



Contemporary Art and the Problem of Indiscernibles: An Adverbialist Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses Arthur Danto's claim that contemporary artworks, such as Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*, do not differ perceptually from ordinary objects, and that in order to see contemporary artworks as art the viewer has to move from mere experience to a meaning expressed by the work. I propose to supplement Danto's thesis. I argue that, while some contemporary artworks may indeed be perceptually indistinguishable from ordinary objects, these works are distinguishable not only by means of meaning but also by means of a non-perceptual aesthetic experience. I then discuss two theories that might provide a model of such an aesthetic experience. First, I focus on James Shelley's theory of non-perceptual aesthetic experience conceived as a representation of non-perceptual aesthetic properties. Second, I discuss Jérôme Dokic's adverbialist theory, which sees aesthetic experience as a combination of non-aesthetic attitudes. I argue that the adverbialist model is the most promising candidate for solving our problem. The model must be extended, however, if it is to account for pragmatic attitudes in response to artworks.

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KEYWORDS:

contemporary art; non-perceptual aesthetic experience; metacognitive feelings; adverbialism; Arthur Danto; James Shelley; Jérôme Dokic

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Koblížek, Tomáš.

'Contemporary Art and the Problem of Indiscernibles: An Adverbialist Approach.'

Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics LXI/ XVI, no 1 (2023): pp.

19–35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.283>

Arthur Danto's greatest contribution to the philosophy of art can be summed up in the following two related claims: contemporary artworks such as Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* do not differ perceptually from ordinary objects, and in order to see contemporary artworks as art the viewer has to move from mere experience to a meaning expressed by the work.¹ The aim of this paper is to supplement Danto's theory. I will demonstrate that, while some contemporary artworks are indeed perceptually indiscernible from ordinary objects, these works are distinguishable *not only* by means of meaning *but also* by means of an aesthetic experience that they elicit. More precisely, I will show that contemporary works that are perceptually indiscernible from their non-artistic counterparts are conceivable in terms of situations that invite the spectator to abandon the position of an observer, assuming instead an active, participatory role in the work. A non-perceptual aesthetic experience is then elicited as the work frustrates the pragmatic attitude of the viewer.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the first part, I explain the sense in which I propose to supplement Danto's approach. In the next section I move on to the evaluation of two theories that may provide a model of aesthetic experience vis-à-vis contemporary artworks that are perceptually indiscernible from their non-artistic counterparts. Here, I focus on James Shelley's theory of non-perceptual aesthetic experience, understood as a representation of non-perceptual aesthetic properties.² I then consider Jérôme Dokic's adverbialist theory. On this view, aesthetic experience consists of a combination of non-aesthetic attitudes.³ I argue that the adverbialist model is the most promising candidate for solving our problem.

I. AFTER PERCEPTION: DANTO

Let us begin with a brief overview of Danto's account of contemporary art. First, it should be noted that Danto uses the term 'contemporary art' as an art-historical rather than an indexical term. In his account, contemporary art *is a kind of art* that has been produced since the 1960s, rather than *current art* or *novelties* in the art

1 See Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) and *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). I will discuss Danto's approach in Section I. It is well known that Danto slightly modified his approach to aesthetics in *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003). These alterations, however, do not affect the argument presented here, since Danto repeats his earlier claim that perceptual aesthetic properties are not an essential facet of artistic works. For discussion, see Jonathan Gilmore, 'Internal Beauty', *Inquiry* 48 (2005): 145–54.

2 See James Shelley, 'The Problem of Non-perceptual Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43 (2003): 363–78. Shelley's essay gave rise to an important debate, which I do not have the space to discuss here. See Noël Carroll, 'Non-perceptual Aesthetic Properties: Comments for James Shelley', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 44 (2004): 413–23, and Diarmuid Costello, 'Kant and the Problem of Strong Non-perceptual Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53 (2013): 277–98.

3 See Jérôme Dokic, 'Aesthetic Experience as a Metacognitive Feeling? A Dual-Aspect View', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 116 (2016): 69–88. To my knowledge, Dokic is the first author to apply the adverbialist approach to the domain of aesthetics. Nevertheless, his text was inspired by Sabine Döring, 'What Is an Emotion? Musil's Adverbial Theory', *Monist* 97 (2013): 47–65. Döring advocates for a theory of emotions whereby evaluative qualities are conceived of in terms of a phenomenology of a 'subject's worldview'.

world.⁴ Danto points out that prototypical contemporary artworks are perceptually not altogether distinct from everyday objects, and takes Warhol's *Brillo Box* (1964) as a case in point. As he puts it, '[n]othing need mark the difference, outwardly, between Warhol's *Brillo Box* and the Brillo boxes in the supermarket'.⁵

In Danto's account, works of a contemporary kind represent a substantial departure from modernist art, which dominated the first half of the twentieth century. In short, for Danto modernism sought to distinguish between artworks and ordinary objects on the basis that artworks are made to be appreciated *solely* for their appearance, while ordinary objects are not primarily intended to exhibit any extraordinary perceptual qualities – although they may also be perceptually appreciated. Danto regarded contemporary art as no longer identifiable on these grounds; as *Brillo Box* illustrates, perception *alone* is not sufficient for discriminating between such artworks and ordinary objects. He therefore claims that the 'arthood' of contemporary artworks is not to be understood in *aesthetic* terms but with reference to the *meaning* expressed by the work.⁶

The aim of this paper is not to discuss Danto's theory of contemporary art in detail but, as noted above, to propose a way of supplementing his account. My approach is as follows.

First, although I take it as a historical fact that perceptual indiscernibility is an important aspect of contemporary artworks, I will not defend the claim that *all* art in the period concerned possesses the property of perceptual indiscernibility from ordinary objects. My starting point will be the more modest and rather uncontroversial claim that at least *some* of the prototypical contemporary works, such as Warhol's *Brillo Box* or some of Claes Oldenburg's installations discussed by Danto, instantiate the property of perceptual indiscernibility from ordinary objects.

Second, I assume that contemporary artworks that are perceptually indiscernible from ordinary objects differ from these objects not only in terms of meaning but also in terms of aesthetic experience, which is not, however, elicited by the perceptual properties of the object. In this sense, I should speak of *non-perceptual aesthetic experience*. My main task in this paper is to explain the phenomenon of non-perceptual aesthetic experience and to demonstrate how such an experience, and not only the meaning, could play a distinguishing role.

Third, I will take perceptual indiscernibility to mean indiscernibility with respect to properties perceptible through *the five senses*. This qualification is important because, as I argue in Section III, the difference between contemporary art and the non-art from which it is perceptually indistinguishable is largely to do with the manipulation of a work's properties related to action of which we are *aware* but which we do not *perceive* in the sense I have just defined. I also use the term 'perceptible through

4 See Danto, *After the End of Art*, 9–10. Compare with the 'generic' use of the term 'contemporary art' in Nathalie Heinich, *Le paradigme de l'art contemporain: Structures d'une révolution artistique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014), 24–30; for important discussion of different uses of the term, see Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 24–29.

5 Danto, *After the End of Art*, 13; see also Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 33–53, Danto discusses Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* on page 44.

6 See, for example, Danto, *After the End of Art*, 13, 15–16, and *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 90–114. Regarding this point, Shusterman offers an interesting perspective on Danto when he speaks of the 'anaestheticization of aesthetics' by Danto; see Richard Shusterman, 'The End of Aesthetic Experience', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997): 29–41.

the five senses' as synonymous with 'sensory' and 'sensual', all referring to low-level sensory properties (lines, colours, and so on).⁷

Fourth, this implies that by non-perceptual experience in contemporary art I refer to an experience that is not elicited by the properties perceptible through the five senses. It does not, however, follow from this claim that contemporary works do not possess perceptual properties so defined, and that these properties may not for their part elicit a perceptual aesthetic experience: one could certainly admire the perceptual properties of the *Brillo Box*. It would be interesting to ask whether such admiration would relate to the properties of the artwork or of the mere real thing from which the artwork is perceptually indiscernible. Whatever the answer might be, it is nonetheless crucial for my claim that, in contemporary artworks that are perceptually indiscernible from mere real things, not only a meaning but also a non-perceptual aesthetic experience plays a distinguishing role vis-à-vis non-artistic objects. Such a claim does not rule out a situation in which a non-perceptual aesthetic experience is supplemented by a perceptual one.

Fifth, the following discussion does not concern contemporary literature or music but draws on conceptual art (including conceptual photography), installation art, and land art. This is in no way meant to imply, however, that contemporary art equals only these art forms and other forms could not play the role of example. On the contrary, there could be a parallel debate on forms of contemporary literature mimicking non-literary writing, such as Édouard Levé's *Journal* (2004), which makes use of journalistic discourse, or the contemporary music known as *musique concrète*, such as Luc Ferrari's *Presque rien* (1970), which consists of real-life sounds recorded on a beach. These examples could also be used to demonstrate that contemporary works that do not perceptually differ from non-artistic objects may elicit an aesthetic experience that I define as non-perceptual.

II. BEYOND THE FIVE SENSES: SHELLEY

We can consider two approaches to the problem of non-perceptual aesthetic experience. A non-perceptual aesthetic experience could be conceived of either in terms of its intentional content or in terms of its phenomenology. In this section I discuss a conception of the first kind, and in the following section a conception of the second kind.⁸

In 2003, James Shelley published a remarkable essay, 'Problem of Non-perceptual Art', which primarily concerns Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, as well as other works that fall into the genre of readymades, and some examples of conceptual art. On Shelley's account, however intellectual the artwork may appear, it has aesthetic properties whose presence we do not infer but which forcibly strike or move us.⁹ Nevertheless,

7 I therefore accept what James Shelley calls Beardsley's 'narrow definition' of perception: 'When [Beardsley] says that the properties on which aesthetic properties depend are essentially perceptual, he means that those properties are essentially perceptible by means of the five senses.' Shelley, 'Problem of Non-perceptual Art', 372–73. Comp. Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 31–32.

8 Here I follow up on Lamarque's claim that 'being a work – certainly being a work of art – must make a difference and the difference [...] must be realizable either in the phenomenology or the intentional content of an experience, broadly conceived'. Peter Lamarque, 'On Perceiving Conceptual Art', in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, ed. Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14.

9 Shelley follows the non-inferentialist position, as defended by Frank Sibley in 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic', *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 135–59. Sibley's approach, as well as that of other aesthetic non-inferentialists, has recently been challenged by Dan Cavedon-Taylor, 'Reasoned and Unreasoned Judgement: On Inference, Acquaintance and Aesthetic Normativity', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 57 (2017): 1–17.

for Shelley, these aesthetic properties are not perceived through the five senses, thus allowing us to speak of *non-perceptual* art. In what follows, I summarize Shelley's argument and consider to what extent it helps us in solving the problem of non-perceptual aesthetic experience.

To begin, Shelley puts forward three propositions that are typically at stake regarding non-perceptual artworks:

(R) 'Artworks necessarily have aesthetic properties that are relevant to their appreciation as artworks.'

(S) 'Aesthetic properties necessarily depend, at least in part, on properties perceived by means of the five senses.'

(X) 'There exist artworks that need not be perceived by means of the five senses to be appreciated as artworks.'¹⁰

Shelley claims that philosophers of art typically adopt one of two positions. The first position is to accept (R) and (S) and reject (X), which is tantamount either to denying that contemporary, non-perceptual artworks are in fact artworks or to reducing non-perceptual to perceptual art. The second position is to argue for (S) and (X) and reject (R), which implies a dissociation between art and aesthetics.

I will not unpack Shelley's discussion of the two positions. Instead, I turn directly to his favoured one – namely, to accept (R) and (X) and reject (S). This yields the following triad:

(R) 'Artworks necessarily have aesthetic properties that are relevant to their appreciation as artworks.'

(X) 'There exist artworks that need not be perceived by means of the five senses to be appreciated as artworks.'

(¬S) 'Aesthetic properties do not necessarily depend, at least in part, on properties perceived by means of the five senses.'

This trifurcated position requires close commentary, since Shelley presents it as *the* solution to the problem of non-perceptual art.

Shelley's position on perception is complex. He does not claim that the aesthetic properties of non-perceptual artworks are *simply* non-perceptual. The claim is instead that these properties are non-perceptual in one specific way, insofar as they do not depend on the five senses.¹¹ Thus, Shelley suggests that aesthetic properties such as being daring, impudent, irreverent, witty, clever, or any other property one may attribute to Duchamp's *Fountain*¹² should be more precisely conceived of as *non-sensuous* aesthetic properties, for we neither see nor hear wittiness, impudence,

10 Shelley, 'Problem of Non-perceptual Art', 364.

11 Shelley thus follows Sibley's definition of perception. This allows him to consider an aesthetic experience to be perceptual even though it is not based on the five senses. See *ibid.*, 372–73.

12 This list of *Fountain's* aesthetic properties comes from Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 93–94.

cleverness, or any other such property. These properties, however, can still be construed as perceptual aesthetic properties insofar as they strike or move us. Thus, on Shelley's view, the aesthetic experience of *Fountain* can be judged as the perceptual effect of a non-sensuous cause. Or, to put it another way, Shelley proposes a conception of non-perceptual aesthetic experience as the perception of non-sensuous aesthetic properties.¹³

What issues might there be with such a view of aesthetic experience? One may countenance a broad range of objections that are traditionally levelled against aesthetic realism, which is a term that one may associate with Shelley's theory: it conceives of non-perceptual aesthetic experiences as veridical representations of non-perceptual aesthetic properties rather than nonrepresentational states, such as delight or pleasure.¹⁴ Shelley might therefore be considered to be a 'non-perceptual aesthetic realist'. In what follows, however, I will not recount the objections generally raised against realism, also due to Shelley's later claim that the relation between his theory and realism is not straightforward.¹⁵ Instead, I will provide further observations regarding the *Fountain* example, and use these observations to identify problematic points in Shelley's theory.

Let us look closer at the aesthetic properties that Shelley attributes to *Fountain*.¹⁶ In his words, the object strikes us with impudence, irreverence, daring, wit, and so forth. To articulate an aesthetic judgement such as '*Fountain* is witty' can therefore only mean to consider 'wittiness' to be a property exemplified by the object, which strikes or moves us. Again, Shelley points out that we do not simply *infer* that *Fountain* has the property of being witty: we rather *perceive* the wittiness itself.

This analysis, however, does not take into consideration several important aspects of *Fountain*. Most importantly, the witty effect would not take place without subverting the spectatorial expectations that we inevitably carry with us when attending an exhibition. Simply put, the spectator expects an extraordinary object that can be appreciated as manifesting artistic mastery. Nevertheless, being confronted with *Fountain*, these expectations are immediately frustrated and stay unfulfilled.¹⁷ This frustration has, then, a double form. First, the spectator's expectations are not frustrated because they are simply confronted with *something other* than the expected fine artwork. Instead, they are confronted with the very *opposite* of what

13 The term 'aesthetic experience' does not appear in Shelley's paper. I follow Noël Carroll's reading of Shelley as defending the idea that non-perceptual artworks support 'aesthetic experience, appropriately understood' (Carroll, 'Non-perceptual Aesthetic Properties', 422; see also 413 and 419). I consider Carroll's reading legitimate as Shelley himself speaks about aesthetic properties that '*strike us with their presence*' (Shelley, 'Problem of Non-perceptual Art', 372; italics my own).

14 We may refer to Roger Scruton's criticism of the realist view on aesthetic experience in his *Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 153–54. Scruton's criticism has been further elaborated on by Malcolm Budd, 'Aesthetic Realism and Emotional Qualities of Music', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 (2005): 111–22.

15 Shelley claims his theory is not about 'what sort of *value* there is, but is rather about what sort of *valuing* there is'; see James Shelley, 'Against Value Empiricism in Aesthetics', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88 (2010): 716. This claim can also be applied to Shelley's claims about aesthetic properties.

16 Any other example of non-perceptual art could also be used to support the following argument.

17 Robert Hopkins makes an analogical claim in commenting upon conceptual art in 'Speaking through Silence: Conceptual Art and Conversational Implicature', in Goldie and Schellekens, *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, 65.

they had anticipated – namely, a vulgar object. Second, the opposite of what the spectator expects paradoxically resembles an anticipated work in certain respects. This is because, at least from one perspective, *Fountain* bears the formal qualities of a sculpture (such as Constantin Brancusi's *Torse de jeune fille*, 1922).

These observations lead to a twofold objection to Shelley's model. First, the assumption of non-perceptual aesthetic properties is redundant for explaining *Fountain*'s wittiness. Second, there is a lack of evidence for non-perceptual aesthetic properties.

To make sense of the first objection, note that Shelley considers three elements in his argument: (1) *Fountain*'s perceptual non-aesthetic properties; (2) *Fountain*'s non-perceptual aesthetic properties, and (3) *Fountain*'s striking effect, where (2) and (3) provide the distinction between the artistic and the non-artistic object. To explain *Fountain*'s wittiness, there is a good reason to consider (3): Duchamp's work can indeed be perceived as witty only if it has this effect on its spectator. Conversely, there seems to be no reason to commit to a specific set of properties (2): as made clear above, the wittiness can be satisfactorily explained as a frustrated expectation provoked by the work being thoughtfully placed in a particular context. Without an additional argument for assuming the non-perceptual aesthetic properties, only a more modest claim is plausible. This is the claim that *Fountain*'s wittiness is not a *striking property* but the *striking effect itself*: in other words, a metacognitive feeling inspired by the artwork.¹⁸

Regarding the second objection, the only elements for which we have evidence concerning *Fountain* are the thoughtfully placed object, which is perceived, and the striking effect, which is felt. There seems to be no evidence for non-perceptual aesthetic properties. Shelley could argue that the striking effect is itself evidence for such properties: a feeling of wittiness perhaps indicates a property of being witty as its cause. We are not, however, provided with an explanation of how a feeling could play such a role in referring to a corresponding property. It seems safer to construct a theory considering solely the perceptual non-aesthetic properties of an object and its effects upon the spectator.

To summarize my position hitherto, I sympathize with Shelley's claim that non-perceptual art inspires aesthetic experiences that are independent of the five senses. Furthermore, Shelley's observation that non-perceptual art strikes us or moves us is important. But, as I have argued, we should not identify this experience with a representation of non-perceptual aesthetic properties. As an alternative, I will offer a different account of non-perceptual aesthetic experience.

III. DOKIC: ADVERBIAL EXPERIENCE

Let us now move to the adverbialist model, which was recently introduced into aesthetics by Jérôme Dokic and constitutes a characteristically phenomenological theory of aesthetic experience. Since the theory is not widely known, I will first present its key premises. Then I will discuss the suitability of Dokic's approach for solving the

18 Our claim also concerns Nanay's aesthetic theory, which operates on the presupposition of 'semi-formal properties'. These properties are constitutively dependent on formal properties such as lines, shapes, colours, and the relations between them; see Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 93–94. For Nanay, then, the difference between *Fountain* and its non-artistic correlate concerns semi-formal properties, while the formal properties of the two objects are identical. I would argue against Nanay that the difference is not one of *properties* but of *experiences*: the former elicits a (metacognitive) feeling of surprise; the latter does not.

problem of non-perceptual aesthetic experience in contemporary artworks that do not perceptually differ from ordinary objects.

The adverbialist approach has in past years been discussed largely in the domain of the theory of consciousness. It is usually contrasted with the relational view including (1) the naïve realism that accounts for consciousness in terms of the external relation between consciousness and its object and (2) first-order tracking theories that view the intentional content of consciousness as a representation of the environment.¹⁹ One of the main motivations for adverbialists to look for an alternative view is that relationists have difficulty explaining the intentional relation to non-existent entities – typically fictional ones – because any relation requires *relata*. The adverbialist solution to this problem consists in considering conscious states not as a relation to an object but rather as a matter of thinking in a certain way. As Uriah Kriegel puts it, '[a]ccording to adverbialism about intentionality, having a dragon thought is not a matter of bearing the thinking-about relation to dragons, but of engaging in the activity of thinking dragon-wise'.²⁰ In other words, the adverbialism considers consciousness not in terms of being about an *x* but in terms of representing it *x-wise*.

Although Dokic in his text on adverbialism applied to aesthetic experience does not explicitly refer to the aforementioned debates, it is clear that the approach he offers corresponds with the main facets of adverbialism about consciousness. This correspondence is detectable in two passages.

First, Dokic claims that aesthetic experience is not an intentional relation to some sort of property but rather a way of considering an object. As he puts it,

[a]esthetic experience is not itself an intentional attitude. [...] *A fortiori*, it is not intentionally about any aesthetic property or value. [...] It is an aesthetic way or mode of considering, and perhaps interacting with, the world and in particular the aesthetic object. To have an aesthetic experience is to view the world aesthetically.²¹

In other words, like Kriegel, for whom thinking of a dragon is not a relation to this object but rather the activity of thinking dragon-wise, for Dokic the aesthetic experience does not consist in an intentional attitude towards an aesthetic property but in a way of experiencing an object.

Second, the correspondence between Dokic's model of aesthetic experience and adverbialism about consciousness is evident in a passage where he explicitly contrasts his approach with aesthetic models that consider the aesthetic experience in terms of

19 Kriegel is one of the main defenders of adverbialism about consciousness, see especially Uriah Kriegel, 'The Dispensability of (Merely) Intentional Objects', *Philosophical Studies* 141 (2008): 79–95, and *The Sources of Intentionality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For critical assessments of Kriegel's approach see Alexander Dinges, 'The Many-Relations Problem for Adverbialism', *Analysis* 75 (2015): 231–37, or Casey Woodling, 'The Limits of Adverbialism about Intentionality', *Inquiry* 59 (2016): 488–512. A metaphysical version of adverbialism may be found in Kyle Banick, 'How to Be an Adverbialist about Phenomenal Intentionality', *Synthese* 198 (2021): 661–86. It is noteworthy that Kriegel himself reflects on the conditions of our aesthetic judgements; see his 'A Fitting-Attitude Approach to Aesthetic Value?', *British Journal of Aesthetics* (forthcoming). Although Kriegel does not invoke adverbialism here, his approach corresponds with this line of thought.

20 Kriegel, 'Dispensability', 79.

21 Dokic, 'Aesthetic Experience', 72.

an intentional relation to properties. Dokic speaks first of the 'Perceptual Model' that in his view relies on an analogy with sensory perception. As he puts it,

[o]n this model, aesthetic experience is an intentional attitude whose content involves some aesthetic property or value. Spontaneous aesthetic judgements ('This sculpture is marvellous') can then be conceived as endorsing the aesthetic contents of the underlying aesthetic experiences, just as ordinary perceptual judgements ('This flower is odorous') endorse the contents of perceptual experiences.²²

Furthermore, Dokic contrasts the adverbialist approach with what he labels the 'Attitudinal Model', which views the aesthetic experience in terms of an intentional relation to non-aesthetic properties. Dokic holds that,

on this model, aesthetic experience is an intentional attitude, but, in contrast to the Perceptual Model, its content does not involve any aesthetic property or value. Aesthetic experience is about a nonaesthetic state of affairs, but it is still a *sui generis* attitude, that is, an attitude that is specific to, or at least typical of, the aesthetic domain.²³

The key question concerning Dokic's adverbialism is as follows: if aesthetic experience is neither an intentional non-aesthetic relation to aesthetic properties nor an intentional aesthetic attitude to non-aesthetic properties but simply a way of experiencing the world, what sort of experiencing is it?

To clarify the 'way' of aesthetic experiencing, Dokic claims that aesthetic experience is a modification of non-aesthetic attitudes. More specifically, he speaks of a combination of pleasure and interest as elicited by familiar and unfamiliar aspects of a perceived object.²⁴ More concretely, by stressing the aspects of unfamiliarity and interest he argues against the 'one-aspect view' of aesthetic experience, which takes it to be a solely pleasurable mental state arising from processing fluency: Dokic refers here to the theory of Rolf Reber, for whom there is a direct proportionality between processing fluency and aesthetic response.²⁵ For Dokic, nevertheless, the pleasure and the processing fluency alone cannot explain why we keep attending to a work. If we recognize an object easily, there seems to be no reason to carry on observing it, but

22 Ibid., 70.

23 Ibid., 71.

24 Ibid., 79–80. Dokic builds here on empirical studies by Berlyne. See Daniel Berlyne, *Aesthetics and Psychobiology* (New York: Appleton, 1971). Besides Berlyne, Dokic refers to the following works that critically discuss the role of pleasure in aesthetic experience: Paul J. Silvia, *Exploring the Psychology of Interest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); 'Human Emotions and Aesthetic Experience', in *Aesthetic Science: Connecting Minds, Brain and Experience*, ed. Arthur P. Shimamura and Stephen E. Palmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 250–75; and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'expérience esthétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015). See also Rasmus Rosenberg Larsen and David Sackris, 'Feeling the Aesthetic: A Pluralist Sentimentalist Theory of Aesthetic Experience', *Estetika* 57 (2020): 116–34, defending a 'pluralist view' on aesthetic experience against Prinz, who conceives of aesthetic experience in terms of a singular emotion (wonder). See Jesse Prinz, 'Emotion and Aesthetic Value', in *Aesthetic Mind*, ed. Elisabeth Schellekens and Peter Goldie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 71–88.

25 See Rolf Reber et al., 'Processing Fluency and Aesthetic Pleasure: Is Beauty in the Perceiver's Processing Experience?' *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8 (2004): 364–82.

this is what happens when we perceive a work aesthetically. It follows from this claim that for Dokic, even if we know a landscape or an artwork really well, it must possess an aspect that keeps disturbing our cognitive fluency in order to elicit an aesthetic experience. For example, looking at Richard Serra's sculptures, such as *Tilted Arc* (1981), the viewer feels an incongruity between the vertical orientation of the object as viewed and as experienced via the vestibular system. As Dokic puts it, the spectator 'might feel mildly anxious, as if the sculpture were going to fall down, although it is not clearly perceived as tilted'.²⁶

I find the adverbialist approach to be the most promising candidate for explaining the aesthetic experience elicited by contemporary works that are perceptually indistinguishable from ordinary things. First, it avoids a commitment to aesthetic properties, including those that are non-perceptual: as I argued in the previous section, the assumption of non-perceptual aesthetic properties seems redundant, and there is a lack of evidence for non-perceptual aesthetic properties. Second, the adverbialism copes well with qualities such as alienation or strangeness, which characterize the effect of contemporary works that are perceptually indistinguishable from ordinary things. Nevertheless, to apply the adverbialist theory to this domain of contemporary art, two qualifications must be added.

First, according to the existing adverbialist account, aesthetic experience depends on a *perception* that is partly facilitated but also partly frustrated by the artwork. As Dokic puts it, there is an 'uncertainty inherent to the *perception* of unfamiliar objects'.²⁷ As I argue, however, the aesthetic experience of contemporary artworks that are indistinguishable from ordinary objects does not depend on a frustrated perception of sensible properties but requires a frustrated *awareness of properties related to action* (that is, action-related properties).²⁸ Or, to put it simply, I am working on the presupposition that such contemporary artworks are conceivable not only as objects to be looked at but also as *situations* inviting us to perform an action that they necessarily frustrate.²⁹ The non-perceptual nature of these works should not then be associated solely with their emphasis on meaning, as Danto would claim. It also lies

26 Dokic, 'Aesthetic Experience', 80.

27 Ibid., 79.

28 By 'frustration', I mean any cognitive dissonance inducing a metacognitive feeling of strangeness or unfamiliarity. This feeling occurs in degrees from mild to strong. Furthermore, in speaking of 'action-related properties', I have in mind Gibson's theory of affordances. On Gibson's view, affordances are opportunities for action that constitute the environment of both human and non-human animals. Thus, according to Gibson, a horizontal, solid surface is perceived as a support permitting an upright posture. Owing to this, it is perceived as 'walk-on-able' or 'run-over-able': James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 2015), 119. Following Gibson, Withagen et al. have pointed out that an environment is not a *neutral* manifold of action possibilities: it rather *invites* a certain action, or a set of actions, at the cost of others. See Rob Withagen et al., 'Affordances Can Invite Behavior: Reconsidering the Relationship between Affordances and Agency', *New Ideas in Psychology* 30 (2012): 250–58. Withagen et al. also apply the notion of affordances to contemporary art. To this end, they discuss the 1994 exhibition of Krijn de Koning's sculptures at the Artcite Inc. gallery.

29 Thus, participation is not only a matter of 'participatory art' as a particular artistic genre. On 'participatory art' as a form, see an excellent text by David Novitz, 'Participatory Art and Appreciative Practice', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59 (2001): 153–65.

in the fact that these works constitute appeal to our awareness of possible courses of action, which has no sensory content.³⁰

To illustrate, we can use Danto's example of the *Brillo Box*. The spectator perceives the work as a well-known object: it appears as an ordinary carton used by the Brillo company for shipping soap pads (the original Warhol work kept the standard size of the boxes and the original design). But the viewer also realizes that the work figures in an unfamiliar milieu – the *Brillo Box* was first exhibited in 1964 at the Stable Gallery in New York – which elicits a feeling of strangeness: the uncommon place of the object's exhibition seems to rule out the action ordinarily connected with supermarket cartons without clearly encouraging a different type of action. Such a feeling of strangeness or frustration is not therefore related to the perception but rather to the awareness of possible action.

This is the first reason why the current, perception-oriented version of adverbialism should be modified if we are to explain the aesthetic experience of contemporary art that does not perceptually differ from non-art. This kind of contemporary art is not distinguishable from ordinary objects on the level of perception but rather on the level of awareness of action, which has no perceptual content. A non-perceptual aesthetic experience is then elicited as an awareness of this sort is frustrated.

The second necessary alteration to the adverbialist model concerns what Jérôme Dokic calls 'the motivational profile of aesthetic experience'. This accounts for our desire to continue looking at an aesthetic object. On the current adverbialist account, this motivation resides in the viewer's curiosity regarding the unknown or unfamiliar aspects of the work. As Dokic puts it, '[w]e are primitively motivated to resolve the tension due to uncertainty inherent to the perception of unfamiliar objects'.³¹ Or, simply put, as perceivers we tend to eliminate uncertainty and to come to knowledge.

I have two objections to this claim. First, if aesthetic experience motivates the perceiver to maintain their relation to the object because it elicits their curiosity, then it cannot be distinguished from several other non-aesthetic experiences. When we hear a noise in a desolate environment, for instance, we are curious about its source and continue to pay it heed. Yet such an audible experience is evidently not aesthetic. Second, curiosity in the face of strange or unfamiliar aspects of something typically

30 With regard to the non-perceptual character of action awareness, I follow Christophe Peacocke's analysis in his essay 'Mental Action and Self-Awareness I', in *Contemporary Debates in the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Brian McLaughlin and Jonathan Cohen (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 359. On Peacocke's account, action-awareness, and the perception of one's own action, constitute two different experiences. Peacocke demonstrates this point on the example of awareness of opening one's mouth: 'If you are asked to open your mouth, you can do so, and you will be aware that you are opening your mouth. This awareness exists even though you do not perceive your mouth or your lower face at all. You can be aware that you are opening your mouth without seeing or feeling your mouth, and without any of the sensations or perceptions of your own body from the inside (that is, without any proprioception).' The independence of perception and action-awareness, which also includes possible and not only ongoing actions, bears emphasis since the artworks that we are discussing elicit a feeling of uncertainty even though the viewer's experience is perceptually coherent.

31 Dokic, 'Aesthetic Experience', 79 (curiosity is mentioned explicitly on page 74).

does not motivate us to *sustain* but rather to *terminate* the experience. Concerning the strange sound, we strive to resolve our curiosity through enquiry.³²

I therefore agree with Dokic that aesthetic experience does indeed have a motivational profile and that a work that elicits such an experience invites us to continue attending to the object. Nevertheless, to head off the objections set out above, I propose that we understand the aesthetic experience in contemporary artworks we are discussing not as a *mix of pleasure and curiosity*, which may also characterize non-aesthetic experiences, but rather as *frustration with a positive valence*. The positive valence of aesthetic experience results from a modification in our cognitive environment:³³ the work frustrates our awareness of action-related properties, which becomes an occasion for us to distance ourselves from our habitual behaviour and to interact with the spectacle from a different perspective – one endowed with a possible new meaning, or indeed an entire array of meanings. While for Dokic, then, aesthetic experience induces a pleasure that results from what we are *already familiar with*, I claim by contrast that the experience has a positive valence resulting from what we *reveal* through this form of aesthetic engagement.

Let's illustrate this claim in more detail with two examples: Mary Miss's *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* (1977–1978) and Andreas Gursky's photograph *Paris, Montparnasse* (1993).

Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys is considered one of the pioneering works of land art. Art critic Rosalind Krauss describes the work as follows: 'Toward the center of the field there is a slight mound, a swelling in the earth, which is the only warning given for the presence of the work. Closer to it, the large square face of the pit can be seen, as can the ends of the ladder that is needed to descend into the excavation.'³⁴ The spectator who approaches the work thus perceives a dig that presumably has a certain function: it could be interpreted as an archaeological site, as a tunnel, as a kind of underground residence, as a cellar or as an entrance to a canal with an outlet far away.

However, the spectator soon realizes that the work serves neither of these expected purposes – at least, it is not implied in any way – which elicits a feeling of strangeness in them, a feeling that is not based on the perception of an object (*Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* is perceptually easy to grasp) but precisely on the uncertainty about how to act in relation to it. This frustration is, nevertheless, also balanced by the discovery that the object is a form of communication – the work can evoke an array of thoughts that are apt to motivate the spectator to maintain the experience's unfamiliarity: *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* may be perceived as an ironic comment on our habitual relationship with art (instead of a statue, an elaborate, upright object, placed for observation, the spectator faces an empty, subterranean space), as a critical statement regarding our

32 I should mention that there is another, phenomenological approach to aesthetic experience in addition to Dokic's conception: theories of aesthetic attitude (defenders of this approach include Jerome Stolnitz, Richard W. Lind, Gary Iseminger, Jerrold Levinson, and Mohan Matthen). A discussion of this approach in relation to the issue of the indistinguishable in contemporary art would require a separate study. I will only point out that the attitudinal approach seems to be inadequate for dealing with aesthetic experiencing of contemporary perceptually indiscernible art, since the notion of disinterested attention is suited primarily to artworks that we appreciate for nothing else than their *perceptual* properties.

33 I borrow the term 'cognitive environment' from Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, 'Rhetoric and Relevance', in *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. John Bender and David Wellbery (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 87.

34 Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October* 8 (1979): 31.

common behaviour towards the environment (a landscape that is normally accessible for free movement is suddenly pierced by a black hole), as a metaphorical approach to an existential question (a land work that normally has a particular function seems here to be purposeless), or it may function as a political piece (the work is by a woman artist who is not permitted to work except for beneath the visible landscape).

Whatever interpretation we prefer, it should be noted that we are not dealing here with the well-known problem of whether and how meaning is *embodied in a work of art*. Rather, the question is how meaning is 'embodied' in *aesthetic experience*, that is, what role it plays in it. I argue that meaning establishes here the positive valence of an otherwise frustrating experience. This positive valence is based on the recognition that *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* communicates a certain sense or a certain attitude, be it in the domain of politics, ecology, and so on.

As noted above, the other example I should use is Gursky's *Paris, Montparnasse* (1993), a photograph depicting a block of flats in the Parisian *quartier*. Recently, attempts have been made to explain the aesthetic experience the picture calls up in perceptual terms. To this end, Bence Nanay claims that the image operates on two levels. He writes that it needs to be seen 'from two different perspectives, both close up and from far away. If we take only one of these perspectives into consideration, we are missing out on something.'³⁵ Simply put, on Nanay's view, this aesthetic experience pivots upon perspectival ambiguity: the picture invites the perceiver to take two different perspectives simultaneously.

Nanay's analysis is sound. Indeed, the aforementioned 'twofoldness' is a prominently striking aspect of Gursky's work. This is not, however, the whole story. *Paris, Montparnasse* elicits an aesthetic experience not only because it concerns the spectator as the perceiver but also as someone who commonly *makes use of* photographic images. Two points should be taken into consideration here. First, Gursky's image is a clear departure from the aestheticism of modernist photography, characterizable as an 'independently beautiful depiction and composition'.³⁶ While *Paris, Montparnasse* certainly has some aspects of the picturesque – like images produced by Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Aaron Siskind, and Harry Callahan – it also encompasses a strong realist element, which prevents us from using it simply as an *objet d'art* but rather leads us to understand it as an image indistinguishable from an ordinary documentary photograph. Nevertheless, the photograph also prevents us from treating it as an 'honest document' of a building.³⁷ The strong, geometrical structure that occupies the preponderance of the image and the peculiar flatness of the scene imbue the image with unreality. Simply put, the picture may feel strange on account of its both contradicting the spectatorial tendency to use it as an 'artsy' image, on the one hand, and for being a frank representation of reality, on the other.

Nevertheless, the strangeness is paralleled by the vast variety of meanings that it calls forth in the spectator. For example, the *façade*, which binds together the building's exterior and interior, might cause us to think of a brittle frontier, functioning

35 Bence Nanay, 'The Macro and the Micro: Andreas Gursky's Aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012): 92.

36 This phrase hails from Jeff Wall, 'Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art', in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960–1982*, ed. Douglas Fogle (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), 33.

37 I take this expression from Dominic McIver Lopes, *Four Arts of Photography: An Essay in Philosophy* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 37.

to separate a public front and an array of concealed, private spaces (an idea that is furthermore evoked by lamplights at the windows). Moreover, one can pay attention to the modernist sculpture situated in the bottom right-hand corner of the photo, which partially blends into the building. This may lead us to think of, among other things, continuity rather than opposition, between modernist art as an individual creation and the impersonal, minimalist kind of architecture that we see in the picture (the photo depicts the so-called Immeuble Mouchotte, constructed between 1959 and 1964 as part of a wider redevelopment of Montparnasse). In other words, *Paris, Montparnasse* can be seen as a comment on a particular moment in art history.

Thus, our experience with Gursky's picture encompasses the two aspects mentioned above. First, the picture frustrates the common, pragmatic attitudes we normally exercise in the face of photographic images; that is, it flouts our proclivity to treat photographs either as nice things to look at or as documents of the world. Second, the experience has a positive valence since the image stirs up a variety of thoughts. More concretely, *Paris, Montparnasse* suggests an overlapping of public and private spheres and, moreover, a continuity between an anonymous architectural form and an individual art piece, which we observe in front of the building. The combination of our feeling of strangeness about the use of the image and a metacognitive feeling of delight in the presence of meaning then creates a unique aesthetic experience.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have framed contemporary artworks that are indistinguishable from ordinary things in terms of an adverbialist model of aesthetic experience. Starting from Danto's theory of contemporary art, I argued that some contemporary artworks are indeed perceptually indistinguishable from non-art. I departed from Danto, however, on the grounds that such contemporary artworks do not altogether abandon the domain of aesthetics: they induce non-perceptual aesthetic experiences.

In the second section, I evaluated Shelley's theory of non-perceptual aesthetic experience as a possible candidate to solve the problem of contemporary artworks that are perceptually indistinguishable from ordinary things. Shelley defines non-perceptual aesthetic experience through its intentional content, as representing non-perceptual aesthetic properties. I challenged this theory on the grounds that non-perceptual aesthetic properties are redundant for explaining non-perceptual aesthetic experience, that there is a lack of evidence for non-perceptual aesthetic properties, and that non-perceptual aesthetic properties are reducible to metacognitive feelings.

In the final third of the paper, I considered a theory that categorizes aesthetic experience in terms of its phenomenology: Dokic's adverbialist model. In his account, aesthetic experience consists in a combination of pleasure and interest that is elicited by both familiar and unfamiliar aspects of an artwork. I argued that the adverbialist model is the most promising theory for solving our problem. This is because adverbialism does not work on the presupposition of aesthetic properties and it also accounts for the feelings of strangeness and uncertainty that commonly constitute aesthetic experiences of this kind of artwork.

Two amendments, however, needed to be made to the adverbialism. First, I transposed the adverbialist model from its usual domain of standard perception to our more specialized awareness of action-related properties. To this end, I argued that contemporary artworks that are indistinguishable from ordinary things

constitute situations that both mobilize and frustrate our recognition of possible courses of action. Second, I claimed that aesthetic experience should not be taken to consist simply in a combination of pleasure and interest – which can also characterize non-aesthetic experiences – but it is rather a form of frustration with a positive valence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for detailed comments from Jérôme Dokic, Margherita Arcangeli, and other participants at the seminar at the Institut Jean Nicod (Paris), where I first presented the topic. I would also like to thank my colleagues at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague, with whom I had the opportunity to discuss adverbialism. Additional thanks for comments go to Enrico Terrone and Jakub Stejskal, who read the text in detail, and to four anonymous reviewers.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Koblížek
Estetika
 DOI: 10.33134/eeja.283

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
 Koblížek, Tomáš.
 'Contemporary Art and the
 Problem of Indiscernibles:
 An Adverbialist Approach.'
*Estetika: The European
 Journal of Aesthetics* LX/XVI,
 no 1 (2023): pp. 19–35. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.283>

Submitted: 13 July 2021
 Accepted: 17 October 2022
 Published: 15 March 2023

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*Estetika: The European
 Journal of Aesthetics* is
 a peer-reviewed open
 access journal published by
 Helsinki University Press in
 cooperation with the Faculty
 of Arts, Charles University in
 Prague.