

# What can conceptual art teach us about whether or not art needs to be aesthetic?

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**Abstract** Conceptual art, and its rejection of the aesthetic, poses a number of challenges to ‘traditional’ definitions of art. This paper considers whether art is necessarily aesthetic and what problems arise if we accept that it is not. My investigation will initially ask whether conceptual art (CA) can even be a kind of art, and will then discuss whether CA is necessarily aesthetic. In section 2, I present a range of existing views on this matter in order to show that conceptual art should indeed be considered a kind of art. I offer an evaluation of these views in section 3 before arguing that art in general is not necessarily aesthetic. In order to show this, I present arguments in support of the propositions that (i) CA is a kind of art and that (ii) CA is not aesthetic. Section 4 comprises a proposal suggesting that artworks are not necessarily aesthetic but rather are necessarily experienced in person. I then briefly address a number of potential difficulties that accepting such a view might appear to entail.

## 1 Introduction

*“In conceptual art, the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work [...] the idea becomes a machine that makes the art”*

– LeWitt (2000)

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## 2 The problem of conceptual art

What I will hereby refer to as the 'problem of conceptual art' is best explained by highlighting a contradiction in the following three independently plausible propositions:

- (i) CA is a kind of art.
- (ii) CA is not aesthetic.
- (iii) Art is necessarily aesthetic.

How can conceptual art, as a kind of art, be non-aesthetic if being aesthetic is a necessary condition for something being art? A solution to the problem of conceptual art can come in one of three forms. Firstly, one might deny (i) that CA is a kind of art by holding (ii) that CA is not aesthetic and (iii) that art is necessarily aesthetic. A second solution might come in the form of denying (ii) that CA is not aesthetic while holding (iii) that art is necessarily aesthetic but also (i) that CA is indeed a kind of art. Finally, one might hold (i) that CA is a kind of art and (ii) that CA is not aesthetic and thereby deny (iii) that being aesthetic is a necessary condition of art. That is the solution I argue for in this paper.

I begin by voicing support for proposition (i). The task here is to show that CA is art without solely targeting 'aesthetic definitions' of art. Simply opposing the claim

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1. Conceptual art historically refers to the movement reaching its pinnacle between 1966 and 1972, (Lippard 1973) but can be more broadly conceived as any work seeking to overcome the view that art ought to produce something with aesthetic value. Conceptual art is art of the mind, not the senses; art in which the idea is the most important aspect of the work.

2. The comparison of various definitions of 'aesthetic' is a core aspect of this paper, so I will avoid misleading the reader by promoting one definition at the outset.

that “CA is not art because art is necessarily aesthetic” with the argument that “art is not necessarily aesthetic and therefore CA is art” would be to fall prey to a textbook case of denying the antecedent. Nevertheless, addressing the shortcomings of what have come to be known as ‘aesthetic definitions of art’ is a natural starting point for this discussion. Monroe Beardsley is the greatest proponent of such definitions and the philosopher most prominently associated with the first solution—denying proposition (i). To progress with a definition of art that incorporates CA as a subtype, sufficient reason must be provided to move beyond Beardsley’s definition.

## 2.1 Conceptual art as a kind of art

Definitions of art have been classified by Stephen Davies (2001) into functional and institutional/historical definitions. Functional definitions hold that something is an artwork if and only if it succeeds in achieving the purpose for which we have art. Beardsley’s definition has emerged as the most prominent of these. He proposed that art is defined by its aesthetic character such that  $x$  is an artwork if and only if  $x$  gives rise to an aesthetic experience (Beardsley 1970).

A work of art is either an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character or (one) [ ... ] typically intended to have this capacity. (Beardsley 1958)<sup>3</sup>

Beardsley’s conception holds that an aesthetic experience is, broadly speaking, an experience of the way things appear to us, where the ‘thing’ that gives rise to the aesthetic experience is a perceptual object.<sup>4</sup> Of course, many objects whose qualities are open to direct sensory awareness *do not* give rise to aesthetic experiences. Precisely what determines whether an object is aesthetic will be the subject of discussion later in this paper. For now, it will be sufficient to highlight that Beardsley’s definition of art, and the assumption that CA does not give rise to aesthetic experience, together entail the denial that works of conceptual art—such as Marcel Duchamp’s readymades—count as art.

In contrast to Beardsley’s definition, Arthur Danto’s ‘institutional’ definition states that one of the necessary conditions of an artwork is that it requires an art historical context (Danto 1981). Similarly, Binkley (1977) states that “An artwork’s being an artwork is determined not by its properties but by its location in the artworld”. Danto’s

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3. This definition should not be misconstrued as a contradiction to another of his seminal works co-authored by William K. Wimsatt, “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946), where it is argued that the intentions of the artist aren’t relevant to the *interpretation* of a work of art. Our present concern is with the definition, not the interpretation, of art.

4. A perceptual object (as contrasted with a physical object like something that is six by six feet in size) here refers to an object some of whose qualities are open to direct sensory awareness (Beardsley 1970), like a ‘frightening’ object. A physical object is not necessarily perceptual.

reasoning is that there exist some artworks with perceptually indistinguishable counterparts that are either artistically distinct or are “mere real things”. In fact, the claim that “to see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry” has come to be known as one of the hallmarks of Danto’s aesthetics (Lamarque 2007). So, Danto argues, it is only within the *context* of the artworld, and a viewer having prior knowledge that the object is an artwork, that Duchamp’s *Fountain* could take on the properties of ‘impudence’ and ‘wit’. These are obviously properties that conventional urinals lack.

David Davies defines artworks by the process that results in their creation. He argues that the ‘thing’ to which we might attribute value or appreciation is the act by which it came into being—the material result is merely a vehicle that allows us to perceive the process (2003). Davies says that this vehicle may be a physical object (e.g. Picasso’s *Guernica*) or an action of a particular kind (e.g. Duchamp’s act of placing *Fountain* in a gallery space). The vehicle is whatever we have a perceptual engagement with and the idea is what we have aesthetic/cognitive appreciation for.

The question facing us now is whether we are warranted in moving past Beardsley’s definition and adopting one along the lines of Danto’s or Davies’. Stephen Davies (2001) advises that a definition of art should identify a set of properties such that each and every artwork has *all* the properties that make up that set and that it is *only* artworks that have that exact set of properties. Contrast this with Beardsley’s definition, which outlines what art *should* be or *really* is, rather than attempting to capture all the works considered as art currently in existence. In light of this, Beardsley’s relatively narrow definition seems arbitrary. If Beardsley had been writing in the 16th century with only Titian and Bruegel to reference—and had developed a conception of art and aesthetic value around the output of these and any preceding artists—one might wonder whether he would then have rejected any later art that required a redefinition of art itself. It seems fairly likely that Picasso and Miró would have been excluded from the canon of art if that were the case. Beardsley said that “it does not seem that in submitting that object (*Fountain*) to the art show [...] Duchamp establish[ed] a new meaning of ‘artwork,’ nor did he really inaugurate a tradition that led to the acceptance of plumbing figures as artworks today” (Beardsley 1958). Yet, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that this is precisely what Duchamp *did* do. It seems entirely implausible now, 37 years after Beardsley, to deny the status of art to the works of Marcel Duchamp, Marina Abramović and Joseph Kosuth given that they attract millions of art lovers each year to art institutions like MoMA and the Tate Modern. This attitude follows Timothy Binkley’s basic reasoning:

How do I know they are works of art? [...] they are listed in catalogues. So I assume they are works of art. If you deny (this), it is up to you to explain why the listings in a Renoir catalogue are artworks, but the listings in a Duchamp catalogue are not. (Binkley 1977)

Granted, this argument is not sufficient to prove that CA really is art, but it does

push the burden of proof onto Beardsley to defend the aesthetic theory of art. It is not for the aesthetic theorist to stipulate what should count as art in the face of such countervailing evidence (Carroll 1999). This is a significant foothold. If we accept that the burden has fallen onto Beardsley to prove that CA is *not* art, and we appreciate that this is something he doesn't attempt beyond arguing that the aesthetic definition works for art up until 1982, I would posit that we now have the grounds to progress with a tentative use of the latter two definitions from Danto and Davies. I believe I have now presented enough evidence to show that the first solution to the problem of conceptual art is sufficiently weak that we might disregard it. CA is a kind of art.

## 2.2 Existing solutions to the problem of conceptual art

I now move on to the question of whether or not CA is necessarily aesthetic. Binkley and Danto both propose theories that use examples of conceptual art to argue that it is not a necessary or sufficient condition of an artwork to be aesthetic (or fall within the subject matter of aesthetics). Binkley (1977) is most notable for claiming that artworks have become synonymous with aesthetic objects as a result of the conflation of the fields of aesthetics and the philosophy of art. He outlines a brief history of aesthetics, referring to the point at which art began to fall into the subject matter of aesthetics. Binkley claims that this occurred to such an extent that aesthetics mistakenly became "just another name for the philosophy of art" and the first principle of the philosophy of art that "all art possesses aesthetic qualities". This is indeed reminiscent of Beardsley's definition. Binkley stresses that they are nothing more than related studies. He cites a number of conceptual artworks that do not appear to be necessarily aesthetic.

It would be a mistake to search for aesthetically interesting smudges on Rauschenberg's work "erased DeKooning drawing". (Binkley 1977)

Binkley defends 'non-aesthetic' works like Rauschenberg's by relating the development of Modernism in art to movements of self-criticism within philosophy. Like philosophy, Binkley supposes, art developed to the point where "a critical act about the discipline could be part of the discipline itself". The underlying problem identified here by Binkley is that aesthetics has disregarded the fact that how an object is perceived is actually dependent on what viewers bring to it. This, in turn is dependent on cultural contexts. Aesthetics—which is an inherently perceptual inquiry—views an artistic medium as a kind of substance rather than as a system of conventions. While the fields of aesthetics and the philosophy of art have extensive common ground, neither one is a sub-specialty of the other. Danto (1981) also alludes to the distinction between the two fields, holding that art appreciation is primarily a cognitive matter while aesthetic appreciation is a form of sense perception. Danto extends his analysis back to 16th century art, claiming that the appreciation of Bruegel's 'Landscape with

the fall of Icarus' depends almost entirely on what information the viewer possesses. Crucially, he argues that such information is not perceptually available.

Elizabeth Schellekens and James Shelly, on the other hand, maintain that art is necessarily aesthetic. Schellekens' is an advocate of the 'second solution' I outlined in section 2, denying (ii) that CA is not aesthetic. She proposes that CA need not be 'antiaesthetic', and that "conceptual art may have aesthetic value that is crucial to the appreciation of its cognitive value" (Schellekens 2007). She assumes that to appreciate a work of conceptual art, it is necessary to have a first hand experience of its central idea. This involves the 'experiential qualities' of such ideas—and aesthetic qualities, it is claimed, are amongst these. The key argumentative feature of her paper is the modeling of the relationship between aesthetic and cognitive value in art. It is proposed that the cognitive value we hold in conceptual artworks is not limited to the kind of knowledge that can be translated into orderly propositions. Schellekens suggests that *if* this were the case, then there would be no difference between experiencing certain works of art and, for instance, experiencing a billboard advertising the same propositional content. Her central claim is that conceptual artworks can 'instantiate' propositional statements, therefore giving rise to increased understanding of the idea.

James Shelly (2003) observed that the main arguments against art being necessarily aesthetic presuppose that aesthetic properties must be susceptible to perception *in terms of the five senses*. Shelley argues that this view of aesthetic properties is too limited. He denies that aesthetic properties necessarily depend on properties perceived by means of the five senses. This move allows him to hold that there may be artworks that do not need to be *perceived* by the five senses in order to be appreciated, while also holding that artworks do necessarily have aesthetic properties relevant to their appreciation. He argues that if this *wasn't* the case we would not be able to call literary works aesthetic.

### **3 Conceptual art is not necessarily aesthetic**

The problem of conceptual art seems to boil down to a disagreement over what exactly it means to say that aesthetic properties must be susceptible to perception. Shelley thinks that since the qualities that we attribute to works of conceptual art (impudence, wit etc.) correspond to the role traditionally played by standard aesthetic properties, we do not have the grounds to deny them aesthetic status. In this section I attempt to undermine Shelley and Schellekens' position, voice support for the intuition behind Danto and Binkley's position and ultimately argue that CA is not necessarily aesthetic.

The weakness of Shelley's (2003) paper lies in his supposition that it is possible to have aesthetic experiences of non-perceptual artworks. Proposing that some aesthetic properties may not be perceptual does not lead to the conclusion that art is 'essentially

aesthetic'. There are, for example, many artworks that may be formless and may fail to obtain the aesthetic qualities that the artist intended them to have. This art, according to Carroll (2004) is what we call 'bad art'—but bad art is still art.

It seems to me that the word aesthetic has been used far beyond its rightful domain by both Shelley and Schellekens. I maintain that their definitions of aesthetic experience are too broad in two distinct ways. The first is in the calling of things other than perceptual things 'aesthetic' and the second is in the assumption that *all* perceptual things *can* be aesthetic. Schellekens argues that "aesthetic value can be allowed for [ ... ] as long as the aesthetic qualities in question are ascribed to the idea at the heart of the artwork" (2007). Her aim, like Shelly's, is to escape the problem of 'non-perceptual' art. Schellekens compares the appreciation of the idea of a work of conceptual art to the appreciation of the 'harmony' of an intellectual process, the 'elegance' of a mathematical demonstration, the 'beauty' of a chess move and the 'ungainliness' of a failed experiment. Based on this analogy, she concludes that there should be no difficulty in the suggestion that ideas and intellectual processes can allow for aesthetic qualities.

My primary contention with Schellekens' thesis is this: to appreciate an idea—which is nothing more than a cognitive experience—as 'beautiful', 'graceful' or 'moving' in the way she describes, is to do nothing more than speak *metaphorically* about that idea. Simply being able to *describe* something with an aesthetic term does not mean that thing must be aesthetic. Consider the following:

If the idea is well represented through its vehicular medium, it is the artwork conceived as idea—not the medium—that can be said to have certain aesthetic qualities. (Schellekens 2007).

By clustering together the common intuitions that art is generally aesthetic and that conceptual artworks are, fundamentally, ideas, Schellekens has suggested that ideas can have aesthetic qualities. I argue that she has actually just conflated the notions of something's being able to *be described* with certain aesthetic qualities and something's being able to *possess* aesthetic qualities. Schellekens does not address the possibility that such a connection has appeared simply as a result of using linguistic figures of speech in which words or phrases are applied to other objects or actions to which they are not *literally* applicable.

It is quite reasonable—and in fact extremely common—to *use* aesthetic terms in a metaphorical sense. My contention is not that use of such language is unwarranted but rather that Schellekens' use of this literary technique as empirical evidence of some underlying connection between ideas and aesthetic value has been insufficiently justified in her paper. When Schellekens talks of the 'harmony' of an intellectual process, we might imagine it being a well-organised process in which each aspect of it is in concord; with the 'beautiful' chess move, we might imagine that it was probably a move that won the game, and because of the rare combination of moves employed, the op-

ponent, statistically speaking, would have had some difficulty in seeing it coming. To reiterate, the ability we have to describe an idea or intellectual process with an adjective that is typically (and in basic or conventional language, literally) used to attribute aesthetic value to things does not mean that such objects are open to the possibility of actually *accruing* aesthetic value themselves. My ability to describe the mood of a person as 'blue' provides no support for the claim that moods or emotions (which have significantly more in common with ideas than with artworks) might be considered aesthetic objects. In nonmetaphorical language, the relation between an object's *being* something on the one hand and being *able to be described* as something on the other hand is not a symmetrical one. Only the former can entail the latter.

I do not mean to suggest, in making this argument, that any or all descriptions of works of conceptual art using aesthetic terms are metaphorical. I am simply attempting to show that Schellekens' argument does not hold because the connection between chess moves and the ideas behind them doesn't exist between art and its ideas. The former is not a truly aesthetic relationship, and therefore cannot be used to evidence the claim that ideas can have aesthetic value. In the absence of any further support for this theory, I believe I can conclude that CA is not necessarily aesthetic. Given that CA is art (from section 2.1) this allows me to deduce that art is not necessarily aesthetic.

Admittedly, this discussion merits the formulation of a new definition of aesthetic—a description of what makes something truly aesthetic in the way that the chess move is not; in a way that, I hope, the reader nonetheless intuitively understands. A new definition of art is not required to present the conclusions of this paper.

## 4 Non-aesthetic art and the experiential condition

The purpose of this section is twofold. I will initially outline my own defence of the possibility of non-aesthetic art before presenting a number of brief responses to the problems that accepting such a possibility might appear to entail. Where my opinion diverges with Danto's (and aligns with Schellekens'), is in their discussions of the necessarily perceptual nature of art. I argue, not only that art is necessarily perceptual<sup>5</sup>—in that it must be experienced in person—but that this ought to be considered as one of the key identifying features of it.

There is an analogy to be made between the use of vocabulary in a novel and the use of material in a conceptual artwork; the pace at which the novelist lets the plot unwind and the subtlety with which conceptual artists place some propositional meaning amongst the mediums of their work. The choice of vocabulary is a necessary compon-

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5. Note that this does not contradict the point made by Shelley that literary works needn't be perceived. When Shelley talked of 'the work', he was talking of the art—we can't perceive the 'art' of a novel because it exists in the imaginative, cognitive 'dimension'. When I talk of necessarily perceptual (or experiential) here, I simply mean that one needs to have a direct experience with the object.



ent of the overall vehicle which is to eventually deliver aesthetic content to the reader in the same way that the medium (whether it be sound or a performance) is a necessary component of the overall vehicle which is eventually to deliver cognitive content to the viewer. To say that a viewer can gain all there is to gain from hearing a description of a conceptual artwork (as Peter Lamarque (2007) does) would be to say that a reader can gain all there is to gain from a novel by hearing a summary of it. This obviously isn't the case. As Schellekens (2007) observes, conceptual artists choose to represent their points in such a way as to *not only* make a statement but also to *instantiate* it—they can “turn propositional statements into something more experiential”. The act of experiencing a conceptual artwork in person carries with it some of the semantic content which is necessary to appreciate it cognitively. At this stage it will be useful to look at a scorecard of where I now stand on the range of issues covered so far in this paper.

Conditions/mechanisms	'Traditional' art	Literary art	Conceptual art
Necessarily aesthetic	✓	✓	
Necessarily experiential <sup>6</sup>	✓	✓	✓
Necessarily cognitive	✓	✓	✓
Direct perceptual mechanism	✓		
Indirect vehicular mechanism		✓	✓

Allow me to flesh out the claims made in this table. The key takeaway is that all art (traditional, literary and conceptual) is necessarily experiential and necessarily cognitive but is not necessarily aesthetic. Consider John Cage's composition 4'33" for which the score instructs the performers not to play their instruments during the entire duration of the piece. The claim that art is not necessarily experiential entails that being present for a performance of a work like 4'33" has no bearing on someone's ability to understand, appreciate or interpret the work—it might as well have been summarised by someone else who has seen it. This feels intuitively wrong. People travel for thousands of miles to see the Mona Lisa and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in person just as they would have with Marina Abramovic's 2010 performance work "The Artist is Present". People do not, however, travel to watch mathematicians write out their proofs.

Of course, this analogy does not in itself show that the defining feature of art is that it is necessarily experiential. One obvious rebuttal would be to highlight the fact that people do travel long distances to see non-artistic events like chess matches and political speeches. It might be argued that the 'experience' of watching a match or a speech cannot be fully conveyed by someone's testimony. If political speeches are necessarily experiential, then using this condition as a way to identify artworks is entirely undermined. Admittedly, the emotions that those present in the House of Commons must have felt while witnessing Winston Churchill's 1940 speech "We shall fight on the beaches" is something that they will never be able to fully convey by retelling the

6. This is has been called the 'experiential requirement' by Schellekens.

story of what happened. However, anyone who raises such a counterargument is neglecting one significant difference which breaks down the analogy between these two examples. Anything that Churchill's audience gained *from* experiencing his speech in person, over and above the propositional content expressed, did not arise from his speech. If we stripped his speech of all context—the atmosphere and energy in the room; the physical grandeur of the House of Commons etc—what would remain is its pure propositional content. This fundamental content *is* transferrable in its entirety by testimony or recording. It is not necessary to experience it to gain a full understanding of it.

Only art is necessarily experiential in the sense in which I am employing the word. Just as there is one sense in which we might experience a Dostoyevsky novel as a sociological account of St Petersburg in 1866, and another sense in which we might experience it qua art; so too are there different senses in which we experience other artworks. That Churchill's speech lends itself to being experienced in the former sense does not imply that it must—or even can—be experienced in the latter sense; the sense of experiencing something qua art. As Lamarque rightly notes, “one of the binding elements [in experiencing all of the arts] can be described as an experience of art *as art*”.

Experience in this sense, Lamarque highlights, is “informed by knowledge about the kinds of objects being experienced” (2007). The type of experiencing which I am referring to is what I suggest ought to be considered a necessary condition for something being an artwork. It may strike the reader that I appear to have offered a circular definition of art by suggesting that artworks are those objects that must be experienced in the unique in particular way that only artworks can be. This would of course fail as a definition; but the account I have just offered is by no means an attempt to provide a non-aesthetic definition of art. My purpose is much simpler; to disentangle the notion of art being necessarily aesthetic with the notion of art being necessarily experiential and to reject the former in favour of the latter.

The trap that the Churchill counterexample has fallen into may be more easily identified if we consider a musical example of the same problem. A live performance of Pink Floyd's “Comfortably Numb” provides the audience with exactly the same artistic content as listening to a recording of it. The distinction I am drawing upon here is not captured by thinking of ‘live performances’ in this sense. Rather, I am suggesting that it is necessary just to *listen* to a performance of “Comfortably Numb” (whether it be a recording or a live performance) in order to appreciate it. The work cannot be suitably appreciated if only a summary or description is given. CA needs to be experienced in the same way literature and music do because the thing that matters for the identity of an experience is not what the experience is of in the sense of what has caused it (such as facts about the performance that can easily be transferred by testimony) but what it is *thought* to be of—thought at that very specific time and place by that particular person (Lamarque 2007). Ideas are necessary but not sufficient for a conceptual artwork to exist. 4'33" cannot be collapsed into a mere supposition or description. It needs to

be experienced.

I will now briefly consider two problems that face advocates of the possibility of non-aesthetic art and propose that by accepting the experiential thesis just outlined, one can avoid all three of them. The problems are; (1) how might we distinguish between art and non-art in light of artworks not being defined by necessarily having aesthetic value; and (2) how might we appreciate artworks given that there is no *aesthetic* object to direct our appreciation towards.

Schellekens' thesis about the aesthetic value of ideas arose, at least in part, from a concern about what would secure a "significant distinction between art on the one hand, and the ordinary proposition or statement expressing that same idea in a non-artistic context on the other hand" (Schellekens 2007). I propose that the 'experiential condition' does precisely that. As was illustrated in Figure 1, all three categories of art are necessarily experiential and necessarily cognitive. There is no class of objects other than artworks that possess this experiential condition in the specific sense that I outlined in detail in the previous section. No other class of objects comes to mind that possesses this necessary condition in the same way that works of art do. Referring back to Stephen Davies' requirements for a definition, this condition is sufficient to distinguish between art and non-art.

Regarding the appreciation of non-aesthetic artworks, I suggest that the experiential condition's ability to cater for the purely cognitive appreciation of conceptual artworks as well as the jointly aesthetic and cognitive appreciation of traditional artworks means that it can offer a neater and simpler solution to the problem of conceptual art than the other solutions outlined here. Appreciating a conceptual work of art that has no aesthetic content is no more complicated than appreciating a Titian or a Bruegel—both provide the opportunity for cognitive appreciation of ideas and concepts and the 16th century works also provide the opportunity for aesthetic appreciation.

## 5 Conclusion

I began this paper by articulating what I referred to as 'the problem of conceptual art', presenting three independently plausible propositions that contradicted each other. I then presented a range of existing solutions to this (or very similar) problems before putting forward a brief argument as to why conceptual art should count as a kind of art. In section 3, I found that none of the existing formulations of the philosophy of conceptual art were suitably coherent or without significant openings to criticism. This led me to suggest that conceptual art is not necessarily aesthetic. Accepting these two claims allowed me to propose that art in general is not necessarily aesthetic. Based on the weaknesses identified in the papers presented here, I proposed that art is necessarily experiential, before briefly outlining how this new understanding of the philosophy

of conceptual art is not undermined by two major problems that afflict many other solutions to the problem of conceptual art.

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