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Exemplification, Knowledge, and Education of the Emotions through Conceptual Art

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[This is the last draft of the paper. Please only quote from the published version]

1. The intellectual value and the structure of conceptual artworks: preliminary remarks

Several philosophers hold the view that, in contemporary visual art, there is a category of works distinguished by the fact that their value *qua* artworks is first and foremost intellectual: the category ‘conceptual art’ (see, e.g., Schellekens and Goldie 2010, Cray 2014, Dodd 2016, Caldarola 2020, ch. 4). Conceptual artworks don’t realize aesthetic value by means of displaying certain higher-order perceptual properties emerging from their lower-order perceptual properties (such as ‘graceful’, ‘delicate’, ‘dainty’, ‘handsome’, ‘comely’, ‘elegant’, and ‘garish’ – to borrow from Frank Sibley’s [1959] seminal characterization of aesthetic properties), and it is not clear whether they realize aesthetic value in other ways,¹ but they certainly realize intellectual value: as a consequence, they can be appreciated *qua* artworks because of the cognitive contents they convey.²

A large number of conceptual artworks were produced between the end of the 1960s and the mid-1970s by artists such as Sol LeWitt, Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner, On Kawara,

¹ According to James Shelley (2003) and Noël Carroll (2004), conceptual artworks can realize aesthetic value by conveying certain views: this claim is compatible with the thesis that they also realize intellectual value by conveying those views. For the sake of the arguments put forward in this paper, there is no need to look deeper into this. Another point that doesn’t need to be discussed here is Julian Dodd’s (2016) claim that some works of conceptual art display aesthetic properties, which are, however, merely instrumental to conveying their intellectual content.

² On artistic value and how to distinguish it from aesthetic value see Louise Hanson (2013; 2017).

Joseph Kosuth, John Baldessari, Vito Acconci, and the Art & Language group (see Lippard 1973). Additionally, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) is usually considered the very first predecessor of conceptual art (see, e.g., Buchloh et al. 1994; Rosenthal 2003), while various works produced after the mid-1970s have continued the tradition of conceptual art into the present (e.g., works by Sophie Calle, Martin Creed, Damien Hirst, Jenny Holzer, Adrian Piper, and Cindy Sherman). What does it mean that we can appreciate conceptual artworks *qua* artworks because of the cognitive contents they convey? Let's look at three examples taken from different moments of the history of conceptual art.

Fountain presents the viewer with a urinal – an object that was not created by Duchamp, that was industrially produced (as opposed to artisanally), and that does not display salient aesthetic properties. What we are supposed to appreciate about *Fountain* is that in 1917 Duchamp submitted it for exhibition at a show organized by the Society of Independent Artists, which rejected it: by submitting a urinal, Duchamp criticized traditional views of the fine arts – implying that anything can be art – and, at the same time, poked fun at the institutional authority of the exhibition committee, by forcing it to take a urinal into consideration (see, e.g., the special issues of the *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* dedicated to *Fountain*, n. 57-58, 2019).

In *Following Piece* (1969), the artist Vito Acconci followed several strangers he had encountered by chance in the streets of New York, until they reached their destinations. Although, retrospectively, we can claim that this event was a sort of performance, the work significantly differed from performance art in that it didn't take place in a location usually devoted to presenting works of art and it didn't happen in front of a public; furthermore, like *Fountain*, this was a work that didn't display any salient aesthetic property emerging from its perceptual properties. The event is documented by some photographs and by Acconci's notes. As I shall explain in more detail below, those pieces of information, along with the work's title, the details of the performance, and critical accounts of Acconci's artistic practice, allow us to

understand that the work conveyed the idea that individuals can be influenced by others in their courses of actions, and that one can happen to influence someone else even unwittingly. It is this idea that Acconci presents to the public for appreciation, rather than the event of the performance, which neither happened in front of a public nor was aesthetically remarkable.³

Sophie Calle's *Take Care of Yourself* (2007) is a collection of records of 107 women professionals' reactions to a breakup email received by the artist: it includes, along with the text of the breakup email and photographs of the 107 women, various texts and images conveying responses from a variety of realms such as anthropology, sociology, soap-opera, philosophy, criminology, and fairytales – according to the women's jobs. Calle's active role in the production of the work consisted in contacting the women professionals, asking for their responses to the email, putting the responses together in order to display them, and photographing the women; many of the objects the work presents us with, then, have not been produced by the artist: the email that is the starting point for the work comes from a former lover of hers, and the responses to the email were produced by women professionals other than Calle. Here, then, we have a work that, in part, consists, like *Fountain*, in ready-made objects selected, rather than produced, by the artist. Furthermore, both the former lover's email and several of the women professionals' reactions to it do not display salient aesthetic properties – an aspect the work shares with both *Fountain* and *Following Piece*. As I shall explain in more detail below, Calle's interest in presenting a great variety of responses to the traumatic experience of receiving a break-up email didn't just lie in making available the opinions, knowledge, and wisdom of the 107 women professionals who responded to the email by analyzing it. First and foremost, it lay in conveying the view that negative feelings – and especially women's negative feelings – are worthy of acknowledgment, investigation, and open

³ For a previous, insightful philosophical analysis of *Following Piece* see David Davies (2004, 195-9; 208-209; 233-234).

exchange of opinions in the public arena, as opposed to repression and confinement to the private sphere. It is this view that the artist presents for appreciation, appealing to the intellectual faculties of the public.

Given that artifacts like the ones just described do not display any salient aesthetic property, one might wonder whether the objects or events those works present us with are somehow relevant for the appreciation of the works. Maybe things like Duchamp's urinal, Acconci's actions of following people, and the texts and images exhibited by Calle aren't relevant for conveying the ideas that matter to the artists: they could be mere placeholders for ideas the public is supposed to grasp by getting information about the artists' views – placeholders that would be replaceable, in principle, by *any other* kind of objects. In section (2), I argue that this is not the case, focusing on Acconci's and Calle's works. The first step in my argument consists in introducing the notion of exemplification; later, I employ such notion to cast light on the workings of both *Following Piece* and *Take Care of Yourself* and show why the *kinds* of events and objects they present us with are relevant for appreciating the views those works convey.⁴

Another worry raised by conceptual artworks is that, as James Young (2001, ch. 5) argues, even if they convey ideas, they might not be worthy of intellectual appreciation, because they might be unable to convey ideas *interestingly* and thus to yield knowledge. In section (3), I focus on Young's criticism against the view that conceptual artworks can yield knowledge by exemplifying certain properties and thereby conveying certain views. Also, I discuss Elisabeth Schellekens' (2007) and Peter Goldie's (2007) replies to Young, both revolving around the claim that conceptual artworks which rely on exemplification can yield significant *experiential*

⁴ As for *Fountain*, I shall leave it aside here: I have argued elsewhere that this work relies on “prop oriented make-believe” (Walton 1993), rather than exemplification, to convey its point, and that the urinal is necessary for it to convey its point (Caldarola 2020, ch. 4).

knowledge. As I argue, unlike the conceptual content that a work conveys by exemplifying one or more of its properties, the experiential content that a work conveys is specific to the particular object, or event, the work presents us with. In section (4), I argue that those works can possess also another variety of cognitive value: probatory value. Finally, in section (5), I show that those works can also be valuable instruments for the education of the emotions. Section (6) concludes.

2. Exemplification in conceptual art

The notion of exemplification has been analyzed by Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin in a number of writings (e.g., Goodman 1976; 1978; Elgin 2018). As Elgin explains:

Exemplification is the referential relation by means of which a sample, example, or other exemplar refers to some of its properties [...] An exemplar highlights, displays or makes manifest some of its properties by both instantiating and referring to those properties. Indeed, it refers via its instantiation of those properties. A swatch of herringbone tweed can be used as a sample of herringbone tweed. It is an instance of the pattern that refers to that pattern. A swatch of seersucker, not being herringbone tweed, cannot serve as a sample of herringbone tweed. A sample does not exemplify all of its properties. It can highlight some of its properties only by marginalizing or downplaying others. In its standard use, a fabric sample does not exemplify its shape, age, or origin. Exemplification is selective. In different contexts, the same object can exemplify different properties. Although they are not exemplified in a tailor's shop, the size and shape of the tweed sample might be exemplified in a marketing seminar, where the focus is on what features make a commercial sample effective (Elgin 2018, 29).

In this passage, Elgin develops on Goodman's remarks (1976, chs. 2 and 6) about exemplification being one of the five "symptoms of the aesthetic" (along with syntactic density, semantic density, relative repleteness, and multiple and complex reference). Interestingly, Goodman also argued that, for instance, abstract pictures exemplify some of their properties (Goodman 1978, 65) and that exemplification can help us understand "the art status of the 'objet trouvé'[i.e., the readymade] and of so-called 'conceptual art'" (Goodman 1978, 57). According to Goodman, all artworks are symbols, i.e., objects that stand for something else, and some artworks function as symbols thanks to their exemplificatory character: they stand for one (or more) of their properties. It is thanks to exemplification, Goodman suggests, that – under the appropriate circumstances – even *objet trouvé* and conceptual works can be artworks. *Following Piece* and *Take Care of Yourself*, I submit, are good cases for illustrating Goodman's view.

As mentioned above, Acconci's performance is documented by photographs of the event – in which we see, plainly, Acconci following some people – as well as by some notes taken by the artist, composed by sentences such as:

Performance as commitment. Performance as 'forming a part of' something, 'forming a part of' someone: not communication so much as lodgment of discourses.

A means of motivating movement. Movement determined by another person. Performance as 'being performed'. Movement as 'being moved'.⁵

⁵ Both the photographs and the notes can be accessed through the MoMA's website: www.moma.org/collection/works/146947 (last access 7 January 2021).

The work's title, *Following Piece*, has the function of stressing that the performance the photographs and text refer to is a series of events during which Acconci followed some strangers. Most importantly, I suggest that, via the notes accompanying the work, Acconci invites the public to consider the actions he performed as exemplifying one of their properties in particular (just like a squared swatch of herringbone tweed can be used to exemplify herringbone tweed, as opposed to squareness): not the property of being acts of following, but that of being events in which the artist let a stranger guide his movements in the street ("movement determined by another person"), unbeknownst to the latter. Furthermore, provided with information about the issues Acconci sought to explore with some of his works – about his interest in how his body occupied public space and in the phenomenon of social surveillance (see, e.g., Manolescu 2018) – we can formulate the hypothesis that *Following Piece* also exemplified a *more general* kind of events, i.e., the kind of events happening in public space, in which individuals are influenced by others in their courses of actions, and in which one can happen to influence someone else even unwittingly. By performing specific actions, Acconci made a work about the particular kind of events those actions exemplified. The intellectual content his work conveys is, at least in part, that there exists such kind of events – a claim his performance demonstrates by ostension. To conclude, as we have seen, the artist's actions during the performance are not mere placeholders for ideas, which could be replaced by objects of *any other* kind; instead, it is thanks to some of the properties of those actions that the work *Following Piece* takes shape and succeeds in conveying a certain intellectual content. Some of the performance's properties, then, are relevant to the work's intellectual appreciation. This, however, doesn't show that the *particular* performance put forward by Acconci was relevant to the work's intellectual appreciation: any performance capable of exemplifying the property of being an act in which one would have let an unknown and unaware person guide one's

actions would have done the job. For instance, Acconci could have gone to a restaurant, paid attention to what a random customer at a different table was ordering, and then ordered the same: this performance could have been used to exemplify just the same property exemplified by *Following Piece*.

One last caveat: as I have already stressed, *Following Piece* is a performance that took place in 1969, in front of nobody, and that is now documented through text and photographs. The work, then, was never directly accessible to anyone. It is likely that even Acconci himself couldn't appreciate it, since at the time when the performance took place his attention was directed towards making the performance happen, rather than observing it. As a consequence, then, the work couldn't be directly appreciated by anyone. *Following Piece* is only indirectly appreciated, through acquaintance with the photographs and text documenting it. Still, the properties of the artist's 1969 performance are key to the indirect appreciation of the work: it is because the text and photographs document an event with such and such properties that we can grasp the view Acconci tried to convey.⁶

Let's now consider *Take care of yourself*: I submit that this work, too, was designed to convey conceptual content through exemplification and that the kinds of objects it presents to the public are relevant to its appreciation. Critical accounts of Calle's artworks underline that they are about her emotional and private life, and that love- and death-experiences figure prominently in them (see, e.g., Chrisafis 2007). Based on this information, we can hypothesize that the focus of *Take care of yourself* be not so much what the 107 women professionals contacted by Calle did (i.e., their specific responses to the breakup email), but rather what *Calle* did, i.e., the project she put together by asking the women professionals to reply to the email she received. What are the salient properties of Calle's project, the ones which her installation of the women's replies exemplifies? I submit they are properties such as being a collection of

⁶ On the indirect appreciation of works of conceptual art see Hanson (2015).

insightful reactions to a breakup email by women professionals from many different fields and being the result of an act of sharing a private event – where the artist was emotionally abused by her lover, who decided to end their relationship by email – with many women and asking for their opinions about it. By exemplifying those properties, Calle’s installation presents for intellectual appreciation the view that negative feelings concerning the private sphere – and especially women’s negative feelings concerning the private sphere – are apt to be an object of acknowledgment, investigation, and open exchange of opinions in the public arena; the installation *shows* that this approach to the private sphere is indeed possible. When encountering Calle’s installation, then, we get acquainted with the properties it is used to exemplify, which are key to conveying the work’s intellectual content: this is why experiencing the very *kinds* of objects the work presents us with matters to our appreciation of it. Again, a different object exemplifying the same properties would have done the job equally well: for instance, a collection of recordings of meetings between the artist and women professionals from many different fields, where the artist would have told the women how she had been betrayed by her former lover and the women’s reactions and opinions about her story would have been recorded.

In this section, I have described two works of conceptual art that exploit exemplification to convey intellectual content by presenting the public with objects and events of certain kinds. I don’t believe exemplification is the only strategy employed by works of conceptual art to this end – in fact, I have described a different strategy elsewhere (Caldarola 2020, ch. 4) and there might be yet more strategies that, to my knowledge, haven’t been identified so far. This, however, is a line of investigation that exceeds the scope of the present paper.

3. Exemplification and the experiential value of conceptual art

James Young (2001, ch. 5) acknowledges the role exemplification plays in several works of conceptual art while, at the same time, arguing that works of conceptual art don't possess intellectual value. In particular, he claims that when a work of conceptual art exemplifies certain properties it does not convey any relevant information, since it merely presents a general view by illustrating it through a particular case, as opposed to investigating it. Does Young succeed in criticizing the claim that works of conceptual art which rely on exemplification to convey content possess intellectual value? I don't believe so. In the rest of this section, I introduce and develop on an interesting line of reply to Young, put forward by both Elisabeth Schellekens and Peter Goldie, illustrating it with reference to Acconci's and Calle's works. In the next section, I explore a further line of reply.

According to both Schellekens (2007, 83-84) and Goldie (2007, 161-164), works of conceptual art are cognitively valuable because they can produce experiential knowledge. Schellekens stresses that conceptual art encourages us "to engage in an emphatic and imaginative manner with the idea it sets out to convey" and "to relate to that idea in a way that goes beyond entertaining it in the form of a proposition" and concludes that "the cognitive value of conceptual art – as with most other art, it must be said – lies in breathing life into the idea it seeks to represent by making us grasp the idea phenomenologically. It is this ability to yield experiential knowledge that saves conceptual art from being superfluous" (Schellekens 2007, 83). Focusing on works of conceptual art that rely on exemplification to convey ideas, Goldie argues, contra Young, that not all of them only yield trivial knowledge, pointing out that there are works capable of conveying "significant what-it-is-like knowledge [a form of experiential knowledge] that is non-trivial through exemplifying certain properties" (Goldie 2007, 161). In particular, illustrating his point with reference to Santiago Sierra's work *Space Closed by Corrugated Metal* (2002), Goldie claims (a) that the relevant experiential knowledge is also available to those who perceptually imagine experiencing the work, rather than directly

experience it, and (b) that “the artwork puts us in a special position to *reflect* on the experience [...] The property thus exemplified by this work, and the emotional experience that it engenders, is sufficiently complex and rich for us to be able to return to the work in imagination on several occasions in order further to enrich our knowledge, including self-knowledge, through this kind of reflection” (Goldie 2007, 163-164). From the latter remark it follows that one can gain knowledge from certain works of conceptual art that convey ideas through exemplification even if s/he has previously experienced the property or the properties exemplified by those works: this is because the works allow to return to the relevant experiences and ponder over them, thereby gaining further knowledge through reflection.

Let us now consider how Schellekens’ and Goldie’s remarks can help us understand Acconci’s and Calle’s works. As observed above, we don’t have direct access to Acconci’s performance; however, as Goldie argues, we can access it through perceptual imagination: by looking at the photographs of the event we are presented with, we can imagine what it would have been like to see Acconci following unknown people in the streets of New York. More precisely, given that some of the photographs show both Acconci’s back and the backs of the people he followed, we can also imagine what it would have been like *to follow* Acconci following unknown people in the streets of New York. Our acts of perceptual imagination, then, can bring us closer to Acconci’s perspective on his performance. The approximation to the artist’s perspective, along with the acquaintance with the perceptual aspects of the performance through the imagination, give us cognitive advantages that the mere entertaining of the proposition that there are events in which individuals can be influenced by others in their courses of actions, and in which one can happen to influence somebody else even unwittingly, does not yield. This conclusion is in line with both Schellekens’ and Goldie’s view that conceptual artworks have *experiential* cognitive value.

It is important to stress that our perceptual imagination allows us to get acquainted with aspects *specific* to the particular performance realized by Acconci, rather than with any kind of object possessing the property exemplified by Acconci's performance. The experiential knowledge we gather concerns, for instance, what the streets of New York looked like on the very day of the performance, which can give us insights, e.g., on how it felt for Acconci to have to walk through certain streets rather than others. We couldn't gather the same kind of experiential knowledge by imagining perceiving Acconci entering a restaurant and ordering what an unknown and unaware customer had just ordered. Unlike the conceptual content that a work of conceptual art conveys by exemplifying one or more of its properties, then, the experiential content that a work of conceptual art conveys is specific to the particular object, or event, the work presents us with. This shows that, for certain works of conceptual art to convey intellectual content, it is relevant not only that they present the public with *a certain kind* of object or event, capable of exemplifying a certain property which allows to convey a certain view, but also that they present the public with a *particular object or event*, because it is the peculiar aspects of specific objects or events that confers to the works their distinctive experiential contents. Both the view it conveys and the experiential content it makes accessible are part of the intellectual content of a work of conceptual art.

Notice, also, that the event of following people in the streets and letting them guide one's actions, unbeknownst to them, can be seen as a metaphor for, e.g., events in which one is subjected to other people's implicit biases, and lets those biases influence one's courses of actions, while the subjects holding the biases remain unaware of this, since their biases are implicit, not evident to them. The imaginative experience of following Acconci's doing his performance, then, not only casts light on how it feels to observe someone following people in the street, but also illuminates how it might feel to testify to experiences that can be

metaphorized through Acconci's performance, such as that of being influenced by other people's implicit biases.

Finally, as Goldie argues, there is knowledge we can gather from the fact that a work like *Following Piece* allows us to go back to the imaginative experience it opens up for us and reflect upon it, when we want. The event we can imagine experiencing while encountering the work's documentation is not one whose only trace is impressed on our memory; on the contrary, it is an event that has been documented by the photographs and texts the artist presented us with, which allow us to come back to it, imaginatively, when it pleases us (provided we can access the work's documentation). As a consequence, we have time to reflect on Acconci's acts of following, imagining their perceptual details and pondering what other situations they might be apt to metaphorize, for instance. The insights we gain by engaging in such activities go beyond the content we can grasp by entertaining the proposition that there are events in which individuals can be influenced by others in their courses of actions, and in which one can happen to influence somebody else even unwittingly.

Let us now look again at Calle's work. I have argued that the installation *Take care of yourself* exemplifies a situation in which a woman shares, with a large number of women professionals, a private event that generated negative emotions, and receives a wide range of insightful comments, thereby conveying the view that negative feelings about private events – and especially *women's* negative feelings about private events – can be the object of acknowledgment, investigation and open exchange of opinions in the public arena. Now, drawing from Schellekens and Goldie, it can be argued that, when we encounter Calle's installation, we don't just become acquainted with the fact that the artist received a variety of insightful responses from the 107 women professionals she contacted, but we are literally surrounded by the abundance and the kaleidoscopic range of the responses: this allows us to observe how a private, negative event, documented by the breakup email, can transition from

dominating one's mind – as it is natural in the case of a sudden breakup, and especially one that happens via email – to becoming an object of multiple analyses, an object that is, itself, dominated by the women professionals consulted by Calle. This is a form of experiential knowledge that we gather from encountering the installation, that we cannot grasp by merely entertaining a proposition concerning the view conveyed by Calle's work in our minds, and that allows us to look deeper into the intellectual contents conveyed by the work: the work also suggests that we can *heal* by sharing private negative experiences and emotions with people who have the means to understand and analyze what happened to us, because the act of sharing the tale of a painful experience allows for us to move to the background that negative event, which formerly dominated the scene of our attention.

Furthermore, following Goldie, it can be argued that *Take care of yourself*, too, is the kind of work that we can come back to in order to reflect upon it and thereby gather further knowledge. The 107 responses by the women professionals are so many that they can hardly be all attentively experienced in one sitting: *Take care of yourself* is a work whose details are better explored through multiple exposures since, in addition to the view about discussing private events in public it conveys via exemplification, it also conveys multifaceted observations about the breakup experience undergone by the artist.

Finally, in this case, too, by encountering the work we gain an experiential knowledge that is specific to the particular installation the work presents us with. As I have claimed, we experience how the reception of the breakup letter can be seen no more as a painful memory dominating the artist's mind, but rather as an event originating a manifold of reactions from the women professionals, to the point that their responses to the letter come to the foreground, while the negative event experienced by the artist is left in the background. Importantly, aspects of the experiential knowledge we gather concern how *specific* replies from particular women professionals, through particular media, frame the *particular* breakup event undergone by

Calle. We wouldn't gather the same experiential knowledge from, say, the replies to a betrayal experience undergone by the artist, expressed via interviews by women professionals.

4. Exemplification and the probatory value of conceptual art

In this section, I would like to claim that there can be a further aspect to the intellectual value of works of conceptual art relying on exemplification: those works can be cognitively valuable thanks to their *probatory value*. Conceptual artworks involving exemplification show, on the one hand, that certain *kinds* of objects and/or events *can* be used to exemplify certain properties and thereby convey certain views, as we have seen in section (2), and, on the other hand, that certain *particular* objects and/or events *can* be used to convey specific forms of experiential knowledge, as we have seen in section (3). In other words, they are *proofs* of the fact that it is possible to convey such views and such experiential contents by means of exhibiting certain (kinds of) objects and/or events that exemplify certain properties. In this respect, works like *Following Piece* and *Take care of yourself* resemble scientific experiments: the best way to demonstrate that something is possible consists not in describing and explaining the possible scenario where it happens, but rather in showing that it actually is the case – for instance, Galileo's view about the acceleration of bodies looks more convincing when it is supported not just by a description and explanation of how it would work, but also by an actual experiment, realized in a vacuum room. A realized experiment enjoys an explanatory efficacy which cannot be compared to a written explanation and which, therefore, allows for an experience that it is worth having, from an intellectual viewpoint, because of its probatory value.

A further dimension of the probatory value of works of conceptual art that rely on exemplification is related to the fact that some of those works are also used to exemplify properties metaphorically. As I have suggested in the previous section, in Acconci's *Following Piece*, for instance, the event of following people in the streets and letting them guide one's

actions, unbeknownst to them, can be seen as a metaphor for, e.g., events in which one is subjected to other people's implicit biases, and lets those biases influence one's courses of actions, while the subjects holding the biases remain unaware of this, since their biases are implicit, not evident to them. *Following Piece*, then, also proves that the property of being an event in which one is subjected to other people's implicit biases etc. etc. *can be metaphorized* by an event exemplifying the property of being an event of following people in the streets and letting them guide one's actions, unbeknownst to them.

To recap, so far, I have shown that works of conceptual art that rely on exemplification convey at least three kinds of intellectual content: they convey certain views, they allow for grasping certain experiential contents, and they prove that certain things can be done in certain ways. When we appreciate one of those works because of the view it conveys and/or because of the experience it affords us, our interest lies in that very view and that very experience. When we appreciate one of those works because it proves that certain views can be conveyed and certain experiences can be aroused by means of an object or event that exemplifies a certain property, as well as because it proves that a certain property can be metaphorized by means of an object or an event that exemplifies *another* property, our interest lies in the fact that the work manifests the activity and the skill of its creator, who was capable of devising and realizing a work that performs those functions (Currie 2018; Grant 2020).

5. Exemplification and the education of emotions

A further dimension of works of conceptual art relying on exemplification to convey content that I would like to explore here is how those works can have an impact on the emotions of their public. In particular, I shall explore the hypothesis that *Following Piece* and *Take care of yourself* can help their public explore certain emotions and reflect upon them.

If we encounter the documentation of *Following Piece* without knowing that the work isn't so much about the people unaware of being followed by Acconci, but rather about Acconci letting those people guide him in his course of actions, we might interpret the performance as an act of stalking and feel uncomfortable for the people the artist followed. However, if, by learning about the work's underlying narrative, we grasp that it presents Acconci, too, as a victim, since he is letting strangers guide his actions and metaphorically stands for people who are conditioned by other people in their courses of actions, even when the latter are not aware of influencing the former, then we can experience also another kind of emotion: namely, we can happen to feel frustrated by the work, noticing not only that it suggests that the social conditioning happens in a way that people don't seem capable to control, but also that we, as viewers of the photographs documenting the performance, find ourselves in Acconci's position, by letting him, and the people he was following, imaginatively guide us through the streets of New York – thereby taking part into the allegory of social conditioning enacted by the performance. As a consequence of engaging in the imaginative perceptual experience of *Following Piece*, then, we can happen to feel certain emotions the work arouses in us. And there is more, I believe. As I have claimed above, *Following Piece* also has probatory value: it shows that it is indeed possible to convey a view about social conditioning, as well as certain (imagined) experiential knowledge, by engaging in a performance with specific features. Here, I would like to suggest that the work is also instrumental to proving something about our emotional realm: by realizing his performance, and having the public experience it imaginatively, as well as paying attention to the property it exemplifies, Acconci also lays down the premises for us to realize that certain kinds of situations – those distinguished by the fact that they saliently present the very property *Following Piece* exemplifies – can arouse in us certain emotions. As a consequence, we learn a lesson about ourselves: we learn that, when put in certain kinds of situations (even if only imaginatively), we can have certain emotional

reactions.⁷ Finally, since, as Goldie observes, we can go back to a work like *Following Piece* and relive the experiences it affords us, then we have an opportunity to get better acquainted with the emotions it arouses in us, and to reflect on how our reactions unfold and what triggers them – which amounts to educating ourselves about our emotional life, the objects of our emotions, and the reasons why we feel certain emotions.

Let us now look one more time at *Take care of yourself*. It can be argued that experiencing Calle's installation and understanding what it exemplifies can arouse in us certain feelings. First, while reading the breakup email received by Calle (which is part of the installation), it is easy to empathize with her, and experience negative feelings such as sadness and anger. Then, when we realize that the breakup email has originated a variety of responses and insights, our attention shifts towards those, and we can happen to empathize with the artist at a different level, this time feeling relieved, because the analyses of the email help us put the breakup event in perspective.⁸ Just like *Following Piece*, *Take care of yourself*, then, is instrumental to proving that we can have certain emotional reactions when faced with certain situations. Finally, Calle's work, too, is an object we can return to in order to scrutinize more carefully the emotions it arouses in us, among other things. It appears, then, that also *Take care of yourself* can be a capable instrument for educating the public's emotions.

⁷ On emotional reactions to fiction see Kendall Walton's (1978) seminal paper, which originated a wide debate.

⁸ This claim is supported by the artist statement accompanying the work: "I received a breaking email. I could not answer. / It was as if it was not intended for me. / It ended with the words: Take care of yourself. / I took this recommendation literally. / I asked one hundred and seven women – one of them feathered and two wooden – chosen for their profession, their talent, to interpret the letter from an angle professional. / Analyze it, comment on it, play it, dance it, sing it. / Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand for me. / Speak for me. / One way to take the time to break up. At my own pace. / Take care of me." (see https://www.artspace.com/sophie_calle/take-care-of-yourself, last access 7 January 2021).

One might observe that *Following Piece*'s and *Take care of yourself*'s capability to arouse certain emotions is not unique to them: it might well be that other situations, artistic and non-artistic alike, are capable of arousing in us the very same emotions aroused by those works and thus provide other occasions for us to educate ourselves about our emotional life. I believe this is correct. My point is not that works like *Following Piece* and *Take care of yourself* provide *unique* occasions for us to experience certain emotions – just like they are not constituted by the *only* particular objects and/or events that can be used to exemplify certain properties and thus conveying certain views. Rather, my goal is to show that apparently inscrutable works such as *Following Piece* and *Take care of yourself*, which, *prima facie*, can hardly be distinguished from ordinary objects, are used by artist to convey various kinds of intellectual contents (conceptual and experiential), about various things (certain views, certain things that can be proved, certain situations, and certain emotions), and thus exhibit a profundity that, at first glance, we might be tempted to deny them. Still, on the one hand, what usually distinguishes works like *Following Piece* and *Take care of yourself* from *non-artistic* objects and/or events capable of arousing the same emotions they arise is the fact that, by being artworks, they invite us to focus on those emotions and to go back to experiencing and investigating them at our will – two activities that we don't standardly engage in when we experience emotions in everyday life. On the other hand, what distinguishes, e.g., *Following Piece* from other *artistic* objects and/or events capable of arousing the same emotions it arises and of making us focus on those very same emotions is the fact that it arises those emotions *in particular circumstances* (by looking at pictures of Acconci following strangers in the street rather than, say, by looking at a film showing Acconci at a restaurant, ordering what others have just ordered, while being ourselves seated at a restaurant and served a plate selected by the chef), which can help us gain insights about, for instance, how specific details of the situation trigger in us those emotional

responses, and about the particular intensity, or lack thereof, of a certain emotional response to a certain situation.

6. Conclusions

I believe there are three main lessons to draw from the analyses put forward in this paper. The first lesson concerns the role of exemplification in art making. Through my analyses, I have shown that, for some artworks, exemplification is the key strategy for communicating with the public. The second and third lessons concern conceptual artworks that rely on exemplification to convey intellectual content. As I have shown, the intellectual contents some of those works are capable of conveying are multifaceted and tightly packed: this is a reason for considering those works interesting and worthy of careful scrutiny. Finally, artworks like the ones I have analyzed here provide an opportunity for the public to explore and reflect on the details of certain experiences and certain emotional reactions: rather than being a sort of machines for the arousal of particular perceptions and emotions, those works invite detached scrutiny of one's experiences on the part of their public. Exemplification is crucial to this. Those works don't merely possess certain properties, but they are used to refer to them: if they merely possessed certain properties, they would be appropriately grasped merely by experiencing the objects and events they consist in, plus whatever emotional reactions those objects and events aroused in us. However, since they exemplify some of their properties, they are appropriately grasped by being conceptualized as things that are used to refer to some of the properties of the objects and the events they consist in. This step allows us to take some distance from the objects and events those works present us with, because it requires us to reflect on them qua conveyors of content. Now, a widely shared view about aesthetic appreciation is the Kantian view that aesthetic appreciation requires some form of detachment from and of practical disinterest in its object (for contemporary endorsements of this view see, e.g., Levinson 1992 and Nanay 2016). Hence,

although I have not provided an argument for claiming that, in addition to inviting intellectual appreciation, works like *Following Piece* and *Take care of yourself* also invite aesthetic appreciation, what I have shown is that those works satisfy what many consider a necessary condition for aesthetic appreciation: that we regard them with detachment. As a consequence, the prospects of investigating whether (some) conceptual artworks that rely on exemplification are appropriately appreciated from an aesthetic viewpoint look attractive, but this is work for another paper.⁹

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