The Acquaintance Principle, Aesthetic Autonomy, and Aesthetic Appreciation

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The acquaintance principle (AP) and the view it expresses have recently been tied to a debate surrounding the possibility of aesthetic testimony, which, plainly put, deals with the question whether aesthetic knowledge can be acquired through testimony—typically aesthetic and non-aesthetic descriptions communicated from person to person. In this context a number of suggestions have been put forward opting for a restricted acceptance of AP. This paper is an attempt to restrict AP even more.

Introduction

There is a widespread view according to which aesthetic propositions of the form '*X* is beautiful' or '*X* is elegant', can only be coherently regarded as a person's beliefs if they derive from that person's first-hand experience of the objects to which the predicates 'beautiful' and 'elegant' apply. This view has been articulated as the acquaintance principle (AP).[1] The principle maintains that it is implausible for a person's aesthetic beliefs to be based on someone else's aesthetic experience. Accordingly, while I may tell you that *X* is beautiful, you cannot come to believe that *X* is beautiful simply because I believe it is or because I tell you so.[2] You must, so says AP, experience this beauty for yourself.[3]

I assume the reader will agree that this view has significant intuitive appeal. Aside from its claim regarding proper aesthetic beliefs, it also seems to express a widely accepted position regarding the subjective genesis of proper aesthetic appreciation.[4] Moreover, it

1 Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

2 This reflects a distinction I make elsewhere between testimony as a source of aesthetic knowledge and testimony as granting a reason for rational aesthetic deference.

3 Another closely related view contends that aesthetic experience is only possible if its genesis is in a first-hand aesthetic experience. According to this view, it is plausible for a person to say that *X* is beautiful if and only if he has experienced the beauty of *X* for himself. These are two closely related but distinct views. The first, roughly, relates to beliefs, the second to experiences. The two views are interrelated yet should be kept apart so as to distinguish claims made about each. My focus here will be on aesthetic beliefs but ultimately I will also discuss aesthetic experience.

4 This can be understood in a number of ways. One way that will not be considered here but is worth mentioning nonetheless, is that expressed by Michael Tanner: 'judgements of aesthetic, and in some cases moral, value must be based on first-hand experience of their objects not simply because one is in no position to assert the presence of the requisite properties without experience, but also because one is not capable of understanding the meaning of the terms which designate the properties without the experience.' (Michael Tanner, *Ethics and aesthetics are — ?* in José Luis Bermúdez and Sebastian Gardner (eds), *Art and Morality* (New York: Psychology Press, 2003), 19–37, at 33)

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also appears to support the consensual anti-realist position regarding the metaphysical dependence of aesthetic properties on an aesthetically appreciative subject.

The acquaintance principle and the view it expresses have recently been tied to a debate surrounding the possibility of aesthetic testimony, which, plainly put, deals with the question whether aesthetic knowledge can be acquired through testimony—typically aesthetic and non-aesthetic descriptions communicated from person to person. In this context a number of suggestions have been put forward opting for a restricted acceptance of AP. This paper is an additional attempt to restrict AP even more than previous suggestions.

The paper is composed of two parts. In the first part I present and discuss AP, its underlying conceptual foundations, and a number of responses to AP and the view it expresses in the recent literature. This discussion paves the way to Part II, where I argue, by way of demonstration, that AP is varyingly plausible in different domains.

I

The Acquaintance Principle

The acquaintance principle appears in a passage in Richard Wollheim's *Art and Its Objects* (1980):

> Realism acknowledges a well-entrenched principle in aesthetics, which may be called the Acquaintance Principle, and which insists that judgments of aesthetic value, unlike judgments of moral knowledge, must be based on first-hand experience of their objects and are not, except within very narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another.[5]

This passage, and the principle that it expounds, can be understood as making two distinct claims that it will be useful to note and distinguish at the outset. The first of these claims relates to aesthetic beliefs, the second to aesthetic experience.

With regard to aesthetic beliefs, the claim made by AP is that without aesthetic experience aesthetic beliefs are improper. As I understand it, the claim can be articulated roughly as follows:

- Aesthetic beliefs involve aesthetic predicates which can only be properly predicated if the quality—e.g., beauty, elegance—has been experienced first-hand.

This means that unless *you* have had first-hand experience of the designated aesthetic object you cannot uphold aesthetic beliefs about it. This restriction specifically applies to proper *aesthetic* beliefs, for which first-hand experience appears to be a condition. I emphasize *aesthetic* beliefs because there doesn't appear to be anything problematic with beliefs in other areas, outside the domain of aesthetics, being proper in the absence of first-hand experience. There doesn't for instance seem to be anything wrong in believing that it is raining without experiencing—seeing, hearing, smelling, the rain—nor is there anything

5 Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 233.

wrong in believing a structure is unstable because someone has told you so.[6] With regard to aesthetic experience, AP seems to be stating that:

- Without direct acquaintance, aesthetic experience isn't proper.

This latter claim is expressive of a widely held view that aesthetic experience requires a direct and unmediated familiarity with its object, and that it is this kind of familiarity that is purportedly what gives rise to proper aesthetic experience, on which proper aesthetic beliefs are based.[7]

Let us put this distinction between aesthetic beliefs and aesthetic experience crisply: AP, as we understand it, states that:

1) Proper aesthetic beliefs must be based on first-hand aesthetic experience;
2) Proper aesthetic experience must derive from first-hand acquaintance.

As I have noted, these are two separate issues. Ultimately my purpose in this paper is to make a point about aesthetic beliefs. All the same, to make the point I wish to make, I will need to discuss the nature of aesthetic experience from which proper aesthetic beliefs derive.

Aesthetic beliefs

Responses to AP in the recent literature have expressed two distinct concerns with regard to aesthetic beliefs. The first of these is epistemic in nature and is concerned with whether, in the absence of first-hand experience, aesthetic beliefs can be sufficiently *grounded*. The second may be regarded as essentialistic, and is concerned with whether *aesthetic beliefs*, as opposed to other kinds of beliefs, are proper in the absence of first-hand experience.[8] This latter question emphasizes the particular nature of aesthetic beliefs and is concerned with whether what it is that aesthetic beliefs typically express can be captured without first-hand experience. Thus in the former case the question is largely whether indirect experience—typically testimonial experience—can provide sufficient grounds for aesthetic belief. In the latter case the question is largely whether aesthetic beliefs that are not based on first-hand experience are proper.

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6 On this, consider what Mark Owen Webb has noted about the epistemic importance of ordinary testimony: 'I do not have to rely on my own cognitive resources; I may freely borrow from the resources of others. If I do not do so freely borrow, 1 shall be hopelessly imprisoned in an impoverished set of beliefs about only those things which I have myself experienced and can remember.' (Mark Owen Webb, 'Why I Know About as Much as You: A Reply to Hardwig', *Journal of Philosophy* 90 (1993), 260–70, at 261)

7 Malcolm Budd, 'The Acquaintance Principle', *BJA* 43 (2003), 386–92; Aaron Meskin, 'Solving the Puzzle of Aesthetic Testimony', in Matthew Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds), *Knowing Art* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 109–24; Paisley Livingston, 'On an Apparent Truism in Aesthetics', *BJA* 43 (2003), 260–78, doi:10.1093/bjaesthetics/43.3.260; Robert Hopkins, 'Beauty and Testimony', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 47 (2000), 209–36; Brian Laetz, 'A Modest Defense of Aesthetic Testimony', *JAAC* 66 (2008), 355–63.

8 A similar distinction has been made by Meskin, between psychological and epistemological issues with regard to aesthetic testimony: 'There are two distinct phenomena that must be explained. The first is psychological: we do not accept aesthetic testimony to the same extent that we accept other sorts of testimony. The second is epistemological: aesthetic testimony does not have the epistemic value possessed by other forms of testimony. What explains these phenomena?' (Meskin, 'Solving the Puzzle of Aesthetic Testimony', 68)

My aim here is both epistemic and essentialistic. I aim to show that aesthetic beliefs can be based on testimony, and that basing aesthetic beliefs on testimony can provide sufficient ground and does not necessarily entail compromising aesthetic beliefs in any way. But if this was my sole claim, I would not be the first to make it. Recent proposals have suggested that certain kinds of aesthetic beliefs can be legitimately acquired without first-hand experience.[9] Moreover, it has also been suggested that a particular kind of aesthetic knowledge—roughly, declarative aesthetic knowledge relating to the existence of certain aesthetic properties in an object—can be transmitted from person to person.[10] In what follows I propose to go further in limiting AP and argue, by way of demonstration, that it is not only possible to transmit declarative aesthetic knowledge through testimony but that aesthetically appreciative experiences–to be more precise, a particular kind of appreciative aesthetic experience—can be transmitted by testimony. But before I proceed to argue for this claim let me show how my proposal is located in the context of the current views in the literature.

Weaker versions of AP

Recent discussions have offered revised proposals of AP in which some of its tenets are maintained and others restricted.[11] One positive amendment that these discussions have proposed suggests that in the absence of first-hand experience and under certain epistemic restrictions aesthetic judgements *can* provide knowledge—declarative knowledge—which is the type of aesthetic knowledge that can be conveyed by descriptions pertaining to the presence of an aesthetic property in an object. In so doing these views have been defending the possibility of aesthetic beliefs, epistemically understood, in the absence of first-hand experience. This defence largely appeals to the possibility that declarative aesthetic beliefs can be sufficiently grounded even in the absence of first-hand experience.

The view, which at root I take to be shared across recent accounts, is that declarative knowledge can be epistemically grounded even when it is not based on first-hand experience, but rather on testimony, that is, on information transmitted from one person to another. The guiding thought here is that aesthetic beliefs in the absence of aesthetic acquaintance are possible in the same sense that, to borrow an example from Sibley, someone who has not heard a joke can still be justified in believing that it is funny.[12] For the sake of convenience let us call the aesthetic knowledge that can be proper without first-hand experience *predicative knowledge*. And let us call the aesthetic knowledge that the literature concedes cannot be proper without first-hand experience *aesthetic appreciation*. I will elaborate further on this distinction in the following pages.

This differentiation between aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic predication purportedly makes aesthetic testimony, as a source of aesthetic knowledge, plausible in a

9 Meskin, 'Solving the Puzzle of Aesthetic Testimony'; Livingston, 'On an Apparent Truism in Aesthetics'; Budd, 'Acquaintance Principle'.

10 *Ibid*.

11 Meskin, 'Solving the Puzzle of Aesthetic Testimony'; Livingston, 'On an Apparent Truism in Aesthetics'; Hopkins, 'Beauty and Testimony'; Budd, 'Acquaintance Principle'.

12 Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic', *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), 135–59.

limited way. This distinction between two types of aesthetic knowledge, one of which makes aesthetic beliefs in the absence of first-hand experience rationally permissible, has been expressed in various ways.[13] Malcolm Budd for instance claims that '*there is no insurmountable barrier to knowledge of something's being beautiful being transmitted from one person to another*.'[14] This can be taken to mean that Budd understands qualifications such as '*X* being beautiful' predicatively, and thus as permissible. Elsewhere Budd states that 'an item's gracefulness, in contrast to its being graceful—likewise, an item's beauty, unlike it's being beautiful—cannot be transmitted from person to person through testimony. . . . *Although aesthetic judgments do not carry appreciation with them, judgments of aesthetic properties are as transmissible from one person to another as are other kinds of judgment*.'[15] Here Budd emphasizes the above-mentioned distinction. To use our terminology, he states that predicative aesthetic knowledge as opposed to appreciative aesthetic knowledge is transmittable via testimony. In a similar vein, Paisley Livingston states that 'True descriptions can reliably inform us that a joke is funny and that an action film is brutal and stupid, and given sufficient sameness of sensibility, it would be unreasonable not to accept an evaluative verdict based on them; but even the most genial descriptions cannot enlighten us regarding the specific splendors of works of Schubert, Villon, Balthus, *et al.*, if we have no prior acquaintance with these works (or adequate surrogates thereof . . . *someone's descriptions can inform one perfectly well about how the work is surprising, but only through a first, description-free experience can one fully gauge the work's surprise value*.'[16] Hence Livingston endorses the same distinction and accepts the permissibility of predicative aesthetic knowledge.

Thus these citations suggest that recent approaches to AP appear to endorse the distinction between two types of aesthetic knowledge in roughly the terms I have suggested above. To recap, predicative knowledge does not appear to be distinct from other kinds of propositional knowledge. But aesthetically appreciative knowledge is a kind of aesthetic know-how of *what it is like* to aesthetically appreciate the aesthetic properties as they are realized in the aesthetic object.[17] The recent literature suggests that aesthetic knowledge of the first kind is possible even without first-hand experience, that is, on the basis of testimony. While aesthetic knowledge of the second kind is not considered possible in the absence of first-hand experience. Thus notwithstanding the amendments that have made in the recent literature there is a consensus among these views that without first-hand experience one cannot fully gauge an object's aesthetic value, appreciatively conceived. The latter, it is maintained, requires a first-hand, description-free appreciative experience.[18]

13 On a related matter compare Sibley on a similar distinction between aesthetic judgements and the attribution of an aesthetic property. See Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic', 137.

14 Budd, 'Acquaintance Principle', 387; my emphasis.

15 Budd, 'Acquaintance Principle', 392; my emphasis.

16 Livingston, 'On an Apparent Truism in Aesthetics', 276–7; my emphasis.

17 Budd, 'Acquaintance Principle'.

18 Paisley Livingston makes this especially crisp by differentiating between knowing and gauging: 'someone's descriptions can inform one perfectly well about how the work is surprising, but only through a first, description-free experience can one fully gauge the work's surprise value.' ('On an Apparent Truism in Aesthetics', 277)

In this vein it is generally accepted that the gracefulness of a line in a painting can only be appreciated through first-hand experience, not through any kind of description of it.[19]

I relate to this last example because it exhibits a concern, expressed in the aesthetic literature, relating to the inability to fully appreciate the aesthetic merits of a perceptual object without perceiving it. I note this here because while the views referred to above have done well to weaken AP, the position they share still appears to accommodate a particular ambiguity in the conception of first-hand experience—namely, the aesthetic experience they are referring to seems, by and large, to be *perceptual experience*.

The relation between aesthetics and perception is a broad topic dealing with historical, conceptual, sociological, cognitive, and psychological questions.[20] It is not my aim to address any of these here. Instead I wish to suggest that the weakening of AP by recent accounts has still kept first-hand *perceptual experience* with an aesthetic object as a requirement for an aesthetic belief to be proper. Yet I believe there are aesthetic experiences where perception is not a necessary component and consequently neither is it necessary for aesthetic beliefs, and possibly even knowledge. Moreover, I think that this is true both of predicative knowledge and of appreciate knowledge. That is, I think predicative aesthetic beliefs can be proper in the absence of perception, as can appreciative aesthetic beliefs. The first claim is straightforward, the second less so. Thus I think that the notion of aesthetic experience in the literature is still rather underexplained. But I contend that with the appropriate demonstration the conception of first-hand aesthetic experience can be broadened to include not only perceptual experience. It seems to me that a person *can* have first-hand experience of an aesthetic object without perceiving this object, and I think that we often take this for granted in our aesthetic conduct.

Aesthetic Autonomy

The acquaintance principle exhibits an entrenched conception which stems from a multifarious tradition of subjectivist aesthetics that spreads over a plethora of works, traditions, and approaches. I believe AP expresses an underlying conception of what I shall refer to as *aesthetic autonomy*, a stipulation according to which the aesthetic agent is someone who arrives at his aesthetic beliefs on his own, through his first-hand experience of the realization of aesthetic properties in an object.[21] The said view also concedes, even if this is not

19 The typical analogy illustrating this is that a fully determinate description of a graceful line in a picture does not entail its being graceful (F. N. Sibley, 'The Inaugural Address: Particularity, Art and Evaluation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Suppl. Vol.* 48 (1974), 1–21.

20 Relevant literature on the topic includes Timothy Binkley, 'Piece: Contra Aesthetics', *JAAC* 35 (1977), 265–70; James Shelley, 'The Problem of Non-perceptual Art', *BJA* 43 (2003), 363–78; Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (annotated edn, London: Routledge, 1999), and 'Non-perceptual Aesthetic Properties: Comments for James Shelley', *BJA* 44 (2004), 413–23; Joseph Margolis, 'Aesthetic Perception', *JAAC* 19 (1960), 209–13; Robert Hopkins 'Speaking through Silence: Conceptual Art and Conversational Implicature', in Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (eds), *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 51–69.

21 My use of aesthetic autonomy is different to the use that has been made of it by e.g. T. J. Diffey, 'Aesthetic Instrumentalism', *BJA* 22 (1982), 337–49, and Robert Stecker, 'Aesthetic Instrumentalism and Aesthetic Autonomy', *BJA* 24 (1984), 160–5, where aesthetic autonomy is taken as an art for art's sake type of conception as oppose to an instrumental approach to aesthetic objects. My use of aesthetic autonomy makes reference to the autonomy of the individual in the constitution of his own aesthetic experience.

always declared explicitly, that the agent acquires his aesthetic beliefs by *perceiving* the aesthetic properties in the object of his aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, in the absence of any claims to the contrary in the recent literature I will assume that this is the only plausible way in which it is considered possible for an agent to have aesthetic beliefs.

I do not want to completely depart from this conception of aesthetic autonomy nor do I want to deny AP. All the same I would like to suggest a modified understanding of aesthetic autonomy, which will also bear on AP. According to what I shall suggest, an aesthetically autonomous agent is required to have first-hand experience of the aesthetic properties that his belief predicates, and this is also a condition for his belief to be proper. In this I will be consistent with the widespread understanding of AP. But I shall also want to claim that such an agent can experience aesthetic properties through testimony. That is, I will be arguing that a person *can* have an aesthetic experience—in fact, he can have an aesthetically appreciative experience—without having any direct perceptual encounter with the object to which the aesthetic properties that constitute that experience belong. If this suggestion turns out to be plausible this would mean that a person can be aesthetically autonomous without having to perceptually experience the object of his aesthetic appreciation.

Aesthetic Experience and Perception

Seeing how prominent abstract and conceptual art is in our day, one would expect our conception of aesthetic experience to reflect what has become the norm. But at root, aesthetic experience still seems to be very much understood in relation to sense perception, as it was in the eighteenth century when the term was coined by Baumgarten.[22] And while nowadays it is common to appreciate the aesthetic merit of works that are not only perceptual in character, perceptual acquaintance—that is, first-hand perceptual experience—still seems to be considered a basic requirement of proper aesthetic experience. This position is quite clearly expressed by prominent defenders of aesthetic autonomy and the implicit connection made, for instance in AP, between aesthetic acquaintance and perception. Kant is an early example. In *The Critique of Judgment* he states: 'Whether a dress, a house, or a flower is beautiful is a matter about which one declines to allow one's judgment to be swayed by any reasons or principles. One wants to *see* the object with one's own eyes, *as though one's pleasure depended on sensation*.'[23] Other, later, expressions include Alan Tormey: 'In art, unlike the law, we do not admit judgments in the absence of direct or immediate experience of the object of the judgment. *We require critical judgments to be rooted in "eye-witness" encounters*, and the indirect avenues of evidence, inference and authority that

22 See Binkley, 'Piece', §IV. In the debate surrounding testimony and AP, Meskin is an exception to what seems to be the prevalent conception linking the aesthetic experience with perception. Meskin notes that 'it is simply not the case that aesthetic judgments are necessarily linked to *perceptual* experience' (Meskin, 'Solving the Puzzle of Aesthetic Testimony', 74). But he appears to be referring here to the aesthetic experience of non-artistic objects, those expressed in the aesthetic judgements made by scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers. On the aesthetic appraisal of scientific discourse and discoveries see Peter Kivy, 'Science and Aesthetic Appreciation', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 16 (1991), 180–95, referenced by Meskin, 'Solving the Puzzle of Aesthetic Testimony', 74.

23 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment,* trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1987), Part I, Book I, § 8, 47; my emphasis.

are permissible elsewhere are anathema here.'[24] Frank Sibley, in his seminal *Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic*: 'It is of importance to note first that broadly speaking aesthetics deals with a kind of *perception*. People have to *see* the grace or unity of a work, *hear* the plaintiveness or frenzy in the music, *notice* the gaudiness of a color scheme, *feel* the power of a novel, its mood, or its uncertainty of tone. They may be struck by these qualities at once, or they may come to *perceive* them only after critics. *But unless they do perceive them for themselves, aesthetic enjoyment, appreciation, and judgment are beyond them*. Merely to learn from others, on good authority, that the music is serene, the play moving, or the picture unbalanced is of little aesthetic value; *the crucial thing is to see, hear, or feel*. To suppose indeed that one can make aesthetic judgments without aesthetic perception . . . is to misunderstand aesthetic judgment.'[25] Last but not least in this list of prominent philosophers is Philip Pettit who takes aesthetic characterizations to be 'essentially perceptual': 'the putatively cognitive state one is in when, perceiving a work of art, one sincerely assents to a given aesthetic characterization, is not a state to which one can have non-perceptual access.'[26] Pettit goes on to state that: 'Aesthetic characterizations are essentially perceptual in the sense that perception is the only title to the sort of knowledge—let us say, to the full knowledge—of the truths which they express.'[27]

I take these extracts from the literature to reflect a prominent and widely held conception of aesthetic experience as largely perceptual experience. Moreover, in the context of the view expressed in AP, I take this to mean that first-hand perceptual acquaintance is a necessary condition for aesthetic beliefs that are based on this experience to be proper. Yet I contend that while most familiar aesthetic experiences are indeed perceptual, there also appears to be a subset of aesthetic experiences that do not depend on perception. My defence of the possibility of non-perceptual aesthetic appreciation stems from two empirical observations which I will assume that the reader shares. The first is that artistic objects are not the only objects that can be appreciated aesthetically. The second is that we often go through aesthetically conversional experiences that are instigated by other people—friends, acquaintances, writers, critics.

The Scope of the Aesthetic Domain

Before I continue a short clarification is needed. In what follows I wish to focus on aesthetics understood in the broad sense of the term, where experience rather than art is the axis of consideration. Aesthetics is ordinarily thought to be about art, or thought of as the philosophy of art. But aesthetics as I shall relate to it here is not exclusively about the artistic domain. In fact, the artistic domain seems to me to be part of the aesthetic domain, not exhaustive of it. To be more precise, I think aesthetics is actually about a particular type of human experience, the aesthetic experience. And I share the belief that the aesthetic experience 'is largely elicited by artworks'.[28] But I also believe that it is not only

24 Alan Tormey, 'Critical Judgments', *Theoria* 39 (1973), 35–49, at 39; my emphasis.

25 Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic', 137; my emphasis.

26 Philip Pettit, 'The Possibility of Aesthetic Realism', in Eva Schaper (ed.), *Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 17–38, at 25.

27 Schaper, *Pleasure, Preference and Value*, 24–5.

28 Timothy Binkley, 'Piece: Contra Aesthetics', in: Joseph Margolis, ed., *Philosophy Looks at the Arts: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics* (Temple University Press, 1987), 80–100, at 80.

elicited by artworks. In fact, as I think the reader will agree, aesthetic experiences of non-artistic artefacts such as aesthetic experiences of nature, buildings, people, mundane objects, theorems, and food are quite familiar in all wakes of life.[29]

In Part II of the paper I will make reference to examples taken from the artworld. Yet my argument about the possibility of gaining aesthetic knowledge through testimony will apply to aesthetics conceived of broadly, which applies to non-artistic artefacts as well as to works of art. I will show how aesthetic autonomy is compatible with aesthetic testimony. I will demonstrate how a first-hand aesthetic experience is possible even when that experience is not perceptual. I will discuss several works of art whose aesthetic appreciation makes perceiving them inconsequential, and I will take the standard aesthetic appreciation of these works to demonstrate my claim. By attending to what an aesthetic experience of these works amounts to I shall pave the way to showing how their aesthetic properties can be aesthetically appreciated even when this experience is elicited through aesthetic and non-aesthetic descriptions communicated by testimony and not through sense perception.[30] In so doing I hope to show that aesthetic experience is not equal to nor is it exhausted by perceptual experience.

II

I shall begin this section by making a claim, the truth of which I will demonstrate in the following pages:

- The acquaintance principle is domain sensitive. More specifically, AP is varyingly plausible in different domains.[31] This means that 1) in some domains it is not only *predicative aesthetic* knowledge that is possible without first-hand experience, but also *appreciative aesthetic* knowledge; and 2) in some domains the perception of the aesthetic object appears to be inconsequential to its aesthetic appreciation.

Let us now attend to some examples from the domain of modern art, where I believe a subdomain of aesthetic works supporting the above claim may be found.

Erasing the Need to See

Robert Rauschenberg was fascinated by Willem de Kooning, and in 1953 he asked the artist if he could erase one of his drawings as an act of art. The genesis of Rauschenberg's project is well documented: Rauschenberg went over to de Kooning's studio and said he'd like to

29 Or at the very least language attests that they are. See also Eddy M. Zemach, *Real Beauty* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), and Kivy, 'Science and Aesthetic Appreciation' on other, non-aesthetic, forms of aesthetic appreciation.

30 For more on the relation between non-aesthetic and aesthetic descriptions see Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic'.

31 Meskin has made a similar claim to this: 'I will also argue that the epistemic status of aesthetic testimony depends on the aesthetic domain that is being considered. Consider the following sorts of things about which aesthetic judgments are made: paintings and sculptures, landscapes, faces, proofs, theories, souls, and sounds. The status of testimony is not the same in all of these domains. For example, the situation with respect to aesthetic testimony about works of art is rather different from the situation with respect to testimony about nature as well as certain abstract objects such as proofs and theories.' (Meskin, 'Solving the Puzzle of Aesthetic Testimony', 69)

erase one of his drawings as an act of art.[32] De Kooning, apparently intrigued, selected a multimedia work on paper that he knew it would be quite difficult to eradicate. And he was right. It apparently took Rauschenberg one month to get the sheet relatively clear of marks.

In *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), Rauschenberg presents an almost white canvas with faint traces of ink and crayon. The canvas denotes the absence of a work of art that was previously there. It is this alluding to what is absent from the canvas that is in a large part what makes *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) a work of art. It is a conceptual work of art. We know that it is a conceptual work of art because you have to know that there was a real de Kooning there that was erased. Moreover, the fact that the work that was erased belonged to one of the most regarded artists of the time contributes to the aesthetic impact of Rauschenberg's piece.

To seal his artistic performance, Rauschenberg asked artist Jasper Johns to inscribe the lettering in a box at the bottom of the picture. The box states: 'Erased de Kooning drawing, Robert Rauschenberg, 1953.' Now, let me be blunt: in point of fact, what we have here are three renowned artists collaborating on a work which is what we might—perhaps anachronistically—call a non-work. And by the fact of their artistic collaboration this non-work becomes a work of art.

Non-works of Art in the Artworld

For many years now it has been widely recognized that in the contemporary artworld esteemed curators, collectors, and artists have a special Midas-like ability to call attention to a work and by this very act inaugurate it as belonging to the artworld and consequently endow it with aesthetic value. At other times it is not *who* the person is that does the artistic inauguration but rather *the context* within which the work is located that establishes it as a work of art.[33] For instance, nowadays it doesn't seem at all far-fetched to think that if one were to place a spoon, or an old rug, a broken iPhone, or a half-full coffee mug, or a car tire, or a hose, or a bed, or a desk in an empty room in a gallery, one's doing so would make viewers artistically intrigued. A common response by the observer in such scenarios might be to inquire into the background knowledge of the creation of the work as a means of grasping the non-perceptual meaning, or the significance, of the perceptual object.[34]

Assuming that we accept that this is how things are in the artworld, or that we at least accept that this is how they are in the artworld's present state of evolution, then it seems that we have a choice. Either we accept that things need not be aesthetic to be works of art, or else we contend that aesthetics is a notion that denotes more than only what can be perceived. If the reader feels this choice is unfair, or instead feels a resistance to accept either of these options, this is understandable. Yet whatever the reader's artistic persuasion happens to be, to deny that works such as Rauschenberg's and the flourishing tradition of

32 Vincent Katz on Robert Rauschenberg, 'A Genteel Iconoclasm', in *Tate etc.* See: http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue8/erasuregenteel.htm.

33 Morris Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics', *JAAC* 15 (1956), 27–35; Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), 571–84.

34 Following Wollheim we might say that this background knowledge is the 'cognitive stock' necessary for appreciation (Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*), 185–204, cited in Livingston, 'On an Apparent Truism in Aesthetics', 267).

conceptual art that emerged in the second part of the twentieth century is art, is to deny too much.[35] It involves denying the dynamics of artistic production, consumption, and economic exchange in the artworld during this period.

But it is not my aim here to convince the reader to embrace a liberal conception of art or aesthetics. Instead, let me actually point out that to agree that the realm of aesthetics goes beyond what can be appreciated through perception is not to contend that all art is good art or that non-perceptual art ought to be regarded positively. To concede that more than perceptual appreciation is involved in the aesthetic evaluation of some of today's prominent works of art is simply to recognize that experiencing art has become more than merely a perceptual experience. I share James Shelley's contention that it is nowadays quite possible to have aesthetic experiences of imperceptabilia.[36] Yet my aim here is not so much to argue that this is possible but more to demonstrate that there are aesthetic experiences in which perception is unimportant.

Back to the Drawing Board

To lay bare the aesthetic unimportance of perception in the aesthetic appreciation of some works of art let us return to *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. I think the reader will agree that no important information about Rauschenberg's piece is presented in the way it looks, except the fact that looking at it is artistically unimportant. To see this, consider how bizarre it would be to come up close and appreciate the lines and smudges created by the previous inhabitants of the canvas and now erased ink and crayon that make up *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. It would simply be a mistake, an embarrassing one come to think of it, to search for aesthetically interesting visual marks, lines, patterns, or shapes in *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. This is not to say that such aesthetically interesting patterns and shapes could not have haphazardly formed on the canvas by the erasing of the previous media. Nor does it mean that if they were observed such patterns could not be given symbolic meaning. It is merely to say that if one were to spend time considering the patterns left over from de Kooning's painting instead of appreciating the painting's absence, one would, aside from doing something non-standard and strange, be missing the point. The point here is that to appreciate *Erased de Kooning Drawing* as an artwork is not to appreciate its perceptual qualities.[37]

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35 Noël Carrol shares this belief, although he refers to non-perceptual art as non-aesthetic art: 'It seems that the existence of anti-aesthetic art is a fact of the artworld and has been for some time . . . The aesthetic theorist cannot stipulate what she will count as facts in the face of massive amounts of countervailing evidence, which continues to grow daily.' (Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 182) See also Shelley's discussion of rejections, such as Beardsley's, of ready-mades and other non-perceptual artworks, 'Problem of Non-Perceptual Art', 367, referring to Beardsley's paper in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (eds), *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition; An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), ch. 6.

36 Shelley, 'Problem of Non-perceptual Art'.

37 Compare Dickie's discussion of *Fountain*'s perceptual qualities: 'Why cannot the ordinary qualities of *Fountain*—its gleaming white surface, the depth revealed when it reflects images of surrounding objects, its pleasing oval shape—be appreciated? It has qualities similar to those of works of Brancusi and Moore which many do not balk at saying they appreciate.' (George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 42)

To put things bluntly, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is a relic of the traditional, perceptual, conception of artistic meaning.[38] And if there is aesthetic value to de Kooning's piece, it resides in the background knowledge we have about it, not in what we *see* in it. Such background knowledge can for instance be the knowledge that there was previously a painting where there is now an almost blank canvas; that the painting was a de Kooning; that it is now erased; that Rauschenberg erased it; and that even though Rauschenberg erased it and it is no longer there visually, it is still with mount and frame and positioned in a prominent place on a gallery wall, a wall which one must pay to view. Now in light of all of this let us ask: does one really *need* to see *Erased de Kooning Drawing* to appreciate its aesthetic merits? In considering this question, think of the information that you, the reader, now have about *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. Does this information—conveyed to you through this author's words—elicit an aesthetic experience of the piece? Could it? If it does give rise to an aesthetic experience, is this the same kind of experience you would have through a perceptual experience of the work? If it isn't the same kind of experience, is the difference between the two *essential* to the aesthetic appreciation of *Erased de Kooning Drawing*?

'Fountain': The Aesthetic Unimportance of Perception

Let us keep these questions in mind while we look at another example, this time of a work that has gained its fame for not appealing to the viewer's perceptual appreciation of the perceptual properties that comprise it, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917).

One of the notable differences between *Fountain* and *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is that the supposed object of *Fountain*—a urinal, was never designed or manufactured as an object for aesthetic appreciation. In this sense it is different from Rauschenberg's drawing. Indeed, in the case of *Fountain*, it is solely the fact that something which is clearly not a work of art has been placed in a context for aesthetic appreciation by a renowned artist that makes it into a work of art. It is effectively this act that transforms the urinal into something deserving of aesthetic appreciation.[39]

Now assuming that we agree that *Fountain* is an object of aesthetic appreciation, we can now consider whether its aesthetic appreciation can be communicated via testimony, instead of needing to be experienced perceptually by the aesthetically appreciating agent. I tend to think it can. I believe this is so because nothing aesthetically important about *Fountain* seems to depend on one's being able to *see* it. All the same I recognize that this may be because I am considering *Fountain*'s aesthetic appreciation from what might be regarded as an essentialist point of view; that is, I am trying to excavate what is aesthetically essential in *Fountain* and emit any subsidiary experiential factors that may arise from a direct first-hand perceptual encounter with it. Let us keep this concern in mind while we consider another two examples. We will readdress this concern in the last section of the paper.

Beforehand, and for the sake of keeping us on track, let me repeat what I take to be my core thesis: I think that it is possible to aesthetically appreciate something without perceptually experiencing it. I think that this is made possible because aesthetic experience can

38 Binkley, 'Piece', 81.

39 Oswald Hanfling, *Philosophical Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1992).

extend beyond the perceptual domain and can be arrived at in absence of perceptual experience by aesthetic and non-aesthetic information that is conveyed through testimony. Let us now consider two more examples of works of art whose aesthetic appreciation exhibits this thesis.

'The Base of the World' and 'Vertical Earth Kilometer'

In 1962, Italian artist Piero Manzoni created *Socle du monde* (*The Base of the World*), in which he exhibited the entire planet earth as his artwork. Mazoni placed a large metal plinth inscribed with the words *Socle du monde* upside down in an open field in Herning, Denmark. The piece, positioned as a pedestal, announces that the world is a work of art.

Many have taken Manzoni's work to be conveying a message about the aesthetic nature of the world conceived as a work of art, a conception that seemingly renders the artist obsolete. Literally speaking one cannot view Manzoni's piece as a *whole* piece (if that is, one seeks to visually comply with the spatial extent of the work) unless one does so from the moon or from some other location in space from which one can view the earth. All the same, the constraint of not being able to view the work as a whole does not appear to limit one's ability to aesthetically appreciate it.

Fifteen years after Manzoni created *Socle du monde*, in 1977, a two-inch-(5-centimetre)-thick solid-brass rod extending 1 kilometre straight into the earth is installed by American artist Walter de Maria in the Friedrichsplatz Park in Kassel, Germany. The work is de Maria's contribution to the *Documenta* exhibition of that year. De Maria calls this work *Vertical Earth Kilometer* (1977). The full length of the rod is completely sunk into the ground so that only its very top, which is level with the surface, is visible. All that the viewer can see in *Vertical Earth Kilometer* is a sandstone square surrounding the brass rod's flat circular top which commemorates the depth of the rod below. The boring of the shaft in Kassel took seventy-nine days and went through six geographical layers. It is a continuous rod that is made up of combined lengths of brass each measuring 167 centimetres.

The enormity of the kilometre of brass that has been sunk into the ground in Kassel exists as background knowledge in the mind of the viewer of *Vertical Earth Kilometer*. Because there is no visual trace of the kilometre of brass other than its exposed top, some have said that the work addresses the question of trust between artist and audience. On this interpretation the viewer sees a round disc which she takes to be the very top of the rod that is one kilometre long that has been plunged into the earth. The viewer assumes that what she sees is the top of the rod, and it is *this* knowledge that supposedly elicits her aesthetic experience.

Sense perception does not seem to be essential for the aesthetic appreciation of the four works of art described above. This at least is what I would like to suggest. I make this suggestion in view of the fact that the perceptual dimension of each of these works does not seem to form a central part of the aesthetic merit of each of these works. Indeed, where perception does play a part in aesthetic appreciation, it does not seem to be of primary importance: Raschenberg's piece denotes the fact that it is an erased de Kooning, and our knowing this seems to form the basis of that piece's aesthetic appreciation. Otherwise put, we do not typically appreciate *Erased de Kooning* because of how it looks. Similarly,

Duchamp's *Fountain* makes the perceptual appreciation of the urinal inconsequential and invites the viewer to contemplate the artistic significance of the sanitary object in the non-standard context in which it has been placed.[40] Moreover, *The Base of the World* is what we might call an aesthetic gesture; it does not so much stimulate visual perception but instead it suggests that the world, conceived of as a sphere that sits on a large metal man-made plinth, is a work of art. Finally, Walter de Maria's *Vertical Earth Kilometer* motivates a mental representation of something that cannot be perceived by observing what is visible in that work.

Aesthetic Autonomy and Aesthetic Testimony

I hope that these examples have convinced the reader that there is some art the aesthetic appreciation of which does not involve perceptual appreciation but rather another kind of, possibly conceptual, appreciation. Now the question that we appear to presently face is whether the fact that there are some works of art whose perceptual appreciation is not essential to their aesthetic appreciation should be taken to mean that perceptual appreciation is not necessary for the aesthetic appreciation of these works of art. Otherwise put, we need to establish whether the fact that seeing *Fountain* doesn't appear to be essential to grasping what lies at the heart of its aesthetic appreciation makes disregarding the perceptual dimension of *Fountain* aesthetically proper.

At first sight, the suggestion that I have made here seems to invite an objection. The objection is that the non-perceptual appreciation of any work of art that has a visual quality to it may be qualitatively different to the perceptual appreciation of that work. On this view, standing in the Friedrichsplatz Park in Kassel looking down at the two-inch brass circle on the ground provides a different experience than that which can be elicited by the description of *Vertical Earth Kilometer*. Just as being told of what Rauschenberg did to create *Erased de Kooning Drawing* may elicit a different experience than seeing the piece would. This objection seems to appeal to common sense and may seem intuitively plausible. Its basic claim is that an experience of *Fountain* cannot be the same as a description of the experience of *Fountain* which would be conveyed by testimony, just as the taste of a fine steak cannot be transmitted from one person to another by a description of it. Let me try and get at what I take to be the basis of this claim.

Can You Appreciate a Steak without Eating It?

There appear to be dimensions of the aesthetic experience of a perceptual object that cannot be experienced without perception. For a start, even if every noticeable element of a perceptual experience is described and communicated, there are some elements that are formative to the experience but are not noticeable and hence cannot be communicated. If I tell you that a urinal of the type that is usually found in public lavatories is set on a plinth in the centre of a dimly lit space in a gallery, I am not telling you enough, so the argument supposes, to elicit in you the kind of experience that you would have if you would see the urinal first-hand. Additionally, even if all communicable elements that belong to a

40 Compare George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic*.

perceptual object that is a work of art are communicated, they may not necessarily elicit the aesthetic experience from which they derive. This is because while there may be non-aesthetic properties the specific arrangement of which can give rise to (I dare say *cause*) an aesthetic experience, this does not mean that if these same properties are arranged in the same way elsewhere on the basis of testimony, they will also lead to the same experience. Moreover, non-aesthetic properties—such as lines, composition, colours—can elicit different aesthetic experiences in different people and thus there is no reason to think that a description of the non-aesthetic properties by one person will elicit an aesthetic experience in another. Generally speaking, aesthetic experience seems often to be explained in reference to certain non-aesthetic elements, but the presence of these same elements does not necessarily yield the aesthetic experience which they explain. And hence even if you receive the most complete description of the aesthetic and non-aesthetic qualities of a work of art this may not elicit the same aesthetic experience or it may not in fact elicit any aesthetic experience at all.[41] Moreover, one might even believe that the most perfect description could not convey the aesthetic experience of a perceived aesthetic object.

The heart of the objection is that there *is* a difference between perceptual and non-perceptual experiences. But this objection does not seem to me to be enough to deny that non-perceptual aesthetic experience is possible. What the objection suggests is that perceptual and non-perceptual experiences are different, and that the non-perceptual experience might possibly lack experiential dimensions that the perceptual experience has. In this sense the difference between both kinds of experience is understood as a difference in measure—the non-perceptual experience having less than its perceptual counterpart. Yet this says nothing about why the non-perceptual experience cannot be an aesthetic experience. And thus in absence of such an argument I will assume the plausibility of the thesis I propose: non-perceptual aesthetic experience *can* be proper aesthetically appreciative experience. Moreover, non-perceptual aesthetic experience can ground proper aesthetic beliefs that convey appreciative evaluations of aesthetic objects.

Concluding Remarks

If *X* is a work of conceptual art, to claim that the aesthetic appreciation of *X* can be communicated via testimony is to say that the first-hand perceptual experience of *X* is not necessary for the aesthetic appreciation of *X*. Positively, it suggests that one can appreciate the aesthetic properties in *X* even if the source of one's experience is testimony rather than first-hand perceptual appreciation.

There seem to be two different positions that can be endorsed here. The first is strong, and suggests that a complete aesthetic appreciation of *X* (whatever that may be) can be attained through testimony and does not require first-hand perceptual appreciation at all. What this strong position is actually stating is that all the qualities that comprise the aesthetic appreciation of *X* can be experienced even when information about *X* is attained through testimony. This position takes all perceptual experience of *X* to be inconsequential

41 See also Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic', and 'Aesthetic Concepts', *Philosophical Review* 68 (1959), 421–50.

to the aesthetic appreciation of it. And this seems to be far too strong a requirement and thus seems implausible.

The second position, which I endorse, is more moderate and suggests that a first-hand perceptual encounter with *X* can provide an aesthetic appreciation of *X* that cannot be transmitted through testimony. This suggests that factors such as the perceptual impact of a work of art and the actual feeling that one has by perceptually engaging with it are exclusive to perceptual encounters. From this more moderate position we can agree that aesthetic experience based on testimony is not a complete aesthetic experience, because it lacks a perceptual dimension. All the same we also contend that whether or not the perceptual dimension is crucial to the aesthetic experience of a work of art will depend on what is aesthetically essential in that work, which consequently depends on the nature of the aesthetic domain to which the work belongs.

Let me make a final note about convention. Even if we permit that non-perceptual aesthetic appreciation is possible, and consequently that beliefs grounded in such experience are aesthetically and epistemically proper, convention may still make the expression and attribution of aesthetic belief in the absence of first-hand acquaintance improper in the sense that a non-perceptual aesthetic belief may imply that a conventional first-hand encounter did in fact take place, when it didn't.

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