

PART 1

Introduction



Could a work of art be nothing? Could it be everything? Could a single artwork *alternate* between being nothing and being everything? Could the same work be nothing, and everything, and something other than nothing and everything? Could the *same* work of art be nothing *and* something, individually and wholly, and so non-compositionally, at the same time? If, as I maintain, every artwork must have an identity, and it must be possible to understand any artistic identity intended, could the ‘zero point’ of art be pushed to such an extreme that a work is understood to be something that one cannot understand? Intriguingly, and provocatively, I think that the answer to each of these questions is yes. The first work of the *Haecceties* series—*Haeccesity 1.0.0*—provides the reply to the first five questions, by putting just three words in a certain configuration that engages understanding and agency in the determination of different entities. And the last work of the series—*Haeccesity 12.0.0*—illustrates how the sixth query can be answered artistically and philosophically by using language, choice, and consciousness as artistic ‘media,’ or as means by which the identity of the artwork is determined. In addition to seeing how artistic responses can be provided to these and other important questions, many other kinds of challenging and exploratory work will be seen that lie between the boundaries established by the first and last work of the series of works from which this book takes its title. In addition, things will be identified and examined on which works of art that address these issues philosophically depend. And other kinds of question and answer, and different problems and solutions, will be seen that come up in relation to many of the more ultimately ‘reductive’ artworks at the extremes of radical identity that it is possible to produce.

Asking if a work of art could be nothing, as the logical terminus of artistic abstraction, is a query that is at least implicit in the late great paintings of Turner, in which ordinarily visible boundaries between figures and grounds dissolve into areas of imprecision that beautifully blur the interface of positive and negative space, and that would, were they extended, turn discernible figuration into the expansive emptiness of an undelineated background. Asking if a work of art can be everything is asking if the maximum thing that consists of all things of every kind of thing—including the universe or multiverse—could be a work of art. This is one of the ends towards which certain works of the last 150 years or so have been progressing, by pushing beyond the frame, and integrating life and art, as Braque and Picasso began to do with the invention of collage, as Schwitters did with his *Merzbildern*, as Arman did with *Le Plein*, as Chris Burden did with *Samson*, and as Alan Kaprow and others did with works of Performance art.¹ And asking either if a work of art could alternate

1 The works named, and others like them, may suggest the dissolution of boundaries between art and life, or between art and everything else. However, philosophy seen below establishes

between being nothing and everything, or if it could be understood to be both everything and nothing simultaneously, is to ask about possibilities of radical artistic identity foreshadowed in Analytic Cubism, and continued, in different ways, by some works of Dadaism, Surrealism, Conceptual art, Installation art, and Performance art. In what follows, I name a number of particular artworks in relation to which the questions of the first paragraph of this introduction can be thought to arise. These works are by no means the only works to have relevance to these questions, nor should any work cited be thought to be only of interest and value in regard to those considerations.²

In 1915 Kazimir Malevich painted *Black Square*, and three years later *Suprematist Composition: White on White*. By eliminating color, replacing standard figuration with common geometry, and dispensing with reference to anything but itself as a painted artifact, Malevich thought that he had reached the “zero degree” of painting. In his black paintings of the 1960s, Ad Reinhardt explored the use of gradations of black that were so subtle that their detection became a perceptual exercise for the viewer, and thus implicated the percipient in the realization of the final form of the painting as something seen. Robert Rauschenberg painted a number of *White Paintings* in 1951 that, in their brilliant starkness, were meant to be means of registering shadows and the changing light of the space in which they were exhibited. Hence they extend beyond their surfaces into the rooms in which they are displayed, and are amplified by the diffuse and changing contents of their surroundings, thus pushing them outwards towards a larger reality. In 1965, Joseph Kosuth eliminated opacity and any internal differentiation intrinsic to the surface and material of the work itself in his *Any Five-Foot Sheet of Glass to Lean Against Any Wall*. This work reflected things and persons in its environment even more obviously than did Rauschenberg’s white paintings, and so could be thought more to mimic, in visual form, John Cage’s work of ‘silent sound’ called *4’ and 33”*, that yet was influenced by Rauschenberg.

Prior to all of the works mentioned, Marcel Duchamp produced *Bottle Rack* in 1914 merely by selecting a preexistent artifact and exhibiting it as his work of art. By giving the artwork the title of the name of the thing that it is, Duchamp made the conceptual boundary of the work coincide precisely with the concept of the object as a utilitarian entity, even as he effected a categorical distinction

that not all boundaries between things can be eradicated, and that art cannot disappear into life, or into non-art, without the disappearance of art.

- 2 I am not asserting that there is a single way or a best way to produce or think about works of abstract art. For various approaches to abstract art that differ from the interests and methods of the work that this book concerns, see Crowther, Paul and Wünsche, Isabel (eds.) *Meanings of Abstract Art: Between Nature and Theory*, London: Routledge (2012).

between the work of art and its material base as a quotidian object. Duchamp eliminated the customary requirement of creating a work of art through conventional means of production, made the look of the thing inconsequential to its being a work of art, and replaced perception with conception as the thing of importance—conception that is more abstract for being something that cannot be seen, but only understood. Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, Yves Klein's *The Void*, and Robert Barry's *Closed Gallery* are works indebted to Duchamp that are themselves important reductive works of radical identity. As such, they are works that can be understood to raise the issue of how far it is possible to go in linking conception to the minimization and alteration of perception, as both perception and conception, and their interaction, have a bearing on the determination and apprehension of artistic identity.

At 1:36 PM on June 15, 1969, Robert Barry wrote ALL THE THINGS I KNOW, BUT OF WHICH I AM NOT AT THE MOMENT THINKING, and appended the date and time to the capitalized language. Since the work is what is singled out by the language, and the language conceptually delineates a class of epistemological entities that we can only guess at—and of which even the artist himself was unaware at that moment—we cannot be aware *of* the work, but can only be aware *that* the work is what is referred to by the language at that point in Barry's history of awareness. Even if that is not what Barry meant—and I can see no greater significance for the work—I now produce a work, seen in Illustration 1.1 below, that is meant to single out or specify all the things you know but of which you are not at the moment thinking, and title it *Homage to Barry*.

all the things you know but of which you are not at the moment thinking

Homage to Barry, 2015

ILLUSTRATION 1.1

Victor Burgin's language-based works, such as the one that is partially reproduced in the second illustration to follow, are also important to the subject matter of this book.

1

All Substantial Things Which Constitute This Room

2

All The Duration Of 1

3

The Present Moment And Only The Present Moment

4

All Appearances Of 1 Directly Experienced By You At 3

5

All Of Your Recollection At 3 Of Appearances Of 1 Directly Experienced By You At Any Moment Previous To 3³*Idea Structures Project, 1970. (detail) Victor Burgin*

ILLUSTRATION 1.2

In different ways, each of the works cited can be understood to raise the issue of radical reduction in art as they take different approaches to artistic Abstraction, and as they simultaneously illustrate different possibilities of radical artistic identity. Now the question is: Is it possible to produce novel works of imperceptible art that are even more radically reductive and challenging than those cited, and perhaps *Homage to Barry* in particular? If so, what would they presuppose, or on what would they have to be based? Philosophically, this is equivalent to asking what the minimum conditions of making and apprehending works of art are.

Perhaps it is worth noting that the identity of *Homage to Barry* is more radical than Barry's own *all the things I know . . .* in being identified equally with the number of classes of entities that are known, but not being thought of, that are indexed to the number of present acts of comprehending the language that specifies that identity. That is, two or more people could read and understand the language at the same time, and as each person has a different set of things that she knows of which she is not then thinking, the language singles out different things at the same time. And yet these are things that are then equally the work in equally answering to the language understood. This differs substantially from Barry's unchanging work that is indexed to a single person at a single time. In addition, the *Homage* never consists of the same things from one moment to the next, even relative to the same person. This is the case since the fund of things known is always increasing, or at least changing, and

3 The language is reproduced in the manner in which it appears in Burgin's work, which includes another 13 sections of language. See Lippard, Lucy, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, 2nd ed. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press (1997), pp. 171–172.

the things that a person knows that she is not thinking of at any particular time is very likely not to be the same at different times. In addition, what the person attending to the language of the *Homage* knows will include any knowledge of having comprehended that language in the past. Accordingly, the work would include a person's knowledge of having earlier engaged with that language if the person now comprehending the language is not thinking of that when she again comprehends the language in the present. Although *Homage to Barry* is more radical than *all the things I know . . .*, it is not as radical as most of the works that will be seen and considered in this book.

In *Subjects and Objects: Art, Essentialism, and Abstraction*, I attempted to articulate both what is required to produce a work of art, and what is required for a subject to understand the intended identification of an artwork with an object, including, in each case, any of the more Abstract artworks that are possible to produce.⁴ Accordingly, a primary purpose of that work was to provide the philosophical groundwork of the question of the limits of Abstraction in art, since those things that are essential both to effecting the identification of an artwork with an object, and to apprehending that intended identification, are things with which even the most Abstract artwork cannot dispense.⁵ To the extent to which these indispensable things can figure in the production of an object that an artwork is meant to be, or can figure in the identification of an artwork with some object, then they can be understood to be the fundamental 'material' of a creative investigation of the limits of Abstraction—an investigation that can be understood to be Essentialist in using only such fundamental material in the determination of its works.

4 Strayer, Jeffrey *Subjects and Objects: Art, Essentialism, and Abstraction*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill (2007). This work should be consulted by anyone who is interested in the conceptual groundwork that underlies the creative determination of the limits of Abstraction and the possibilities of radical identity in art.

5 The terms 'Abstract' and 'Abstraction' are capitalized here, as they were in *Subjects and Objects*, to distinguish them from the use of 'abstract' and 'abstraction' as they occur in philosophy, art history, art criticism, and conventional commerce. Abstract artworks of the *Haecceities* series—the works that are the subject of this work—are Essentially Abstract in ways that will be seen and considered in the course of the book. This kind of Abstraction is based on using the essential elements of an artistic complex, identified below, in the production of an object that a work is to be understood to be. The word 'object' has the widest latitude possible here, and an Abstract object may, or may not, be an abstract object, even when it exemplifies one of the more ultimately reductive artworks possible. In addition, any of the more Abstract artworks, and those with more radical identities, may or may not be abstract in the sense of being spaceless and timeless.

The use of the terms ‘Essentialist Abstraction’ and ‘Essentialism’ in *Subjects and Objects* pertains to the previous remarks, and to the essential elements of what I call an ‘artistic complex,’ defined in the next paragraph, and more thoroughly considered below. Just as words such as ‘Cubism,’ ‘Minimalism,’ and ‘Conceptual art’ mark different kinds of artistic practice, so the equivalent terms ‘Essentialist Abstraction’ and ‘Essentialism’ are used to pertain to the creative undertaking of identifying the limits of artistic Abstraction. Accordingly, I call the work that determines limits of Abstraction through utilizing only essential elements of artistic complexes—elements that constitute the fundamental material in or through the use of which those limits are determined—Essentialist Abstraction, or simply Essentialism.

An artistic complex is formed whenever a conscious subject attends to an original perceptual object, such as a painting, that an artwork is meant to be, or on which the identity of an artwork depends, as in the apprehensible language presupposed by *Homage to Barry* printed above. Use of the term ‘apprehensible’ here indicates that the identity of an artwork may depend on things, such as language, that presuppose perception, but that are not limited to seeing as reduced or uninformed sensation, or to seeing that lacks the sort of conceptual or cognitive dimension on which comprehending the identity of a supra-perceptual work depends.⁶ The identity of an artwork may also depend on how language is related to the space in which it is situated, so that what is apprehended in trying to understand that identity is a partial function of understanding the language in relation to its surrounding space. In fact, both of these things will typically be true for an Essentialist artwork. It is always necessary to understand language to understand Essentialist identity, and it is usually the case that the relation of Essentialist language to the space in which it is apprehended must itself be apprehended, since that space is almost

6 By stating things this way, I simply mean that a visual line or square does not, and cannot, function conceptually to point beyond itself to something else that a work is meant to be, as language can. This is not meant to assert however, what I think is false, that even purely formal works of visual art lack any semantic or cognitive dimension. One cannot look at red without it registering silently in thought as being that particular primary color, or registering epistemologically in the sense that one could correctly identify it if asked to. Similarly, one cannot look at a square in Malevich or a line in Mondrian without knowing that one is looking at a square or a line, although neither has to be stated verbally, to oneself or to anyone else. And knowledge of art history and theory will inform perception of perceptual art, as it will perception that is relevant to Conceptual, Essentialist, or any art that, although depending on perception, is not itself something that can be perceived. The previous remarks agree with John Dewey’s view that “nothing enters experience bald and unaccompanied.” Dewey, *John Art as Experience*, New York: Capricorn Books (1958), p. 162.

always designed to have a bearing on the identity of the work that the language specifies. Use of the term 'perceptual' to characterize the visual object of an Essentialist artistic complex is therefore sophisticated, and includes both comprehending visible language, and apprehending the relation of the language understood to the perceptible area of which it is an attribute.

Any artistic complex includes a conscious subject, a perceptual object, and the subject's consciousness of that object. In a standard, especially Modernist, artistic complex, the perceptual object is designed so that the conscious portion of the complex terminates in, and is exhausted by, that visual object *as visual*. The perceptual object of an Essentialist artistic complex though is always partially linguistic, and is so structured visually that the relation of the language that it contains to the space containing it either has a direct bearing on what the work of art is to be determined to be, or it raises the question of the relation of what is specified by the language to the space in which that language is apprehended. That means that the subject's consciousness of an Essentialist perceptual object is shaped by the interaction of the visible and linguistic parts and properties of that intricate phenomenal entity, which further means that the resulting contour of consciousness has a role to play in the determination of artwork identity. The emphasis in Essentialism is on identity, and on the relations of subjects and objects on which particular identities depend. The artistic complex of Essentialism is thus an existing entity of which the act of apprehending the intended identity of an artwork is a constituent. It is the subject of the section two of Part One below, where additional 'elements' of the complex are identified.

In addition to using them in determining the limits of Abstraction, the fundamental elements of artistic complexes are employed in the investigation of identity. Indeed, the determination of the limits of Abstraction, and exploring the most extreme and fundamental possibilities of identity, are interwoven in fact and are wedded in theory. The notion of identity, with the concepts of 'object' and 'difference,' is fundamental to our conceptual scheme, and to the idea of a work of art. Every work of art, as every individual object, must have a particular identity. However, not every work of art must be a perceptual object, including any perceptual object on which its identity nevertheless depends. That is, an artwork may depend on a perceptual object to which it is not equivalent. That means that all or part of an artwork may be imperceptible, even though any imperceptible work will rely on at least one apprehensible object that is correctly apprehended, as in reading language that specifies what the work is to be understood to be. An example is *Homage to Barry* in Illustration 1.1 above. This view then is opposed to the view that says that, if x is a work of art, then it must be possible to experience x , as in seeing or hearing it. What is true is that, if x is a work of art, then it must be possible to experi-

ence at least one object *y* on which *x*, as a work of art, depends, but where *x* may or may not be object *y* as experienced, as in the latter's being seen, read, or understood. Object *y* may be a physical object that is artwork *x* only when *y* is perceived, as when seeing the physical material of a painting results in the painting seen as a particular visual work of art. But object *y* may be an external-world object that can enable someone appropriately attending to it to understand what artwork *x* is meant to be. And this may be something other than *y* as perceived, as in the *Homage to Barry* above, or as in several works of the *Haecceities* series, some of which are introduced and examined below. And of course in saying that an artwork *x*, as an entity, depends on *y*, it is implicit that knowledge of the identity of artwork *x* depends on *y*, or understanding that some object is *x* depends on the apprehension of *y*.⁷

Exploring the possibilities of identity in relation to the ineliminable elements of an artistic complex then is part of the program of Essentialism, and is coordinate with determining the limits of Abstraction. Using those elements—and the apprehension of intended identity in particular—in the determination of a work's identity is using those elements to produce what I call 'radical identity' or a 'radical object.' Essentialist identity is radical both in the sense of being rooted in the fundamental elements of making and apprehending works of art, and in the sense of being extreme, or in departing from the kind of identity that typically characterizes even modern and contemporary, in addition to conventional, works of art. Identity then is radical when it is effected in relation to essential elements of artistic complexes, including the apprehension of intended identity that, as a conscious act, itself forms part of an artistic complex. More technically, identity is radical when it is determined in an 'ideational object,' which is defined and discussed later in the book. Here it can be said that ideational identity is, and only can be, effected as a result of understanding language that singles out the identity intended in relation to that understanding. Different kinds of radical identity can be determined in different kinds of ideational object that are effected in relation to different uses of different constituents of an artistic complex. The determination

7 Dewey says that, "Every art does something with some physical material... with a view to production of something visible, audible, or tangible." *Art as Experience*, p. 47. Physical material manipulated according to the intentions of the artist results, for Dewey, in an "art product," such as the physical substrate of a painting or sculpture that, qua physical, is only potentially a work of art. The art product for Dewey then is not, as that product, the work of art. Rather, the work of art is something that is "active and experienced," as in a painting perceived. *Art as Experience*, p. 162. I think that this is correct for artworks, such as prints and paintings, that are meant to be seen, but not for any work that is something that cannot be seen or otherwise experienced, or whose point is not perceptual, even if it depends on perceptual material, as in Duchamp's readymades.

of different kinds of radical identity will coincide with the identification of different limits of Abstraction that are possible to realize, and any discussion of Abstraction that does not include identity explicitly is to be understood to include it implicitly. Many examples of Essentially Abstract works of radical identity will be seen and considered in this work.

Henceforth, it should be understood that the investigation of identity in relation to Abstraction is an implicit part of the Essentialist investigations that are based on the use of the essential elements of an artistic complex. And this relation of identity and Abstraction is implicit in the use of either the term 'Essentialism' or 'Essentialist Abstraction.' I will sometimes speak of 'Essentialist identity and Abstraction' to emphasize that no determination of a limit in Abstraction can occur apart from the determination of identity, and that the exploration of the possibilities of radical identity is also based on using the essential elements of an artistic complex, but these facts should be understood in the use of either 'Essentialism' or 'Essentialist Abstraction,' as indicated. Accordingly, given its relation to those essential elements, any particular object of radical identity will be an Essentially Abstract object at the same time, and any Essentially Abstract object will determine a kind of radical identity as it identifies a limit of Abstraction in its particular identity.

In addition to the philosophy that it contains, this book is meant to be an artistic and critical complement of *Subjects and Objects* that, as artistic, exhibits and examines some Essentialist artworks that I have produced in which I believe different limits of Abstraction, and different kinds of radical identity, are identified. As critical, it considers things of aesthetic, artistic, analytical, and philosophical relevance to the works, those limits, and those kinds of radical identity. The previous remark requires the following qualification: Given the book format and the reliance of Essentialism on language, the examination of Essentialist artworks referred to largely consists of considering the 'specifications,' or what I term '*Haecceities*,' that are either circular or linear pieces of language that are used to single out the more Abstract and radical objects possible. A specification is a piece of language that is used to single something out that all or part of an artwork is to be understood to be. The works by Barry and Burgin noted, as well as *Homage to Barry* above, are examples of works that are determined in whole or in part by specifications. An Essentialist specification is a *Haecceity*. While the identity of an Essentialist artwork can be quite complex, and is sometimes variable, a token of a *Haecceity* that specifies something as all and part of a sophisticated Essentialist artwork typically appears as part of a framed perceptual object.⁸ A token of a *Haecceity* that

8 On the difference between basic and sophisticated identity in works of the *Haecceities* series see section 23 of Part Three of the book below. It is part of the radical identity of Essentialism

forms part of a framed perceptual object may appear in the circular format of certain specifications that can be seen in certain works below, or the words of a token of a *Haecceity* may be distributed in correlated sets of matrices according to an algorithm that I discovered that solves certain problems that arise perceptually and conceptually in relation to the use of visual language on a two-dimensional surface.⁹ The foregoing things having been noted, the manner of presenting the *Haecceities* in this work that the format of a book requires is not an insurmountable problem. This is because the sort of Abstract limits that are possible to establish and recognize can initially be appreciated in virtue of comprehending specifications in or through which those limits are identified. The same is true of novel kinds of identity that can be determined in the identification of those limits. More particularly, once the algorithmic distribution of language in correlated sets of matrices is exhibited, the placement of linear, non-circular, language in such matrices can easily be imagined, and the relation of that language both to a subject comprehending it, and to what it specifies, can be understood. In addition, this book contains a number of reproductions of the perceptual objects of Essentialist works of art that can assist the reader in comprehending how *Haecceities* can appear as part of a completed work.¹⁰

The previous remarks pertain to grasping the essentials of Essentialist artworks. That having been said, there is no substitute for understanding Essentialist identity in relation to the original perceptual objects of the series. And apprehending language as a constituent of such a perceptible object is

that something that a *Haecceity* singles out as the whole of an Essentialist artwork is also a part of the work, both with anything else that is singled out by the language, at the same or different times, and, in any case, with the perceptual object on which it depends. That is the reason for the use of “and” in “all and part of” in the sentence to which this footnote is appended. See Part Three of the book below, and sections 22, 25, 26, and 28 in particular. I will continue to speak of objects in general that all *or* parts of artworks can be understood to be, but when the object is one that is singled out by an Essentialist specification—a *Haecceity*—then it is an object that is both the whole *and* a part of a particular Essentialist artwork, as will be seen in Part Three. This means that if the locution ‘all or part of an artwork’ is used in speaking of ideational objects of Essentialism, the word ‘or’ in that language is inclusive, not exclusive. That language is not inclusive, however, when a part of an artwork can only be a part, and not a whole, as is the case for the perceptual object that commonly contains the language of Essentialism.

9 These problems, and the solution of them, are discussed in depth in Part Two below.

10 Reproductions of these and other objects, including enlargements and details of them, can be seen at my website at www.JeffreyStrayer.com. It is highly recommended that the reader regularly refer to Essentialist artworks and their perceptual objects in reading this book to understand how the ideas here stated pertain to them.

necessary for appreciating the aesthetic differences between language that is read and understood in relation to the sophisticated space of an original object, and language that is read and understood in relation to the conventional space of the printed page.

The artworks of Essentialism are indebted to, and are developed in part from, works in the history of the visual arts, and from works of Minimal, Conceptual, and Performance art, that themselves come out of that tradition. In addition, every Essentialist artwork has a visual dimension marked by the inclusion of written language that is directed towards conscious understanding that it is designed to engage. Language has to be used to pursue the interests of Essentialism, and as will be seen in the course of this book, things can be done with visible language that cannot be done with language that is directed to the ear. The points about visual arts and visual objects having been made, anyone who would wish to pursue the limits of Abstraction, and to identify different kinds of radical identity, should end up in the same place, that is, with written language on a visual surface. And he should arrive at that destination no matter what other artistic background it is out of which such interests may develop.

This introduction includes seven theses of Abstraction, and contains an outline of the idea of Essentialism, and the relation of that idea to the notion of an artistic complex and its essential elements. It defines the notion of radical identity with which works of Essentialism are concerned, and comments on the notion of essence in relation to Essentialism. Because all art depends on objects and consciousness, and different kinds of object and different kinds of conscious event are relevant to the works of the *Haecceities* series, the introduction concludes with brief sections on consciousness and objects. Some of the remarks on each may be of general interest, but they are included primarily for their relevance to the art of Essentialism and its objects.

The subject matter of Part Two of the book not only includes a detailed consideration of the use of visual language on a two-dimensional surface, but it includes things that must be examined in relation to that use. Part Three is concerned with ideational objects and identity as each pertains to works of the *Haecceities* series. Part Four is about what I call the 'space of apprehension' and the 'field of understanding,' the relation of each to the other and to the conscious subject that they presuppose, and the relation of each to Essentialism and its interests. Part Five consists of 10 selections from the *Haecceities* series with commentary on each of them. Some of this commentary is of a more general nature, while other writing is either a brief or an in-depth examination of certain works, as different limits of Abstraction and kinds of radical identity are identified and contemplated in them.