory does not work. This interpretation has it that Kant’s conception of the recipient’s experience is that she can apply several different concepts to the manifold of sensations provided by the artwork. See Guyer 2006, p. 166. The application of different concepts, however, does not establish the required “kindred” connection between the idea or concept that the artwork embodies and the concepts employed by the recipient. The element of ideality or conceptuality, by contrast, does establish such a connection.

¹⁴ It is not only relevance or kinship that is gained by this modification, but also universality or a “shared” element, which is also significant for Kant.

¹⁵ In fact, it is not only (some) conceptual artists who hold this view. It seems to be a commonplace among artists. Harold Cohen, a computer artist, for example, writes: “I regard artworks as meaning generators that evoke meaning in the viewer rather than inform the viewer what someone else, some artist remote in time and culture, intended to communicate” (Cohen 2008, p. 44).

whilst conceptual art certainly seems to rest on something like [...] interpretative plurality [...], it is not obvious how a kind of art that presents itself as an idea can, in reality, accommodate such indeterminacy. (Schellekens 2017)

For Schellekens, the view of many conceptual artists that conceptual art can legitimately lead to experiences composed of thoughts that are all *irrelevant* to the *particular* idea the artist has instilled in the artwork generates an irresolvable “conundrum”:

The conundrum can be put in the following terms. If the conceptual work is the idea, it seems reasonable to assume that artistic interpretation will consist primarily in coming to understand that idea (which is conceded by the artist to the artwork considered as such). In other words, if we take conceptual art's dematerialization claim seriously, we are left with a notion of interpretation which is relatively constrained to the artist's intention and to the claim that that intention determines *the* appropriate or correct interpretation for that particular work.

As we have seen, though, we are often encouraged by conceptual artists to take the interpretative exercise into our own hands, so to speak [...]. We are, in other words, asked to combine the idea of art as idea with the claim that we can, as spectators, convey an entirely new and fresh interpretation onto an artwork that is nothing but an idea which, by definition, needs to be about or concerned with something. So, if the idea is the art, then how can my idiosyncratic interpretation of that idea be anywhere near valid? It seems, then, that in order to be coherent, conceptual art must give up either the claim that the actual artwork is nothing other than the idea, or the claim that the interpretative onus lies on the viewer. (Schellekens 2017)

In truth, however, conceptual art does not need to give up *any* of these claims, for they are *not* incompatible. The idea the conceptual artist instills in the conceptual artwork is composed of *two* elements, its *particular* theme and its *general* character as idea. The conceptual artist does not demand that we think her particular idea (although we can do so) but only that we think (period!). Thinking can be done in many particular ways and can be about a variety of themes, so there is no one “correct” or “valid” interpretation of a conceptual artwork. Yet, if an artwork fails to make *any* recipient have a multitude of playful thoughts about *any* subject-matter, if *all* recipients *simply* admire the aesthetic attributes of its sensible form, then it cannot be said that this artwork is really a *conceptual* artwork – and, according to the Kantian art theory, as presented by Costello, it is not at all an *artwork* (or, if you will, a beautiful or good or successful artwork). When Lewitt, therefore, writes that “in conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work,” he does not mean – as Schellekens understands him to mean – that the idea's particular theme (what the idea is *of* or *about*) is the conceptual artwork's most important aspect, but rather that the artwork's most important aspect is the idea's *ideality*. Conceptual art is there to make us think, not to make us think about a *given* particular idea. The conceptual artist Mel Bochner refers approvingly to the following passage from James Gibson's *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*:

The structure of an artificial optic array may, but need not, specify a source. A wholly invented structure need not specify anything. This would be a case of structure as such. It contains information, but not information *about*, and it affords perception but not perception *of*. (Cited in Bohner 1967, p. 26)

Now we understand perfectly why a conceptual artist would approve this thought. It is because the important thing in conceptual art is the idea's ideality or the concept's conceptuality, not what it is about or of. Precisely because what matters most in conceptual art is this ideality or conceptuality, conceptual art is *obliged* to place the interpretative onus on the recipient. Thus, conceptual art, *pace* Schellekens, does not contradict itself when it claims both "that the actual artwork is nothing other than the idea" and "that the interpretative onus lies on the viewer."

In section 5 I claimed, *contra* Costello's rejoinder, that one's holding that a "proper" recipient of a conceptual artwork can have a multitude of thoughts that are *irrelevant* to the artwork's particular conceptual or ideal content does not lead to conceptual art's collapse into aesthetic formalism. I argued that this is so because, *pace* Costello, the presence of *such* a multitude of thoughts in the recipient's mind does not exclude its being affected by the *idea* that is present in the artwork. The discussion in the present section has provided an *explanation* of the asserted compatibility of (a) the recipient's mind having a multitude of thoughts that are *irrelevant* to the artwork's particular conceptual or ideal content and (b) that mind's being affected by that particular content. The explanation is that (a) and (b) are compatible because what affects the "proper" recipient's mind is not only the particular theme a particular content expresses but also the general character of that particular content as idea or concept, namely its ideality or conceptuality. When Art & Language declared as their mission the production of the artwork as "the 'continuum', the system, the structure-as-whole," as "a kind of generic work" (Wood 2002, p. 49), what they had in mind was not the expansion of the "system" of a particular idea or concept but rather the expansion of the "system" of ideality or conceptuality as such.

It may be objected that by placing the interpretative onus on the recipient conceptual artists make it hard to explain why there are actually different pieces of conceptual art and why artists choose the different objects or forms they actually choose to "embody" their ideas or concepts. This "problem," though, is non-existent because the conceptual artist's leaving the recipient absolutely free to determine her own interpretative pathway *by no means* entails that the artist should have no interest in presenting her own particular idea in the way she deems best. The issue of the interpretative freedom of the recipient does not affect the issue of the expression of the artist. It is impossible for the artist to create an artwork without having a *particular* idea or concept in mind: the realization of (the universal) ideality or conceptuality always requires its particularization, its expression as a particular idea or concept. The artist is driven by the particular idea or concept she desires to express, but this does not entail that the artist should demand the recipient to think this particular idea or concept. Differences in the materials used or in the form of the artwork

are perfectly explainable from the side of the conceptual artist: each conceptual artist aims at finding the best means for the expression of their particular idea or concept and/or for creating the most intriguing-for-thought experience for the recipient. In neither of these cases there is an entailment of either an absolute uniformity of artistic creation or the rejection of a stream of irrelevant thoughts in the recipient's mind. The objection supposes that if conceptual artists place the interpretative onus on the recipient, they should not worry about different means and forms of artistic expression. This supposition is simply false for, first, artists still have a desire to express their own particular idea or concept in the best way possible *for their own satisfaction* and hence some means and forms will be better suited for their purposes than others, and, second, some means and forms are better than others *in making the recipient think* (whatever she will actually think) *in an expanded fashion*.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that Kant's aesthetics, as interpreted by Costello, cannot accommodate conceptual art. The reason for this is that, contra what Kant's art theory, as presented by Costello, demands, a conceptual artwork may *cause* some of its "proper" recipients to have a multitude of playful thoughts that are *irrelevant* to the idea the artist has instilled in that artwork. I have claimed that this does not collapse conceptual art into aesthetic formalism because a multitude of thoughts *can* result from the "proper" recipient's mind being *affected* by an *idea* whose particular theme is *irrelevant* to those thoughts. I have concluded that either one of two amendments to Kant's art theory, as presented by Costello, could enable Kantian aesthetics to accommodate conceptual art. The first amendment asks for the Kantian theory to apply, not to *any given* "proper" recipient of conceptual art, but only to *at least one* such recipient. The second amendment asks for the Kantian art theory to determine the idea the artist instills in the artwork not only in terms of its particular theme but also in terms of its general character, its ideality. This second amendment clarifies that the reason conceptual art does not collapse into aesthetic formalism even if the "proper" recipient's mind generates a multitude of thoughts that are irrelevant to the idea the artist has instilled in the conceptual artwork is because the "proper" recipient's mind is affected by the *sheer ideality* of that idea. In this way the causality between the artwork and the recipient is maintained. Conceptual art aims at making us think (period!), not at making us think about what the artist thought when she created the artwork. Whether these two amendments are compatible with other basic tenets of Kant's aesthetics is a puzzle for future work.¹⁶

¹⁶ I am grateful to Christos Kyriacou, Vassilis Livianos, Kipros Lofitis, and, most of all, Andreas Vrahimis, for enormously helpful commentary on a previous draft of the present paper. I would also like to thank the two anonymous referees of *Con-Textos Kantianos* for truly invaluable comments on the submitted manuscript.

Bibliography

- Alberro, A. and Stimson, B. (1999), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Bochner, M. (1967), "The Serial Attitude," in Alberro and Stimson (1999), pp. 22-27.
- Boudaille, G. (1968), "Interview with Daniel Buren," in Alberro and Stimson (1999), pp. 66-75.
- Cohen, H. (2018) "A Million Millennial Medicis," in *Explorations in Art and Technology*, ed. L. Candy, E. Edmonds, and F. Poltronieri, London, Springer, pp. 39-50.
- Costa, E., Escari, R., and Jacoby, R. (1967), "A Media Art (Manifesto)," in *Happenings*, ed. O. Masotta, Jorge Alvarez, Buenos Aires, pp. 119-122.
- Costello, D. (2007), "Kant after Lewitt: Towards an Aesthetics of Conceptual Art," in Goldie and Schellekens (2007), pp. 92-105.
- Costello, D. (2009), "Retrieving Kant's Aesthetics for Art Theory After Greenberg," in Halsall *et al.* (2009), pp. 117-132.
- Goldie, P. and Schellekens, E. (eds.) (2007), *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Greenberg, C. (1986-1993), *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vols. I-IV, Chicago University Press, Chicago.
- Greenberg, C. (1999), *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Guyer, P. (2006), "The Harmony of the Faculties Revisited," in *Aesthetics and Cognition in Kant's Critical Philosophy*, ed. R. Kukla, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 162-193.
- Halsall, F., Jansen, J., and O'Connor, T. (eds.) (2009), *Rediscovering Aesthetics*, Columbia University Press, New York, NY.
- Kant, I. (1790), *Critique of Judgement*, trans. W. S. Pluhar, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1987.
- Lewitt, S. (1967), "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in Alberro and Stimson (1999), pp. 12-16.
- Oiticica, H. (1966), "Position and Program," in Alberro and Stimson (1999), pp. 8-10.
- Oiticica, H. (1967), "General Scheme of the New Objectivity," in Alberro and Stimson (1999), pp. 40-42.

- Piper, A. (1967), "A Defense of the 'Conceptual' Process in Art," in A. Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996, pp. 3-4.
- Schellekens, E. (2017), "Conceptual Art," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/conceptual-art/>>
- Reinhardt, A. (1953), "Twelve Rules for a New Academy," *ArtNews* 56, no. 3 (May 1957), pp. 37-38.
- Reinhardt, A. (1962), "Art as Art," *Art International* 6, no. 10 (December 1962).
- Rogerson, K. F. (2008), *The Problem of Free Harmony in Kant's Aesthetics*, SUNY Press, Albany, NY.
- Wood, A. W. (2005), *Kant*, Blackwell, Malden, MA.
- Wood, P. (2002), *Conceptual Art*, Tate Publishing, London.

