

Design and Abstraction

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Abstract: This article examines how the notions of design and abstraction are to be understood and related when the goal of creative investigation is to produce the most reductive and radical artworks possible. An outline of the development of abstraction in art history is sketched, and special attention is devoted to the ideas of something and nothing as pertinent to that development. The more reductive radical artworks possible cannot be produced simply by limiting the perceptible properties of a visible object. Rather, one must look beyond the surface and consider how knowledge of the necessary conditions of making and apprehending works of art might guide the inquiry into abstract art and its possibilities. Of principal significance here is the conscious construction of the thiness of a particular object determined in the event of its understanding. Design in ultimate abstraction will focus on how to fashion identity in relation to its identification.

Keywords: abstraction, conceptual design, Essentialism, language, consciousness, agency

Introduction: Summary of the argument and outline of its progression

The most interesting and challenging philosophical question regarding artistic abstraction is how minimal in form and content something can be and still be a work of art. The daunting challenge for art is how to design artworks through which the possibilities of extreme kinds of abstraction are tested and revealed. The interrelation and resolution of these issues are the subject of this article. The answer to the philosophical question noted requires consideration of what the question presupposes. That means looking beyond the perceptible properties of a perceptible object to the necessary conditions of making and apprehending works of art as the foundation on which the creative design of any of the more reductive artworks has to rest. The identification of those conditions reveals that a distinction between the meanings of the words 'abstract' and 'Abstract' must be recognized and that it is the novel meaning that attaches to the latter notion that is of principal importance to the subject of this investigation.¹ As the design of the more Abstract artworks possible depends on variously using essential conditions of making and apprehending works to determine the identity that is essential to any artwork, the artistic program of identifying the limits of Abstraction in art is called 'Essentialism.'² Because perceptual objects as merely visual cannot carry the conceptual information required to reach the limits of Abstraction, language has to be used that will not only specify what all or part of an artwork is to be understood to be, but will engage its understanding to result in objects in or through which the more reductive and radical objects possible are revealed.³ Such understanding is then productive, and means that the determination of particular artwork identity must be indexed to the conscious comprehension of that identity. This comprehension depends on understanding language that specifies that identity, as what is understood is understood both in relation to the properties of the object that contains it, and to the mental events and properties on which that comprehension depends. Because the concepts of consciousness, agency, object, identity, and difference lie at the foundation of our conceptual scheme in general, and as it pertains to making and apprehending works of art in particular, artworks that focus on the use of

them to produce works of art will be more Abstract than works in which those things are assumed rather than used in their determination.

The order of the article proceeds as follows. Different definitions of the words 'design' and 'abstract' relevant to the fundamental question cited are first canvassed. Because the question of the relation of design and abstraction arises through the history, conditions, and possibilities of fine art, the evolution of abstraction is next briefly outlined in selected works of art that are cited as figuring in the course of that progression. This includes looking at the pertinence to abstract art of the notions and relations of something and nothing, and works by Joseph Kosuth, On Kawara, and Ray Johnson are considered that are germane to those notions as they pertain to the limits and possibilities of abstraction. Abstraction in art history continues as the topic of the fourth section in which works by Robert Barry and Victor Burgin are cited to illustrate the importance of language, indexicals, and understanding to those limits and possibilities. The subject of the fifth part is the necessary conditions of making and apprehending works of art, and section six pertains to the ways in which the character and connection of design and Abstraction in Essentialism figure in relation to the 'configuration space' of Essentialist artworks. That is followed by how form and function can be understood in Essentialism in section seven. The pursuit of Abstraction in the identity-identification relation next sketched precedes the penultimate section of the article, which concerns the relevance of the notions of thisness and haecceity to the subject of this inquiry. The article concludes with an analysis of an Essentialist Abstract artwork in which one kind of limit of Abstraction is identified.

The terms 'design' and 'abstract'

There is an active and a passive sense of design, and a primary and secondary form of design that fits both its active and passive senses. To design something is to act according to a plan to produce something whose character bears a relation to the act or acts on which it depends to have that character. The active sense of design pertains to constructing something according to a conception so that its nature and identity as a created object reflect its relation to that conception. The passive sense of design then refers to the form and content of the determined object whose apprehensible properties reflect the notions, decisions, and actions in virtue of which it has those attributes. The primary sense of design, for art, concerns the act or actions of the artist(s) and the artistic product that results from that act or actions. It fits the vast majority of artworks in the history of art. However, an artwork may be so designed in the primary sense that attributes of the primary object of design are meant to engage the observer in the production of an additional object or objects that all or part of the work is to be understood to be. The secondary form of aesthetic design in that kind of case applies both to the act or actions of the observer(s) required to produce such an additional object and to the artistic product that results from that act or actions. Victor Burgin's *Ideas Structures Project* of 1970 is an example of such a work, and another work with these dimensions of formal design will be seen at the end of this article.⁴

The idea of abstraction in general is to draw or take away something from something else so that the thing withdrawn and kept is emphasized as a focus of attention and what is left behind as discarded is ignored. The term 'abstract' has meaning both within and outside of art. To take the latter first, an object is abstract if it is spaceless, timeless or eternal,⁵ immaterial, causally inert, indestructible and, typically at least, mind independent.⁶ Abstract(ion) in art has to do with the reduction of detail that is achieved through omitting some elements of figurative images while emphasizing those that have been retained. It can also mean organizing shape and space in such a way that their interaction provides an alternative view of reality, as in Cubism and Futurism. Artworks become more abstract as they eliminate imagistic, symbolic, or suggestive reference to common or imagined reality, resulting in a work of Non-objective art that consists of colors and shapes that figure only as such as they stand to one another in formal aesthetic relation. Abstraction in Essentialism means using the fundamental elements of making and apprehending works of art to create, con-

struct, or otherwise determine works of art in which the use of those elements is reflected in what the work is to be understood to be. An artwork of Essentialism then is Essentially Abstract because its particular identity reflects the use of the basic kinds of element required of artistic identity in the determination of that identity.⁷

1. *Abstraction and art history I: something and nothing*⁸

The basis for organic abstraction began with Turner in the 19th century and then mutated and evolved in various ways through Monet and Impressionism, Whistler, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Fauvism, af Klint, Kandinsky, Soutine, Corinth, Kirchner, and the German Expressionists, followed by Pollock, de Kooning, and Rothko, and the Abstract Expressionists whose work is more indebted to the lines, shapes, and colors of nature than to the artifactual divisions constructed by man in the manufactured environment. Geometric abstraction stems from Cézanne and grows and forms in the Analytic Cubism of Braque and Picasso, and then through the work of Mondrian, Malevich, Albers, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, and Agnes Martin, among others. When Marcel Duchamp exhibited readymade objects as works of art, he eliminated the manual labor that commonly preceded the creation of an artwork and showed that art can be produced, if not traditionally created, by the selection of an object whose exhibition as art in a fine-art context makes explicit the claim to be art that he meant to be implicit in that selection.

None of the lines of development cited is meant to be complete, and no suggestion is made that the works of the artists and movements cited only have importance, or even primary significance, in relation to the evolution of a/Abstract art.

Although the degree of an artwork's abstraction is not the same as its simplicity, the notion of what Béla Bartók called the "inexorable elimination of inessentials" is of the utmost importance both to the development of abstract art in history and to the question of how to continue that development in the design of Essentialist Abstraction.⁹ Where can art go in search of the 'zero point' of reduction after a monochromatic painting that eliminates imagery, line, shape, and internal differentiation has simply asserted itself as a self-enclosed non-referential object? Joseph Kosuth's 1965 work *Any Two Meter Square Sheet of Glass to Lean Against Any Wall* eliminates opacity and the uniqueness of a singular object typical to art history by making an instance of such a sheet of glass leaning against some wall a token of a type.¹⁰ Although Kosuth did not design the glass relevant to this work, we could still understand design to fit the coordination of the ideas and actions required to organize a state of affairs in which art transcends opacity and uniqueness and draws attention both to physical and cultural characteristics of the physical and institutional structure on which it literally and figuratively leans as a visible set of connected data meant to be art. The form of this state of affairs is partly perceptual and partly conceptual and the interrelation of the two constitutes the aesthetic design of the work.

This complex work raises a couple of interesting questions. The first has to do with something. If Kosuth removed the idea of uniqueness from a work of art, could an artwork be an object without being any particular object? That is, could an artwork just be something but not a particular something? As the stage after transparency and the elimination of uniqueness would seem to be nothing, the second question is if a work of art could be nothing. As one cannot make nothing, how could something be designed so that nothing as nothing would be understood to be a work of art that follows from that design? And if an object has to exhibit formal relations between at least two of its parts or apprehensible aspects to be a design, and as nothing qua nothing consists of nothing to be related, then nothing as a work of art would reveal that there could be an artwork that is not a design, and so would constitute an exception to centuries of artistic practice. Should it be possible to single out nothing as a work of art, in the sense that it is understood that the work is to be identified with nothing, then the sense in which such an artwork involves design must pertain to how nothing as nothing can be conceived and revealed to be a work, so that what the artist designs in conceiving of

how to identify a work of art with nothing is the set of interrelated ideas that characterize the thinking that underlies a means of making that illustration comprehensible.¹¹



Figure 1. *Any Two Meter Sheet of Glass to Lean Against Any Wall* (Joseph Kosuth, 1965)

The conceptual contrast between nothing and something, and the relation of something to anything that would be understood to be a work of art, recognizes the importance to art both of understanding concepts in the functioning of thought and the importance of distinction in the isolation for understanding of anything that is to be understood to be a particular work of art. As nothing lacks parts and properties, one cannot use or target parts or characteristics of nothing in an artistic investigation that would result in its being a work of art. In this respect nothing differs from both an object that is something and what is everything, since characteristics of each can be used in relation to appropriate actions and intentions to bring about the identification of a work of art with either kind of thing.¹²

Each thing is a particular something that can either be apprehended in a way that recognizes its particularity as an individual thing that nothing else is, or that can be seen as an otherwise anonymous instance of something as something, in which case it does not advance in thought beyond that kind of general classification. A paradigmatic manifestation of this analysis of the concept of something appeared in 1963 when the Japanese Conceptual artist On Kawara printed the word ‘SOMETHING’ in capital letters in Letraset on paper and titled the work *Nothing, Something, Everything*. This work can either be understood to use the word ‘SOMETHING’ to single out any object of all objects without singling out one object to the exclusion of everything else – so that the work would be something of everything without being any particular thing – or the work can be understood to use the word ‘SOMETHING’ to single itself out as being something to which the word applies. In this second case, SOMETHING draws attention to itself as a token of the type *something*, both as word and object, at the same time that, in having the referential relation to itself that it is the means of providing, and in being exhibited as a work of art, it singles out the particularity that it is designed to have as something whose symbolic nature and relation to mind enable it to refer to its being a being that is to register as such in awareness. The meaning of the word ‘SOMETHING’ allows it to pertain to itself as something that instantiates the idea of something that it is the source of evoking, so that SOMETHING as a particular something is enclosed in that self-reference, and the anonymous direction to a different something is precluded in the conceptual intimacy of that relation. Of all somethings this is the only something to which SOMETHING can be understood to have that particular connection. That connection is individual and specific, and results from the symbolic character of the word as understood within a fine-arts context. Every other something as something is anonymous.



Figure 2. *Nothing, Something, Everything* On Kawara, 1963

Although conventional artistic understanding would suggest that Kawara's work *Nothing, Something, Everything* is a discrete perceptual entity containing the word 'SOMETHING,' the previous remarks indicate that this work cannot be said definitively to be the visual object containing the word 'SOMETHING' without violating the indifference in the diversity of reference that it makes possible. The radical character of this work results from the fact that it can be understood to refer to a particular something or an anonymous something without providing a means of deciding between them. Rather than being a bounded object on a wall containing a word – and so taking the standard form of standard works of art – the work can be understood to set up a disjunctive state of affairs that is to remain disjunctive in providing no way of deciding which something of either kind of something the work is to be understood to be. This constitutes a departure from the usual relation that holds between an artwork and everything other than the artwork, which is exclusionary. That is, the world typically divides into an artwork x and everything other than x . Because in *Nothing, Something, Everything* the same symbol SOMETHING does different referential work according to different interpretations, the typical difference between the work and the world as different here is different.

Each visual work of art, such as a painting, is something. And the perceptual object or information on which the understanding any artwork relies is something. Although nothing itself is not perceptible and cannot, as nothing, form part of anything, it may be possible to make one understand nothing to be a work of art by utilizing something to make that understanding possible. However, there are two apparent logical problems here. The first has to do with distinction and distinguishability. How can nothing be distinguished from something if it lacks any property that would enable it to be discriminated from anything else? It would appear then that any attempt to use something to identify a work of art with nothing would have to fail, since nothing qua nothing could not be distinguished from anything else, including from whatever is used with the intent to make that identification comprehensible. The only thing that could be accomplished would be to use one thing to isolate another thing for consideration as a particular work that may be very minimally something but is not nothing. The second problem has to do with the logic of properties. If nothing is to be thought of as what lacks every property, including the property of differing from something, then it cannot acquire any property, including being a work of art, without ceasing to be nothing in virtue of the acquisition of that property.

It could be that to make nothing comprehensible a distinction needs to be made between nothing as the absence or negation of something and nothing as a concept. Nothing as the absence of something is what is meant in asserting that there was nothing prior to the Big Bang. But when nothing is understood to be distinguished from something and everything, for instance, then nothing is an idea that has a perfectly good use in thought and commerce as a common notion in our conceptual vocabulary. Whereas there is nothing to nothing in the first sense of which we could predicate properties, that is not true in the second sense, where nothing as the concept used in the thought of nothing has the properties of so functioning and of being something to which the notions of something and everything have conceptually determinate relations. The distinctions recognized are critical to the design of an abstract artwork meant to be nothing and they hinge on the presence or absence of objects and the presence or absence of mind.

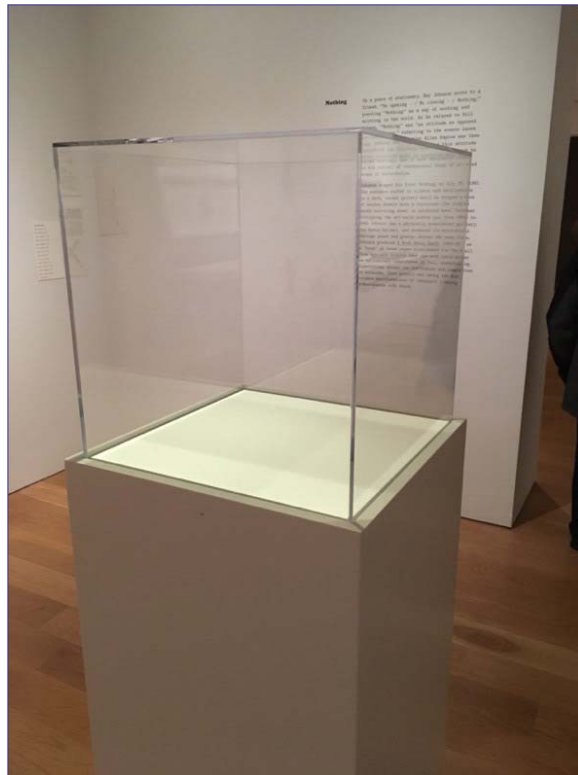


Figure 3. *Nothing* Ray Johnson, 1989

The concept of nothing that is relevant to the identification of an artwork with nothing – as in Ray Johnson’s *Nothing* of 1989 that uses a clear acrylic cube to enclose a visually empty space – is the concept of nothing that presupposes active intelligence. Given the title of this work, one understands in viewing Johnson’s *Nothing* that the emptiness inside the box represents nothing and that the box is the means of making the relation of what it contains to an understanding of nothing explicit. And we take this to be the case even if the being bounded of a delineated cube of space is something rather than nothing. Having arrived at this point, the question to ask is if abstract art reaches a single terminal point in nothing or if, instead, there are other artworks that are as, or more, reductive than nothing. If that is the case, then it must be because of the way in which such an artwork depends on, and reflects its relation to, the necessary conditions of making and apprehending works of art, and consciousness and agency in particular. Johnson’s work retains the customary structure of subject-

object detachment in which mind is a presupposition of art-identity understanding, but mind is not enlisted as an active ingredient of art-identity determination as it is in works of Essentialist Abstraction. Thus, the empty cube is passively received in perception as a confined empty space, and nothing here is actually something that is marked off in a traditional form of object making and exhibition that is not instead arrived at in virtue of engaging thought in its conceptual delineation, as thought is engaged in object determination in *Haeccity 9.149.0* to be seen and considered below.

Something of interest to note about the design of an artwork and its relation to artistic intentions is that certain things of value may follow from, or have an aesthetic, artistic, or conceptual relation to, the design that was not intended by the artist who designed the work. It may be that neither Kosuth nor Kawara nor Johnson conceived of their works in relation to the matters of importance that I assign to them in the way that I do. And yet, because the remarks made are supported by their works and the nature of their designs, matters of the kind to which I have drawn attention can be due to, and supported by, the artifacts produced even if they are not directly historically linked to the original thoughts of the artists responsible for the works and the character of their designs.

Abstraction and art history II: language, indexicals, and understanding

The determination of a limit of Abstraction in art that may lie beyond nothing, or that may be thought to equal the degree of Abstraction of nothing, depends on the epistemological and indexical relation that a person has who is attending to an object relevant to a work that is designed as a means of establishing such a limit. Identifying the limits of Abstraction in art, and designing an object to figure in the realization of a work in or through which such a limit would be determined, requires language to identify the more Abstract possibilities of singling something out. There is simply no other means of engaging mind to apprehend and/or create the kind of object with the kind of conceptual precision that is required of this kind of creative exploration.

At 1:36 PM, June 15, 1969 Robert Barry wrote the words *all the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking*, and then appended the time and date noted to the language to make what is singled out by it indexed to Barry's awareness of it at that time.¹³ A 'specification' is a piece of language of one or more words that is used to single out an object that all or part of a work is to be understood to be. That is, language is used to make it comprehensible what the whole or part of an artwork is meant to be. The language and the object that contains it is not the work.¹⁴ Rather, language is used to make comprehension of the intended identity of a work possible. Specification is as much a means of artistic production as are Duchampian selection and the standard practices of object creation in painting and sculpture. Specification does not contradict Abstraction but can be used with the principles of Essentialism to determine the more Abstract objects possible. Barry's language in *all the things I know . . .* functions as a specification, and the way that I talked about the work by On Kawara treats the word 'SOMETHING' as a specification. This work by Barry uses language to delineate a class of epistemological objects indexed to Barry's consciousness at the time and date given that had to do with general and personal knowledge as features of his experiential biography. This is something of which we cannot be aware in the sense of being acquainted with it, as we are acquainted with a painting in perceiving it. It is an object that we can only understand to be a work of art. Accordingly, it has a relation to conscious comprehension and to perception only to the extent to which understanding its intended identity rests on the apprehension of which perception of the words is a constituent condition. We can be aware *that* the object of the specification is that work even though we cannot be directly aware *of* any object that is a member of the class, as such a member, in the way that we can perceive or be directly acquainted with works of perceptual art. As we can only understand and not perceive what the work is intended to be, this work illustrates that the intended identity of an artwork need not have the relation to awareness with which we are familiar from art history. This fact makes it, with the work by Victor Burgin to follow, an important forerunner of the works of Essentialism.

In such works of linguistic Conceptual art as his *Ideas Structures Project* of 1970, Victor Burgin used the language of specification to engage the person attending to it to understand of what the work was intended to consist, and to make certain aspects of the work depend on objects created through that engagement.¹⁵ For instance, one specification is used to single out objects in the room in which the language is located and another is used to refer to appearances of such objects as earlier experienced by the person to whom the language is directed. This technique enlisted conscious acts and understandings in the determination of the identity of the work as the language germane to that determination is indexed to the time, place, and particularity of those acts and understandings. As the objects and events relevant to this work are indexed to the conscious acts on which they depend, and are distributed across such acts of the same and different people at either the same or different times, they constitute a work of such extreme abstraction and nature that it invites the question of how to proceed further in the determination of greater abstraction and even more radical identity.

Consciousness and action are always required to engage with, interpret, understand, and value any work of art, but these and other works by Burgin and Barry use consciousness and action to determine the identity and character of the works. The consciousness of someone attending to a traditional work of art is passive in the sense in which one receives in sight and understands the work as a completed object, but this is not true with the work cited by Burgin. The problem that arises for anyone who would extend art in the direction of greater extremes of reduction is determining what the advance beyond Barry and Burgin would depend on and how it might be realized.

The necessary conditions of making and apprehending works of art

To identify the extremes of reductive possibility one needs to understand what is essential to making and apprehending works of art. This is a job for philosophy and is one aspect of Essentialism.¹⁶ Once those necessary conditions have been identified, one has to develop means of using the conditions in relation to themselves to investigate what that use enables to be determined. That is a task for art.

There is not room here to consider this in any detail.¹⁷ The basic points follow. The fundamental artistic action is singling something out. What is singled out is an object of some kind of object, using 'object' in the widest possible sense, so that everything is an object. Every object has a particular identity that everything else lacks and every artwork differs from everything that lacks its particular identity. This identity must be comprehensible, even when it is not possible to be aware of the object itself that the artwork is intended to be. Knowledge of intended identity is required to contemplate, interpret, appreciate, evaluate, and otherwise respond to the work.¹⁸ There is a necessary relation then between the artistic determination of what the work is to be understood to be and the public understanding of that intended identity. This understanding depends on an apprehensible object that is either the work or is the means through which its identification with something else is made comprehensible, as with the works cited by Burgin and Barry. A subject's epistemological relation to such an object depends on choice, and so agency is a necessary condition of making and apprehending even the most Abstract artwork possible.

Because every artwork is an object; because every object has a particular identity that differs from everything that lacks its identity; because it must be possible to understand an artwork's identity; and because knowledge of an artwork's identity depends on an object of which it must be possible to choose to be aware, Essentialism must use consciousness, agency, and objects to investigate identity and difference. This requires the use of language since only language has the flexibility and precision necessary to engage the reflection and comprehension required of the Essentialist investigation of Abstraction. How identity and difference are related in the determination of the particular identity of a particular artwork, and how their relation is targeted and determined through using language and perceptual data to address consciousness and agency in that determination, is of particular interest to Essentialism.

Design and the configuration space of Essentialism

An Essentialist ‘space of apprehension’ results from placing language in a perceptual object that is addressed to the ‘field of understanding’ that the conscious subject brings to the encounter with that object. The field of understanding includes both the cognitive capacities that the conscious subject brings to an engagement with that space and such cognitive events as perception and understanding that are relevant to interpreting and appreciating a work of art.¹⁹

The space of apprehension of an Essentialist artwork is the designed space of its perceptual object. It includes its language of specification, any perceptual elements of that space that have to do with the repetition, division, and placement of the words of that language, and the abstract space of meaning apprehensible through language in thought and understanding. The term ‘apprehension’ in the space of apprehension recognizes this complex relation to language and the importance of the conceptual attention and activity prompted by characteristics of the perceptual object that, although presupposing visual sensation, do not terminate in it. In some works, the space of apprehension includes a ‘space’ or dimension of imagination in which the language on the surface is to be imagined to be on film, the purpose of which is to extend and complicate the notion of identity in relation to repetition, individuation, meaning, and understanding. The language of Essentialism is written to single out ‘ideational’ objects. An object is ideational when its being all or part of a work of art depends on understanding language that singles out the object in relation to that understanding. The Essentialist perceptual object, with its complex properties and relations of data, is the understood means of effecting the identification of a particular artwork with a particular ideational object, and it is specifically designed to be a necessary condition of realizing that intended identification. As such, it can be understood to be a record of the artistic intention of how it is designed to figure in some way or ways in the determination of the ideational object that is all or part of a work of art.

The space of apprehension, in being directed to the field of understanding, is designed to engage such things as perception, conception, reflection, recollection, imagination, inference, choice, and interpretation that are relevant kinds of event and capacity of which that field consists. This makes the Essentialist perceptual object a zone of potential, and creates with the field of understanding a ‘configuration space’ of Essentialism that consists of the space and field in active interaction. The configuration space of Essentialism, in consisting of the interaction of elements of both the space of apprehension and the field of understanding, is similar to what Alexander Alberro calls an “aesthetic field,” as “an area of possibility through which the spectator constructs meaning.”²⁰ In this space, language is used with consciousness, agency, and objects to investigate identity and difference as they pertain to the construction of the artistic identity whose comprehension presupposes their active interrelation.²¹ The Essentialist space of apprehension includes language and visual data that are designed to interact so that one shapes the other as they combine to engage elements of the field of understanding to construct or determine an ideational object that is a consequence of that engagement. This relation of language and understanding means that the relation of subject and object in Essentialism is active and determinative and includes the conceptual in addition to the perceptual. Because of the dependence in Essentialism on the use of concepts in the determination of artistic identity, I call the subject to whom the language of Essentialism is addressed a ‘conciipient.’ This term is used to reflect the intellectual participation that is required of the identification of ideational objects and that extends beyond the passive reception of visual forms in being a necessary condition of the determination and understanding of Abstract artwork identity.

How language, as visual, is to be used in relation to a perceptual surface is a question of design. The answer to why language is to be used in the way that it is used in a particular design follows from the informed artistic intentions that have led to it. How language, as conceptual, is written to engage the mind of the conciipient in the determination of identity is also a matter of conceptual design that extends into the semantic dimension of the space of apprehension as it is addressed to the field of understanding. In addition, the relation of design and Abstraction in Essentialism extends beyond the

operation and results of original artistic intention to include observer-concipient intention and participation that are deliberately engaged to determine the nature and identity of an ideational object that results from that participation.

Design in art and abstraction is linked to, and focused on, the solution of problems. Such solutions in art may not only be of aesthetic and artistic significance but of philosophical interest and importance. Essentialist Abstraction as a design problem pertains, fundamentally, to the determination of identity in relation to the configuration space of an Essentialist artwork, such that the nature of that space is not only relevant to understanding and reflecting on what is determined in relation to it, but is relevant too to the interpretation and evaluation of the identity of what is so determined. Because of the complexity and multifarious nature of the space of apprehension, how a/Abstract spaces, with their objects and relations, can figure in the determination and understanding of identity via their necessary connection to intentional action and relevant kinds of conscious event is also a design issue to be considered. And because the cognitive ingredients of the field of understanding can turn on themselves and recognize their own contribution to the determination and analysis of Essentialist identity in addition to the parts and properties of the space of apprehension, these two aspects of the Essentialist configuration space can be understood to be different 'regions of recognition.'

How the nature, importance, and value of their interaction in the configuration space that they construct can, and should be, determined is fundamentally a design problem having to do with the diverse character of the things of which these regions of recognition are composed and the nature and variety of their interaction. This includes looking at how the spheres and data of perception and conception can be treated as areas and ingredients of stable and active construction that, in common with conscious events to which they are directed, determine the form and content of an ideational object shaped by a complex of things and relations that have aesthetic, artistic, epistemological, and ontological significance.²² This will involve consideration of the relation of the syntax and semantics of the language of specification, as ideal, to its visual form as molded and affected by the perceptible structure of the Essentialist perceptual object, as they register in mind according to the character of that relation.

The previous points indicate that the contrast and interaction between the fixed, overarching, and generative nature of the design of the perceptual object, and the flexible, dynamic, and contingent nature of the perception, thought, and reflection targeted by it, are relevant to the issue of design in Essentialism. Finally, language and perceptual data are designed here to interact, not just in the construction or determination of an ideational object, but in any mental activity that follows its understanding that has to do with its interpretation and evaluation. Thus, the ideational object is to be understood, interpreted, and evaluated in relation to the interaction of the space of apprehension and the field of understanding, or in relation to the nature of the configuration space that is determined by that interaction.

Form and function in Essentialist Abstraction

It is useful here to make a distinction between general and particular form and general and particular function. The general function or purpose of Essentialism is to investigate the limits of artistic Abstraction and to test notions of identity that attend that investigation. The general form of the enterprise follows from how the things on which it depends, including language, perception, and understanding, stand in relation to one another as necessary conditions of that exploration. The particular form of an Essentialist artwork is determined by how its ideational object stands in relation to the elements of its configuration space as they stand in relation to one another in the production, understanding, and interpretation of that object. The particular function of that work is to reveal a kind of identity determined in the particular way in which it is designed to disclose a particular limit of Abstraction. Essentialist form and function then operate in concert with one another.

In the general form and function of Essentialism, form follows function epistemologically in the sense that one has to *know* in general *what* an artifact is intended to do in an artwork to know how to design it, and so to give it a particular form that serves the general function stated above. In the particular form and function of an Abstract Essentialist artwork, function follows form ontologically in that it is only in virtue of the formal nature of a particular artifact – the formal character of the *being* that it has in being the being that it is – that enables it to function in the particular way or ways in which it is designed to function.

Identity and identification

The relation that an artwork's identity has to the understanding of that identity is both fundamental and ineliminable. For that reason, investigating the relation between the understanding of artwork identity and the identity to be understood is operating at the most extreme level of Abstraction and is of the greatest importance to thinking about the relation in art between abstraction and design. For Essentialism, exploring how to use the fundamental conditions of making and apprehending works of art to examine the possibilities of linking identity to its identification is of principal interest. In particular, if a direct relation can be established between the identity and identification of a work, such that the former depends on and reflects its relation to the latter, this will represent one kind of Abstract limit.²³ The reason for this is that everything will have been omitted from the work except understanding the relation of identity to identification in making the first depend on, and reflect its relation to, the second.

Thisness, haecceity, and Haecceities

Talk of an object's particular identity is a way of talking about its thisness or haecceity. An object's haecceity is the property that it has of being the object that it is. This is a particular logical property that is a consequence of the interrelated notions of object, individuality, identity, and difference. Every artwork has a haecceity that distinguishes it logically from everything else, and every artwork is a particular *this* that nothing else is. Essentialist investigations into the limits of Abstraction can also be understood to be an investigation of thisness in relation to artwork identity that, in being coupled with the conditions of making and apprehending works of art, explore how to make the particularity of identity a consequence of those conditions. For this reason, I call the specifications that I write that figure in the construction or determination of artwork identity *Haecceities*.²⁴

One limit of Essentialist Abstraction: *Haecceity 9.149.0*

*what is to be understood in understanding how understanding this
is related to an understanding that reflects its relation to this
and the understanding of this in some understanding*

Haecceity 9.149.0

Illustration 1.

The language of *Haecceity 9.149.0* appears in Illustration 1 above. That specification, as visually distributed and configured in Figure 4 below, and as a comprehensible unit of meaning, forms with conscious thought an interactive complex of things and relations that constitutes an instance of the configuration space of Essentialism. These things, functioning together in intended relation, are the means by which an ideational object of the work of this specification is generated, and their understood connection creates the comprehensible condition that an object must meet to be such an ideational object.

The constituent language *what is to be understood* of the initial language *what is to be understood in understanding . . . of Haecceity 9.149.0* can be understood to refer either to the abstract meaning of the specification as an independent object of understanding, or to the *being understood* of that meaning as an act, so that the meaning is the content of an occurrent event of understanding. In the former case, the word *what*, in *what is to be understood*, refers to the abstract meaning that is grasped in an event of understanding what is to be understood in understanding the specification. In the latter case, the word *understood*, in *what is to be understood*, pertains to a cognitive fact in which what is to be understood is actively grasped. This means that how the words *what is to be understood*, in *what is to be understood in understanding . . .*, are understood will direct understanding in one way or the other: to an abstract meaning or to the being understood of that meaning. In either case though, the language of specification has to be understood to function as a specification – *what is to be understood* has to *be understood* – and so each version, including the abstract meaning, is linked to understanding and cannot be detached from it. However, in the second case what is *to be understood* is so coupled to the fact of its *being understood* that these are coordinated elements of an existential event that manifests, as it understands, how it features in that conceptual relation. As such, it underlines the general dependence of art on consciousness, and so is the more Essentially Abstract of the two ways of thinking noted about the initial five words of this specification. This second understanding of the relation of what is understood in understanding the *Haecceity* to its understanding is implicit in the following remarks, even when one can understand an understanding of the *Haecceity* to involve other understandings in the determination of an ideational object that is singled out by the *Haecceity* understood.

There are two basic ways in which understanding this specification can be directed in understanding the specification. And this bidirectionality can be thought to be something of an Essentialist variation on the work by On Kawara considered above. The content of the first kind of understanding sees that it and a different event of understanding the specification have in common being epistemological effects of which the specification is the common cause. Each understanding then is alike in being a sufficient condition of the specification that is a necessary condition of each having that relation to that specification. When this is understood, then the being understood of that common connection can be understood to be singled out by the language that is a condition of understanding the relation that it shares with other understandings of the relation shared through such an understanding.

The second kind of understanding understands itself to realize reflexively the relation to an understanding that a single understanding must have to be singled out by the specification understood in that kind of understanding. Because of how it turns back on itself, the second kind of understanding described in the following paragraph is more Abstract, interesting, and Essentially aesthetic than the kind of understanding considered in the previous paragraph.



Figure 4. *Haecceity 9.149.0* Jeffrey Strayer, 2022

The Abstract character of the reflexive kind of ideational object singled out by *Haecceity 9.149.0* is determined by the way in which what is to be understood in understanding the specification and an act of understanding the specification stand in relation to one another as elements required of an understanding that grasps their relation to one another as interactive constituents of the condition of that understanding. More specifically, the language of this specification is so narrowly written that what can be understood to be singled out by this *Haecceity* – as what answers to *what is to be understood* in *what is to be understood in understanding how understanding this . . .* – is a higher-order understanding that, as the understanding of how understanding the specification is itself something that reflects its relation to the specification, realizes in the fact of its occurrence what is to be understood in understanding its relation to the specification as such a reflective understanding. Accordingly, the ideational object that is understood to be singled out by the specification is the understanding of a state of affairs that it figures in constructing, and to which it sees its relation, as the exemplification of what is to be understood in understanding its relation to what is to be understood as such an exemplification. What is realized then is the existential fact of a cognitive state of understanding that what is to be understood in understanding the specification is the relation in which what is to be understood, as a comprehensible condition of a particular understanding, stands to its understanding as the realization of that condition. The Abstract consequence of this state of affairs is that the understanding of that comprehensible condition, in reflecting its relation as an understanding to what is named by *an understanding that reflects its relation to this and the understanding of this in some understanding*, itself conforms to the condition that it understands to be a condition of understanding itself to conform to that condition, and so to be singled out by the specification in which that constituent language appears and on whose comprehension its understanding of its relation to the conditions on which it depends.

This understanding of *Haecceity 9.149.0* realizes, in content and occurrence, its relation to the conditions required of an understanding to determine its relation to those conditions in that understanding. Then the process of understanding the language of the *Haecceity*, as an unfolding active event, is utilized as a secondary means of designing, as a kind of cognitive construction proceeding according to an original plan, the ideational object that registers in its noetic character the formal and semantic aspects of the secondary design that is the immaterial product of that construction. This can be understood to be a case of the being designed of a being designed as secondary forms of design, and its realization represents one kind of radical identity in one kind of limit of Abstraction determined by one form of primary design according to principles of Essentialism.

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Notes

- ¹ However, different meanings of the term ‘abstract’ may be apt, and when they are, I write a/Abstract to reflect the relevance of each to the thought in which the use of that term appears.
- ² Use of the term ‘Essentialism’ throughout this article is meant to convey in a single term a set of interrelated notions that would otherwise take several words to express, and whose omission in favor of those words would result in the kind of redundancy in which repetition becomes objectionable. Any other meaning that ‘essentialism’ has in or outside of philosophy is irrelevant to the particularity of its use in the way that it is used as it pertains to the subject matter of this investigation.

- ³ An artwork is ‘radical’ or has a ‘radical identity’ either when it challenges accepted forms of making and apprehending works of art and of understanding intended artwork identity, or when it uses what is required of making and apprehending works of art to fashion artistic identity through the use, in ways that investigate them, of what is required of such making and apprehending. See Strayer, Jeffrey, “I_rD_aE_aN_iT_eA_aT_iY,” in Douglas, Simone, Geczy, Adam, and Lowry, Sean (eds.), *Where Is Art? Space, Time, and Location in Contemporary Art*, New York: Routledge (2022), pp. 149–165.”
- ⁴ For Burgin’s work see Lippard, Lucy, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press (1997) pp. 171–172.
- ⁵ If abstract objects can acquire properties, as seems possible, then they are eternal rather than being purely timeless, and their eternality must intersect with the temporality of the existential events in ordinary time on which their acquisition of properties depends. See Appendix I: Time, Objects, and Properties in Strayer, Jeffrey, *Essentialism and Its Objects: Identity and Abstraction in Language, Thought, and Action* (work in progress).
- ⁶ Certain kinds of object can be spaceless, timeless or eternal, and immaterial and yet depend on mind or consciousness. This is the case in a ‘type-dependent’ object that depends on some type of conscious event to have its particular identity and yet is abstract in the sense now considered. See Strayer, Jeffrey, *Subjects and Objects: Art, Essentialism, and Abstraction*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill (2007), pp. 217–221.
- ⁷ Essentialism can be understood to be a broadening and deepening of Greenbergian Modernism in using necessary conditions of making and apprehending works of art to produce works that reflect conceptually the use of those conditions in their production and apprehension. See *Subjects and Objects*, pp. 29–32.
- ⁸ For a detailed consideration of this history in relation to the images and surfaces of art, and to consciousness, concepts, and language, see Strayer, Jeffrey, “Planarity, Pictorial Space, and Abstraction,” in Purgar, Krešimir (ed.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Image Studies*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, (2021), pp. 187–202. See also *Subjects and Objects*, pp. 15–20.
- ⁹ Bartók’s quote appears in Tamplin, Ronald (ed.) *The Arts: A History of Expression in the 20th Century*, Oxford: Grange Books (1991) p. 52.
- ¹⁰ As Kosuth also produced *Any Five Foot Square Sheet of Glass to Lean Against Any Wall* and *Any Seven Foot Square Sheet of Glass to Lean Against Any Wall* (both in 1965), each of these works is a token of the megatype under which each type named by the title of the work falls. That megatype could be said to be *any sheet of glass to lean against any wall (as a work of art)*. Although this amounts to an increase in the complexity of certain relationships, this could be seen to reduce the difference between one of these works and another as tokens of the same megatype, and so to increase their level of abstraction in relation to the higher-level abstraction of the megatype and the minimization of the difference between the works that follows from it.
- ¹¹ How illustration is related to art and philosophy is complex and interesting. See Wartenberg, Thomas, *Thoughtful Images: Philosophy Illustrated*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2023).
- ¹² To understand how it is possible for the same work of art to be identified with nothing or something or everything relative to the same person at different times, or different people at the same or different times, see *Haecceity 1.0.0* in Strayer, Jeffrey, *Haecceities: Essentialism, Identity, and Abstraction*, Leiden: Brill (2017), pp. 340–364. It is possible to do this by addressing interpretation and understanding through the use of just three words put in the right relation to one another. See also <https://www.jeffreystroyer.com/haecceity-sequence-1/haecceity-1-0-0/>
- ¹³ For remarks on how this work can be thought to be paradoxical by Margaret Boden and to generate an infinite regress by Diarmuid Costello, see Strayer, Jeffrey, “I_rD_aE_aN_iT_eA_aT_iY,” p. 155. Boden, Margaret A., “Creativity and Conceptual Art,” in *Philosophy & Conceptual Art*, Goldie, Peter and Schellekens, Elisabeth (eds.) Oxford: Oxford University Press (2007), p. 230, and Costello, Diarmuid, “Kant After LeWitt: Towards an Aesthetics of Conceptual Art,” p. 112 of the same volume.
- ¹⁴ Unless, that is, the language is used to refer to itself or the object that contains it, as with *Nothing, Something, Everything* by On Kawara.
- ¹⁵ See Lippard, Lucy, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press (1997) pp. 171–172.
- ¹⁶ I conceive of Essentialism as a complex investigation that includes both art and philosophy as its cultural constituents.
- ¹⁷ The interested reader is referred to Strayer, Jeffrey *Subjects and Objects* and *Haecceities*.
- ¹⁸ For an Abstract work that, paradoxically, can be understood to confirm this in being understood to be an exception to it see *Haecceity 12.0.0* in *Haecceities*, pp. 433–437. Also, see <https://www.jeffreystroyer.com/haecceity-sequence-12/haecceity-12-0-0/>.

- ¹⁹ On how the space of apprehension is designed to solve the problems of number, distribution, figure and ground, and asymmetry that arise with placing language on a two-dimensional surface see *Haecceities*, pp. 63–84.
- ²⁰ See Alberro, Alexander, *Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth-Century Latin American Art*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, (2017), p. 2.
- ²¹ This kind of investigation of identity results in different kinds and forms of radical identity, which, in Essentialism, is tied to the creative inquiry into the limits of Abstraction in art. See Strayer, Jeffrey, “*I D E N T I T Y*.”
- ²² On the notion of a medium, and how consciousness and agency, in conjunction with language that is intended to engage them, can be understood to be media, see *Subjects and Objects*, pp. 234–253. To see how they can function as such, see *Haecceities*, and *Essentialism and Its Objects* (work in progress).
- ²³ Within that *kind* of limit there may be several different *particular* limits, or ways of achieving Abstract Essentialist identity, that can be individually determined by different means that are also of substantial significance and value.
- ²⁴ To distinguish it from the philosophical use of haecceity that pertains to the particularity of identity, and to acknowledge its relation to the titles of artworks, I capitalize and italicize the use of *Haecceity* in Essentialist Abstraction.

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