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The Case of Hypothetical Art: From Philosophy of Art to Contemporary Art Practice

Jurij Selan*

Introduction

In previous writings, I have introduced a concept of a hypothetical art, which I have defined as a mental creation of an art philosopher, intended to attract a reader to become fictionally involved in an art issue.¹ However, further research has led me to recognise the dual role of hypothetical art, one in the philosophy of art and one in contemporary art practice.² The intention of the present paper is to delve into this issue.

On Thought Experiments

Since creating fictional cases is a standard methodological strategy of thought experiments for testing theories in philosophy and theoretical science, due to the absence of possibility for empirical experimentation, the use of hypothetical artworks in the philosophy of art should also be reflected in reference to the role thought experiments play in science.

There are two challenges to thought experiments: the source of thought-experimental knowledge and the evidential significance of thought experiments.³ As James Robert Brown and Yiftach Fehige questioned: 'How can we learn about reality ... just by thinking ... without new empirical data?'⁴ Thought experiments, according to this position, closely relate to the problem of mental models. Mental models are 'unreal creatures of our imagination'⁵ that are referred to in explanations of real-world happenings, even though they do not really exist. For Peter Godfrey-Smith, this is a new perspective on the ancient problem of modality: how knowledge of modal facts concerning the mental model can lead us to an understanding of the real world.⁶ This problem is especially severe regarding impossible fictions, which are not only unreal but also impossible in the real world.

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Thought experiments can be acknowledged from several perspectives. I find the following three especially relevant for the role of hypothetical art in the philosophy of art: argument, possible worlds, and fictional narratives.

First, from the perspective of argument, thought experiments have a paradoxical nature, being both experiments and arguments.⁷ Tim De Mey recognises this to be the dual nature of thought experiments.⁸ A thought experiment has an experiment-like set-up (a description of an imaginary experimental situation, described in detail, with particulars irrelevant to the generality of the conclusion), and an argument-like interpretation,⁹ which follows a logic of induction. Since an argument only has a certain degree of probability in inductive argumentation, the key question regarding thought experiments as inductive argument is how strong and cogent they are.¹⁰

The source of knowledge in thought-experimental argumentation is two-fold: experience-based knowledge from the past and some theoretical background.¹¹ Obviously, since thought experiments are largely based on the theory they are trying to prove, they are facing the danger of winding up in a *circulus vitiosus*¹² of argumentation, which already presumes the truth of what is yet to be proved. What makes thought experiments escape such logical fallacy and count as a source of evidence is the evidential significance,¹³ which arises in their dual experiment/argument-like nature. Although the experimental-like set-up of a thought experiment is, in a way, already determined by the theory, a thought experiment will acquire the evidential significance only when its set-up is described as seemingly independent of a theory. This is what makes a thought experiment *virtuous* rather than *vicious*. When an outcome of a seemingly independent experimental-like set-up is interpreted within the theory in terms of an argument, a thought experiment gains argumentative strength and cogency, and becomes evidentially significant.¹⁴ That is also why, when reduced solely to an argument without its experiment-like set-up, a thought experiment loses its evidential significance.

Second, possible worlds in modal logic extend the semantics of propositions to different modalities, like necessity, possibility, and contingency.¹⁵ If our world is only one (actual) of the possible (unactualised) worlds,¹⁶ this suggests propositions of differing modal values: possible (true in at least one possible world), impossible (false in any possible world), and contingent (true in some and false in other possible worlds). Accounts of possible worlds are especially relevant for those thought experiments that are clearly impossible in our actual world, but can nevertheless tell us something relevant about our world. By exploiting informational gaps in our knowledge of reality and filling it with surprising facts, such thought experiments function as ‘true fiction’, a how-possibly explanation (in contrast to a how-actually explanation) that gives a relevant insight into the real world.¹⁷ This is often the case with science fiction, which is (in some cases) a thought experiment with scientific and philosophical relevance, addressing the technological, physical, biological, evolutionary, ethical, religious, political, and other issues in some possible worlds, with the intention of making us rethink the world in which we live.¹⁸

Third, is the perspective of fictional narratives. Clearly, it is often difficult to draw the boundaries between proof and persuasion in thought experiments. They combine argument, storytelling, and exemplification, which leads to an account of thought experiments as fictional narratives.¹⁹ Thought experiments gain their explanatory power by proposing a compelling story. The narrative of a thought experiment is more than just an indispensable medium of communication; it has an important role in persuading us of the strength and cogency of an argument-like interpretation of a thought experiment. Thus, the intention of thought experiments—like that of literary fiction—is to convince us to play ‘what-if’ games,²⁰ which we subsequently use to make real-world inferences.²¹ The way one narrates a thought experiment is a game of make-believe with our judgements and experiences.

Accounts of seeing thought experiments as literary fictions are interesting in relation to hypothetical artworks, as these, too, must satisfy the crucial requirement of fictionality: to make-believe that certain conditions are not constrained by beliefs related to actual events.²²

Danto's Artworld

There is a long history of thinking about real artworks as models for different theories and definitions of art.²³ Hypothetical artworks in the philosophy of art have a similar intention: they serve as *exempla* for some art theory.²⁴ We can find hypothetical art in different art theories, but it is undoubtedly most prolific in Arthur C. Danto's.

To understand Danto's hypothetical art, it is essential to understand the theory that his hypothetical artworks help support. To do that, we should introduce another form of hypothetical art: that of Kendall L. Walton. In his renowned essay on the categories of art,²⁵ Walton uses hypothetical artworks called *guernicas*—a series of artworks in a fictional world that are like versions of Picasso's *Guernica* done in various bas-relief dimensions—to illustrate two levels of perception of an artwork: the first concerns the philosophy of art (why something is considered an artwork); the second, aesthetics (how something, when it is regarded as an artwork, is aesthetically perceived). In respect to this, Walton distinguishes standard, variable, and contra-standard features of art. The relationship between standard and variable features refers to the problem of aesthetics, and the relationship between standard and contra-standard features refers to the philosophy of art.

Standard and variable features form a traditional way of thinking about art in some cultures. Variable features, despite possibly being aesthetically outrageous, are still part of art. For instance, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* was, despite its shocking cubist morphology, still a painting and not problematic in relation to standard features, only to variable ones; it was a problematic artwork in an aesthetic sense, but not as an artwork in a philosophical sense. In contrast, Duchamp's *Fountain* with its contra-standard features of the time could not be evaluated adequately according to the standard categories of art, as it was not only anti-aesthetic but it also rejected the very idea that art should involve the

creation of any physical thing with any perceptible aesthetic properties at all. Only eventually, after *Fountain's* contra-standard features were integrated into the standard categories of art, was conceptual art acknowledged as art.²⁶

In respect to categories of art, Danto's intention is not that of the aesthetician but of the philosopher. Danto is credited for laying the groundwork for the institutional definition of art later developed by George Dickie.²⁷ The premises Danto laid in his first essay, 'The Artworld',²⁸ still hold in his latest book, *What Art Is*.²⁹ For Danto, aesthetics is a matter of considering how things appear to the senses and how artworks are superior in their appearance. In contrast, the philosophy of art is concerned with distinguishing artworks from 'mere things' (the ordinary objects and phenomena of our everyday world). According to Danto, the error that most theoreticians make is thinking aesthetic properties are essential to an artwork. As conceptual art has made clear, aesthetic properties cannot make a 'mere thing' an artwork. Therefore, for Danto, the essential properties of an artwork cannot be aesthetic in nature; an artwork can only be made by an act of interpretation in some *artworld*—a term coined by Danto to describe the complex social and cultural context that defines something as art.

Danto attempts to reconcile the categories of art with the challenges the traditional definition of art faced when conceptual art came along. But despite his motivation coming from conceptual art, he struggles to generalise his definition of art to all art in history. Thus, in a Hegelian vein, Danto's claim advocates essentialism.³⁰

In the context of such a philosophical investigation, one can see Danto's hypothetical artworks as a blend of the previously stated perspectives on thought experiments: argument, possible worlds, and fictional narratives.

*Species Artis Hypotheticae*³¹

Danto follows an analytic philosophy that emphasises argumentative clarity, achieved using formal logic and analysis of language. This is clear in most of his writings, notably *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*,³² in which he scrutinises the nature of artworks through logical analysis of an object's (artwork's) properties and analyses the language of propositional clauses and the relations of predicates concerned with an artwork's meaning. His precision is most clearly revealed when he defines art with the simple yet meaningful formula: $I(o) = W$. The formula proposes that interpretation (I) is a function that transfigures a material object (o) into the artwork (W).³³ According to Danto, even though we might have materially indiscernible objects (o), different interpretations (I) would make them different as artworks (W). Accordingly, the underlying intention of Danto's hypothetical artworks is to elucidate such argumentation.

By proposing fictional situations that are implausible or even impossible in the actual world, Danto also constructs different possible worlds—*possible artworlds*. This, however, raises the question we came across with thought experiments as possible worlds. If Danto's hypothetical artworks are often implausible or even impossible in our world (see below, the example of *Polish Rider Made in a*

Centrifuge), how can one infer their evidential significance from a possible world to our real world?

To enhance their evidential significance, Danto communicates his hypothetical artworks as clever fictional narratives. As stated earlier, the narrative of the thought experiment is essential to its evidential significance, as it seduces the reader into the game of persuasion. Similarly, through narrative, Danto gives his hypothetical artworks a persuasiveness that argument by itself does not have.

As I see it, there are two reasons why Danto conceives of hypothetical artworks. The first is to illustrate his concept of an artworld, in which something is an artwork because of interpretation and not its aesthetic properties. The second is to promote essentialism and to persuade us that his definition of art could be generalised to *all* art. To understand how Danto achieves this, the dual-structure account on thought experiments, explained above, is relevant.

As with thought experiments, a process of constructing a hypothetical artwork also has two levels: experiment-like and argument-like. First, a hypothetical artwork is cleverly designed as a convincing instance of art, to be trusted in the same way as we trust real artworks. Only when we are convinced can the hypothetical artwork then enter the second level, where it is involved, with other hypothetical artworks, in the argumentative process of *inductive generalisation*³⁴—where the theory demonstrated by some hypothetical artworks is suggested as essential for all art. In this respect, hypothetical artworks act as what Godfrey-Smith calls a ‘hub-and-spoke’ analogy, in which one case, which is fictional, serves as a ‘hub’ that anchors several other real or fictional cases.³⁵ So, by proposing that hypothetical artworks could ‘anchor’ real instances of art to his theory, Danto convinces us to accept the validity of his claim for all art in history.

Let us now consider in more detail how Danto does that. According to Till Grüne-Yanoff, thought experiments convince us of the possibility of what they are trying to explain (Lat. *explanandum*) in three ways: by identifying some initial conditions that could lead to *explanandum*, by indicating the sort of process through which the *explanandum* could have been produced, and by showing how *explanandum* properties could be produced by a possible process from some background condition.³⁶ Danto’s hypothetical artworks also follow this, when their experimental-like nature is established as a legitimate instance of evidence. Accordingly, we can discern various *species of hypothetical artworks* (see [fig. 1](#)) in Danto’s *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.³⁷

Le Cravat, which first led me into the research of hypothetical art,³⁸ is representative of one such species. Its characteristic is that the imagined artwork is fictional but the proposed artist is real (in this case, Picasso). Another species is artworks that are real but that have their creation process hypothetically reimaged. Here is an example:

Imagine that we learned that the object before us, looks like a painting that would spontaneously move us if we believed it had been painted—say the *Polish Rider* of Rembrandt, in which an isolated mounted figure is shown

Type of hypothetical artwork	Example	Graphical illustration	Comment
Cycle of fictional artworks	At the beginning of the book <i>Transfiguration of the Commonplace</i> is a hypothetical cycle that Danto fictionally collects and curates for a hypothetical exhibition.		The cycle encompasses eight factually almost identical red-painted rectangles, which have various subjects and titles and were made in different historical époques. Different hypothetical artworks from this cycle belong to different types of hypothetical artworks.
Fictional artworks without specified authors, but with a meaningful context	A painting, <i>Israelites crossing the Red Sea</i> , once described by Kierkegaard.		This is the first painting of the hypothetical cycle. A red rectangle, in this case, represents Jewish-Christian iconography.
	<i>Red Square</i> as a representation of Moscow's main square.		The third painting of the hypothetical cycle. A red rectangle, in this case, represents a cityscape.
	<i>Red Square</i> as a minimalist masterpiece.		The fourth painting of the hypothetical cycle. A red rectangle, in this case, mirrors Malevich's Suprematism.
	<i>Nirvana</i> as a metaphysical work.		The fifth painting of the hypothetical cycle. A red rectangle, in this case, represents Buddhist iconography.
	A plain red painted canvas.		The eighth work of a hypothetical cycle. Since it is just a plain red painted canvas with no historical relevance, it is not an artwork but a 'mere thing'.
Fictional artworks with a real author	<i>Le Cravat</i> by Picasso.		A cravat painted blue by Picasso. A fictional crowning work of Picasso's career.
	A red grounded canvas by Giorgione.		The seventh work in a hypothetical cycle. It is actually not an artwork, but only a grounded canvas on which Giorgione intended to paint a masterpiece <i>Conversazione sacra</i> . Therefore, it only has historical value.
Fictional artworks with a fictional author and a real author as a reference	<i>Red Table Cloth</i> by Matisse's student.		The sixth painting of a hypothetical cycle. It obviously refers to Matisse's <i>L'atelier rouge</i> , which was the breakthrough point in Mark Rothko's understanding of colour in 1949. Therefore, by Matisse's student Danto is perhaps having Rothko in mind.

Figure 1. Danto's species of hypothetical art. Image: © Jurij Selan.

midjourney to an uncertain destiny—was not painted at all but is the result of someone's [*sic*] having dumped lots of paint in a centrifuge, giving the contrivance of a spin, and having the result splat on canvas, 'just to see what would happen'.³⁹

This hypothetical artwork can be entitled the *Polish Rider Made in a Centrifuge*, and it is evidently a how-possibly explanation, a cleverly narrated 'what-if' game.

Fictional artworks with a fictional author	A painting by a Danish portraitist called <i>Kierkegaard's Mood</i> .			The second painting of the hypothetical cycle.
	<i>Untitled</i> by J.			J is a fictional author in Danto's book. Before the opening of the exhibition, J demands Danto also include his red painting into the show. Danto accepts it with reservation, since he thinks it is too shallow and one of J's least successful artworks.
	Other various hypothetical artworks made by J (and his rival K).	<i>The Mirror</i>		J is obviously Danto's alter ego and promotes artworks that Danto would make if he had decided to be an artist. In parallel to the book, J creates several hypothetical conceptual artworks with which Danto (as a hypothetical artist) paraphrases different art theories (<i>The Mirror</i> as a paraphrase of mimesis theory of art), radicalises some real artworks (<i>The Bed</i> as a radicalisation of Rauschenberg's <i>Bed</i>) and illustrates some scientific knowledge (Newton's first and third of laws).
		<i>The Bed</i>
		<i>Newton's Third Law</i> by J <i>Newton's First Law</i> by K
		<i>Yearning for Unity</i>		An allegorical landscape looking like the painting of the first and third of Newton's laws.
Real artworks with a fictional creational process	<i>Polish Rider</i> made in a centrifuge.			Danto transforms an actual artwork by Rembrandt into a hypothetical one by making speculations about how it could be created.
Artworks in real artworks	Flemish portrait hanged on the wall in the <i>Portrait of James Tissot</i> by Edgar Degas.			On several accounts Danto discusses representations of imaginary artworks in real artworks to address some art issue.
Re-titling of real artworks	<i>Plowman by the Sea</i> ; <i>Landscape #12</i> (different titles of the <i>Landscape with the Fall of Icarus</i> by Pieter Bruegel the Elder)			To illustrate the importance of a title for the interpretation of an artwork, Danto gives different titles to real artworks.

Figure 1. Continued.

Even though its premise is unlikely to be true in our world, Danto forces us to note that in some possible world we would not appreciate such a ‘thing’ as an artwork if it had such an accidental history.

On an argument-like level, Danto’s species of hypothetical artworks (fig. 1) play a part in a process of inductive generalisation, through which he claims his essentialist perspective. Notably, conceptual artworks—such as Duchamp’s *Fountain* and Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, which Danto uses as prime examples to support his theory—have a limited range of generalisation and cannot inductively generalise Danto’s thesis to all art. If Danto made the inductive generalisation based only on conceptual artworks, this would lead him into the fallacy of hasty generalisation, which is inevitable when inductive generalisations are based on too

narrow a span of evidence.⁴⁰ Therefore, Danto needs to expand the historical diversity of artworks to back up his essentialist claim. This is precisely what hypothetical artworks such as the *Polish Rider Made in a Centrifuge* do: they expand historical diversity to make plausible the inductive generalisation of Danto's theory to all art.

The Failure of Conceptual Art

One could say that conceptual art was initiated as a reflexive thought experiment, with the intention to challenge the accepted boundaries of the traditional concept of art.⁴¹ The goal of Duchamp's *Fountain* was not only to disturb the variable (aesthetic) features of art but to redefine the standard (philosophical) categories of art. By asserting aesthetics conceptually irrelevant to art, and only the cognitive value of art mattering—its *idea*—conceptual art set itself the task of revising what qualifies as an artwork.⁴² That was the goal of *purely* anti-aesthetic conceptual art defined by Joseph Kosuth and Art & Language⁴³ and expressed in Sol LeWitt's 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art'.⁴⁴

A manifesto of purely conceptual art turned out to be utopian. The failure of conceptual art, as Osborne observes, demonstrated the incoherence of a particular self-understanding of conceptual art.⁴⁵ However, as Michael Kelly realised, this failure was fortunate, as it prevented the self-defeat of conceptual art.⁴⁶ Therefore, it is only a failure in theory, not an artistic failure,⁴⁷ as it prevented conceptual art from dissolving into philosophy. If conceptual art really was dematerialised and anti-aestheticised it would become redundant, as it could be reduced to philosophical propositions.⁴⁸

According to Elisabeth Schellekens, the failure helps us answer three dilemmas concerning conceptual art, the first of which is the issue of the firsthand experience in conceptual art. An appreciation of a conceptual artwork does not seem to require the firsthand experience of the medium's aesthetic qualities, but it does entail some intimate relation with the idea—'a personal first-hand experience of the idea central to the piece'.⁴⁹ What distinguishes conceptual art, such as one of Robert Barry's pieces, from philosophical propositions is that conceptual artists, in contrast to philosophers, do not only make their point but also *instantiate* it; that is, 'they manage to turn what in the form of a proposition seems to be rather prosaic comment into something more experiential'.⁵⁰ This gives us a different view of the importance of the idea in conceptual art: an idea that is not only intellectually apprehended but is experienced. As Jeffrey Strayer argues, Duchamp chose to instantiate his idea of a readymade by choosing different objects. Indeed, we cannot appreciate the revolutionary importance of works like Duchamp's *Fountain* and *Bottle Rack* without understanding the idea. However, even such seemingly pure conceptual artworks must be 'embodied in such objects since we distinguish, for instance, between *Fountain* and *Bottle Rack* by distinguishing between the perceptual objects with which those artworks are supposed to be identified'.⁵¹ So, the reason conceptual art does not demand a firsthand experience is not that it lacks

aesthetic value but that the perceivable object of art is not what is aesthetically relevant; the idea itself is.

Second, the failure of conceptual art reveals that pleasurable experience may still occur in conceptual art. The power of the conceptual artwork, its artistic value, cannot be reduced to propositions stating its idea, but we need to relate to that idea in an emphatic and imaginative manner; for example, in contemplating political injustice, social issues, etc.⁵² Therefore, the aesthetic appreciation of an idea may induce pleasure in engaging with a conceptual piece, which is reminiscent of the pleasure we gain from hearing 'a good joke, or looking at a satirical cartoon'.⁵³

Third, striving for the dematerialisation promoted by conceptual art need not imply any incommensurable philosophical divide between conceptual art and traditional art. The vehicular role of medium in the process of experiencing conceptual art is as important as in any other art, as it has the task of *triggering* the imagination and a cognitive process of personally engaging with the idea.⁵⁴ 'It is this ability to yield experiential knowledge that saves conceptual art from being superfluous.'⁵⁵ Therefore, the importance of choosing the right medium to convey the idea is as essential to conceptual art as it is to any other art, and if the medium is badly chosen in relation to the idea, the conceptual artwork may not be persuasive.⁵⁶ This is obvious in the work of poet and conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers, who, according to Deborah Schultz, gradually, through his artistic career, began to use materials to express more complex, multilayered ideas.⁵⁷

According to Jrge Heiser,⁵⁸ the recognition of the experiential and aesthetic value of conceptual art links the conceptualism with the type of art that appears to be its obvious antithesis: romanticism. As an example, Heiser proposes Andy Warhol's film *Kiss* (1964), which stimulated him to come up with the concept of the 'romantic conceptualism':

Seeing *Kiss* for the first time a couple of years ago, I was amazed how sensuous it is ... I had assumed it was all about the concept, not about real kissing ... In short, Warhol's *Kiss* seemed to comply in many ways with what would become the conventions—as contested as these may have been—of Conceptual art. But at the same time, a voluptuous bliss overwhelmed the rigidity of the Conceptual execution.⁵⁹

By using the paradoxical term of romantic conceptualism, Heiser argues it is precisely the importance of the material medium that makes conceptual artworks not only mentally interesting but also emotionally rich.

The failure of conceptual art has had a decisive impact on contemporary art, which must be, according to Osborne, conceptualised as 'post-conceptual art'—art that is defined by the critical recognition of the failure of conceptual art towards radical dematerialisation—by 'the historical movement of conceptual art from the idea of an absolute anti-aesthetic to the recognition of its own inevitable pictorialism'.⁶⁰ To transcend the traditional dualism of conceptual vs aesthetic and come

up with an understanding more suited to contemporary art, Osborne, similarly to Heiser, turns into romanticism and revives the 'romantic ontology of an artwork'. In the romantics' ontological conception of art, aesthetics is considered as both *partial* and *relational*. This means that it presents a necessary sensuous condition of art, but its significance is not exclusive and must always be judged 'in the context of historically shifting relations between aesthetic and other—cognitive, semantic, social, political and ideological—aspects of artworks. And the balance and meaning will be different in different kinds of art.'⁶¹

Hypothetical Art and the Limits of Art

The limits of art exposed by conceptual art and its failure also reveal an interesting paradox in hypothetical art. In a search for the limits of abstraction, artist and philosopher Jeffrey Strayer set out to identify the fundamental elements of making and apprehending works of art. Strayer shows that, minimally, even the most conceptually abstracted art depends on something delineated, marked off, or singled out from everything that is not, otherwise there is no work to discuss, interpret, evaluate. Such a delineation is an object—a *public perceptual object*—and when a subject views and identifies it as an artwork, this results in an *artistic complex*. The constituents of an artistic complex are the subject, the perceptual object, and the subject's consciousness of perceptual object.⁶²

Strayer's term 'public perceptual object' must be understood in the widest and most abstract sense, which means that, at art's outer limits, non-embodied⁶³ and ideational⁶⁴ works can be identified as art. But in either case, the identification 'must rest on at least one perceptible entity through which the intended identification is made comprehensible'.⁶⁵ This means that it must refer to something perceptible, at least at the outer-most limits of one's consciousness:

It is not possible to conceive of an artwork that would not have a relation to consciousness. Consciousness is both a necessary condition of an artist's effecting the identity of an artwork and of a subject's understanding of that intended identity.⁶⁶

Consciousness is the most abstract of all mediums, and when relying only on consciousness an artwork is an ideational artwork, which has no properties apart from that comprehension and where consciousness is used as a medium.⁶⁷

In cases of non-embodied and ideational artworks, the comprehension of an artwork's identity depends solely on the use of verbal language to specify and affect its identification.⁶⁸ Thus, a verbal language alone, without any physical manifestation of an art object, according to Strayer, can be a medium of visual art because it makes the identification of an artwork possible.

Strayer uses the example of Robert Barry's most materially minimal works to illustrate his point. For George Dickie, Barry's infamous pencilled wall piece *All the Things I Know But of Which I Am Not at the Moment Thinking*—1:36p.m.; June 15, 1969 (1969) is not art, at least not in the traditional sense, as what language

indicates to be the artwork is not an object executed in some medium; it is not crafted but is specified by language.⁶⁹ Thus, when such work is considered an artwork, it is so despite transcending the need for a medium. In this way, according to Dickie, Barry's work is a prototype of purely de-aestheticised conceptual art. However, as Strayer argues, in such cases, the medium, in this case a language, is still very much important, as it has a function of singling out a public perceptual object—'the object that the work is meant to be'.⁷⁰ Thus, even such a noumenal artwork is dependent on an awareness of the language through which the object is delineated.⁷¹

How do the limits of art identified by Strayer affect hypothetical art (as found in Danto's philosophy of art)? Because the experiential existence of a work of art in the perceiver's mind could depend upon nothing more than being named—that is, singled out by the use of language (such as mentioned in a book, lecture, etc.)—does this also mean objects such as Picasso's *Le Cravat* could be some day documented in an art anthology, such as H.W. Janson's?⁷² It just might. But there is a catch. According to Strayer, a public perceptible object, with which the artwork is meant to be identified, must be singled out by the artwork's artist.⁷³ Similarly, Strayer notes that philosophy cannot identify the limits of art, only the unavoidable 'material' with which the artist must work. Only the artist can figure out what to do, and accept the creative challenge of investigating artistic possibilities. Philosophy can only state the presuppositions of art; it cannot produce works of art. 'For that you need art.'⁷⁴ Hence, Strayer differentiates between the *artistic* and *philosophical* identity of an artwork. The philosophical identity of an artwork should begin with the artistic identity—the public perceptual object as determined by the artist—and relate to historical, philosophical, and other issues.⁷⁵ The paradox of hypothetical art is that it has no such distinction between artistic and philosophical identity, as there is no difference between the artist and the philosopher, between the art and philosophy.

Does that mean that hypothetical art transcends the limits of abstraction set by Strayer? Well, not necessarily. It could be contended that hypothetical art converts a philosopher into a *hypothetical artist*—the artist that the philosopher (for example, Danto) would be, if they decided to be an artist instead of a philosopher. In this way, Danto, as a hypothetical artist (his alter ego 'J'), is 'correcting' the real artworks to be philosophically *ideal* and conceptually *pure* (for example, when radicalising Rauschenberg's *Bed*, Matisse's *Red Studio*, etc.; see [fig. 1](#)). From such perspective, unimaginable as it may seem, pure and idealistic hypothetical art such as Picasso's *Le Cravat* might be one day considered *real* art and placed in Janson's *History of Art*.

Hypothetical Art in Contemporary Art

I started from the presupposition that hypothetical art has no life outside the philosopher's theory. However, as we have seen, the vehicular medium for Danto's hypothetical art is language, which according to Strayer is the most abstract medium to single out an artwork. That is why Danto's hypothetical art also could

be *real* art if we were to accept Danto as a kind of hypothetical artist, although he presents as a philosopher. With hypothetical art, a distinction between artist and philosopher seems to fade away, so perhaps we need not limit a definition of hypothetical art that to created by art theorists only.

If we consider the practice of contemporary art, hypothetical art reveals itself from a new perspective—an artist's perspective. According to Osborne, one of the priorities of contemporary art is *fictionalising* the idea of 'global contemporary' as a 'geopolitical fiction'—projecting the disjunctive unity of social space in a most extended geopolitical form.⁷⁶ Global contemporary is a fiction of a 'disjunctive unity of present times',⁷⁷ which projects a single historical time of the present, despite the different historical and geographical times of human lives in the *real* present. Therefore, a concept of global contemporary is a kind of a thought experiment that depends upon 'as if' games—*heuristic fictions*, according to Kant—which cannot be objectively validated but are nevertheless legitimately used to regulate experience. According to Osborne, this is the *hypothetical* employment of reason in contemporary art as 'art of the contemporary'; contemporaneity hypothetically renders present and projects a non-existent unity onto the disjunctive relations between coeval times of human existence.⁷⁸

The characteristic way contemporary art fictionalises contemporaneity—occupies, articulates, critically reflects, and transfigures transnational spaces into geopolitical fictions—Osborne finds in the work of the Atlas Group, which could be considered a type of hypothetical art.⁷⁹ Osborne sees its work as emblematic of a new kind of art that aspires to articulate the fiction of our incipiently global contemporaneity to its fullest. In the work of the Atlas Group, Osborne identifies two types of active fictionalisation: fictionalisation of artistic authority, and collectivisation of artistic forms.⁸⁰ The first relates to an *author function*, as the Atlas Group is a fictive group of authors imagined by artist Walid Raad. The second relates to content and characters in the form of fictional documentaries, which 'stand-in for the missing political collectivity of the globally transnational'.⁸¹ This carries elements of actual documentation, which, combined with some actual documentary content, continue to persuade viewers of its factual status, despite the numerous markers of the project's overall fictitious character.⁸²

If, in the philosophy of art, hypothetical art is a thought experiment put forward by an art philosopher to test the limits of some art theory, the hypothetical artwork in contemporary art practice is a kind of thought experiment put forward by an artist to fictionalise and redefine the concept of contemporaneity. In either way, hypothetical art seems to have exceptions that prove the rule—the rule of the necessary materiality of art—finding its place at the outer-most limits of art.

Conclusion: Hypothetical Artworks as Intuitions

To conclude, let me return to the point where I began—to hypothetical artworks as thought experiments in Danto's philosophy of art. Because thought experiments cannot be empirically tested, they produce knowledge by relating to our background experiences, theories, and beliefs. Therefore, thought experiments are

constrained mostly by logical impossibilities and by the limits of philosophical intuitions.⁸³ However, as Robert C. Cummins argues, intuitions are poor candidates for evidence in philosophy, as they are not susceptible to external calibration,⁸⁴ which casts a shadow of doubt on the evidential significance of thought experiments,⁸⁵ and, therefore, also on the use of hypothetical art in philosophy of art.

Hypothetical artworks are experienced when we imagine their effect in the world. The (impossible) existence of fictional or hypothetical art frustrates us as we attempt to imagine effects designed to preclude the imagining of effects. However, if hypothetical artworks are susceptible to diverse background knowledge, education, and beliefs, different theorists can have different intuitions about them. For instance, the *Polish Rider Made in a Centrifuge* is based on Danto's premise (or should I say 'intuition') that the material complexity of an artwork is only a matter of aesthetics, and has no essential role in defining its status as an artwork. But this very intuition can be discussed.

The common denominator of Danto's hypothetical artworks is the relativisation of their material facture,⁸⁶ showing how banal it can be. Danto's intuition to do that is clearly based on his understanding of conceptual art, for which there are no aesthetic properties. Following such logic, Danto presupposes that in *all* art aesthetic properties do not take part in defining the artwork.

But can we define Rembrandt's art in the same manner as Duchamp's? Or, can we even define all conceptual art in the same manner? Of course, by transferring his intuition based on some cases of conceptual art to the *Polish Rider*, Danto is not trying to undermine Rembrandt's artistic virtuosity. By its absurdity, he simply wishes to shock us, to force us to re-evaluate our beliefs about the essence of art—that aesthetic properties are not *essential* to but *contingent* on defining something as an artwork. However, to me, exactly such absurdity reveals that the materiality of any artwork—including conceptual artwork—cannot be that easily dispensed with.

Even though in conceptual art there was a persistent tendency to restrain the role of materiality, also reflected in Danto's philosophy of art and his hypothetical artworks, the need for some kind of medium to transmit an idea cannot be escaped—even in conceptual art. As Osborne stressed by reviving the romantic ontology of an artwork, the relationship between aesthetic and conceptual is present in any kind of art, though their balance and meaning may differ in different kinds of art. Indeed, the vision of 'purest' conceptual art promoted the idea that an artwork should not be essentially linked to the aesthetic experience of the material object, as the firsthand experience is not essential to properly experiencing a 'pure' conceptual artwork. However, the manifesto of purely conceptual art failed; as stressed by Schellekens, in conceptual art the *idea also has to be experienced firsthand*. As exemplified by the most profound and complex cases of conceptual art—by romantic conceptualism, with regards to Heiser—conceptual art can also provide us with the meaningful firsthand experience. This is as *essential* to the experience of the idea of a conceptual

artwork as it is to an encounter with the most admirable cases of traditional art; for instance, a Rembrandt. Therefore, it may be suggested that in cases of all great art, experiencing material complexity is *essential* to, not only *contingent* on, the experience of the idea of an artwork.

Notes

1. Jurij Selan, 'Who's Afraid of Picasso's Tie, or Do You See the Catch in Hypothetical Art?', *Leonardo* 41, no. 5 (2008): 536–37; Jurij Selan, 'Exploring the Method of Hypothetical Artwork Modelling: Case of the Primary Colours Fallacy', *Leonardo* 43, no. 3 (2010): 314–15; Jurij Selan, 'Hypothetical Art and Art Education: The Educational Role of the Method of Hypothetical Artwork Modelling', *CEPS Journal* 1, no. 2 (2011): 59–72.
2. I kindly thank the reviewer of the first draft of the paper who alerted me to the dual role of hypothetical art and stimulated me to expand and further research the topic.
3. Tim De Mey, 'The Dual Nature View of Thought Experiments', *Philosophica* 72 (2003): 61–78.
4. James Robert Brown and Yiftach Fehige, 'Thought Experiments', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (summer 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/thought-experiment>.
5. Peter Godfrey-Smith, 'Models and Fictions in Science', *Philosophical Studies* 143, no. 1 (2009): 101–16.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Søren Hæggqvist, *Thought Experiments in Philosophy* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1996).
8. De Mey, 'The Dual Nature'.
9. See John Norton, 'Thought Experiments in Einstein's Work', in *Thought Experiments in Science and Philosophy*, ed. T. Horowitz and G.J. Massey (Savage: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991), 129–48; and John Norton, 'Are Thought Experiments Just What You Thought?' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (1996): 333–66.
10. In deductive argumentation, the conclusion by necessity follows from premises and leads to valid and sound arguments; in inductive argumentation, the conclusion follows from premises with a certain degree of probability, thus leading to arguments that have different strength and cogency. See Patrick J. Hurley, *A Concise Introduction to Logic* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 2000), 47–50.
11. Andrew D. Irvine, 'Thought Experiments in Scientific Reasoning', in *Thought Experiments in Science and Philosophy*, 149–65.
12. *Vicious circle*, from Latin; a term that denotes different types of logical fallacies.
13. *Evidential significance* is the credibility of an experiment to count as a source of evidence. See James W. McAllister, 'The Evidential Significance of Thought Experiments in Science', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 27, no. 2 (1996): 233–50.
14. De Mey, 'The Dual Nature'.
15. Christopher Menzel, 'Possible Worlds', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (winter 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/possible-worlds>.
16. David K. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
17. Benoit De Baere, 'Thought Experiments, Rhetoric, and Possible Worlds', *Philosophica* 72 (2003): 105–30.
18. See Noël Carroll, 'Science Fiction, Philosophy and Politics: Planet of the Apes as a Thought Experiment', *Ethical Perspectives* 20, no. 3 (2013): 477–93; and Susan Schneider, *Science Fiction and Philosophy: From Time Travel to Superintelligence* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
19. David Davies, 'Thought Experiments and Fictional Narratives', *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2007): 29–45.
20. Kirk Ludwig, 'Thought Experiments and Experimental Philosophy', in *Routledge Companion to Thought Experiments*, ed. Michael T. Stuart, Yiftach Fehige and James Robert Brown (New York: Routledge, 2016), 385–405.
21. Arthur Fine, 'Science Fictions: Comment on Godfrey-Smith', *Philosophical Studies* 143, no. 1 (2009): 117–25.
22. Davies, 'Thought Experiments and Fictional Narratives'.
23. For instance, Clement Greenberg promoted his vision of art through paintings of American abstract expressionism. See Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).
24. *Examples*, from Latin; a term that accentuates the fact that something is used as a model.
25. Kendall L. Walton, 'Categories of Art', *The Philosophical Review* 79, no. 3 (1970): 334–67.
26. Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
27. George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974); Thomas Adajian, 'The Definition of Art', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (winter 2012), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/art-definition>.

28. Arthur C. Danto, 'The Artworld', *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964): 571–84.
29. Arthur C. Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).
30. Michael Kelly, 'Essentialism and Historicism in Danto's Philosophy of Art', *History and Theory* 37, no. 4 (1998): 30–43, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.661998066>.
31. *Species of hypothetical art*, from Latin; a term coined by author as a reference to nomenclature of Latin names for biological species.
32. The book was first intended to be titled *Analytical Philosophy of Art*, to match Danto's previous works *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965), *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge* (1968), and *Analytical Philosophy of Action* (1973). However, Danto considered such a title too closely associated with the Wittgensteinians and Institutionalists, and therefore dismissed it. See Brian Soucek's review of *The Philosophy of Arthur C. Danto*, ed. Randall E. Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 2013), *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2014), <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/49600-he-philosophy-of-arthur-c-danto>.
33. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 125.
34. Inductive generalisation is a form of inference in which, based on evidence regarding a sample of cases, we conclude that something is universally true of a class.
35. Godfrey-Smith, 'Models and Fictions in Science'.
36. Till Grüne-Yanoff, 'Appraising Models Nonrepresentationally', *Philosophy of Science* 80, no. 5 (2013): 850–61.
37. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.
38. Selan, 'Who's Afraid of Picasso's Tie, or Do You See the Catch in Hypothetical Art?'.
39. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 31.
40. John H. Gardiner, *The Making of Arguments* (Charleston, SC: Bibliobazaar, 2008), 139–40.
41. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 40.
42. Elisabeth Schellekens, 'The Aesthetic Value of Ideas', in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, ed. Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 72.
43. Peter Osborne, 'Art Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Criticism, Art History and Contemporary Art', *Art History* 27, no. 4 (2004): 664, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0141-6790.2004.00442.x>.
44. Sol LeWitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967): 79–83.
45. Osborne, 'Art Beyond Aesthetics', 664.
46. Kelly, 'Essentialism and Historicism in Danto's Philosophy of Art', 43.
47. Osborne, 'Art Beyond Aesthetics', 664.
48. Schellekens, 'The Aesthetic Value of Ideas', 80.
49. *Ibid.*, 86.
50. *Ibid.*, 81.
51. Jeffrey Strayer, *Subjects and Objects: Art, Essentialism, and Abstraction* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 107.
52. Schellekens, 'The Aesthetic Value of Ideas', 83.
53. *Ibid.*, 86.
54. *Ibid.*, 83.
55. *Ibid.*, 83.
56. *Ibid.*, footnote 12.
57. Deborah Schultz, *Marcel Broodthaers: Strategy and Dialogue* (Oxford: Peter Lang AG, 2007).
58. See Jörg Heiser, 'Emotional Rescue: Jörg Heiser on Romantic Conceptualism', *Frieze* 72 (2002), <https://frieze.com/article/emotional-rescue>; and Jörg Heiser, 'All of a Sudden: Things that Matter in Contemporary Art. An Interview with Jörg Heiser', *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 2, no. 1 (2008), www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/heiser.html.
59. Heiser, 'Emotional Rescue'.
60. Osborne, 'Art Beyond Aesthetics', 666.
61. *Ibid.*, 661.
62. Jeffrey Strayer, 'Essentialist Abstraction', *Aesthetics – American Society for Aesthetics (ASA) Newsletter* 33, no. 2 (2013): 9; Strayer, *Subjects and Objects*, 3.
63. Strayer, *Subjects and Objects*, 107.
64. *Ibid.*, 257, 300.
65. *Ibid.*, 110.
66. *Ibid.*, 171–72.
67. *Ibid.*, 260.
68. *Ibid.*, 305.
69. George Dickie, *The Art Circle* (New York: Haven, 1984), 59–61.
70. Strayer, *Subjects and Objects*, 251–52.
71. *Ibid.*, 171–72.
72. Art history's survey texts can be seen as a bedrock of what is considered art. Silver and Levine review ten of such texts, among which 'the big three' are Janson's, Gardner's and Stokstad's. These texts present the canon of artworks, which shapes and is shaped by the artworld. Janson's *History of Art* has been widely considered a 'who is in' standard of Western art history and was often polemicised. New revisions and editions are eagerly expected and can also hit a nerve. The first edition, for instance, was attacked by feminists for not including any female artists. Later editions excluded some artworks that were previously included and did not include some artists who, in the opinion of other scholars, should be included. From the sixth to seventh edition, Janson's survey went through such drastic changes that, according to Weidman, it shouldn't be called Janson's anymore. See David A. Levine and Larry Silver, 'Quo Vadis, Hagia Sophia? Art History's Survey Texts', *CAA Reviews* (2006), doi:10.3202/caa.reviews.2006.134; Randy Kennedy, 'Revising Art History's Big Book: Who's in and Who Comes Out?', *New York Times*, March 7 2006, www.nytimes.com.

[nytimes.com/2006/03/07/arts/design/07jans.html?pagewanted=2&r=0&incamp=article_popular](https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/07/arts/design/07jans.html?pagewanted=2&r=0&incamp=article_popular);

Jeffrey Weidman, 'Many Are Culled but Few Are Chosen: Janson's History of Art, Its Reception, Emulators, Legacy, and Current Demise', *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 38, no. 2 (2007): 85–107.

73. Strayer, *Subjects and Objects*, 39.

74. *Ibid.*, 28–29.

75. *Ibid.*, 47, 128–29.

76. Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All. Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 25.

77. *Ibid.*, 22.

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.*, 28.

80. *Ibid.*, 15.

81. *Ibid.*, 35.

82. *Ibid.*, 32.

83. Kaija Mortensen and Jennifer Nagel, 'Armchair-Friendly Experimental Philosophy', in *A Companion to Experimental Philosophy*, ed. J. Sytsma and W. Buckwalter (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 53–70.

84. Robert C. Cummins, 'Reflection on Reflective Equilibrium', in *Rethinking Intuition*, ed. M.R. DePaul and W. Ramsey (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 113–28.

85. McAllister, 'The Evidential Significance of Thought Experiments'.

86. A *facture* is the quality of the execution of an artwork and an artist's characteristic handling of the material.