

## The Good Life as Conceptual Art

### I. INTRODUCTION

What is art?<sup>1</sup> Although many may think they know how to respond to this question, the definition of art remains one of the most highly debated issues in contemporary philosophy of art. Worse, this question seems less answerable than it was in past centuries, long before the birth of what was called ‘conceptual art.’ Conceptual art is generally characterized as lacking a distinctive medium, focusing on cognitive properties (what’s in the head of the art maker and the art observer—ideas, opinions) rather than aesthetic ones, and a counterexample to the very idea that art should have clear-cut boundaries. In short, conceptual art shows us that art can be pretty much anything that the artist identifies to be worthy of her time and attention. Conceptual art puts great emphasis on the cognitive processes at the basis of its artworks; a conceptual artwork is worthy of attention if considered from a vantage point over and above the observable object itself. Roughly, the *ideas* surrounding the object in front of us justify its existence, thereby making it interesting to the sympathetic observer. As one might expect, a perfect match between the artist’s interpretations of her artwork and the observer’s interpretations of that same work is not required, and a conceptual artwork can still be worthy of attention even when the observer doesn’t completely get what the artist intended to convey, or gets something different altogether.<sup>2</sup> What matters, one could say, is to have cognitive content that is meaningful to the artist and the observer, whatever that content might be, while conceiving and/or contemplating the artwork. Conceptual art is messy, and, one might say, that’s the point of it.

That said, conceptual artworks can be anything that is conceivable or intelligible to the human mind, ranging from a random chair accompanied by its own picture<sup>3</sup> to the whole world itself.<sup>4</sup> For the romantic, a nice implication of taking conceptual art to be genuine art is that one is less reluctant to count one’s psychology, behaviors, or even whole life as real pieces of art. One is now more justified in taking the expression ‘art of living’ seriously; all that matters is how one makes sense of one’s life and conceives it as art. Whatever one is engaged in, one can conceive one’s engagement as artistic and display in one’s behavior properties that constitute this conception. This is actually what every conceptual artist does, conceiving the process (the set of specific cognitive states and behaviors), leading to the piece that everyone can observe, as a constitutive part of the artwork in question.

In this paper, I will discuss the idea that we can not only conceive specific activities as artworks, but also conceive our whole life as a genuine artistic object. In particular, I will argue for that conception and try to show how the building of a character (roughly as a set of psychological traits exemplified in behavior) can be meaningfully conceived as a genuine artistic endeavor. This, we shall see, will bear on a major issue in contemporary philosophy of art, namely the question whether ethics should intervene in aesthetic appraisal.

## II. THE IDEA

The characteristics of conceptual art that are relevant for our purposes are the following:

- (1) It is focused on cognitive properties (ideas, concepts, representations, opinions), as opposed to aesthetic ones;
- (2) It has no distinctive medium; rather, any physical object that may be conceived as a piece of conceptual art is the *means* by which we have access to cognitive properties (the object we can all perceive is not the ultimate goal of conceptual art);<sup>5</sup>
- (3) It constitutes a critique of the idea that art should have clear-cut boundaries.<sup>6</sup>

These three features by themselves constitute a counterexample to any theory that seeks to define art with a set of necessary and sufficient conditions.<sup>7</sup> Thus, if we take conceptual art seriously, we must be careful while trying to define art systematically. I propose the following criteria for an object to count as an artwork:

An artwork (i) is whatever is conceived, seen, perceived as artistic by its maker, and (ii) has, or potentially has, an effect on an audience whose emotional, cognitive, and/or behavioral reactions may or may not have been intended by the artist.

From this construal, we can say that an artwork can be anything that is intended to be artistic by its producer, be it an object, an idea, or both. In other words, anything that can be thought, intended, or made by humans can meaningfully be conceived as artistic.

But what does it mean for something to be ‘conceived as artistic’? Granted, anything can be conceived as artistic, hence a genuine piece of conceptual art, but this does not tell us what it is to conceive an object as a piece of art—it does not provide us with plausible constraints as to what constitutes the conceiving of this sort. I believe the solution, in the case of conceptual art at least, lies in the relationship between (i) and (ii), between the conceiving and the effect on an audience. Like other (all?) kinds of artwork, conceptual art seems intrinsically audience-directed. If I start to conceive of my bedroom as a piece of conceptual art, and decide to put it in an art gallery, I intend to make this conception public, that is, I want it to be seen and appreciated by others. We might think therefore that a necessary condition for something to count as conceptual art is that it is somehow directed at an audience, however large.<sup>8</sup> We can say that the two criteria given above are necessary, though not *sufficient*, for an object to be an artwork; for other, perhaps specific, ingredients may be needed for the individuation of specific forms of artworks—in the case of conceptual art, its audience-directedness. Thus, for any art form, (i) and (ii) *plus something* have to be met in order for an object to be part of that art form; and this ‘something’ is, at least for conceptual art, its public nature, the fact that ideas are to be communicated to, or perceived by, an audience.

Conceptual art rejects the idea that aesthetic experience is a necessary element of artistic appraisal, that artistic worth is based on aesthetic worth. On the contrary, aesthetic appraisal has no primacy in artistic appraisal; it can, it seems, add value to an artwork, but should not be considered as necessary for the artwork to count as *artistic*. This is why conceptual artists put great emphasis on cognitive appraisal, which can be construed as a knowledge acquisition process, how subtle that might be.<sup>9</sup>

Now comes the possibility that one’s cognitive processes (ideas, intentions), activities, or whole life be considered as conceptual artworks. This idea already exists in the research on fiction and fictional characters. A novel, for instance, tells us a story involving characters thinking and acting in specific ways that are meaningful to us, generally creating the impression of actuality. This is artistic for several possible reasons: it may teach us certain truths about humans or the world, it may amaze us with its beauty, or it may just aim at entertaining us. However, I do not think every artwork should always have a fictitious dimension in order to come under the heading of art. According to our definition, an artwork can be anything, fictitious or not, that we deem worthwhile. Arguably, being fictitious does not necessarily add extra value to a piece of art, and may even decrease its artistic worth when

this dimension is hidden to the audience.<sup>10</sup> An artwork can therefore be fully actual in the sense that nothing in its content is obviously invented by its author.<sup>11</sup>

That said, we can now say that it is not nonsensical to talk about one's behaviors or activities as objects of art. Any behavior or activity can be subject to artistic appraisal, and therefore any behavior or activity can be intended by an agent to be artistic expressions of an agent's ideas. Take for instance the activity of washing the dishes. I may intend to construe this activity as an artistic performance whose aim is to show (say) that simple things are what make life worth living, and as something that is directed toward both anyone who may stop by my kitchen and myself: washing the plates one after the other in a skillful fashion, displaying them in a particular way on the nearby table, following a specific subtle rhythmic pattern, and enjoying the making of my work to the fullest. To the insensitive observer, I am just washing the dirty plates of last night's dinner; but in my mind, and to anyone who knows about my artistic 'gift,' what I am doing constitutes a genuine artwork. This performance is actual in the sense that nothing in my actions is invented—I am not a character in a story, my plates even less so; but it is surrounded by a plethora of ideas, more or less complex, more or less interesting, that make it a more or less worthwhile artistic performance, especially for me, the foremost spectator of this wonderful piece. If this makes sense, and I think it does, then conceptual artists are probably right that art cannot (and should not) have clear-cut boundaries.

### III. THE WORTHWHILE LIFE AS WORTHWHILE ART

Now, let's consider the possibility of conceiving one's whole life as a piece of conceptual art. If I am willing to conceive my life as an artistic endeavor, a problem immediately arises: what would make my life a *worthwhile* piece of conceptual art? In other words, what are the activities that would ideally qualify as the best possible ones for a life to count as a *good* conceptual artwork? Now, I would like to explore the possibility, not without difficulties, that seeking a *virtuous* life is, if not the best, a good way to achieve a life worthy of artistic appreciation, for it would be based on cognitive properties that are valuable to us, and that an audience may be able to grasp by looking at our behavior.<sup>12</sup>

According to Aristotle, a fulfilled life is one that accords with virtue, which is roughly the development of good human capacities to their best.<sup>13</sup> For instance, in order for someone to survive in the world, she must develop capacities enabling her to recognize when an event poses a danger and to determine how to deal with it. Character traits such as being courageous are said to be part of the individual when she has attained a state of excellence in the relevant domain (warfare, for instance); and this is, Aristotle tells us, conducive to true individual happiness. Moral virtues are generally construed as the outcome of the constant refinement of habitual dispositions (behavioral, conative, and emotional) that are central to the virtuous person's life. Virtue, as the pursuit of excellence in character and action, is a goal pursued for its own sake, and all the activities that the virtuous engages in are not pursued for any other reason than that they accord with virtue. This undeniably contributes to what Aristotle calls the 'good life.'<sup>14</sup>

Now, this poses an obvious problem. If virtue is something to be sought for no reason other than itself, then the idea of a virtuous life based on the desire to make it a worthy piece of art is itself inconsistent. I cannot be generous to others (by developing a disposition to be generous in the right circumstances) both because it is good to be generous and because I want my life to be a great masterpiece. This last motive would obviously count against my virtuous character, for it seems based on a desire both unnecessary and self-interested.

I do not think this objection constitutes a real danger for the agenda I have put forward, for several reasons. To begin with, this objection confuses two senses of what it is to seek a virtuous life. On the one hand, we can seek to pursue a virtuous life in the sense that everything that we do is done in relation to an overall goal, which is here to have a virtuous life (sense 1). On the other hand, we can seek to pursue virtue by means of excellence at particular activities: in all activities at which I want to be excellent, my actions, intrinsically

valuable, are pursued for their own sake (sense 2). The difference between the two senses lies in what the agent finds intrinsically valuable: is it the fact that one is virtuous while performing an action, or is it the action itself?

We can accept the idea that virtue (sense 1) should be sought for its own sake while rejecting the idea that its pursuit cannot be accompanied by other reasons. More, we can accept the idea that a virtuous action (e.g., an instance of generosity) has to be performed for its own sake (sense 2) without conceding that the overall goal of having a virtuous character cannot be conceived as an artistic endeavor. Even more, we can accept that the ‘for-its-own-sakeness’ of a virtuous action (sense 2) is its motivation while rejecting the idea that something else can’t figure in its *explanation*.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore possible to view one’s life as an artwork (by thinking of it as generally audience-directed) without this playing any motivating role in the *specific* activities that one engages in.

Furthermore, while conceding the point that virtue should be pursued for its own sake (in both sense 1 and 2), we can still make the empirical claim that *in the actual world*, it is virtually impossible to be always motivated intrinsically. Extrinsic motives are always part of our lives, and may even sometimes reinforce our intrinsic motives.<sup>16</sup> If one is to choose extrinsic motives in order to reinforce one’s purpose to build a virtuous character, why not choose harmless ones (such as seeking an artistic life) as opposed to self-serving—and essentially unvirtuous—ones (such as being virtuous in order to get something in return from others)?

Last, it is not even clear why seeing one’s life as a piece of art would count as an extrinsic motive, as opposed to a way of making sense of it. This is the time to distinguish between two ways that we might construe our life as an artwork, which may have been a source of confusion in this paper: one way is to make art the ultimate goal of our life; the other is to make art the explanation of our life. In the former case, we do what we do *because* it fits a lifelong goal, which is the building of a worthwhile artwork. However, as we have seen, this motive, although apparently extrinsic, is compatible with the motive to be virtuous *simpliciter* in all the situations of the relevant domain(s). The latter way of construing one’s life as an artwork involves the doing of virtuous actions *as* artistic expressions. I act generously in a particular situation not because of a desire to make my life an artwork, but because acting generously is the best thing to do in that situation (sense 2); but this doesn’t prevent me from *conceiving* my life as a genuine artwork, worthy of artistic appreciation, hence as somehow audience-directed. In other words, I do not choose to be virtuous because it would constitute good art, but because lives based on virtue are the most worth living; constituting good art is a consequence of my pursuit of virtue, not a cause. If we accept this construal, in order for an agent to be genuinely virtuous and for her virtue to count as artwork, she must evolve a meta-representation of her overall life, which cognitively may be better explained as a skill involving a set of dispositions to perceive her own life as exemplifying artistic properties that can in turn be evaluated by an audience (including herself).

#### IV. ETHICAL VALUE AND ARTISTIC VALUE: ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A CONNECTION

So far, I have argued that the pursuit of a virtuous life can count as an artistic endeavor. I have however not shown what would make a virtuous life one with any *artistic worth*. Since the good life is conceived here as a piece of conceptual art, we should expect it to at least have cognitive qualities that make it a worthwhile object of appreciation.

Besides its undeniable ethical value, it seems that cognitive value would be the most obvious kind of value that a virtuous life would qualify for. A life successfully based on virtue teaches us several things. It first gives us some hints of ways to live our lives, by means of exemplary behaviors and dispositions. By doing so, it may contribute to our *moral education* by showing ways to behave that are considered ethically honorable by the artist.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, it expands our moral sensibilities by confronting us with unusual doings; the virtuous is after all an unusual person (think of Gandhi). However, one might say that fictional characters can play the same role in our life, thereby making them as cognitively

valuable as real virtuous agents. My reply to this is that a real virtuous individual teaches us something that fictional characters do not teach: that it is actually *possible* to be virtuous in *this* world. To anyone who believes that all men are selfish and self-focused, a Gandhi or a Mother Theresa is a *prima facie* proof that such a belief is not completely true.<sup>18</sup> Fictional narratives often show us what virtue can be like, but real-life narratives are the only ones that can show how virtue actually is in this world. It can therefore give us hope—‘moral hope’ one could call it—that we might become virtuous people, and perhaps great artists, by designing our character in a way that we deem worthwhile. Real lives may not be better artworks than fictional lives, but at least they are of a different sort.

Before concluding, I would like to discuss a possibility that has not been raised in this paper. We have assumed that cognitive value was the primary criterion by which we judge conceptual artworks, without considering the fact that some conceptual artworks may also have *aesthetic* merit. We have seen that ethical merit can also count as cognitive merit. And this was enough to show that a life based on virtue can be a good conceptual artwork. This does not mean that being ethical cannot be conceived as aesthetically valuable. However, the move from the ethical to the aesthetic is not easy (not as easy as the move from the ethical to the cognitive), in part because the concept of ‘aesthetic’ is hard to define in the first place. Among the many different possible meanings, I would like to consider two: aesthetic as inherently coherent (in ‘form’) and aesthetic as what is good for its own sake.<sup>19</sup> In the first sense of ‘aesthetic,’ it seems that a virtuous life would also count as aesthetically valuable, for the construction of a virtuous character is constrained by standards of internal consistency. If this is true, then it is possible to appreciate a virtuous life both cognitively and aesthetically. As for the second sense, it is plausible that one could appreciate a virtuous life as worthy of attention, not just because it teaches us something, but for its own sake. In other words, there is no contradiction in the idea that an artwork can have cognitive value and still be appreciated for its own sake.

Of course, all this does not show that people would be inclined to judge as beautiful something that they also consider as ethical any more than they are inclined to judge less ethical, including vicious, things as beautiful. This is a matter of empirical inquiry that is out of the scope of this paper. The hypothesis that I privilege, however, which I call the ‘axiological transfer hypothesis,’ is that it is possible to value something for moral reasons and to end up valuing it for aesthetic reasons if we are asked to make an artistic judgment of it. In other words, the ethical aspect of an object may influence, or perhaps bias, people in their aesthetic judgment of that object, as when we judge a virtuous person to be beautiful and a vicious person to be ugly.<sup>20</sup> If it turns out that this hypothesis is true, this will show that ethics and aesthetics are more connected than some might contend, at least in people’s minds.<sup>21</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have given reasons to believe two things: that someone’s life can meaningfully be conceived as a genuine piece of conceptual art by herself and by anyone who may know about her conception, and that this life can be subject to an artistic appraisal, for it can have cognitive value and may hypothetically have aesthetic value. If it turns out that this hypothesis is true, this would mean that we can not only be taught by virtuous others, we may also find their lives beautiful by virtue of their virtue. Life, as opposed to other kinds of object, is hard to appreciate from outside a system of values that may influence us in our artistic appraisals from the very beginning. Nevertheless, this is to be shown. I have indeed not dealt with the possibility that a life based on vice (a life constructed in opposition to a system of values) can count as artistic, have both cognitive value and aesthetic value, and have more *artistic* merit than a virtuous life. Answering these questions will prove crucial in determining (i) whether lives of a particular sort count as better artworks than other lives, and (ii) whether moral values directly influence our artistic appraisals of lives (whether the

axiological transfer hypothesis is true, at least for some).<sup>22</sup> Like conceptual art, life is messy, and for some, that's probably the point of it.

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1. I would like to thank Peter Goldie, Florian Cova, Alberto Masala, and two anonymous referees for their comments on previous drafts of this paper.

2. Of course, an artist can sometimes intend to produce *some* cognitive effect in the audience, as opposed to specific, determinable effects.

3. *One and Three Chairs*, by Joseph Kosuth (1965).

4. *The Base of the World*, by Piero Manzoni (1962).

5. For a distinction between 'physical medium' and 'physical means,' see Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?* (London: Routledge, 2009).

6. This does not, however, mean that every conceptual artist *intends* to produce an artwork that constitutes such a critique. Here, I am talking about conceptual art as a movement.

7. Elisabeth Schellekens, "Conceptual Art," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conceptual-art/> (2007).

8. An implication of this paper is that the audience can sometimes be only one individual, namely the artist herself.

9. Peter Goldie, "Conceptual Art and Knowledge," in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, ed. Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

10. On the aesthetic (de)merit of deceit in conceptual artworks, see Peter Goldie, "Conceptual Art, Social Psychology, and Deception," *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics* 1, no.2.

11. I say 'obviously' because one might otherwise object that anything on earth, as necessarily apprehended through the lenses of our own subjectivities, cannot be conceived without some kind of interpretation, subject to wishful thinking, distorted memory recalls, and so on. Here, I am using the terms 'fictitious' and 'actual' in their everyday sense as, respectively, 'partly or completely invented by means of imagination' and 'real or considered as real.'

12. What would distinguish living one's life as a conceptual artwork and living one's life as a performance artwork is therefore that, in the former case, the agent's behavior is the *means* by which the audience is able to grasp cognitive properties (the agent's ideas, thoughts, emotions, character), while in the latter case, the agent's behavior *is* the artwork itself.

13. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1976). Of course, the list of the virtues (and corresponding activities) is subject to debate. We will assume here that what is 'considered as' virtuous is indeed virtuous. This allows a variety of positions, possibly influenced by culture, that one can have on the issue. Here, I take Aristotle's theory of virtue as an illustration to introduce a few issues about the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, and surely not as giving us a decisive account of what constitutes the good life. Even though the 'good life' is typically seen as an Aristotelian expression, I think it can still be used to qualify the kind of life that one (if not Aristotle) considers as worth pursuing. The problem in this paper is merely whether the good life (as exemplifying moral properties) can be seen as good conceptual art, rather than what exactly constitutes this exemplification of moral properties.

14. There are some debates about what exactly the good life consists in for Aristotle. For some, the good life is constituted by theoretical contemplation; a fulfilled life would here mainly depend on intellectual capacities. By contrast, some interpretations emphasize the importance for the development of virtue or working on capacities that are conducive to social well-being. See Gerard Hughes, *Aristotle on Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2001). If the good life is (at least partly) to be conceived as a set of observable behaviors, the public dimension (as opposed to private, in the artist's mind) of conceptual art does not therefore pose any problem for the project of conceiving one's life as a conceptual artwork.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Geoff Colvin, *Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else* (New York: Portfolio, 2008).

17. For a critique of the idea that this sort of moral education is good for morality, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (New York: Dover, 2004/1788).

18. Of course, it is not because the lives of Gandhi and Mother Theresa are virtuous that they constitute pieces of conceptual art, for they were not conceived as such by the relevant protagonists (as audience-directed and thought of as exemplifying artistic properties).

19. For a distinction of the different senses, see Noel Carroll, "Art and the Moral Realm," in *Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy, 126–51 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

20. If a life is considered as a piece of conceptual art, then it would perhaps not be so much the person herself that would be considered as beautiful, but rather her *character*.

21. See Carroll, "Art and the Moral Realm," for a similar commonsense-based approach. Experiments in psychology have shown that the reverse is true: that people are more inclined to consider attractive people as morally better than less attractive people, all other things being equal. For instance, see Karen Dion, "Physical Attractiveness and Evaluation of Children's Transgressions," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 24, no. 2: 207–13; Karen Dion, Elen Berscheid, and Elaine Waltster, "What Is Beautiful Is Good," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 24, no. 3, 285–90; Michael Efran, "The Effect of Physical Appearance on the Judgment of Guilt, Interpersonal Attraction, and Severity of Recommended Punishment in a Simulated Jury Task," *Journal of Research in Personality* 8: 45–54.

22. Indeed, we don't need to find that everyone who considers a life as virtuous also views it as beautiful, but that some people (a significant number, if possible) are inclined to consider a virtuous life as aesthetically beautiful. It would be preposterous to require otherwise. Not everyone has the sensibility for making artistic appraisals, and a piece of art can be appraised differently from person to person. No need, therefore, to assume that, if a life is to be counted as a better artwork than other lives, it *has to* be judged as better by *everyone*.

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