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Conceptual Art, Ideas, and Ontology

ABSTRACT

Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens have recently articulated the *Idea Idea*, the thesis that “in conceptual art, *there is no physical medium: the medium is the idea.*” But what is an idea, and in the case of works such as Duchamp’s *Fountain*, how does the idea relate to the urinal? In answering these questions, it becomes apparent that the *Idea Idea* should be rejected. After showing this, I offer a new ontology of conceptual art, according to which such artworks are not ideas but artifacts imbued with ideas. After defending this view from objections, I briefly discuss some implications it has for the ontology of art in general.

Even a cursory glance at literature on conceptual art—including commentaries by conceptual artists, art theorists, art historians, and philosophers of art alike—reveals a general consensus that such art has something to do with *ideas*.¹ Lucy Lippard and John Chandler discuss at length the “dematerialization of the artwork” that has happened alongside an increasing focus on the non-perceptual idea, with Lippard elsewhere chronicling this focus in great detail.² Sol LeWitt tells us that the idea “is the most important aspect of the work” and that “conceptual art is only good when the idea is good.”³ Timothy Binkley suggests that, with conceptual art, “to know the art is to know the idea,” and Joseph Kosuth goes as far as to say that “the ‘art idea’ (or ‘work’) and art are the same.”⁴ With conceptual art, Paul Wood seems right: “the idea is king.”⁵

Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens have codified these sentiments into the *Idea Idea*: “in conceptual art, *there is no physical medium: the medium is the idea.*”⁶ But, as Robert C. Morgan points out, “[to] say that art is about ideas is a problematic and misleading assertion. . . . It is misleading to the extent that the question of ‘ideas’ is too general, too open-ended, and without an appropriate context it means nothing.”⁷ Morgan is right: without offering something to say about

what ideas are, it is hard to know what to make of such claims.

My goal here is to make some progress on these issues. In Section I, I present the *Idea Idea*. In Section II, I discuss the ontology of ideas. In Section III, I argue that, on any plausible ontology of ideas, the *Idea Idea* is problematic. In Section IV, I offer a new ontology of conceptual art according to which conceptual artworks are not ideas but artifacts imbued with ideas and spell out what this notion of *imbuing* amounts to. In Section V, I discuss a potential worry, and, finally, in Section VI, I discuss some applications this ontology has for not just conceptual art but more traditional art as well.

I. THE IDEA IDEA

According to Goldie and Schellekens:

conceptual art has no physical *medium*: the medium of conceptual art is ideas, and any physical presence is *merely the means* by which the artist lets us gain access to his ideas. . . . The idea idea, thus understood, is that conceptual art works with ideas, or with concepts, as the medium, and not with shapes, colours, or materials. This, we think, is what marks out conceptual art as *radically* different from traditional art.⁸

The *medium*, as understood by Goldie and Schellekens, is that which is central to our appreciation of a work.⁹ The *means*, on the other hand, are just that: the mere means by which we come to appreciate that work. Though, with some art forms—perhaps painting or sculpture—it might feel natural to take the medium and the means to be one and the same, there are others in which they plausibly come apart. According to the Idea Idea, in the case of works such as Duchamp's *Fountain*, the medium is the idea, whereas the urinal is the mere means by which we come to engage with and appreciate that idea.¹⁰ The exact physical details of the urinal are irrelevant to our appreciation of the idea (hence LeWitt's remark that, in conceptual art, "the execution is a perfunctory affair"), but the urinal itself allows us access to and aids us in focusing on that idea.¹¹

Here, the inquisitive ontologist will ask: What, then, is the work? What sorts of things are *Fountain* and its ilk? The best answer for the friend of the Idea Idea is that the work itself really is the idea: as Schellekens herself has said, "the claim is that the artwork actually is the idea."¹² This makes good sense of the remarks mentioned earlier by LeWitt, Binkley, Kosuth, and others. It also makes good sense of LeWitt's claim that "[i]deas alone can be works of art," Piper's claim that the existence of "[g]ood ideas [is] necessary and sufficient for [the existence of] good art," and Schellekens's own discussion of the artwork "conceived as idea."¹³ The Idea Idea is properly understood, then, as the thesis that works of conceptual art—including *Fountain* and its ilk—really are ideas themselves.

But even if conceptual artworks are ideas, it cannot be that all ideas are works of art: Darwin's idea of evolution through natural selection is not an artwork, and it does not seem that my idea for a conceptual artwork that I am going to create but have not yet created is really an artwork yet. What is it, then, that distinguishes the ideas that are artworks from those that are not?

One line of response focuses on how the idea in question is presented. Darwin's idea was presented as a scientific claim, whereas Duchamp's idea was presented in a particularly artistic fashion: associated with physical means, in an artworld context, for artistic appreciation by members of the artworld.¹⁴ My idea for a conceptual artwork I would like to create is not yet a work, but will become one once I take the requisite steps for pre-

senting it as one. What these steps might be is a matter I do not address here, as this is intended only as the start of an answer. I take it, though, that this start is the best start for friends of the Idea Idea and that the challenge of fleshing it out more fully would prove tractable.

The Idea Idea has virtues. It makes sense of conceptual art's characteristic "dematerialization of the object" as well as the apparent radical distinction between conceptual and more traditional art. It also gives us a story to tell about why and how conceptual art is to be appreciated—recall LeWitt's assertion that "conceptual art is only good when the idea is good." Furthermore, it does so within what seems to be a remarkably simple ontological framework: accounting for conceptual artworks requires no commitment beyond a commitment to ideas. This all constitutes an argument: the Idea Idea ought to be accepted because it helps us, in a relatively simple manner, make sense of conceptual art and our engagement with it.¹⁵

II. THE ONTOLOGY OF IDEAS

Given their importance so far, we should pause to consider what ideas are. After all, whether the Idea Idea is ultimately a plausible position depends in part on our ontology of ideas.

Though she does not tell us what ideas are, Schellekens does discuss what they are not. What we do when we engage with a work such as Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning*, Schellekens tells us,

is not simply imagine *that* there was a drawing, *that* it was erased, and *that* the canvas is now empty. Rather, we have to enter into a slightly more challenging imaginative relationship with the work. . . . [We do not] imagine 'that a drawing has been erased', as that does not allow for the particularity of the case.¹⁶

This suggests that ideas cannot be the entities that serve as the referents of such that-clauses, namely, propositions. Reinforcing this point, Schellekens writes, of the 1970 Art Workers' Coalition's *Q. And babies? A. And babies*,

[the] contextualized photograph of human corpses strewn over a small road in South-East Asia brings the idea of injustice to us in a way that a mere statement of the event cannot. The power of the artwork, its artistic

value, cannot be reduced to the proposition ‘Innocent people have suffered tremendously as victims of US foreign policy’. The image of the massacred women and children, together with the burning question and shocking answer painted over it enables us to appreciate the situation’s true callousness and horror.¹⁷

Propositions, it seems, just cannot get the required work done.

Furthermore, as Anthony Everett and Timothy Schroeder point out, ideas are, intuitively, things we “come up with.”¹⁸ But when Darwin “came up with” the idea of evolution by natural selection, he did not in any sense “come up with” the proposition that organisms evolved by natural selection. Ideas are not eternal *abstracta*; they originate within the minds of thinkers, at particular times and places. Propositions do not, so ideas should not be identified with propositions. We can run similar arguments that suggest that ideas should not be identified with senses, states of affairs, facts, or other, similar entities.

But if ideas are not those sorts of things, what are they? Any adequate ontology of ideas, I take it, should satisfy certain criteria. First, whatever ideas are, they should be the sorts of things that we “come up with”—that is, creatable historical particulars. Second, they should be public rather than private: ideas are the sorts of things that we communally engage with. Third, ideas should be causally efficacious: they can inspire us, motivate us, instill in us happiness or distress, and so on. And fourth, ideas should have dynamic lives: they are the sorts of things that are capable of being spread, forgotten, and so on. Whatever account we offer should, at minimum, meet these criteria.

Goldie and Schellekens suggest that ideas are nonphysical when they say that, in conceptual art, there is no physical medium and then say that the medium is the idea. If the medium is the idea and there is no physical medium, then, straightforwardly, the idea cannot be physical. But they do not need to say this, as nothing in their account hinges on such a claim.

In fact, Everett and Schroeder do think of ideas as physical things—specifically, as “distributed systems of contentful mental states”¹⁹ Ideas are created when—and where—an individual adopts the first token of a novel mental state type, which has as its content a sense, proposition, state of affairs, fact, or some similar entity. Ideas are transmitted via various forms of communication: as

more and more individuals enter into tokens of that mental state type, the idea spreads, becoming what Everett and Schroeder refer to as a *spatially discontinuous individual*.²⁰ The idea, then, is the spatially discontinuous system of these contentful token mental states.

Though this is just a rough sketch of the view, Everett and Schroeder’s ontology of ideas is attractive. According to it, ideas are historical particulars, originating at particular times, in particular places, with particular agents. The account also locates ideas in physical space, making them publicly accessible and giving us a convenient framework within which to understand their causal efficacy. The question of how ideas can inspire us, motivate us, instill in us happiness or distress, and so on is now just the question of how one physical mental state can cause another. The account also preserves the intuition that ideas can be spread or forgotten: ideas are spread as more agents come to have the appropriate mental states, causing the system to grow, and forgotten when, for whatever reason, no more tokens of the relevant type can be tokened.²¹ And, finally, the account does all of this within an ontologically parsimonious framework: ideas are not some new class of entity but instead systems of things we already believe in, namely, mental states. Together, these virtues offer us good reason to accept Everett and Schroeder’s account of ideas.

III. ARE CONCEPTUAL ARTWORKS IDEAS?

Combining this idea of ideas with the Idea Idea, *Fountain* is not a urinal but a spatially discontinuous individual, a distributed system of contentful token mental states of the same type that have as their content some relevant entity, be it a sense, proposition, state of affairs, fact, or some similar entity. Similarly with *Erased de Kooning*, *Q. And babies?* *A. And babies*, and the like.

But this leads to trouble. It very much seems that *Fountain* is located in a particular place—most plausibly wherever the urinal is. When *Fountain* was on display in Alfred Stieglitz’s gallery, 291, in 1917, it was located in that gallery and not elsewhere. But according to the Idea Idea, it turns out that, since the work *is* the idea, *Fountain* is located wherever anyone is having the relevant idea. Despite it seeming clear that, as of the time of this writing, I have never been in the same room as

Fountain, it follows from the Idea Idea that I have been many times. In fact, I am right now and, presumably, so are you. This is a strike against the Idea Idea: it gets the location of many conceptual artworks wrong. Call this the *Location Objection*.

Why should we take intuitions such as these seriously? Here, I follow what David Davies calls the *pragmatic constraint* on the ontology of art. If we are to respect “artistic practice,” which is the

touchstone for our philosophical theorizing about art, . . . [artworks] must be entities that can bear the sorts of properties rightly ascribed to what are termed ‘works’ in our reflective critical and appreciative practice; that are individuated in the way such ‘works’ are or would be individuated, and that have the modal properties that are reasonably ascribed to ‘works,’ in that practice.²²

Davies is quite right: if we are to inquire responsibly into the ontology of conceptual artworks, we must respect these sorts of intuitions or risk losing touch with our very subject matter.²³

The pragmatic constraint, as stated, can be broken down into three parts. First, we ought to make sure that works can bear the properties that they seem to have, given our reflective critical and appreciative practice. Second, we ought to individuate works in the way they seem to be individuated in that practice. And third, we ought to make sure that works have the modal properties ascribed to them in that practice. The Location Objection is a worry for the first of these, but there are also worries pertaining to the latter two.

Suppose that Fred, a lesser known contemporary of Duchamp’s, gets a hold of Duchamp’s idea, grabs a bathroom sink, and calls it *Another Fountain*, intending to make an artwork that reiterates the very same point already made by *Fountain*. In this case, Fred is not working with his own idea but really with Duchamp’s—we can think of it as a case of artistic quotation. According to the Idea Idea, since the ideas here are the same, *Fountain* and *Another Fountain* are actually the same artwork. This is another strike against the Idea Idea: it incorrectly conflates artworks that should, intuitively, remain distinct and thereby fails to properly individuate works. Call this the *Conflation Objection*.

The friend of the Idea Idea might respond to this worry in one of two ways. First, she might suggest that the work is not the idea itself, but the idea as presented as an artwork.²⁴ Call such enti-

ties *presented ideas*. If we posit such things, the fact that Duchamp and Fred engaged in distinct presentational acts would be sufficient for individuating *Fountain* from *Another Fountain*, even though they are working with the same idea. This would, of course, require the friend of the Idea Idea to explain what exactly the difference is between a given idea and its associated presented ideas. Is it really plausible to suppose that we generate new entities—presented ideas—simply by presenting extant ideas? Is not the presented idea really just the idea, presented?²⁵ I do not mean these questions as objections per se. Instead, the objection is this: by invoking presented ideas, the friend of the Idea Idea incurs the burden of answering very difficult metaphysical questions, and it would be preferable if such questions did not come up at all.

Alternatively, the friend of the Idea Idea might claim that conceptual artworks are not identical with the relevant ideas, but are instead constituted by them, much in the same way that many claim that the statue, while not identical with the lump of clay, is still constituted by it.²⁶ Distinct artworks could be constituted by the same idea, thereby allowing *Fountain* and *Another Fountain* to remain distinct despite both being constituted by Duchamp’s idea.²⁷ While this strategy is promising, it does come with a commitment to coincident objects, which some take as a theoretical cost.²⁸ It also does nothing to solve the Location Objection and, in fact, tells us that *Fountain* and *Another Fountain* are necessarily colocated, which seems false.²⁹ The strike remains.

The third worry, corresponding to the third part of the pragmatic constraint, deals with modal properties and, more specifically, survival conditions. Suppose that Picasso’s *Guernica* gets lost and, over time, everyone forgets about it. We would be hesitant to conclude from this that *Guernica* thereby goes out of existence. Instead, we should say that *Guernica* lives on, albeit unknown to those deprived future individuals. To avoid an unprincipled asymmetry, we should be equally hesitant to conclude that *Fountain* goes out of existence if the urinal becomes lost and, over time, everyone forgets about the idea.³⁰ But the death of *Fountain* in such circumstances, along with the asymmetry that goes along with it, is exactly what the Idea Idea commits us to: if, as discussed in Section II, ideas have dynamic lives and go out of existence when forgotten, then when

the idea is gone, so is the work.³¹ That's yet another strike: the Idea Idea gives incorrect survival conditions for conceptual artworks. Call this the *Survival Objection*.

That is three strikes. If we accept Everett and Schroeder's idea of ideas, the friend of the Idea Idea faces the Location, Conflation, and Survival Objections, which together give good reason against identifying conceptual artworks with ideas. So, insofar as the Idea Idea tells us that conceptual artworks are ideas, and insofar as Everett and Schroeder's idea of ideas is independently plausible, we find ourselves with good reason to reject the Idea Idea.

Furthermore, notice that the objections just discussed presuppose only that (i) the idea in question is not necessarily located where the associated object is located, (ii) ideas are public, rather than private, and (iii) ideas can go out of existence if forgotten. As stated earlier, these should turn out to be true on *any* adequate ontology of ideas. So, even if we find reason to reject Everett and Schroeder's idea of ideas, the Idea Idea still faces the same troubles.

IV. IMBUED ARTIFACTS

We would do well to reconsider the role of the supposedly "dematerialized" object. Schellekens is friendly to this suggestion, stating that "we should be wary of the conceptualist's claim that the focus of appreciation in conceptual art does exclude the [means] completely and art has been entirely dematerialized."³² But what, then, is the relation between these means and the work itself?

Let us call these means *artifacts*, taken loosely here to include not only physical objects, events, activities, or other things created or modified by agents, but also natural and otherwise unmodified objects merely indicated or selected by agents.³³ We might, then, take works to be mereological fusions of ideas and artifacts; on such a view, the urinal and Duchamp's idea are both proper parts of *Fountain*. This, however, will not do. Since mereological fusions are partially located where each of their parts is located, we would again face the aforementioned Location Objection: *Fountain* is partially located wherever anyone has the relevant idea, so *Fountain* is not wholly located just where we might think that it is.

Another strategy is to take the work to be a set, the members of which are the artifact and the idea. This, however, will still not do: if sets are located where their members are, we face consequences analogous to those just mentioned. And if sets are not located where their members are, we find ourselves with the result that *Fountain* exists in the realm of mathematical objects, and, hence, again not where we might think it does. Either way, taking such works to be sets leaves us vulnerable to the Location Objection.

Conceptual artworks, then, should be identified neither with ideas themselves nor with fusions of ideas and artifacts nor with sets of such things. I propose instead that conceptual artworks are *imbued artifacts*. They are physical objects, events, activities, or perhaps tokens of some other type of object—perhaps even ideas!—that stand in a special relation to certain ideas. *Fountain* is a urinal, but it is no mere urinal: it is a urinal that stands in a special relation to an idea that originated with Duchamp. Call this view the *Imbued Artifacts Account* (henceforth, *IAA*).

Before 1917, that particular urinal was yet not an artwork, but it later became one. The urinal was a mere urinal until it came to stand in that special relation with Duchamp's idea; after that, it was an artwork. Since *Fountain* is a urinal, albeit a special one, it exists right where we might think it does. If it gets lost—which it did—and everyone forgets about it, that same urinal is still *Fountain*.³⁴ If it is found and no one remembers it, it is still *Fountain*, even though no one knows it. And, as long as any artwork involves any other artifact, even if it involves the same idea and even if it involves some similar urinal, that artwork is distinct from *Fountain*.

All of this hinges on what this special relation amounts to. Say that an agent *imbues* an artifact *a* with an idea *i* just in case that agent presents *a* with the intention that, if *a* were presented to an appropriate artworld audience, *a* would elicit in that audience artistic or aesthetic appreciation of *i* (or perhaps the relation between *i* and *a* or between *i* and current artworld paradigms and so on). I take it that the notions of the *artworld* and *appreciation* are familiar enough, and that, if our understanding of such things is cloudy, it is cloudy in ways that are problematic for all parties, not just the present account. Say that *a* has *been imbued with i* just in case there has been a time *t* such that

an agent has imbued *a* with *i* at *t*. If *a* has been imbued with *i*, call *a* an *imbued artifact*.

The *imbued with* relation takes only extant *relata*: both *a* and *i* must exist at the time of imbuing. Since imbued artifacts are artifacts, if *a* is destroyed, the artwork is destroyed. By contrast, *i* need exist only at the time of the imbuing: if *i* goes out of existence later, *a* does not automatically revert to being a mere artifact. Conceptual artworks are artifacts that *have been* imbued; so as long as there was a time at which an artifact was imbued, it remains a conceptual artwork even if the idea is forgotten. That is, at the time of the imbuing act, the artifact is changed, entering into the category of conceptual artwork and remaining there for the rest of its existence. So, even if the imbued urinal is lost—which, again, it was—and everyone forgets the idea, *Fountain* still exists. In this way, having been imbued is like having been kissed: once you have been kissed, you are always such that you have been kissed, even if the person who kissed you no longer exists. Likewise, once an artifact has been imbued, it is always an imbued artifact, even if the idea is lost. The IAA thereby avoids the Survival Objection.

The IAA also avoids the Conflation Objection: since *Fountain* is a urinal, albeit a special one, no artwork, even if it involves the same idea, is identical with *Fountain* unless it is *that* urinal. Fred's *Another Fountain*, being a bathroom sink that is distinct from Duchamp's urinal, is a distinct artwork, despite both having been imbued with the same idea.

Finally, the IAA also avoids the Location Objection: since *Fountain* is a urinal, albeit a special one, it exists exactly where that urinal exists. And though it was not yet an artwork before Duchamp's imbuing act, it still exists exactly *when* the urinal exists. We can correctly say, after all, that President Obama has existed since 1961, even if he did not become president until 2008. While it follows from this that there was a time during which *Fountain* was not yet an artwork, this is no more problematic than saying that there was a time during which President Obama was not yet president.

If the above consequence is unpalatable, there is an alternative: say that *Fountain* is the object composed of all and only the urinal's temporal parts after (and perhaps concurrent with) Duchamp's imbuing act.³⁵ This is available, of course, only if we accept temporal parts, and it

also forces us to reject the claim that *Fountain* is, strictly speaking, a urinal. Instead, on this view, it is proper part of a urinal. Fortunately, throughout the rest of this discussion, nothing I say crucially depends on which of these strategies we adopt. As such, I avoid talk of temporal parts, but everything I say could be translated into this alternative.

There are some notable consequences of the IAA. First, some of Duchamp's readymades—such as *Fountain*, *Coat Rack*, and *50cc of Paris Air*—were such that the artifact was either lost or destroyed and a new artifact or series of artifacts was created and imbued with the same idea. On the IAA, it follows that these artworks really were lost or destroyed and that the later artworks were, in fact, replicas. The artworks we see in museums today presented as *Fountain* are not, then, really *Fountain*, but replicas of Duchamp's original work. This consequence seems correct at best and palatable enough at worst.³⁶

Second, since some artworks, such as Barry's *Inert Gas: Helium* or Acconci's *Following Piece*, are plausibly taken to be imbued events or activities, such works share the life spans of those events or activities. This suggests that, despite our still being able to engage with and appreciate them, such works existed in the past but do not exist now. This consequence is, again, tolerable, as the puzzle of how we can presently engage with and appreciate works that do not presently exist is no more puzzling than the puzzle of how I can appreciate my deceased grandfather—which is not to say that it is not puzzling, but that the puzzle is not at all specific to the present account.

Third, it might seem that, on the IAA, the proper object of appreciation is not the artwork itself but the idea with which it is imbued. Recall again LeWitt's remark that "conceptual art is only good when the idea is good," as well as the error George Dickie makes in claiming that we appreciate *Fountain* because of "its gleaming white surface, the depth revealed when it reflects images of surrounding objects, [or] its pleasing oval shape."³⁷ If the idea is the proper object of appreciation and "the execution is a perfunctory affair," does not the IAA, in telling us that the work is the artifact, simply get the proper object of appreciation wrong?

It does not. When we appreciate *Fountain*, we are appreciating the imbued urinal in part because it triggers in us further understanding and appreciation of Duchamp's idea, much like how

we appreciate *Guernica* in part because it triggers in us certain attitudes about the bombing of Guernica in 1937. Furthermore, the aesthetic properties (or lack thereof) of the urinal do play into our appreciation of the work as a whole: as Cabenne documents, Duchamp purposefully chose objects that would inspire “visual indifference,” and the interplay between that indifference and the relevant idea is part of what makes the work so biting.³⁸

This is all consonant with Schellekens’s discussion of *Q. And babies? A. And babies*, quoted in Section II, where she emphasizes the bearing the image and text have on our appreciation of the work. Here, as with many other works of conceptual art—including, if what I have said above is correct, *Fountain*—proper appreciation of the work requires not just engaging with the idea but engaging with that idea alongside the artifact, considering the artifact’s properties and how they relate to the idea. The artifacts are, in such cases, carefully chosen by the artist, it seems, for reasons relevant to the appreciation of the piece: for Duchamp it was, again, “visual indifference,” whereas for the 1970 Art Workers’ Coalition, it was the disturbing imagery which conveyed a specific sense of horror and callousness.³⁹

The IAA, I claim, is preferable to the Idea Idea. This is because the Idea Idea, when combined with the idea of ideas developed by Everett and Schroeder—or, for that matter, any plausible idea of ideas—faces several objections that the IAA does not. Put another way, the IAA succeeds in preserving important intuitions whereas the Idea Idea simply fails to do so. When it comes to the analysis of costs and benefits, the IAA comes out ahead.

V. THE CONFLATION OBJECTION RETURNS

Suppose Duchamp imbues his urinal with his idea i_1 , and Rauschenberg goes on to imbue that same urinal with his idea, i_2 . If the artwork is the artifact, and, in this case, the artifact is the same, then the resulting artworks are identical. Intuitively, however, the two artists create distinct works. The IAA, then, just like the Idea Idea, faces the Conflation Objection.⁴⁰

We might try to fall back on the temporal parts view discussed in the previous section: Duchamp’s work is the fusion of those temporal parts of the

urinal after (and perhaps concurrent with) his imbuing act, and Rauschenberg’s is the fusion of those temporal parts after (and perhaps concurrent with) his imbuing act. This would be sufficient for properly individuating the works, but only if the imbuing acts occur at different times: Duchamp and Rauschenberg could imbue the same urinal at the same time, so the Conflation Objection still looms.

There are (at least) three options available to the friend of the IAA. First, she could bite the bullet: the Conflation Objection *is* a worry, and there is no immediately apparent solution to it. This is not so bad, however, since it is just as much a worry for the Idea Idea. Both views face the same objection, so the playing field is leveled and neither view is worse off than the other. This is, however, a less than satisfying response and also takes some of the force away from the earlier arguments against the Idea Idea.

A second solution is to deny that conceptual artworks are, strictly speaking, identical with imbued artifacts, but instead claim that they are *constituted* by such artifacts. Since multiple artworks could be constituted by the same artifact, the friend of this view—which we can call the *Constitution View*, contrasted with the earlier *Identity View*—avoids the Conflation Objection. And recall that a similar move cannot be made by the friend of the Idea Idea: as discussed in Section III, if we take conceptual artworks to be constituted by ideas alone, we end up with the undesirable result that works like *Fountain* and *Another Fountain* are necessarily colocated.

While the Constitution View offers a solution to the Conflation Objection not available to the friend of the Idea Idea, it comes with a commitment to colocated objects, which, again, might be a theoretical cost. It also fails to preserve the claim that *Fountain* is, strictly speaking, a urinal. Additionally, the friend of the Constitution View also incurs the burden of offering an understanding of the constitution relation defined on both concrete and abstract objects, since in the case of some works, such as more conceptual works of music or literature, the artifact might be abstract. Whether these worries count as objections will vary largely with metaphysical temperament; I do not intend to settle such issues here.

For those who would rather avoid such worries, there is a third option. The friend of the IAA who prefers the Identity View could say that,

while the works are strictly speaking the same object, the differences we attribute to them simply arise from the difference in roles that object can play in different contexts. When thought of as Duchamp's work, the work might be original, but when thought of as Rauschenberg's work, it might be derivative—the same object, that is, can take on different aesthetic properties depending on how it is conceived. Suppose that someone is both the president of the United States and a store manager. It is still true that the president has properties and powers that the manager does not, and vice versa, despite them being the same person, because the possession of those properties and powers largely depends on which role that person is playing in a context. The same, it seems, can be said for imbued artifacts.⁴¹

This third strategy might initially seem to be, in principle, open to the friend of the Idea Idea as well. If conceptual artworks are ideas, then one idea could play the role of two artworks (such as *Fountain* and *Another Fountain*) in the same manner as suggested above. If this were so, the playing field would again be leveled: rather than both views facing the Conflation Objection, armed with this response, neither the friend of the IAA nor the friend of the Idea Idea need worry. But, as before, opting for this strategy leaves the friend of the Idea Idea with the consequence that *Fountain* and *Another Fountain* are necessarily colocated, which seems false. Since friends of the Idea Idea can adopt this strategy only by biting a bullet elsewhere, the IAA still comes out ahead.

VI. ONTOLOGY AND APPRECIATION

Goldie and Schellekens discuss the distinctly ontological challenge conceptual art purportedly confronts us with.⁴² They claim that conceptual art is “radically different from traditional art.”⁴³ But, really, how radically different is conceptual art from traditional art, ontologically?

Recall the comparison made earlier between *Fountain* and *Guernica*: full appreciation of either work requires some engagement with an idea. In the case of *Fountain*, the idea in question is that which has as its content Duchamp's commentary on the artworld community, whereas in the case of *Guernica*, the idea in question is that which has as its content the horror of aerial bombardment. A virtue of the IAA is that it allows us to give these

cases a uniform treatment: though the relevant artifacts are quite different, both works ultimately are—or are constituted by—imbued artifacts. As such, the IAA offers more than just an ontology of conceptual art: it gives us a unified account of contentful artworks in general.⁴⁴ This is a distinct advantage over the Idea Idea.

Fountain either is or is constituted by an artifact—a urinal—imbued with an idea. We appreciate the urinal insofar as (i) it acts as a conduit for further appreciation of the idea in question and (ii) its aesthetic features (or lack thereof) complement that idea. We do not, however, appreciate the urinal for its aesthetic features in general—this would be to make the mistake attributed to Dickie in Section IV. We can think of engagement with *Fountain*, then, as running along two axes: there is engagement with the urinal qua urinal and engagement with the urinal qua conduit for appreciation of Duchamp's idea. Call the first axis the *physical axis* and the second the *conceptual axis*. Appropriate engagement with *Fountain* involves putting very little weight on the former and very much weight on the latter, as well as considering the relationship between these two axes.

Likewise, *Guernica* either is or is constituted by an artifact—a painting—imbued with an idea. Just like *Fountain*, we appreciate the painting insofar as (i) it acts as a conduit for further appreciation of the idea in question and (ii) its aesthetic features complement that idea. Unlike *Fountain*, however, we do also appreciate the painting for its aesthetic features in general—there is no mistake made in appreciating the painting as a visual object. Engagement with *Guernica*, then, also runs along the same two axes, though appropriate engagement with the work involves putting much weight on the physical axis but still also some weight on the conceptual axis. And again, considerations of the relationship between the two axes will also be relevant insofar as we should consider how well the visual image represents or communicates the relevant idea.

The IAA gives us a unified treatment of both conceptual art and contentful, traditional art: both kinds of art either are or are constituted by imbued artifacts, with the difference between them being not an ontological difference but a difference in appropriate appreciation—in how much weight we put on each of these axes of appreciation.⁴⁵ Traditional artworks involve much more weight being put on the physical axis, whereas conceptual

artworks involve much more being put on the conceptual axis. Surely enough, this makes the distinction between traditional and conceptual artworks vague, but, seeing as it is quite natural to describe some works as “more conceptual” or “more traditional” than others, this vagueness is a positive feature.

Conceptual art, then, poses no new ontological challenge, nor is it radically different, ontologically, from more traditional art. The “dematerialization” of the object, so central to discussions of conceptual art in general, need not be thought of as an ontological claim, but can instead be thought of as a relative devaluing of the physical axis of appreciation in favor of an increased focus on the conceptual axis. What makes a work of contentful art a work of conceptual art is not merely what kind of thing it is but how it is most appropriate to engage with and appreciate it.⁴⁶

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1. Here follow Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens, who, in *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?* (New York: Routledge, 2010), take ‘conceptual art’ to refer not to the specific movement between 1966 and 1972 but instead to the more general and inclusive category of art dating back roughly to Marcel Duchamp’s readymades and containing works since then more or less in that tradition.
2. Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object 1966–1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973); Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” *Art International* 12 (1968): 46–50.
3. Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Art Forum* 5 (1967): 54–79; reprinted in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (MIT Press, 1999), pp. 12–16.
4. Timothy Binkley, “Piece: Contra Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35 (1977): 265–277, at p. 266; Joseph Kosuth, “Art After Philosophy,” *Studio International* 178 (1969): 134, 160–161, 212–213, reprinted in Alberro and Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, pp. 158–177 (quotation at p. 166).
5. Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art* (London: Tate, 2002), p. 33.
6. Goldie and Schellekens, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?*, p. 33.
7. Robert C. Morgan, “Introduction,” in *Art Into Ideas: Essays on Conceptual Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 1–9, at p. 1.
8. Goldie and Schellekens, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?*, p. 60. Emphasis in original.
9. Goldie and Schellekens, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?*, p. 60.
10. Throughout this discussion, when I talk about *Fountain*, I have in mind the original readymade, produced by Duchamp in 1917, rejected by the Society of Independent Artists, and photographed by Alfred Steiglitz. This work was lost shortly after originally being displayed, though, as Gavin Parkinson tells us in *The Duchamp Book* (London: Tate, 2008), p. 61: “facsimiles of *Fountain* were found or made by Duchamp or others in 1950, 1963, and 1964 (the last a multiple edition of eight with two artist proofs), which were close enough to the 1917 version to satisfy Duchamp, who went ahead and ‘signed’ them too (as ‘R. Mutt’).” The relation between the original work and these “facsimiles” will depend on our ontology of conceptual art; I return to this topic throughout the rest of this discussion when aspects of the views under consideration have consequences for it.
11. LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” p. 12.
12. Elisabeth Schellekens, “The Aesthetic Value of Ideas,” in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, eds. Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 71–91, at p. 75.
13. Sol LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” 0–9 5 (1969): 3–5, reprinted in Alberro and Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, pp. 106–108, at p. 106; Adrian Piper, “Idea, Form, Context,” in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume II: Selected Writings in Art Criticism* (MIT Press, 1996), pp. 5–12, at p. 5; Schellekens, “The Aesthetic Value of Ideas,” p. 85.
14. Compare LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” p. 107: “All ideas are art if they are concerned with art and fall within the conventions of art.”
15. This line of argument can be extracted from *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?*, though Schellekens has clarified to me that it was not their intention to endorse this argument.
16. Elisabeth Schellekens, “‘Seeing Is Believing’ and ‘Believing Is Seeing,’” *Acta Analytica* 20 (2005): 10–23, at p. 20.
17. Schellekens, “‘Seeing Is Believing’ and ‘Believing Is Seeing,’” pp. 20–21.
18. Anthony Everett and Timothy Schroeder, “Ideas for Stories,” unpublished manuscript, p. 2.
19. Everett and Schroeder, “Ideas for Stories,” p. 4.
20. Everett and Schroeder, “Ideas for Stories,” p. 3.
21. Stating exactly when this would occur turns out to be complicated. Timothy Schroeder and I hope to say more about this issue in future work.
22. David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 17–18.
23. It is exactly because of these considerations that I resist Davies’s own ontology of art, according to which works are to be identified with generative performances. For more on the tension between Davies’s pragmatic constraint and his ontology, see Andrew Kania, “Review of David Davies, *Art as Performance*,” *Mind* 114 (2005): 137–141; Robert Stecker, “Review of David Davies, *Art as Performance*,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 75–77; Robert Stecker, “Methodological Questions about the Ontology of Music,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009): 375–386.
24. As indicated types, as developed in his “What a Musical Work Is,” *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973): 5–28. I take this to be a real worry for Levinson: if indicated types are distinct from the original types, indicated — as he needs them to

be—we face very difficult questions that we could otherwise avoid. For one, it seems very odd that we can create a new entity simply by indicating or presenting another entity; it does not seem that we can generate new indicated persons or presented coffee cups simply by indicating persons or presenting coffee cups. If we want to say that types or ideas are somehow special in this respect, we incur the burden of explaining how and why. Compare Gregory Currie, *An Ontology of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 58.

25. Compare Currie, *An Ontology of Art*, p. 58.

26. See, inter alia, David Wiggins, *Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967); E. J. Lowe, "Identity, Instantiation, and Constitution," *Philosophical Studies* 44 (1983): 45–59; E. J. Lowe, "Coincident Objects: In Defense of the 'Standard Account,'" *Analysis* 55 (1995): 171–178; L. R. Baker, "Why Constitution Is Not Identity," *Journal of Philosophy* 94 (1997): 599–621; Kit Fine, "The Non-identity of a Material Thing and Its Matter," *Mind* 112 (2003): 195–234.

27. Regardless of whether the friend of the Idea Idea adopts Everett and Schroeder's account of ideas or some other account, if she is to avail herself of this strategy, she must either acknowledge that ideas are physical objects or offer an understanding of the constitution relation defined on nonphysical objects. This, I take it, is a challenge and a reason for the friend of the Idea Idea sympathetic to the constitution view to accept an account of ideas as physical objects.

28. Compare to Michael Burke, "Preserving the Principle of One Object to a Place: A Novel Account of the Relation Among Objects, Sorts, Sortals, and Persistence Conditions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (1994): 591–624.

29. The same could be said if we identify works with titled ideas, along the lines of the account developed in Jerrold Levinson's "Titles," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44 (1985): 29–39. Even though such a move would individuate *Fountain* from *Another Fountain* on the basis of the difference in title, it would still face the Location Objection and the unpalatable consequence that *Fountain* and *Another Fountain* are necessarily collocated. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing me on this point.

30. Perhaps it is the case that there should be some disanalogies between conceptual artworks like *Fountain* and more traditional pieces like *Guernica*, but it is not at all clear that they should be disanalogous in this respect. The most striking asymmetries between conceptual and more traditional artworks—and, I think, the one we have the strongest intuitions about—are asymmetries with respect to how we appreciate these different kinds of works. These asymmetries, however, can be accounted for without a difference in ontology or survival conditions, as I argue in Section VI.

31. One might reject this claim, however, and instead claim that, once created, ideas exist eternally, even if they are forgotten and, for whatever reason, cannot be remembered. Going this route requires rejecting Everett and Schroeder's idea of ideas and also raises problems for the earlier claim that ideas should be causally efficacious, since it is difficult to understand how eternally existing objects could enter into causal relations with physical objects. Rather than take on such questions, I suggest instead sticking to the view that ideas are historical particulars, the life spans of which are bounded by (i) the initial time at which they, as it were,

"came up," and (ii) the time at which they can no longer be remembered. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing this point.

32. Schellekens, "The Aesthetic Value of Ideas," p. 85. Schellekens uses 'vehicular medium' here, rather than 'means,' but I take it that the two are, in this context, equivalent. I switch to 'means' for consistency with the rest of this article.

33. Including events allows us to make sense of works such as Robert Barry's 1974 *Inert Gas: Helium*; including activities allows us to make sense of works such as Vito Acconci's 1969 *Following Piece*; and including natural or otherwise unmodified options allows us to make sense of, say, pieces of driftwood presented as ready-mades or the ideas or propositions that make up Barry's 1969 *All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking—1:36 P.M.; 15 June 1969, New York*.

34. See above, n. 10.

35. For discussion of temporal parts, see, inter alia, David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 202–205; Theodore Sider, *Four Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

36. If, like me, you think that this consequence is correct, we see a return of the Conflation Objection to the Idea Idea: since the idea behind Duchamp's original *Fountain* and all of the replicas that have since been created is the same, if we take the work to be the idea, independent of any of the relevant originals, we then incorrectly conflate the original with the replicas. See above, n. 10.

37. George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 42. For criticism of Dickie's claims, see James Shelley, "The Problem of Non-perceptual Art," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 43 (2002): 363–378.

38. Pierre Cabenne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971), p. 48.

39. Thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing attention to this point.

40. Thanks to Joshua Spencer for pushing me on this.

41. This move is inspired by the general strategy proposed in Ross P. Cameron's "There Are No Things That Are Musical Works," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 295–314.

42. Goldie and Schellekens, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?*, pp. 21–34.

43. Goldie and Schellekens, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?*, p. 60.

44. This unified account is similar to Arthur Danto's idea of the transfiguration of the commonplace, as developed in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard University Press, 1981). Whereas Danto casts artworks in terms of embodied meanings (a topic which is expounded upon in his *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994]), the IAA identifies the works not with meanings, but with the artifacts which embody them. A key difference here has to do with the history and location of the piece: an imbued artifact exists where and when the *artifact* exists, whereas an embodied meaning exists where and when the meaning exists. To sidestep this conclusion, Danto might take embodied meanings to be objects that are distinct from

the meaning itself or the artifact in which it is embodied, but are instead constituted by the meaning as embodied in an artifact. The resulting view would be very similar to the Constitution View discussed in Section V, and face similar worries.

45. In the case of artworks such as works of music, literature, poetry, and the like, the story told about the artifact will be far more complicated. If, for example, we find ourselves drawn to Levinson's view that musical works are abstract types, then, on the accounts under development here, works of contentful music would either be or be constituted by such types imbued with ideas. This is, of course, to remain silent on the metaphysics of types. As such, I do not

pretend that the account offered here offers a full story of the ontology of any art form.

46. For helpful feedback and discussion, I owe many thanks to audiences at the 2012 Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, Rocky Mountain Division; the 2012 Meeting of the British Society of Aesthetics; the 2013 Siena Heights University Philosophy Workshop; the 2013 Dubrovnik Inter-University Center Conference on Art and Reality; and a 2013 colloquium at Grand Valley State University. Special thanks to the anonymous referees and the editors of this journal as well as Ben Caplan, Sam Cowling, Anthony Everett, David Sanson, Sarah Sawyer, Elisabeth Schellekens, Timothy Schroeder, and Joshua Spencer.