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Conceptual Art (Taylor's Version)  
Sherri Irvin

Let's say you signed your first record contract when you were a teenager. This was your dream, so of course you accepted the terms, which included signing away the rights to your master recordings. This gave the record label the power to license your songs for movies, TV shows, ads, and streaming services. You became a huge star with an incredible career, and you wanted to renegotiate, to buy back the masters and regain artistic control. But the negotiations failed, and you left the label. Then the label was bought by your nemesis, your bully, giving him the power to license your work—and the profits. But there was a loophole: the law allows you, as the songwriter, to produce new recordings. So that's what you did: you recorded new masters, replicating the sound of the originals, and encouraged your fans to abandon the originals and switch to the new versions. It worked: your huge and loyal fan base gravitated to the new records, sought them out on streaming platforms, and shared tips about how to hide the old versions. The new records were huge sellers, topping the charts. Anyone licensing the earlier versions for an ad or movie would risk alienating your fans and mobilizing a campaign of resistance. You won: you wrested back control over your early works and the associated profits.

This is the story of Taylor Swift's ongoing project of re-recording her first six studio albums. I'll use the name *Taylor's Versions* to refer to this project as a whole. At a glance, the project might seem more financial than artistic: it's a copying project designed to put control and profits back in the artist's hands. But I want to explore another way of understanding the project, one that positions it in the tradition of conceptual art. This might seem surprising: conceptual art is often thought of as an arcane and unapproachable art form involving weird or boring objects in museums. But over the decades conceptual art has broadened into a movement that encompasses explorations of institutional power, social hierarchy, and community participation. I'll argue that it is fruitful to think of *Taylor's Versions* as conceptual art, even if Swift herself doesn't see the project directly in those terms. Seen in this light, *Taylor's Versions* has both notable strengths and marked limitations.

**Taylor's Versions as an artistic project**

My primary focus will be less on specific albums, such as *Red (Taylor's Version)*, and more on the *project* of which they are a part: Swift's project of re-recording her early albums and securing the new versions' uptake as replacements for the originals. Understanding the project will require thinking about individual songs and albums and how they relate to the earlier recordings. But looking at *Taylor's Versions* as a unified project will help us identify features of Swift's artistic practice that connect to conceptual art.

As an artistic project, *Taylor's Versions* involves more than just making the recordings. Swift's goal was and is to motivate her fan base, and those who might license her music, to shift away from the earlier versions and toward the new versions. This is far from a given and requires a

specific strategy. After all, there is nothing preventing anyone from continuing to license the originals, which have historical authenticity and popularity on their side. Previous re-recording projects by other artists have often stumbled badly at the uptake stage. After Swift announced her intention to re-record her albums, Tim Ingham of *Rolling Stone* interviewed music industry experts about re-recording, revealing general pessimism. English new wave band Squeeze re-recorded several of their hits to make them available for licensing at lower cost, but songwriter and lead singer Glenn Tilbrook noted, “10 years later, we’ve not had a single uptake.”<sup>1</sup>

Allen Kovac, who manages major acts including Blondie (who re-recorded several hits) and Mötley Crüe, suggests that re-recording projects are rarely successful due to what we might call a loss of flavor:

When you re-record, do you ever capture that same atmosphere? Do you have the same band, the same studio? What is it you’re trying to do—say to your fans, “Don’t listen to the music you already love”? I don’t know fans like that.... If you could show me [one artist for whom] it’s worked out well, I’d say it’s a great idea and everyone should do it; I just haven’t seen any evidence of that.<sup>2</sup>

Kovac notes that proposals to license re-recordings rather than originals to reduce cost are usually rejected for this reason.

Securing uptake requires direct attention, over and above simply making re-recordings. As we will see, the stunning success of *Taylor’s Versions* so far reveals Swift’s creative attention to uptake as a key element.

### **What is conceptual art?**

To get a handle on my claim that *Taylor’s Versions* can fruitfully be seen as a conceptual art project, we need to know what conceptual art is in the first place. Conceptual art has often been framed as art that foregrounds ideas as much as (or more than) sensory structures like pictures or melodies. (Goldie & Schellekens 2010) While conceptual art narrowly construed had its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, its precursors date back to the early twentieth century, and the expression ‘conceptual art’ is now used broadly to refer to works that have a key conceptual element even if they also involve an elaborate sensory experience.

A few examples will provide a sense of the flavor and development of contemporary art. In 1915, Marcel Duchamp took an ordinary snow shovel, painted the words “In advance of the broken arm” on its rim, and hung it from the ceiling of a gallery for display.<sup>3</sup> In 1952, John Cage composed *4’33”*, a work of music that musicians perform by remaining silent.<sup>4</sup> In 1953, Robert

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rollingstone.com/pro/features/taylor-swift-plans-to-re-record-her-hits-heres-what-she-might-be-facing-923019/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rollingstone.com/pro/features/taylor-swift-plans-to-re-record-her-hits-heres-what-she-might-be-facing-923019/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/marcel-duchamp-in-advance-of-the-broken-arm-august-1964-fourth-version-after-lost-original-of-november-1915/](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/marcel-duchamp-in-advance-of-the-broken-arm-august-1964-fourth-version-after-lost-original-of-november-1915/)

<sup>4</sup> [https://johncage.org/pp/John-Cage-Work-Detail.cfm?work\\_ID=17](https://johncage.org/pp/John-Cage-Work-Detail.cfm?work_ID=17)

Rauschenberg acquired a drawing by painter Willem de Kooning and erased it, leaving behind only suggestive smudges, to produce Rauschenberg's work *Erased de Kooning Drawing*.<sup>5</sup>

In 1966, On Kawara began his series *Today*, for which he made thousands of paintings, each simply showing the current date on white against a monochrome background, using the date conventions of the region where he made the painting.<sup>6</sup> In 1969, Robert Barry created *All the Things I Know but of Which I am Not at the Moment Thinking: 1:36 pm; June 15, 1969*. The work is displayed by inscribing the words of its title in pencil on the wall.<sup>7</sup> Many of these early conceptual works exhibited a stripped-down minimalism—it doesn't get much more minimal than silence, after all—along with resistance to the idea of the artist as a fabricator of elaborate objects or melodies.

In the seventies and beyond, conceptual art reintegrated much more sensory richness. It continued to raise questions about the nature of art, the artist's role, and—increasingly—the institutions and power structures in which artists and their works are caught up. From 1973 to 1979, Mary Kelly created *Post-Partum Document*, a massive work that integrated babies' garments, soiled diaper linings, and crayon scribble drawings with tables, diagrams and notes documenting the child's development and the mother's reflections, bringing into the art world a set of topics and concerns that had long been invisible due to women's exclusion from art creation.<sup>8</sup> Starting in the 1980s, Louise Lawler took photographs of artworks by other artists in various settings of preparation, sale, and display: at auction, during museum installation, and in private boardrooms and bedrooms, where they serve decorative or corporate purposes at odds with the ideals touted for high art. (Irvin 2012) In 1985, the Guerilla Girls started their campaign of posters highlighting the fact that women are present in museums primarily in nude depictions rather than as artists.<sup>9</sup>

Elements of interaction or participation have been increasingly prominent in conceptual art of the past few decades. From 1986 to 1990, Adrian Piper created *My Calling (Card) #1*, a series of interactive performances in everyday settings that involved Piper presenting a pre-printed calling card to people who made racist comments in her presence.<sup>10</sup> In her 2010 performance *The Artist Is Present*, Marina Abramović sat for almost three months in a chair at the Museum of Modern Art for all of its opening hours, allowing visitors to sit across from her and gaze into her eyes for as long as they chose.<sup>11</sup>

Art in the broadly conceptual vein, then, can take a wide variety of forms, involving either simple or complex objects and experiences. But a common thread is that it often consists in the artist challenging concepts of art or intervening in the roles, power structures, and social

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.298/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/on-kawara-date-paintings>

<sup>7</sup> <https://brooklynrail.org/2015/03/artseen/robert-barry-all-the-things-i-know-1962-to-present>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.marykellyartist.com/post-partum-document-1973-79>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/projects>

<sup>10</sup> <https://walkerart.org/collections/artworks/my-calling-card-1>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010/](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010/)

practices that govern the creation and circulation of art. In the following sections, we'll see how *Taylor's Versions* exhibits many of the same tendencies as works squarely in the lineage of conceptual art, including the appropriation of structures that already exist into a new work, critique of the institutions and power structures that govern the circulation of art, and an essential element of audience participation.

### **Appropriation**

Conceptual art has often involved appropriation, the artistic practice of incorporating material from other artworks or cultural domains directly into a new work. Duchamp appropriated a snow shovel into *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, Rauschenberg appropriated a drawing by de Kooning into *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, Kelly appropriated diaper linings and babies' garments, and Lawler appropriated the works of other artists by photographing them. Other artists have gone even further with appropriation, making works that are close copies of earlier artworks. Starting in the 1960s, Sturtevant produced close copies of work by artists including Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, using similar techniques and materials. She even borrowed one of Warhol's screens to produce her appropriations of his Marilyn Monroe works.<sup>12</sup> For her 1981 project *After Walker Evans*, Sherrie Levine re-photographed a series of photographic works by famed Depression-era photographer Walker Evans and presented the results as her own works.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, any time you record a song that has been recorded before, you are appropriating a structure from another work into a new context. But since this is part of standard practice in pop music, that's not the act of appropriation that stands out. What stands out is that Swift has appropriated the precise sonic qualities of her earlier recordings, with results that are near simulacra.

Like her predecessors in appropriation art, Swift is not trying to deceive us: in adding "*(Taylor's Version)*" to the titles of her re-recorded albums, she openly acknowledges that these are new versions that she endorses and over which she has a proprietary right. Swift has also, like some appropriation artists before her, added marks that distinguish her new works from the originals, such as the inclusion of new songs and longer versions of original songs as bonus tracks on the *Taylor's Version* albums. Sturtevant, similarly, incorporated an element in each of her works of appropriation to distinguish it visually from the original. (Arning 1989: 46)

The fact that *Taylor's Versions* involves self-appropriation, rather than appropriation of work by others, distinguishes it from most conceptual artworks involving appropriation. But self-appropriation is not unprecedented: for her 1995 work *They Have Always Wanted Me to Do This*, Louise Lawler photographed one of her own earlier photographic works, itself depicting two other artists' works at auction, hanging in a gallery. (Irvin 2012: 80) While Lawler's self-appropriation points wryly toward the prospect of indefinite regress in appropriation, self-appropriation can also be used for political purposes. Justo Serrano Zamora (2017) and

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/sturtevant-moma-retrospective>

<sup>13</sup> See Irvin 2005 for discussion.

Macarena Martín Martínez (2020) use the term 'self-appropriation' to describe the intentional reclaiming, re-deployment, and recontextualization of one's cultural products, and even one's very body. For instance, Martín Martínez describes an example of an Afro-Latina who writes and performs slam poetry to "re-appropriate the agency over her body by moving from a self-imposed invisibility and silence," developed in response to racist and misogynistic self-conceptions foisted upon her under white supremacy, "to a non-objectified visible position" that includes a "self-representative embodied narrative" (2020: 1). Through this act of self-appropriation, she reclaims the ability to define herself and her own experiences.

Swift's act of self-appropriation, somewhat like those Serrano Zamora and Martín Martínez describe, involves resistance to hierarchical power structures. As a woman artist in a male-dominated industry, Swift is caught up in and responding to relations of domination. The fact that Swift, as a teenager and emerging artist, had no leverage to resist signing away the rights to her master recordings is a symptom of systemic music industry exploitation. Swift has sometimes been dismissed as writing about trivialities, in line with the longstanding dismissal of the concerns of women and girls as merely private and not of broader intellectual or artistic interest—the same situation Mary Kelly was responding to with *Postpartum Document*. By reappropriating her own earlier cultural productions, Swift reasserts the value and importance of her teenage concerns and artistic production from her new position as an influential cultural figure who brings years of additional life experience to bear.

The fact that Swift is not simply replicating, but also evaluating and endorsing, her earlier work is indicated, somewhat ironically, by her choice to change a lyric in *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)*. In the song "Better Than Revenge," the slut-shaming lyric "She's better known for the things that she does / On the mattress" is replaced by "He was a moth to the flame / She was holding the matches." Not everyone approves of the change: Larisha Paul, for instance, argues that it would be better for the historical record of Swift's gradual path toward intersectional feminism, and missteps along the way, to remain intact.<sup>14</sup> But by making the change, Swift signals that the appropriation of original songs in *Taylor's Versions* is not simply a rote copying exercise: Swift is critically evaluating the original works along the way, and where no changes are made this signals her current endorsement.

### **Institutional critique**

Swift is using a loophole to do something few artists have previously done, and none with the same degree of comprehensiveness and success: re-record and release her earlier works in a way that undermines an entrenched system of corporate property rights, restoring the artist's ability to control and profit from their own artistic production. In this way, *Taylor's Versions* challenges power dynamics in the music industry. This positions the project in relation to another movement in conceptual art: institutional critique, which highlights the arbitrary and oppressive role of art institutions in restricting the production, distribution, and valuing of artworks.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/better-than-revenge-taylor-swift-speak-now-taylors-version-problematic-song-recording-1234732910/>

Conceptual art has sometimes been very pointed in highlighting exploitative artworld practices. In 1987, James Luna (Luiseño, Puyukitchum, Ipai, and Mexican) first presented *Artifact Piece*, a work involving two vitrines, one containing Luna's personal belongings such as photos and his college diploma and the other containing a bed of sand on which Luna sometimes lay, wearing a loincloth.<sup>15</sup> *Artifact Piece* skewers museum practices of including Native Americans only as historical objects of study (which has often involved disrespectfully displaying human remains as artifacts for viewing) and not taking them seriously as artists and active members of living contemporary cultures.

For his groundbreaking 1992 work *Mining the Museum*, Fred Wilson appropriated and displayed works from the collection of the Maryland Historical Society in ways that revealed the violent underpinnings of the collection and the society it represented. In one room, Wilson juxtaposed honorific busts of Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, and Napoleon Bonaparte, all on elaborate pedestals, with three empty pedestals labeled with the names of Benjamin Banneker, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman.<sup>16</sup> The former group are white men, none with a special connection to Maryland, two of whom owned slaves and the other of whom reversed the French abolition of slavery. The latter group are all prominent Black Marylanders who fought for Black liberation yet are not honored with a bust in the museum's collection. Elsewhere, in a display titled "Metalwork," Wilson juxtaposed elaborate silver serving pieces with slave shackles, underscoring the vicious economy that made it possible for whites to enjoy drinking from silver goblets.<sup>17</sup>

Sometimes conceptual artists intervene directly in institutional practices of acquiring and displaying art. Through his performative artworks, Tino Sehgal has interrupted museums' standard ways of doing business. His 2002 work *This is propaganda*, acquired by Tate, requires the museum to train a performer dressed as a museum guard to sing a certain song each time a visitor enters the gallery where the work is displayed.<sup>18</sup> Normally, on acquisition of such a work the museum would do extensive video, photographic, and written documentation to ensure continuity and accuracy of the performance standards over time. But Sehgal forbade the museum from creating an official record. He trained the museum staff directly on the performance requirements, and while staff members are allowed to make notes for their own use, these notes cannot be shared or integrated into an official file. (Saaze 2015) On acquiring the work, then, Tate committed itself to an ongoing practice of oral transmission if the work is not to be lost. Through these processes, Sehgal throws into question the standard museum processes of pinning a work down through an elaborate bureaucracy rather than treating artworks as dynamic, evolving entities within social practices.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nga.gov/press/acquisitions/2022/luna.html>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.mdhistory.org/resources/mining-the-museum-pedestals-globe-and-busts/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.mdhistory.org/resources/mining-the-museum-metalwork-1793-1880/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sehgal-this-is-propaganda-t12057>

With *Taylor's Versions*, Swift is deploying an available but rarely exercised artistic prerogative to disrupt standard music industry practices and economic structures. Normally, the label that owns the master recordings retains the ability to control and profit from the artist's work as presented on those recordings; an artist unable to negotiate for their masters simply moves on to produce new work, though they might occasionally record new (and clearly sonically different) versions of earlier songs. Re-recording that aims to reproduce the sonic qualities of earlier recordings has been uncommon. Decades ago, artists including Chuck Berry and the Everly Brothers re-recorded their hits when they changed labels, allowing the new labels to release greatest hits albums. But as David Browne describes in *Rolling Stone*, "those redos amounted to often bloodless collections that only satisfied their new bosses."<sup>19</sup> More recently, Def Leppard went to great lengths to produce faithful re-recordings of several hits in a dispute with their label, referring to the new recordings as "forgeries" of the originals. But their ability to profit from the new recordings was abetted by contractual terms different from those available to Swift: as Def Leppard's Joe Elliott put it, "Our contract is such that [the label] can't do anything with our music without our permission, not a thing.... So we just sent them a letter saying, 'No matter what you want, you are going to get "no" as an answer, so don't ask.'"<sup>20</sup>

Swift has gone against custom and beyond precedent by producing faithful re-recordings of multiple albums and working to deprive the label of the ability to exercise rights it still holds. As her statements about the project have made clear, she is doing so in response to the exploitative tendencies of the standard arrangements as well as to the gendered power structure that tends to leave men with creative control over—and an outsized share of profit from—women's artistic production.

In her discussion of the motivation for producing *Taylor's Versions*, Swift directly invokes concerns about power and domination. The initial impetus for *Taylor's Versions* was the fact that the label owning her masters was purchased by Scooter Braun, whom Swift has accused of years of "incessant, manipulative bullying," including involvement with client Kanye West during the production of a video that Swift characterizes as revenge porn, showing Swift nude in bed with West.<sup>21</sup> In the CBS interview where she first clearly announced her intention to re-record her albums, Swift gives a chilling account of the stakes of men's nonconsensual sexualization of a woman artist:

Swift: Since all my addresses are on the internet, people tend to show up uninvited. Like, you know, dudes that think we have an imaginary marriage.

CBS correspondent Tracy Smith: And you mentioned that you keep wound dressing with you?

Swift: Yeah. I've had a lot of stalkers show up to the house, armed. So, we have to think that way.

Swift also notes a gendered double standard for evaluating artists' business choices: "There's a different vocabulary for men and women in the music industry.... A man does something, it's

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/album-remakes-u2-taylor-swift-1234660335/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/def-leppard-re-recording-forgeries-of-old-hits-247079/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://taylorswift.tumblr.com/post/185958366550/for-years-i-asked-pleaded-for-a-chance-to-own-my>

‘strategic’; a woman does the same thing, it’s ‘calculated.’ A man is allowed to ‘react’; a woman can only ‘over-react.’”<sup>22</sup>

By painstakingly re-recording her early albums and (as we will see in the next section) creatively deploying her fan base, Swift has depleted much of the economic value of her early masters and regained creative control, thereby shifting the balance of power back to herself while also drawing attention to gendered power structures and the tendency of standard industry practices to exploit the vulnerability of early-career artists. In a social media post about her re-recording plans, Swift expresses her hope that “young artists or kids with musical dreams will read this and learn about how to better protect themselves in a negotiation. You deserve to own the art you make.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Participation**

While institutional critique had its heyday between the 1960s and 1980s, Swift updates her critique for the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a third hallmark of conceptual art: a participatory element, namely the creative deployment of her large and dedicated fan base. Because the original albums were wildly popular and Swift had no power to quash them, mobilizing her fans to abandon the much-loved originals and shift to Taylor’s Versions is essential to the project’s success.

Over the past several decades, artists have increasingly provided opportunities for audiences to interact with or participate in art. (Irvin 2022, ch. 4) In the 1960s, Brazilian artist Lygia Clark created a variety of sculptural works that audience members could manipulate, play with, reshape, and even wear. This allowed for different kinds of experiences than are available simply through looking or listening, both by engaging more senses (including touch, hearing, and smell) and by giving the audience the opportunity to interact with objects that sometimes seemed to have a mind of their own. Of her *Bichos* (critters), hinged sheet metal sculptures that audiences were invited to reconfigure, she said,

Each *Bicho* is an organic entity that fully reveals itself within its inner time of expression....

It is a living organism, a work essentially active. A full integration, existential, is established between it and us.

There is no room for passivity in the relationship that is established between the *Bichos* and us, neither from them nor from us.

What happens is a body-to-body between two living entities.<sup>24</sup>

Audience accounts confirm that interacting with the *Bichos* is an experience of one’s own agency confronting another agency, rather than simply manipulating a passive object. (Irvin 2022, 210)

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/taylor-swift-on-lover-and-haters/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://taylorswift.tumblr.com/post/185958366550/for-years-i-asked-pleaded-for-a-chance-to-own-my>

<sup>24</sup> Artist’s statement translated by Licia R. Olivetti and reprinted in Butler and Pérez-Oramas 2014, 160.



Audience members have sometimes been invited to affirm commitments or engage in transactions. Adrian Piper's *The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1-3* (2013-2017) gives viewers the opportunity to affirm three statements:

I will always mean what I say.

I will always do what I say I am going to do.

I will always be too expensive to buy.<sup>25</sup>

Each statement has its own desk where the participant can commit to the statement by signing a contract. Those who sign are added to a registry that all other signatories have access to, making for a degree of joint accountability. Piper's work invites audiences to reflect on their own integrity and raises questions about the relationship of art contexts to real-life contexts: does signing the contract as part of an art experience actually mean anything, or is it more like reading lines in a play?

Other artistic projects have moved audience participation out of the primarily artistic context and explored new modes of social and economic organization. Fran Ilich's *Spacebank*, beginning in 2005, allowed participants to invest in a virtual currency to micro-finance art and community projects. (Thomson 2012, 172) With his *Edible Estates*, also starting in 2005, Fritz Haeg has worked with families and communities to create community gardens that enrich outdoor space and provide edible produce.<sup>26</sup> The gardens shed light on what is lost when lawns are the prevailing landscape: opportunities for sensory richness, meaningful creative activity, engagement with nature and community, and nourishment. Mammalian Diving Reflex, with their work *Haircuts by Children* (2006-), organizes children to run a hair salon and invites brave passersby for haircuts.<sup>27</sup> While lighthearted, the work explores the tendency to see children as unfit for serious responsibilities—though they often embrace such responsibilities when offered—as well as the sense of risk and vulnerability inherent in giving up control over a prominent aspect of our bodily appearance, even when the change is temporary. With their 2004 work *Guaraná Power*, SUPERFLEX collaborated with Brazilian farmers who grow guaraná to create and market a new guaraná drink to compete with those marketed by a global monopoly that had undermined the farmers' livelihood by drastically driving down the price of the crop.<sup>28</sup> SUPERFLEX expanded their support for guaraná production with their 2007 work *Free Beer* by creating a free, open-source recipe for a beer with added guaraná and colorful branding materials, publishing these elements under a Creative Commons license so anyone can use them. *Free Beer* has been produced by brewers around the world.<sup>29</sup> SUPERFLEX “describe[s] their projects as tools for spectators to actively participate in the development of experimental models that alter the prevailing model of economic production.” (Thomson 2012, 226)

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.smb.museum/en/exhibitions/detail/adrian-piper-the-probable-trust-registry-the-rules-of-the-game-1-3/>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.fritzhaeg.com/garden/initiatives/edibleestates/main.html>

<sup>27</sup> <https://mammalian.ca/projects/haircuts-by-children/>

<sup>28</sup> [https://superflex.net/works/guarana\\_power](https://superflex.net/works/guarana_power)

<sup>29</sup> <https://freebeer.org/blog/>

Participatory projects don't always bear clear hallmarks of art—while Haeg's *Edible Estates* are sometimes commissioned by art museums and are often accompanied by a more traditional art exhibition, the garden itself need not be understood as an artwork by everyone who participates in creating and maintaining it. Likewise for *Spacebank*, *Haircuts by Children*, *Guaraná Power*, and *Free Beer*: what marks these projects as art is the fact that an established artist or art collective pursues them as an avowed part of an artistic practice, placing them in the lineage of participatory conceptual art.

While the re-recording portion of *Taylor's Versions* was completed exclusively by Swift and a team of music professionals, the uptake portion, which was essential to Swift's aim of regaining control over her work, required active participation by the audience, rather as the success of *Free Beer* required uptake from brewers to produce and market the guaraná beer. Moreover, while many of these conceptual art projects invite people to do something fun or undertake a new experience, Swift is asking fans to give up something that matters to them. As Katie Goh puts it, *Taylor's Versions* "asks a tough task of her fans: to renegotiate their love for original recordings that Swift says are now toxic."<sup>30</sup> Fans clearly recognize this as a loss. After the 2021 release of the first re-recording, *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, Goh observed,

Something is missing for me on the re-recordings of the most juvenile-in-theme songs: Swift's near-yelp on Fifteen's climax—"we both cried"—has been smoothed out and she's no longer straining with frantic desperation on You Belong With Me's choruses. These might be objectively better vocal performances, but the unpolished inflections of the original songs have become a sense memory. I hear them and I see my younger self sitting on the bus clutching a blue iPod nano....<sup>31</sup>

Another fan Goh spoke to finds that the song "Change," originally recorded in 2008, lost its historical connection to "youthful optimism" about the impending Obama presidency when it was re-recorded years later, partly due to "Swift's more mature vocals." "It's the one song from *Fearless* (2008) that she'll still listen to, but on CD, not via the Braun-benefitting streaming services."<sup>32</sup>

Swift has used a variety of strategies to mobilize her fan base and overcome sources of resistance. She has built enthusiasm for each release by dropping Easter eggs on social media, prompting speculation about which album will come next. She has seeded the albums with new material: extended versions of original songs as well as first-time releases. And the subtle differences between the originals and the faithful re-recordings have led to a focused intensity in fan reception as listeners notice and remark on changes in intonation, breath, and vocal timbre. Even where a change was experienced as a loss, this attracted listeners to attend carefully and engage in public discourse. Olivia Novato observes:

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/apr/15/i-made-my-peace-fans-divided-over-taylor-swifts-re-recording-project>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/apr/15/i-made-my-peace-fans-divided-over-taylor-swifts-re-recording-project>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/apr/15/i-made-my-peace-fans-divided-over-taylor-swifts-re-recording-project>

Following the release [of *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)*], superfans were quick to note the absence of *the* shaky breath in "Long Live," specifically after the line "And I never planned on you changing your mind." Memes mourning the loss of the shaky breath started popping up around social media moments after the release as fans expressed their sadness about the updated, *sans*-breath recording. R.I.P.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, using creative strategies to attract fans to your new work is commonplace in the music industry. Swift also used strategies to mobilize them *against* the originals. Crucial to this effort is Swift's self-presentation as a victim of misogynistic bullying and music industry exploitation, and as a champion of better opportunities for emerging artists in the future. Joe Coscarelli notes,

You could teach an entire marketing class around the way she's made an esoteric fight among multimillionaires feel intimate and important, demystifying arcane contract minutiae and setting up the decision to stream "Taylor's Version" over the original like an ethical choice.<sup>34</sup>

Ben Sisario summarizes the participatory element in observing that *Taylor's Versions* reveals one of Swift's "key skills: her effortless mastery of connecting with (and leveraging) her audience.... It's hard to imagine any other star engaging in an act of business retribution while also making it seem so joyful and so participatory for her fans."<sup>35</sup> Swift has enlisted her fans in a form of collective activity they understand as activism in pursuit of an ethically and politically desirable goal.

### **Conceptual Art (Taylor's Version)**

I've pointed out that *Taylor's Versions* exhibits three hallmarks of conceptual art: appropriation, institutional critique, and audience participation. Does this make the project a work of conceptual art? I will offer some considerations that point toward a positive answer. I'll also consider some virtues as well as some shortcomings of *Taylor's Versions* viewed from this perspective.

Philosopher Kendall Walton (1970) discusses the fact that placing an artwork in a relevant artistic category, such as conceptual art, affects how we appreciate it. He also notes that some category assignments are correct or appropriate, while others are incorrect: *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* is not an opera or a collection of poetry. Walton identifies four considerations that help to determine category assignment:

- (1) The work has many of the qualities that are standard for works in the category.
- (2) The work "is better, or more interesting or pleasing aesthetically, or more worth experiencing" when seen in relation to the category "than it is when perceived in alternate ways."

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<sup>33</sup> <https://crfashionbook.com/heres-what-has-changed-in-speak-now-taylors-version/>. Emphasis in original. A meme linked in the article can be found here: <https://twitter.com/swifferwins/status/1677181791105437697>.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/09/arts/music/taylor-swift-fearless-taylors-version.html>.

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/09/arts/music/taylor-swift-fearless-taylors-version.html>.

- (3) The artist “intended or expected” the work to be seen in relation to the category, or “thought of it as” a member of the category.
- (4) The category “is well established in and recognized by the society in which” the work was made. (Walton 1970: 357)

Walton notes that the considerations sometimes diverge; but an appropriate category assignment must always involve either (3) or (4), since these are the considerations that give the category historical relevance in relation to the context of the work’s making.

We can acknowledge immediately that there is no reason to think Swift intends or expects *Taylor’s Versions* to be seen as a conceptual art project. However, conceptual art is historically well established as a category in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century US (4), and I’ve noted that *Taylor’s Versions* has several hallmarks of conceptual art (1). So let’s focus on consideration (2). I suggest that *Taylor’s Versions* has notable merits when seen as a conceptual art project, and seeing it this way directs our attention to features we might otherwise have glossed over.

Thinking of *Taylor’s Versions* as a project of appropriation brings into relief three compelling achievements. First, as we’ve seen, *Taylor’s Versions* has prompted very close listening that is aimed at comparing and contrasting the new recording with an earlier version—and, specifically, with that earlier version as remembered rather than as listened to, since fans are encouraged to stop engaging with the earlier recordings. Popular music is sometimes dismissed as a shallow form that does not encourage or reward deep listening, but the response to *Taylor’s Versions* demonstrates that fans are carefully assessing specific sonic qualities and their impact. Second, their appropriative nature imbues *Taylor’s Versions* with a distinctive aesthetic quality: the uncanny. As Joe Coscarelli describes it:

The original “Fearless” is one of those albums that I’ve never stopped listening to, and so I know every breath, pluck and hiccup by heart, and I anticipate the exact sounds to come split-seconds before they happen. But the rerecordings are as if someone came into my room and replaced all the dinged-up furniture I’ve had forever with spotless versions.<sup>36</sup>

New recordings of the same songs that did not strive to replicate their sonic qualities, and thus engaged not in sonic appropriation but in the far more common practice of recording new and different versions of earlier hits, would not have this uncanny quality.

Third, by prompting close comparison of quasi-simulacra produced in different contexts, *Taylor’s Versions* highlights the role of context and authorship in determining the aesthetic quality and impact of a work. “Change” doesn’t function the same way when re-recorded long after the context of the Obama presidency. And “a woman in her early 30s getting in the head space of her 18-year-old self to sing about the awkwardnesses of her 15-year-old self,” as Jon Caramanica puts it, is very different from the 18-year-old woman singing those songs in the first place from the vantage of only a couple of years of reflection and maturity.<sup>37</sup> Joe Coscarelli observes that

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/09/arts/music/taylor-swift-fearless-taylors-version.html>.

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/09/arts/music/taylor-swift-fearless-taylors-version.html>.

the meta-quality and knowingness of hearing her now, at 31, sing lines like “in your life you’ll do things greater than dating the boy on the football team” or “I didn’t know who I was supposed to be at 15” can’t help but feel more winking than gutting, as they originally played.<sup>38</sup>

When we simply hear a song as performed by a particular person at a given moment, it can be difficult to know what role the person’s age, status or life experience is playing in our response. Hearing two recordings with very similar sonic qualities performed by an artist at two different life stages reveals how entwined our response to the music is with our understanding of the artist. These reflections on authorship and context are in line with those prompted by well-known projects of appropriation art like those of Sherrie Levine and Sturtevant. (Irvin 2005)

I suggest that the participatory element of *Taylor’s Versions*, too, is a notable original achievement. While attracting fans to your new work is a standard business or marketing project, motivating them to abandon original recordings that they are profoundly attached to and know breath-by-breath is much more original. With some initial prompting from Swift, this was taken up as a collective project by fans who cultivated a shared sense of moral duty to renounce the earlier recordings. The collective aspect of the project involved fans sharing strategies to avoid accidentally streaming the originals while also creating a sort of mutual accountability to resist temptation to listen to the originals, being prepared instead to engage in public discourse about the re-recordings.

The institutional critique aspect of the project is, in my view, the weakest. Positioning the work as a critique of music industry hierarchies and gendered relations of domination was key to Swift’s participatory strategy. However, as legal theorist Anjali Vats (2023) notes, Swift’s project appropriates and builds not only on her own earlier recordings, but also on a long history of strategies by artists of color to reclaim rights to their music in contexts of racialized and gendered domination.

While the teenaged Swift freely entered into a contract whose standard terms allowed her to amass extraordinary fame and wealth, many songwriters and recording artists of color experienced extreme forms of racialized financial exploitation that left them in poverty despite writing or recording transformative hits. As Vats discusses, Black artists, many of them women, have been active and creative in resisting this exploitation. In 1921 Juanita Stinnette Chappelle made the “revolutionary move” of becoming the first Black woman to hold an ownership stake in a record label. She thereby “claimed ownership of her master recordings through the co-ownership of her business” and paved the way for other women to own or co-own labels. (Vats 2023: 558) Dionne Warwick, too, used ownership of a record label as part of a strategy to increase her financial leverage and regain control over her master recordings in the wake of what she referred to as a “slave contract” with a label owned by a white woman. (Vats 2023: 559) Moreover, Prince preceded Swift in what we might plausibly regard as a conceptual art project when he renamed himself as a symbol in an intellectual property struggle against Warner Brothers. (Vats 2023: 561) Swift doesn’t acknowledge the historical precedent provided

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/09/arts/music/taylor-swift-fearless-taylors-version.html>.

by the long struggle of earlier artists against conditions that were often far more exploitative; nor does she openly recognize their role in allowing her to secure more favorable terms even as a teenaged newcomer.

Moreover, as Vats argues, Swift's whiteness is part of the landscape that allows her to present herself in an uncomplicated way as a victim of exploitation. Black women do not benefit from the presumption of innocence and discourse of protection that surround white womanhood. While white women certainly experience gendered harassment and violence, they are more likely than Black women in similar circumstances to be recognized as victims and to benefit from efforts at redress, and less likely to be blamed for the surrounding circumstances. Swift can arouse her fans' ire about Kanye West's so-called "revenge porn" video in part because, as a white woman, she is not presumed to be hypersexual and may be seen as needing protection from West, given the historical positioning of Black men as sexual aggressors against white women. Though Scooter Braun, who Swift identifies as her bully, is white, the Blackness of West, his client, may be implicitly heightening the perception of Braun's culpability.

As we noted earlier, powerful acts of institutional critique have been mounted by artists like James Luna and Fred Wilson who belong to groups overwhelmingly disenfranchised and excluded in art contexts. Self-appropriation, as we saw in discussions by Martín Martínez and Serrano Zamora, has been used by people of color to resist racialized and gendered exploitation. And Black women in the music industry have used creative business strategies to reclaim power, recognition, and profit in the face of severely inequitable treatment. For Swift—whose net worth was \$360 million in 2019,<sup>39</sup> when she declared the intention to re-record—to use self-appropriation and institutional critique to mobilize an intensive rescue effort might be seen as a form of audacity, or indeed caucacity.<sup>40</sup> But it would be hard to deny the strategy's success: she is reportedly now a billionaire.<sup>41</sup>

Swift is clearly a master of self-appropriation, as she cultivates a persona that motivates intense and lucrative loyalty from her fans. The victim persona that underpins her institutional critique is the extension of the underdog persona she continues to manifest in her music, including through such new hits as "Anti-Hero" (2022), where she sings, "It's me, hi, I'm the problem, it's me / At tea time, everybody agrees."<sup>42</sup> Her ongoing construction of a vulnerable, relatable girl-next-door persona—periodically engaged in acts of revenge as satisfying as they are petty—is perhaps its own conceptual achievement.

Taylor Swift is a highly successful popular music artist, and the *Taylor's Version* albums belong first and foremost to the category of pop music. To declare that *Taylor's Versions* is a clear exemplar of conceptual art would outstrip the evidence. But considering the project in relation to the conceptual art category helps both to shed light on distinctive aspects of its aesthetic

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/profile/taylor-swift/>.

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/caucacity/>.

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2023-taylor-swift-net-worth-billionaire/>.

<sup>42</sup> I'm grateful to Jeremy Fried for this observation.

innovation and success—especially in the domains of appropriation and participation—and to reveal that when it comes to Swift’s avowed intention of institutional critique, commercial success may have occurred at the expense of greater integrity and attention to historical precursors. Perhaps a convergence of popular and academic discourse about *Taylor’s Versions* will raise awareness of the pathbreaking work of Black feminists and other artists of color striving for intersectional liberation on both gender and racial fronts.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> I’m grateful to Cheryl Frazier, Jeremy Fried, Stephanie Holt, and Babak Khoshroo for helpful feedback on an earlier version.

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