

# Rediscovering the Non-Conceptual

*Andreas Keller*

## I. Introduction: Before Words

There seem to be certain emotions that are characteristic of childhood. I remember feeling certain ways, and I notice that these feelings have become sparse. It seems to me that there were experiences of beauty and fascination pervading my early childhood days. Such feelings bring up emotional memories about being small, and about being in the garden or on the street. I remember the strange patterns of curtains or carpets, and of cracks on the paving slabs, and the branching patterns of ferns. These feelings seem to be rare now, but they can be evoked sometimes by something I see or a sound I hear.

What is essential about these particular “aesthetic” states is that there are no explicit concepts involved, although there is something like thought processes.<sup>1</sup> But

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<sup>1</sup> There is a tradition within philosophy that restricts the use of the term “thinking” to conceptual and propositional cognition that’s more or less closely connected to language. In contrast, for the purposes of this essay, I propose extending the meaning of the term “thinking” to all kinds of cognitive processes (and this seems to be in line with the everyday use of the word), and to distinguish “conceptual thinking” from other types of thought, e.g., cognition of image-like information. Behind this proposal is a computational view of cognitive processes, where the term “computational” is, however, not meant to be restricted to processes describable in terms of algorithms but also is meant to include creative processes that cannot be modeled completely in terms of algorithms and formal theories; see, e.g., A. Keller, “Proteons: Towards a Philosophy of Creativity,” *Borderless Philosophy* 2 (2019): 117–172, available online at URL = <<https://www.cckp.space/single-post/2019/06/01/BP2-2019-Proteons-Towards-a-Philosophy-of-Creativity-pp-117-172>>. Conceptual/propositional thought processes are then just one type of thought. If we look at computational processes in machines, e.g., in smart phones, we will note that not every kind of computation there is conceptual. There are different types of data. Some represent sounds, some represent images, some represent measurements, e.g., of somebody’s heart beat. A photograph is not something conceptual. There are many different kinds of information processing going on, processing different types of data. I hold that, by analogy to this plurality of data types, there are different types of information in the human mind as well. It is, of course, possible to view all kinds of information processing as conceptual. It is possible to construct programming languages in which every computation is a propositional derivation in some formal theory. Nevertheless, for various reasons, it makes more sense to me to restrict the term “conceptual” to certain types of representations and processes.

There are probably individual differences among people in the way representations that are non-conceptual in the way I am using the term here are used. For e.g., Oliver Sacks reports a blind patient who dropped into “deep blindness,” and lost any kind of visual imagination; see O. Sacks, *The Mind’s Eye* (London: Picador, 2010). Other blind people, on the other hand, seem to develop an ability for vision-like imagination. Sacks describes the example of his mother who, after seeing a lizard’s skeleton, was able to make accurate drawings of it from different perspectives, rotating a 3-D-representation of it in her mind. I regard that a non-conceptual thinking process.

when you grow up, the world is increasingly blanketed by a mesh of concepts. You don't see a visual structure directly like you did before, instead you see "a wall," a "a fence," or "a leaf." You do not hear a sound, or a noise, directly as you did before, instead you hear "a car," "a banging door," or "a bell." You identify the objects conceptually and therefore what reaches your conscious attention is predominantly a conceptual representation. The immediateness of perception has been lost.

I love certain types of abstract art. One of the reasons might be that such art throws me back into a state before concepts and words. I don't have concepts, except for very basic "geometrical" ones like "line" or "speck," to describe what I am seeing, or very general ones like "waves" that do not really capture the structure that is there. I cannot create an interpretation. I just see. I just hear. And there it is again, just as in my childhood, that feeling of pure beauty and fascination.

In a way, the small child is living in a world of abstract art, a world that is not yet interpreted by concepts. This is what you would see if you could step outside of all those conceptual constructions again. The pictures drawn by children of this young age are purely sensory or sensual, with no discernible objects.

Then the drawings change. They draw pictures of "people" consisting of "heads," "arms," and "legs," of "faces" consisting of "eyes" and "mouths," and of "houses" with "windows." The drawings of the children become conceptual and that immensely rich world of uninterpreted, beautiful, and fascinating shapes, structures, and textures is more and more driven to the back of our minds.

Nevertheless, the non-conceptual perception can still be experienced, evoked by unnamed natural structures or by works of art that are "strange" in the sense of not being comprehended by our concepts. So, one of the main avenues into such an experience is abstract art.

An "abstraction" in the original sense of the word is a completely conceptual thing, a very general concept with little or zero sensory or sensual content. I think, therefore, that calling abstract art "abstract" is actually a highly misleading misnomer. Better terms would be "direct art," "pre-conceptual art," "non-conceptual art," or simply "sensory or sensual art." It is art before words, and for me, it brings back those fascinating aesthetic feelings of early childhood, when the world did not yet consist of conceptually identified things.

## **II. The Patina of Reality**

But the experience of the pre-conceptual or non-conceptual I am interested in here is not limited to the domain of art. The world as we imagine it to be tends to be

more well-ordered than manifest reality.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the order of the imagined world is typically the order of our concepts, the order of what “ought” to be, or “should” be, the order of functionality as we’ve intended it. Our concepts and functional systems, however, are implemented in terms of manifestly real physical entities that have more properties than are required by our concepts. And often the implementations are only just good enough to work, more or less.

If we look directly into side-streets and backyards, and if we look with sufficient conscious attention, we will discover a complexity that is obfuscated by the conceptual order, the emerging and lurking “chaos” beneath the thin layer of technology and functionality. Rusty sheets of corrugated iron are nailed together with pieces of tar paper to implement the idea of a house. Cracks in blotchy plastering implement the surface of a wall. Buildings are covered in a cocoon of cables that in some places starts to resemble the mycelium of a fungus.

What is really there is a mass of sand and cement, metal sheets and copper cables, plastic tubes and bricks, window panes, dirt, paint, and other things,<sup>3</sup> arranged in such a way that the whole structure can serve a certain function, at least for some time. As long as it does not deviate from its intended function too much, we can pretend it is actually a house, a window, a wall, a doorknob, a light switch, a passage, a staircase.

If we look at it with the eyes of an imagined Stone Age human, a small child, an extraterrestrial, or somebody who has suffers from partial amnesia – i.e., without all of our worldly knowledge<sup>4</sup> and all of our concepts – we would see the material of

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<sup>22</sup> Our knowledge of the world generally consists of idealizations or simplified models of reality. Manifest reality, or its parts, normally has or have more properties than can be described within or derived from any of our theories or models, i.e., our knowledge, as a general rule, is in most cases incomplete. See, e.g., Keller, “Proteons: Towards a Philosophy of Creativity.”

<sup>3</sup> Zooming in further, using magnifying glasses or microscopes, would dissolve the apparent homogeneity of concrete and other materials, and reveal the seemingly smooth surfaces as rugged terrain, and eventually lead to a thoroughgoing dissolution of our ordinary perception of solid materials. Historically, this happened in early modern natural science and philosophy of nature after the invention of the microscope. See, e.g., C. Wilson, *The Invisible World: Early Modern Philosophy and the Invention of the Microscope* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper, I’m not using the term “knowledge” in the sense in which it is often used in philosophy, as “justified true belief,” but instead in the sense I in which I’ve used the term in Keller, “Proteons: Towards a Philosophy of Creativity.” There I wrote:

When I say “knowledge,” I mean real knowledge, in a sense much closer to the everyday meaning of the term. I mean that stuff in our libraries or on the internet. There are gaps in it, there are inconsistencies, there are errors, there is vagueness, and there are different degrees of justification, or lack thereof. But our knowledge can be extended, revised, corrected, and made more exact and more explicit. It is developing. It is dynamic. (p. 119)

manifest reality for what it is, a pile of minerals, metals, and plastic. Talking about this here obviously requires concepts, but these are absent from the experience of, say, a pre-linguistic child. Just as we perceive only “gibberish” if we listen to a foreign language whose grammar and words we do not know, we would then see the structures of our civilization only as symbols or artefacts we cannot interpret. The “pre-structuring grammar” of our everyday knowledge enables, even forces, us to see conceptually or linguistically meaningful structure instead. The knowledge, especially the conceptual knowledge we use to understand things, at the same time obscures the things we perceive, giving us a filtered and sometimes distorted view of manifest reality.<sup>5</sup> Many or even most of us will then either stop seeing the cracks and blotches, and see only “walls,” “houses,” and “staircases,” or will perceive those “imperfections” and “deviations” as chaos, disorder and dirt, as something that has to be cleaned up, repaired, and/or refurbished away. They will perceive the house in terms of its use and usefulness. When we hear a language we know, we separate noise from language, we hear the sounds of the language as instances of a sound system, we hear words and clauses and sentences according to a grammar, and thereby we understand them. In a similar way, we perceive not a cracked plaster surface but “a wall,” for example, “a wall of a house,” perhaps of our own house or workplace.<sup>6</sup>

The manifestly real physical entity “underlying” or “emulating” the building or house, however, does not “know” anything about being “a wall” or “a staircase,”

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This use of the term is nearer to its everyday meaning and also to its use in cognitive science, AI, psychology and other disciplines. More generally, I think that the restricted use of the word “knowledge” in philosophy, like the restricted use of the word “thinking,” are symptomatic of the longstanding disregard and neglect of non-conceptual cognition in the Western tradition.

<sup>5</sup> The example of language provides an instance of this. If we learn a foreign language, we generally perceive the sounds of the other language through the sound system of our own. This makes it difficult in some or even many cases correctly to perceive the sound differences that are phonemic in the other language. For example, speakers of non-tonal languages often have difficulties perceiving the tones of tonal languages correctly. The difference of phonemic descriptions of speech sounds (i.e., sounds within the system of a language) and phonetic descriptions (i.e., sounds as physical or physiological entities outside such a system) has then been generalized into the “emic” vs. “etic” distinction in cultural studies in general, by the linguist and anthropologist Kenneth Pike. See K. Pike, “Emic and Etic Standpoints for the Description of Behavior,” in K. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1954), vol. 2, ch. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Good examples of what I’m talking about can be found in the photography of Jacqueline M. Hadel. See, e.g., J.M. Hadel, *TOKIDOKI (NOMAD)* (2014a), available online at URL = <http://jacquelinemhadel.wordpress.com/2014/10/22/kobe-japan-images-all-the-beauty-of-life/>; J.M. Hadel, *TOKIDOKI (NOMAD)* (2014b), available online at URL = <http://jacquelinemhadel.wordpress.com/2014/07/23/osaka-images-painful-crudity/>; and J.M. Hadel, *TOKIDOKI (NOMAD)* (2014c), available online at URL = <http://jacquelinemhadel.wordpress.com/2014/05/16/osaka-images-the-only-moment/>. More generally, her photographs of Japan vividly shows how incredibly complex the underlying manifest reality is, and by sharp contrast, how “thin” and superficial the layer of conceptualization that we put on top of it by means of our conceptual imagination is.

that is, that wall or staircase is “a wall” or “a staircase” only inside a cultural “emic” system, not on the “etic” level of the underlying manifest physical entity. There are grains of sand and little stones, glued together by cement crystallites; there are rods of steel, and particles of rust; and there are cracks filled with water, algae, and bacteria. The “house” is an “as-if structure” emulated by a manifest physical entity that we access perceptually, and by our conceptual thinking about it and use of it.<sup>7</sup>

Again, these piles of manifest materials and products are “houses” only in our conceptual imagination, and their function is implied by the way we use them. Buildings (or other things) are implemented in terms of the manifestly real material things on the one hand, directly accessed by perception, and in terms of our conceptual thinking on the other. I am not saying they are not *real*, but the “houses,” “tables,” “chairs,” and “staircases” are an *emulated* reality.

If we pay attention to the details, if we look at the patina of our world and at the structures behind that patina, we can see that below that emulated world, there is an incredibly rich world of unnamed and undescribed things. That patina is a message bubbling up from the depths that underlie manifest reality. By looking at those undescribed details and by describing them, we can either elevate some of them into our emulated everyday world, or lower ourselves into that fascinating world of the undescribed.

I have been using the term “chaos” here not in the sense of something negative, but in the sense of something that is not (yet) structured by concepts and knowledge. There is a form, structure, or syntax here, but not one for which our conceptually structured languages already contain terms, expressions, or concepts. The term “chaos” as I use it here, denotes *the irreducible richness of being*. Any entity has more properties than can be described in our language, or can be derived in our theories about that entity. This richness is irreducible in the sense that an undescribed residuum will always remain, although the descriptions can always be extended. If it is a planned and created thing, then it has more properties than the “blueprint” used for its production. Manifest reality is a *proteon*.<sup>8</sup> The “chaos” is the part of it that has not been planned, and is not yet covered by our concepts and theories. We are used to viewing it negatively, as “defects,” “disorder,” “dirt,” “imperfections,” and so-on, as deviations from the perfect platonic forms that serve as implicit templates for our conceptual thinking. The weeds are singled out as something bad in the ordered and planned structure of the garden. The term “irregular,, that denotes something lying outside what is formalized and

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<sup>7</sup> See “The As-If-O-Scope” (in this volume, pp. 122-177) for a discussion of as-if-structures, in a partially fictional setting. Pike’s emic/etic-distinction played a role in the development of the ideas behind the “As-If-O-Scope,” as well as the ideas presented in this section of the present essay.

<sup>8</sup> See Keller, “Proteons: Towards a Philosophy of Creativity.”

conceptually described, has a negative connotation in the Western tradition, a tradition that can be traced back to Plato. By contrast, I'm proposing that we stop viewing the "chaos," the "residuum" of not yet described things and properties, as something anti-intellectual or bad.

### III. Decay

Inside our flawless conceptualized world, where doors function perfectly and walls are smooth, even, and monochrome, and where the world consists of ideal implementations of platonic forms, this underlying level of manifest reality seems to be ugly and imperfect. But if we stop viewing these just-as-real things as noise and dirt, if we try to perceive them as what they are, stepping out of the world of idealizations, functions, and concepts we normally yet unself-consciously inhabit, we can suddenly discover a hidden beauty, a glimpse of the true richness of reality.

There are objects that "are" "buildings," "floors," "tubes," "machines," etc. We use them in a certain way and as long as they function according to these concepts we can pretend as if that is what they just "are." But they are always more than that. We have a concept of an object and this concept is implemented in some concrete, manifestly real physical entity. As emphasized earlier, the manifestly real entity always has more properties than the conceptual description accounts for. For example, engineers have a theory of how a given system is supposed to work. We can take this description or "blueprint" as a comprehensive theory of the system, but it is incomplete as an exhaustive description of the manifestly real entity it describes. There are processes going on in that entity that are not covered by the "blueprint theory," and through these processes, the object exits the scope of that theory. If that happens, it is "broken." The manifestly real physical entity is not broken (and in some instances, it might even acquire new useful properties unforeseen by the user), rather, it is just that the system implemented by the manifestly real entity no longer behaves as planned or conceptualized. For the manifestly real physical entity, these processes of breaking, of decay, and of wear-&-tear, are simply normal processes, just as the unbroken, undecayed, and unworn-&-untorn processes described by the blueprint theory are simply normal processes. From the point of view of the manifestly real physical entity, there is no difference between these processes. The difference exists only in our conceptualization of them. It is not the manifestly real entity that breaks down, but only our *as-if-construction* about it.

When the manifestly real physical structure that implemented, or played the role of, the ideal conceptual system (e.g., of "a house" or "a car") is abandoned, that is, when people stop nudging it back into the part of its state space that's described by the conceptual blueprint, the entity will develop properties not described by the blueprint. The blueprint-theory is incomplete, and the underlying entity has many

properties not covered by that theory, properties I have called the “residuum” or “chaos” above. These residual properties that were hardly visible when the structure was still functioning according to the blueprint, now start to creep in. The paint is coming off the walls and the first spots of rust appear. Then the residual properties and processes take over.

As an example, let’s consider an abandoned, decaying former power station.<sup>9</sup> We see that the manifestly real system existing there was not only “a power station.” It had many more properties and possibilities of development than the blueprint theory described. These properties were repressed into its micro-structure, or covered by paint or behind casings, but now they bounce back, as rust produced by oxidation, as scaling paint, as sprouting spores of wood-digesting fungi and bacteria, as invading plants and animals, or as gravitation. The once protective layer of the building opens, and then heat, cold, wind, and rain start affecting its interior, exposing many once hidden possibilities of causal interaction. As long as it functioned as “a power station,” we could say that it “is” one. But perhaps it would be more accurate and appropriate to say that it was just “an implementation” of the power-station theory, that it “emulated,” or *behaved like*, “a power station.” In everyday language, we use the word “is” to denote an object instead of “emulates” or “behaves like.” This results in statements such as:

That [object] *is* a power station,

instead of

That [object] *emulates* a power station,

or

That [object] *behaves like* a power station.

Using “is” is convenient, and I am not suggesting that we stop using it in everyday language, but it claims too much. According to this way of speaking, we say the building “is” a power station, and then that the power station is “broken” if it can be nudged back into “being” one, or that it is “beyond repair” when it no longer can be so nudged. This way of speaking is convenient; but in a way, “the power station,” that is, the object described by the blueprint, is a fiction. We pretend that the real entity is like that, and we thereby ignore the residuum.

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<sup>9</sup> Wikipedia, “Demolition of the EVVB Power Plant” (2020), available online at URL = [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Demolition\\_of\\_the\\_ECVB\\_power\\_plant.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Demolition_of_the_ECVB_power_plant.jpg).

The manifestly real object, however, does not care about our theory to the effect that it supposed to be “a power station.” It is what it is. It’s going its own way.

The aesthetic aspect of such places is brought to us by an increasing number of photographers who explore such places via what has come to be known as “Urban Exploration” or “Urbex,” especially the sub-genre of photographing abandoned buildings.<sup>10</sup>

In an earlier essay, I have hypothesized that the experience of beauty is an effect of a mix of order and disorder.<sup>11</sup> Beauty, I have proposed, is an experience of successfully discovering order or patterns in structures that show a mix of order and disorder. When objects decay, they start from a state of relative order (and often, on our side, boredom), and then they go through stages of increasing disorder. At some point, they move through a “beauty zone,” where there is an “aesthetic optimum” of order and disorder. We can often still identify what things have been, so patterns and shapes can be identified, but things have become different enough from what they once had been to require some mental work before we are rewarded with recognition, resulting in the aesthetic effect of defamiliarization.<sup>12</sup> After that stage, follows a stage of “abstract expressionism,” whereby we are no longer be able to recognize objects, and instead, rich and complex patterns and textures will develop. These “abstract” structures are especially likely to appear if we “zoom in.” While on a larger scale, order might still be there, if on the contrary we look at small enough sections, then no large-scale objects will remain recognizable, and our concepts no longer apply. This technique is used by “abstract photographers” to produce stunningly beautiful pictures.<sup>13</sup>

#### IV. Randomness and Control

Not all properties of artifacts are controlled by the people creating them. Some properties are planned by the designer or artist and controlled in the process of production, but there is a rest of “natural” properties. In section III, I’ve called this

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<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., V. Leroy, *Valsdarkroom*, available online at URL = <<https://valsdarkroom.com/>>, a blog displaying many fascinating examples of photographs of abandoned houses, apartments, and industrial plants.

<sup>11</sup> Keller, “Proteons: Towards a Philosophy of Creativity,” p. 145.

<sup>12</sup> This is obviously related to the work of Victor Shklovsky; see, e.g., V. Shklovsky, “Art, as Device” (2015/1917), trans. A. Berlina, available online at <[https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/first/en122/lecturelist2017-18/art\\_as\\_device\\_2015.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/first/en122/lecturelist2017-18/art_as_device_2015.pdf)>.

<sup>13</sup> A good example is B. Kutin, *Blaž Kutin Photography* (2020), available online at URL = <<https://tibornak.wordpress.com/>>. Some of the pictures on this blog have also been published in a books-on-demand. See, e.g., B. Kutin, *ABSTRACTS: Abstract Photography 2012-2013*, (UK: Blurb, 2013), available online at URL = <<https://www.blurb.co.uk/b/4525618-abstracts>>.

the “residuum,” or more simply, “chaos.” Our descriptions of things are incomplete, and also the plans and “blueprints” used for the production of artifacts.

In the productive parts of technology, people typically try to make the residuum as small as possible. Each item produced should come out like the other. The residual, natural properties of things can mostly be found in the microscopic domain. If you take a piece of metal, for example, cut it, etch it, and put it under a microscope, you may see small grains, called “crystallites.” The exact shape and orientation of these grains is, to a large extent, a result of random processes, although some statistical properties of these textures can be controlled for in the processes of casting and welding. On the macroscopic level, however, one object, for example, “a car,” will look like any other. It is only through processes of wear and tear, of rusting and cracking, that the microscopic properties are gradually amplified, and the residuum slowly creeps in from below, bit-by-bit destroying the designed structure and turning the object back into something natural and individual.

In creating works of art, however, artists may allow for the residuum of the artifact to claim a larger share of the object’s properties right from the beginning. The artist may develop production processes in which random events and the resulting random structures are not restricted to the microscopic world of features smaller than what can be seen by the unaided eye, but instead appear on macroscopic level. The artist is thus exploiting the fact that not all properties of what he makes are controlled and controllable.

Paradigm cases of this are the abstract paintings of Gerhard Richter, as shown, for example, in a video clip from the documentary “Gerhard Richter Painting.”<sup>14</sup> Richter has developed techniques that lead to a mix of controlled and uncontrolled properties of his paintings. He first applies paint to the canvas (or another surface, like aluminum), and this is a process that is controlled to a large extent, although the exact distribution and thickness of paint probably also has elements of randomness. He then uses a large metal squeegee blade to scratch some of the paint off, or change its distribution. The result is partially controlled—resulting in a pattern of parallel stripes—and partially random.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> YouTube, “Gerhard Richter Painting” (2020), available online at URL = <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yF6EluMNR14&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>15</sup> Various examples of abstract paintings generated by Richter’s unique process can be found in U. Wilmes (ed.), *Gerhard Richter: Abstrakte Bilder* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009). This part of Richter’s oeuvre can be assigned to what’s called the *Informel*, a tradition of modern art of which teacher K.O. Götz is a leading representative. See, e.g., K.O. Götz, *K.O. Götz* (2020), available online at URL = <https://www.ko-götz.de/>; and also *Stiftung Informelle Kunst* (2020), available online at URL = <http://www.stiftung-informelle-kunst.de/>. In the English-speaking world, a comparable art tradition is known as *Abstract Expressionism*.

You can actually hear the randomness. The process creates not a harmonious sound, as would be created when you strike a chord. Such a sound consists of a mix of regular tones in harmonious relations. Here, however, you have a *noise*, a random mix of frequencies produced by random micro-events of scratching or—as for example when the squeegee is glued to the surface of the drying paint—the noises of tearing.

Some aspects of the process are under the artist's control, for example, the location at which the tool is applied, and the directions and speed of its movements, perhaps also the pressure exerted. The choice and initial distribution of colors is another controlled parameter. Other parameters, such as the degree to which the paint has dried when a tool is applied also influence the outcome as well, so the time at which tools are applied is another parameter that is under the artist's control. Nevertheless, to a large extent, the processes are random.

The resulting patterns show a mix of order and disorder. The process produces stripes, scratches, or patterns of holes, that expose underlying layers of paint. These structures show some correlations in their positions and shapes as a result of the movement of the tools and the application of paint, but the distribution and shape of the structures is also largely random, especially on smaller scales. The repetition of such processes with several layers of paint results in very complex patterns and textures.

A side effect of this is that the creation of these objects cannot be repeated: each one is unique. Even if you could repeat the process as exactly as possible, even if you could do it by means of a machine, the result would in all likelihood never be the same. In terms of physics, this might be due to non-linear processes, i.e., processes in which small differences in initial conditions can result in large differences in the outcome, thus amplifying microscopic differences to macroscopic levels.

The resulting structures are partially ordered, enabling our perception to find regularities, and partially disordered, providing anomalous counterexamples to the orders that anyone looking at the object has identified so far. More correlations and patterns can be identified, and the anomalies can be integrated into the perceived patterns and structures. However, the high level of complexity of the structures ensures that the process of perception will not terminate quickly. The picture provides enough complexity to avoid boredom, and enough order to discover partial order again and again.

Another example of random processes used for aesthetic purposes can be seen in some kinds of Japanese pottery. For example, in a wood-fired kiln of the Anagama type, particles of ash moving randomly due to the turbulent conditions inside the

kiln settle down on the surfaces of the pieces, melting into them and forming a natural glazing. The outcome of this process can be influenced by the placement of the pieces in the kiln, by the type of wood used, etc., but it cannot be strictly controlled. The pieces that come out of the kiln have unique surface structures that are not reproducible and are not designed.<sup>16</sup> The marked difference of Japanese aesthetics compared to traditional European aesthetics might be due to the quite different significance given to conceptual descriptions in Buddhist philosophy. The influence of the Platonic tradition that overemphasizes conceptual structures and views the “residuum” that is not covered by the concepts as a deviation that must be avoided and minimized or treated as if it is not there. Instead, there is a tradition emphasizing the emptiness and vanity of concepts. However, the interplay between Buddhist philosophy and Japanese aesthetics<sup>17</sup> is beyond the scope of this article.

As I mentioned above, I’ve hypothesized in an earlier essay that the experience of beauty is an experience of success of finding order in the perceptual data.<sup>18</sup> It therefore requires correlations between parts of the perceived object. This is provided by the order-creating aspects of the artistic processes. On the other hand, too much order would lead to boredom since no new experiences of order-discovery are possible once all the order present has been identified. Too much disorder, on the other hand, would frustrate and confuse our perception. The “beauty zone” is between these two poles. Processes like the ones developed by Richter and some other artists provide a way to create artifacts just in this area of beauty, fascinating and mesmerizing.

The aim of the artists belonging to the tradition of the *Informel*, aka Abstract Expressionism, is the dissolution of form, escaping from the realm of what is covered by concepts. And this is directly opposed to *geometrical* abstract art, for example Piet Mondrian’s paintings in the early 1920s, in which geometric shapes, conceptualized as such, are used to compose structures. In many cases, the *Informel* artists use procedures in which random processes play a role, as just described. The artwork is not designed in every detail but is the result of a process only partially controlled by the artist. This results in structures not captured or comprehended by concepts.

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<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., C. Peters and G. Wrage, *Japan beginnt an der Ostsee: Die Keramik des Jan Kollwitz* (Hamburg: Wacholtz Verlag, 2017); and also J. Kollwitz, *Jan Kollwitz* (2020), available online at URL = <https://www.jankollwitz.de/en/>.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., G. Parkes and A. Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), E.N. Zalta (ed.), available online at URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/japanese-aesthetics/>. This reference is intended only as a gesture in the direction of Japanese or more general East Asian aesthetics. The article is by no means sufficient to cover the topic I’m touching on—the role of non-conceptual thinking in East-Asian cultures and the connections to some forms of Buddhism and Daoism—exhaustively.

<sup>18</sup> See note 11 above.

However, alongside these random processes, some aspects of the works are also planned and controlled. Here, it must be emphasized that non-conceptual thinking processes play an important and even essential role.<sup>19</sup> And this is the topic I'll focus on in the next and penultimate section of this essay.

## V. Non-Conceptual Thinking and Art

The area of reality that's not covered by conceptual thinking is not the same as the area that is not covered by our thinking as such. As I mentioned above, in earlier work I've defined a "proteon" as something that cannot be completely described in terms of algorithms or formal theories. Each description of it (and we can call that just "knowledge") is incomplete. It can be extended, but the resulting extended description is also going to be incomplete. This does, however, not necessarily mean that the "knowledge," i.e., the description that can be represented in terms of formal theories or algorithms, is always conceptual. There can be non-conceptual formal theories or algorithms too. So the data the "knowledge" is about might be pictures or sounds, for example, and the "knowledge" that is applied to it does not necessarily take the form of conceptual representations. Likewise, the human mind does not think in an exclusively conceptual way even when it is thinking formally and according to algorithms. There is non-conceptual thinking in this sense as well. The existence of such thought processes has been observed at least since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but following on from Kant (or at least, according to a tradition of interpreting Kant that either leaves out, downgrades, or at least underemphasizes Kant's theory of "pure intuition" and his philosophy of mathematics, as well as his theory of "sensibility" more generally<sup>20</sup>), they have been viewed as subordinate to conceptual

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<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., O. Kornhoff and B. Nierhoff-Wielk (eds.), *Karl Otto Götz: In Erwartung blitzschneller Wunder* (Rolandseck: Arp-Museum Rolandseck, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> By sharp contrast to this *Kantian conceptualist* tradition, however, see, e.g., R. Hanna, "Mathematics for Humans: Kant's Philosophy of Arithmetic Revisited," *European Journal of Philosophy* 10 (2002): 328-353; R. Hanna, "Kant and Nonconceptual Content," *European Journal of Philosophy* 13 (2005): 247-290; R. Hanna, "Kantian Non-Conceptualism," *Philosophical Studies* 137 (2008): 41-64; R. Hanna, "Beyond the Myth of the Myth: A Kantian Theory of Non-Conceptual Content," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 19 (2011): 321-396; R. Hanna, "Kant, Hegel, and the Fate of Non-Conceptual Content," *Hegel Society of Great Britain Bulletin* 34 (2013): 1-32; R. Hanna, *Cognition, Content, and the A Priori: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind and Knowledge* (THE RATIONAL HUMAN CONDITION, Vol. 2) (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), chs. 2-3, also available online in preview at URL = [https://www.academia.edu/35801833/The\\_Rational\\_Human\\_Condition\\_5\\_Cognition\\_Content\\_and\\_the\\_A\\_Priori\\_A\\_Study\\_in\\_the\\_Philosophy\\_of\\_Mind\\_and\\_Knowledge\\_OUP\\_2015](https://www.academia.edu/35801833/The_Rational_Human_Condition_5_Cognition_Content_and_the_A_Priori_A_Study_in_the_Philosophy_of_Mind_and_Knowledge_OUP_2015) >; R. Hanna, "Directions in Space, Non-Conceptual Form, and the Foundations of Transcendental Idealism," in D. Schulting (ed.), *Kantian Nonconceptualism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 99-115; R. Hanna, "The Essential Non-Conceptuality of the Imagination," (October 2019 version), available online at URL = [https://www.academia.edu/39289860/The\\_Essential\\_Non-Conceptuality\\_of\\_the\\_Imagination\\_October\\_2019\\_version](https://www.academia.edu/39289860/The_Essential_Non-Conceptuality_of_the_Imagination_October_2019_version) >; R. Hanna, "Sensibility First: How to Interpret Kant's Theoretical and Practical Philosophy," (October 2019 version), available online at URL =

and logical thought-processes. Such thought processes play an important role in everyday life (e.g. when we walk or drive a car, etc.), although many people don't notice this. They also play an extremely important role in areas like the visual arts, music, and dance.

The painter Karl Otto Götz, mentioned above, speaks of "*anschauliches Denken*," and I would translate this as "non-conceptual thinking." In turn, here is an example documenting a non-conceptual thought process in four images:



Image 1

<[https://www.academia.edu/40549538/Sensibility\\_First\\_How\\_to\\_Interpret\\_Kants\\_Theoretical\\_and\\_Practical\\_Philosophy\\_October\\_2019\\_version](https://www.academia.edu/40549538/Sensibility_First_How_to_Interpret_Kants_Theoretical_and_Practical_Philosophy_October_2019_version) >; and R. Hanna, "Non-Conceptualism Explained, Defended, and Extended" (December 2019 version), available online at URL = <[https://www.academia.edu/41352827/Non-Conceptualism\\_Explained\\_Defended\\_and\\_Extended\\_December\\_2019\\_version](https://www.academia.edu/41352827/Non-Conceptualism_Explained_Defended_and_Extended_December_2019_version) >.



E. G. S. 2019  
Sizimik, 100 x 100 cm  
Tijuanilla, Chile

41

Image 2



Ostsee, 1806  
Eiweißmalerei auf Leinwand, 200 x 320 cm (zweifelh.)  
Privatbesitz

60

Image 3



Image 4

The first image shows a sketch for the painting “Otella”; the second image shows a small draft version of the painting, made after that sketch; and the third and fourth images show the painting itself.<sup>21</sup> We can see here, then, how a completely non-conceptual picture idea is developed.

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<sup>21</sup> See Kornhoff and Nierhoff-Wielk (eds.), *Karl Otto Götz: In Erwartung blitzschneller Wunder*, pp. 84-87.

Non-conceptual thought processes also exist beyond the visual realm. If a musician composes or improvises music, or jams with other musicians, then non-conceptual auditory thought processes are involved. The musician in a jam session will not think something like “she played a C, so I have to play an E.” Instead, the process works non-conceptually. It is important to note that this is not essentially an *emotional* thought process, although emotions may be involved, just as the planning of a painting is not a matter of emotions, but instead an essentially *non-conceptual* (“*anschaulich*” in Götz’s terminology) thought process.

Other examples—also relevant to artwork like Götz’s, whose artistic process involves very rapid movements—include the sensorimotor planning and control of motion and the orientation in space, and associated thoughts. And just as there is visual art and auditory art (e.g., music), so too there is also a form of art that may be called proprioceptive, that’s geared towards the sensors inside our muscles and tendons and the motion- and balance- sensors in our inner ear. Such proprioceptive art is generally underdeveloped in Western culture, but highly sophisticated in some other cultures, especially in the West African dance tradition. Since this realm of art has been largely ignored in the Western tradition, I’ll take this opportunity to write about it in a little more detail.

In the tradition of the restricted list of “the five senses,” proprioceptive senses have been seriously overlooked, no doubt due to the anti-embodiment tradition of Western culture during the Medieval period,<sup>22</sup> and to the Puritan tradition in

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See also G. Götz, “*Entwurf zu Otella*,” available online at URL = <<https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/242805>>.

<sup>22</sup> This point, of course, itself deserves itself a detailed treatment. In the European tradition, dance tends to become a visual art. Moreover, the body is treated as a rigid unit and the main purpose of the dance is the movement of the body through space, not movement inside the body. Movement inside the body is to a large extent suppressed. Europeans tend to perceive African dance movements as sexual even if they are not: e.g., pelvic movements in African dance are often just another degree of freedom of the body that can be used as a rhythmic component. This skewed conception of African dance seems to have played an important role in the European perception of Africans as merely “savages” doing “wild” movements, whereas in fact Africans possessed a movement culture that was (and is) by far more sophisticated than that of the Europeans who so completely misunderstood it. The anti-dance (and anti-embodiment) bias of the European tradition is also reflected in the fact that dance is regarded as inappropriate for funerals, and also that, e.g., dance events on Good Friday are prohibited in some countries. In Africa, on the other hand, there are highly developed traditions of funeral dances, because dance is particularly suitable for expressing, dealing with, and cultivating feelings of grief. These topics are outside the main scope of the current essay, but it would also be extremely interesting to examine the role played by the anti-embodiment bias of the Christian, European, and Anglo-American traditions in overlooking essentially non-conceptual (*anschaulich*) thinking, and in subordinating it to conceptual-logical thinking. Against the grain of these one-sidedly *intellectualist* (i.e., conceptualist and anti-embodiment) traditions, for a view that emphasizes the fundamental character of proprioceptive consciousness, and also fuses non-conceptualism with the metaphysics and phenomenology of embodiment, see R. Hanna and M. Maiese, *Embodied Minds in Action* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009). Hanna’s and Maiese’s book, in

particular. What has also been seriously overlooked is that it's possible to create art for the proprioceptive senses. We can move our bodies in ways that generate perceptible patterns of great beauty. I discovered this during the 1980s when I learned some (West-) African dances myself, in part by taking lessons from the late Isaac Amissah, a former member of the National Ballet of Ghana, and in part by watching Africans dance for probably several hundred hours in African concerts and discotheques. This dance tradition has spread over large parts of Africa. Many dance forms of middle and south America and also dances associated to Jazz and other forms of "black" music can also be traced to this tradition.

The West African dance tradition has been described as "polycentric." This means that different parts of the body are not moved as a single rigid unit, but instead each part of the body (shoulders, pelvis, etc.) can be moved independently. The movements are not really independent, on the contrary, they're fully synchronized, but typically, different body parts will be moved according to different rhythmic components of the music. So, you can think of the body here as a system of oscillators that are synchronized with each other but can also be modulated and coupled in different ways.

What I observed was this: basically, a rhythmic pattern might be auditory (in the music one can hear), or visual (in a dance one sees). But from the point of view of the dancer, the same rhythmical pattern is essentially a proprioceptive dynamic pattern, i.e., a dynamic pattern that the dancer observes with the muscle- (and sometimes touch-) receptors in his or her body. The abstract rhythmical pattern of a specific dance is always the same. Hence you can transfer a piece of music to another musical instrument, or you can "play" it with your own body. Or you can add another "tune" or "voice." Music in this musical tradition is not necessarily an auditory form of art. The fact that many African languages don't distinguish between concepts of music and dance in the same way as European languages do may well have its roots here.

In fact, African dance can be viewed as a *proprioceptive art* whereby the dancer is the only person who can perceive the piece of art completely. The rhythmical structure you feel in the body is then integrated with the auditory music into a "multimedia" experience of great beauty. In this way, Africans have created an art form for the proprioceptive senses that has been neglected or overlooked in most other parts of the world as a possible target for art. If you know the dance, you can perceive the structures in somebody else's dance that you're able to see; but as I've

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turn, was importantly influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's brilliant, ground-breaking, and yet still insufficiently appreciated book in this area, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962/1945).

proposed, African dance is not primarily a visual art, but instead essentially a proprioceptive art.

Since an auditory dynamic pattern can be transferred to a proprioceptive dynamic pattern, and vice versa—the abstract pattern of “music/dance” being the same in both ways of performing it—and both parts of the experience can then be integrated into one multimedia structure in the dancer’s/listener’s mind, then both are just different expressions of the same abstract structure.

The Western way of looking at dance as a visual form of art is therefore far too narrow. The visual component does exist in Africa as well, especially in dances in which masks are also used, but it is only part of the story.

What is unique in the proprioceptive aspect of dance is that this is a form of art you cannot passively consume. You must learn it yourself, and do it in order to be able to experience it fully. Once the movement patterns have become automatized to some extent so that you can just observe them, there is a rich world of swinging patterns that you can observe in their relationships to each other and to the music. And once you have learnt that, you can also see more when observing other dancers. What goes on in the mind of the experienced dancer is a non-conceptual process of planning and modifying movements, synchronizing it with the music or with the movements of other dancers and of perceiving the movement inside one’s body and in other dancers. It is a similar experience to improvising a tune in a jam session, where also auditory thinking and movement-thinking are combined in a mostly non-conceptual way.<sup>23</sup>

## **VI. Conclusion: Non-Conceptual Thinking and Philosophical Aesthetics**

After investigating some aspects of non-conceptuality in the visual, auditory, and proprioceptive/motional realms, let me conclude with some metaphilosophy. I return to Karl Otto Götz, who, in addition to being an artist, was also a theoretician and philosopher of art. In a book co-written with his wife Karin Götz (better known

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<sup>23</sup> It would be interesting to trace the anti-carnal tradition mentioned above in more detail. One can trace this back both to some currents in Greek philosophy, especially in Platonism and Neoplatonism, and to different forms of Christianity (including some that were later declared heretical, like Gnosis, as well as to other religions of late antiquity, like Manichaeism. In all these traditions, the body and the material world is associated with evil, the senses are associated with the material world and as a result, “logos” or “ratio” are declared superior. I see here the main reason for the disregard and neglect of the non-conceptual aspects of the mind. However, going deeper into these matters (and the extensive literature that exists about them) is beyond the scope of this essay.

under her artist's name Rissa) and published in 1972,<sup>24</sup> the co-authors criticize traditional philosophical aesthetics. They write:

Philosophical aesthetics [...] has never done justice to the fine arts and art practice, neither in the past nor today. Its assertions about the visual artist and its interpretation of his artistic work have never touched on the real problems of the artistic, i.e. the non-conceptual (*anschaulich*), thinking in its complexity.<sup>25</sup>

The authors then give a historical overview of philosophical aesthetics. They write, for example, about the influence of Plato's negative attitude towards visual art:

Plato's accusation has had a devastating effect on the assessment of the artist's abilities to this day. The idea of the conceptual and metaphysical has blocked access to the differentiated, non-conceptual [*anschaulich*] thinking of the visual artist.<sup>26</sup>

Referring to Plato again, they write:

For Plato, beauty belongs to the realm of ideas or archetypes [...]. Here beauty is something metaphysical, an objective concept of value [...] This original determination of both concepts (aesthetics and beauty) has an effect up to the present [...] It is also the cause of the underestimation, even misjudgment, of the non-conceptual [*anschaulich*] in relation to the conceptual and logical.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> K.O. Götz and K. Götz, *Probleme der Bildästhetik: Eine Einführung in die Grundlagen des anschaulichen Denkens* (Düsseldorf: Concept Verlag, 1972). In retrospect, the name of the publisher is unintentionally ironic.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38: "Die philosophische Ästhetik [...] ist der bildenden Kunst und der Kunstpraxis nie gerecht geworden, weder in der Vergangenheit, noch heute. Ihre Behauptungen über den bildenden Künstler und ihre Interpretation seines Kunstschaffens haben die wirklichen Probleme des Künstlerischen, nämlich das anschauliche Denken in seiner Komplexität, nie berührt." The problem here is translating the term "*anschaulich*," which refers to thinking in terms of visual representations. The term is closely connected to Kant's terms "*Anschauung*" and "*Anschauungsform*," which are usually translated into English as "intuition" and "form of intuition." However, as has been noticed many times by Kantians and other philosophers, the English terms "intuition" and "intuitive" have surplus connotations and meanings not contained in the term "*anschaulich*." The term is also closely connected to what Kant calls "*Sinnlichkeit*," aka "sensibility," hence "sensible" might also be considered as a possible English synonym. In the current context, the term could also be translated as "visual"; but all-things-considered, I've chosen to translate it as "non-conceptual."

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38: "Dieser Vorwurf Platons hat für die Beurteilung der Fähigkeiten des bildenden Künstlers bis heute eine verheerende Wirkung gehabt. Die Vorstellung des Begrifflichen und Metaphysischen hat den Zugang zum differenzierten, anschaulichen Denken des bildenden Künstlers versperrt."

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39: "Für Platon gehört das Schöne in den Bereich der Ideen oder Urbilder [...]. Das Schöne ist hier etwas Metaphysisches, ein objektiver Wertbegriff [...] Diese ursprüngliche Bestimmung beider Begriffe (Ästhetik und Schönheit) wirkt sich bis zur Gegenwart [...] aus. [...] Sie ist auch die Ursache für die Unterbewertung, ja Fehleinschätzung, des Anschaulichen im Verhältnis zum Begrifflichen und Logischen."

They also note the negative influence that this has had on art lessons in school, where the necessary visual education does not get the attention it should have.<sup>28</sup> (p. 39, 40). Finally, by way of a summary, they write:

In the whole of philosophical aesthetics, it becomes apparent that, as already with Plato, the processes of non-conceptual [anschaulich] thinking in their fundamental meaning are not recognized or underestimated and that it deals always only with pleasure, with aesthetic feelings. Today, in the age of heightened visual communication, warning voices from the fields of science and art (Arnheim 1969, Berlyne 1968, Götz 1963) are finally emerging, which emphatically refer to the still unresearched, non-conceptual [anschaulich] methods of thought of the visual artist and advocate their long overdue exploration.<sup>29</sup>

Around the time Götz and Götz published their book, conceptual art became dominant in art schools, museums, galleries, art journals etc. The generation of professors to which K.O. Götz belonged was pensioned off, and a new generation of professors, museum curators, art journalists, and so-on took over. As a result, interest in the kind of research K.O. Götz and Rissa had proposed effectively disappeared.<sup>30</sup> The bulk of philosophical aesthetics since then reflects this turn toward conceptual art. Indeed, leaving aside brief bursts of interest in non-conceptual cognition and content in the work of Gareth Evans in the 1980s and 1990s, and in Kantian philosophy after 2005,<sup>31</sup> there has been very little philosophical work about the realm of the non-conceptual. But now, almost fifty years after Götz's and his wife's work interest in *Informel*-style non-conceptual art is on the increase again, and correspondingly it is time to turn our serious attention as philosophers

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-40.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 45: "In der gesamten philosophischen Ästhetik zeigt sich also, daß wie schon bei Plato, die Prozesse des anschaulichen Denkens in ihrer fundamentalen Bedeutung nicht erkannt oder unterschätzt werden und daß es sich immer nur ums wohlgefallen, um die ästhetischen Gefühle dreht. Heute im Zeitalter der gesteigerten visuellen Kommunikation melden sich endlich warnende Stimmen aus dem Bereich der Wissenschaft und der Kunst (Arnheim 1969, Berlyne 1968, Götz 1963), die mit Nachdruck auf die noch unerforschten anschaulichen Denkmethode des bildenden Künstlers verweisen und sich für ihre längst fällige Erforschung einsetzen." For the reader's information, I've also included the Arnheim 1969, Berlyne 1968, and Götz 1963 citations in my list of References at the end of the essay.

<sup>30</sup> My copy of *Probleme der Bildästhetik* was bought second hand. It's a former library copy that had been discarded by a scientific library, and sold to a used book dealer. While this was good for me, it's also symptomatic of the cultural and intellectual situation after the paradigm shift to conceptual art. Another symptom is that since that time, many works of *Informel* art in museums have disappeared into their storerooms. For example, a room dedicated to *Informel* paintings in the *Hamburger Kunsthalle* (Hamburg Art Hall) was destroyed in the course of construction work, and never replaced. In particular, an extremely interesting painting by the painter Sam Francis was removed. It remains available online, but the original looks very different "in person." See S. Francis, "As For the Open" (1962-1963), available online at URL <<https://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/sammlung-online/sam-francis/open>>.

<sup>31</sup> See note 20 above.

onto the world of non-conceptual thinking,<sup>32</sup> not only as it occurs in artistic non-conceptuality,<sup>33</sup> but also in theoretical and practical non-conceptuality.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> An increased interest in the understanding of non-conceptual thought processes could also come from the fields of neuroscience, AI, and robotics, e.g., from the attempts to develop autonomous cars. Such attempts might be limited, not only because of the inherent limits of formal proof and algorithms—see Keller, “Proteons: Towards a Philosophy of Creativity”—but also because it is quite clear that much of the information processing required in such fields is non-conceptual.

<sup>33</sup> Let me add a brief critique of conceptual art in general here. In all cases of conceptual art, some idea is encoded in the work of art that can be decoded out of it again. This idea can almost always also be expressed in language. One might ask then why it had to be encoded into some non-language structure instead of simply being expressed as a language statement or text, e.g., in the form of an essay, blog article, or manifesto. The work of art itself then appears to be unnecessary. The artist produces it because, given the recent and current state of the professional art-world, s/he/they make their living by producing and selling objects. The object, however, becomes uninteresting the moment the content is understood (i.e., the “aha” or “oh I get it” case) or not understood (i.e., the “eh?” or “what?” case). Sometimes the idea is amusing (i.e., the “haha” case). After this brief moment of “aha,” “oh I get it,” “eh?,” “what?,” or “haha”, however, the work of art has done its job. Looking at it is then uninteresting. It no longer works, just as a joke told a second time over will not make people laugh again. Nevertheless, conceptual art continues to take up a great deal of space on museum floors or walls. An *Informel* work of art, on the other hand, remains beautiful and fascinating over a rather long stretch of time. For it is in most cases not perceived exhaustively, and remains evocative from one visit to the next. I therefore very much hope that in the not-too-distant future, *Informel* art will be brought out of the storerooms again and re-displayed on museums’ floors and walls, and conceptual art carted off to the storerooms where it belongs.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Hanna, “Sensibility First: How to Interpret Kant’s Theoretical and Practical Philosophy.”

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