

PHILOSOPHY AND THE VISUAL ARTS: ILLUSTRATION AND PERFORMANCE¹

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Abstract: In this paper I distinguish between illustrative and performative uses of artworks in the teaching and communication of philosophy, drawing examples from the history of art and my own practice. The former are where works are used merely to illustrate and communicate a philosophical idea or argument, the latter are where the artist or teacher philosophizes through the creation of art. I hope to promote future collaboration between philosophers, art historians and artists, with artworks becoming catalysts for artistic-philosophical investigation, thus revitalizing the idea of universities embodying ongoing and open-ended conversations.

Keywords: philosophy; history of art; performance; pedagogy; Kant; conceptual art.

The Big Book is the public face of philosophy—think Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* or Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, both close to 1000 pages of dense, imageless text—and professional philosophers today spend the majority of their time reading, writing, submitting and revising peer-reviewed journal articles, the standard form of which is about 8000 words. This focus on the word, however, contrasts with a prominent visual dimension to the teaching of philosophy. In the early modern period, students were encouraged to think through spatial and visual metaphors and analogies in order to articulate philosophical theories. Susanna Berger's (2017) recent *The Art of Philosophy* argues that 'in early modern Europe the viewing and creation of imagery functioned as important instruments of philosophical thought and teaching' (p. 2).² Thought experiments are widely used in contemporary analytic philosophy, particularly in the philosophy of mind and ethics, and they are highly visual. We imagine Mary leaving the black and white room and encountering a red rose, and the trolley approaching the fork in the tracks. We attempt to project these images into the heads of our

¹ Thanks to seminar audiences at Oxford Brookes and CRESA, San Raffaele University, Milan, for feedback on previous drafts.

² Images were not merely tools for knowledge transmission and pedagogy, but the activities of the mind themselves were seen in perceptual terms, or at least this was the dominant metaphor for thinking of the activities of the mind. Locke, for example, held that knowledge is 'nothing but *the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas*' (Locke, 689, p. 4.1.2).

students, and the intuitions they prompt lead to philosophical conclusions concerning, in these cases, materialist accounts of the mind and the ethical distinction between acts and omissions.

Actually, though, the pages of philosophy are not as imageless as I might have suggested. There are some memorable images—those that leap off the page, partly because of their rarity, but also because of how they engage the reader in philosophical thought. Our visual experience oscillates with the duck-rabbit of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and this teaches us something about perception. All who have taken Political Philosophy 101 will remember the frontispiece to Hobbes' *Leviathan*. This is no mere decoration: the multi-bodied 'artificial person' provides formal stability for the engraving and political stability for the state. The image conveys Hobbes' argument: the populace constitute the body of the state and consent to be ruled by the monarch, thus preventing 'war of all against all' (Hobbes, 1651, p. 1.13).

Here I shall distinguish between illustrative and performative uses of images and artworks, particularly in the context of teaching philosophy. The former are where images are used merely to illustrate and communicate a philosophical idea or argument, the latter are where the artist or teacher philosophizes through the creation of images.

Diagrams are of course visual and these can use spatial and geometric arrangements to illustrate conceptual relationships. A Venn diagram, for example, may help someone see that knowledge is justified true belief, with knowledge situated where the three circles overlap. Schopenhauer (1913) used spatial diagrams for conceptual analysis and Charles Peirce's (1992) existential graphs were visual representations of logical notation. Early modern thesis prints or broadsides visually summarized university philosophy courses, and Chéron and Gaultier's *Typus* contains a particularly pleasing visual representation of Aristotelian philosophy of mind. A boy picks flowers (representing sensory input), and hands these to a girl (labelled 'Apprehension'), who processes this sensory information and passes the flowers on to a seated woman, who binds them together into a wreath, symbolizing the combining of concepts into propositions (Berger, 2017, pp. 98–9).

These are images explicitly designed for teaching, but the history of art is also rich with artworks that illustrate philosophical ideas and many teachers of philosophy attach jpegs of these to their PowerPoint presentations. Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* (1601) illuminates Hume's essay on miracles (1772, sct. 10) and related contemporary debates in the epistemology of testimony. The two disciples believe what the stranger is saying, that he is the resurrected Christ, but the innkeeper is more circumspect. The painting can be seen as asking whether we would believe the stranger—and whether we should. In Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* a group of prisoners have been chained to the wall of a cave for as long as they can remember, watching the shadows of things passing behind them projected onto the cave wall in front of them. This world of shadows is all they know; they are in total ignorance of the objects that are casting the shadows they see. Plato's allegory is strikingly visual, and it lends itself to artistic representation. Robert Motherwell painted a series of abstract expressionist paintings of *Plato's Cave* in the 1970s, with thick layers of black, white, and various shades of grey creating a deep space within which—we imagine—the denizens of the cave are chained, cut off from the colours of the world outside.³ I have painted my own series

³ Orson Welles narrated a wonderful cartoon version from 1973: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFi8JUIwu2s>.

of six works that chart Descartes' *Meditations* in which he overcomes his sceptical doubts and comes to acquire certain knowledge of his existence, God and the world around him.⁴ These have been used in class, providing a visual reminder of the arc of Descartes' journey back to knowledge.

There are also artists who have a deeper engagement with philosophical ideas, those where it could be said that the artist philosophizes *through* their art—where their artistic practice is a form of philosophy. Such art does not merely raise philosophical questions or prompt philosophical reflection, but philosophical ideas or conclusions are, in some sense, to be found in the artworks themselves or in the acts of creating them. These artists can be seen as engaged in Performance Philosophy, a movement that explores the philosophical content of artistic performances in the forms of drama, dance or music, although, as yet, there has been limited focus on visual art.⁵ The claim is not merely that 'painting is a means of thinking', as expressed by Motherwell (Flam, 1991, p. 14), but that the creation of visual art, and our engagement with it, is a form of *philosophical* thinking.⁶

One art movement where such an approach to performance is explicit is conceptual art, where *the idea* is primary and the visual (aesthetic) element plays a limited role. Marcel Duchamp's 'Fountain', better seen as a performance than an art object, involved his entering a latrine into the Society of Independent Artists exhibition in New York in 1917 as a sculpture. Duchamp did not make the latrine or even choose a specific one based on its aesthetic properties; he merely signed it 'R. Mutt'. Any one would have done, and we do not even need to see this latrine to appreciate its artistic and philosophical value. The art is *the idea*, and the idea—or perhaps better, the *question*—is a philosophical one, concerning the nature of art and of artworks, and the role played by the gallery space, artists and critics in conferring that status. To my mind this contribution to the debate is more philosophically astute and engaging than the ongoing attempts by analytic philosophers to define or provide necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a work of art.

However, many of the concepts explored by conceptual artists are of limited philosophical interest, and some works are too abstruse or enigmatic to be philosophically illuminating. The meaning of the bride, nine bachelors and several mechanical forms on the almost 3 metre high glass sheet of Duchamp's (1923) 'The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even' (aka 'The Large Glass') is far from clear, and the accompanying 'Green Box' containing 94 'explanatory' documents and plans does not make things any clearer. The focus of other works is more obvious. On Kawara's 'Today' series of date paintings consisted only of meticulously painted dates—just the text and numbers—one a day, most days, from '4 Jan 1966' to just before his death in 2014. They certainly elicit reflection on time and mortality, although it is not clear what exactly they are saying. This, of course, may not undermine their artistic value, but here I am only interested in works that can provide clear and determinate contributions to philosophical debates.

⁴ See www.lowwintersun.org for these paintings and the other artworks of mine described below.

⁵ See Cull & Lagaay (2014).

⁶ Motherwell's focus, in contrast, is on the role that painting has in bringing forth creativity and unconscious thoughts. See Cornish (2011, pp. 11–34) for discussion of the influence of the psychic automatism of surrealism on Motherwell.

Artists are of course interested in the nature of their own activity and philosophical questions concerning the nature of representation have arisen at various times in the history of art. Modernism, for example, is driven by reflection on the nature of perception, and there is deep engagement with questions concerning how images represent and what distinguishes visual images from other symbolic systems.⁷ Semiotic interpretations of cubism, for example, take cubist pictures not to represent via resemblance, but via conventional signs, as suggested by Gertrude Stein (1938): ‘From 1914 to 1917 cubism changed to rather flat surfaces, it was no longer sculptural, it was writing’ (p. 39). Stein’s claim concerns the second, ‘synthetic’ phase of cubism, and not its first ‘analytic’ flowering. It is to the latter that I now turn and, in particular, to the works of Picasso and Braque and their relation to the philosophy of Kant.

Various critics, art historians and philosophers find Kantian themes in art. Clement Greenberg (1960), for example, cites Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) as the source of what he sees as the teleological direction of modernism towards medium-specificity, that is, towards sole focus on what is unique to a particular art form. In the case of painting, this is the flatness of the surface upon which paint is applied to create abstract forms purged of any perspectival or illusionist elements.⁸ The painter Maurice Denis gives early expression to this modernist theme in an essay from 1890: ‘Remember that a picture—before being a battle horse, a nude woman or some anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a certain order’ (Denis, 1890). Cubist works are seen as a key stage on the path towards flatness and abstraction, the destination reached a few years later by Mondrian, Malevich and others.

Others interpret cubist works in terms of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781); their focus not the fleeting appearances which impressionists attempted to capture, but Kant’s noumena and transcendental things-in-themselves.⁹ Elsewhere I have suggested a distinct Kantian interpretation of cubism (O’Brien, 2018). In the ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’, Kant argues that the mind imposes spatio-temporal order on experience. Space and time are not things-in-themselves; they are preconditions of experience—necessary, a priori, aspects of experience through which we must engage with the world; what Kant calls ‘forms of intuition’. Commentators on cubism gesture towards such an account: ‘The arrangement of bottle and fishes [in George Braque’s ‘Still Life with Bottle and Fishes’, 1911] is not embedded in a spatially recognizable background.... Spatial integration of the objects in the picture develops only in the viewers’ minds’ (Gantefuhrer-Trier, 1996, p. 42). The viewer fuses multiple perspectives into a single image, reconstructing objects from dislocated facets, bringing to bear their conceptual understanding of those objects. This chimes with the cubist sculptor Alexander Archipenko’s description of the constructive role of the mind: ‘One can say that Cubism had created a new cognitive order in respect of pictures.... [T]he viewer is...

⁷ For discussion of how early modern still life painting can be seen as a form of philosophical reflection, see Grootenboer (2020).

⁸ For criticism of Greenberg’s interpretation of Kant, see Costelloe (2007), although the most striking critique comes in the form of John Latham’s, ‘Spit and Chew: Art and Culture 1966-1967’ (1966). Latham and his students chewed the pages of Greenberg’s *Art and Culture*, spitting out the pulp that was then collected in a phial, which is now in the collection of MOMA, New York.

⁹ For this ‘idealist’ reading of cubism, see Cheetham (2001).



Fig. 1. D. O'Brien. 2020. 'Blood'

creatively active, and speculates and creates a picture by building upon the plastic character of those objects that are sketched out as forms' (Gantefuhrer-Trier, 1996, p. 30). Such a Kantian account of visual experience can therefore be seen as one of the subjects of these works.¹⁰

What, though, are the jumbled, unresolved painted facets of analytic cubism, those that have not yet been synthesized in the mind of the viewer? Here, Adrian Piper, the conceptual artist and philosopher, has been instructive—in, as you will see, an unexpected way. For her, Kantian 'unsynthesized intuition[s]' consist in 'those collections of representations that are unified into appearances by the elementary operations of apprehension, but not further unified and classified into recognizable objects by the advanced operations of comprehension'. These intuitions are, as it were, the bunches of flowers held by the girl in the early modern broadside discussed above, before they are passed to the seated woman to conceptualize. Piper (2016) continues: 'Although we have sorted these representations into discrete presences that are situated in space and exist in time, we have not succeeded in applying to them the higher-order functions of the understanding that enable us to recognize

¹⁰ Cf. John Berger: 'The real subject of a cubist painting is not a bottle or violin, the real subject is the functioning of sight itself' (Sperling, 2018, p. 83).

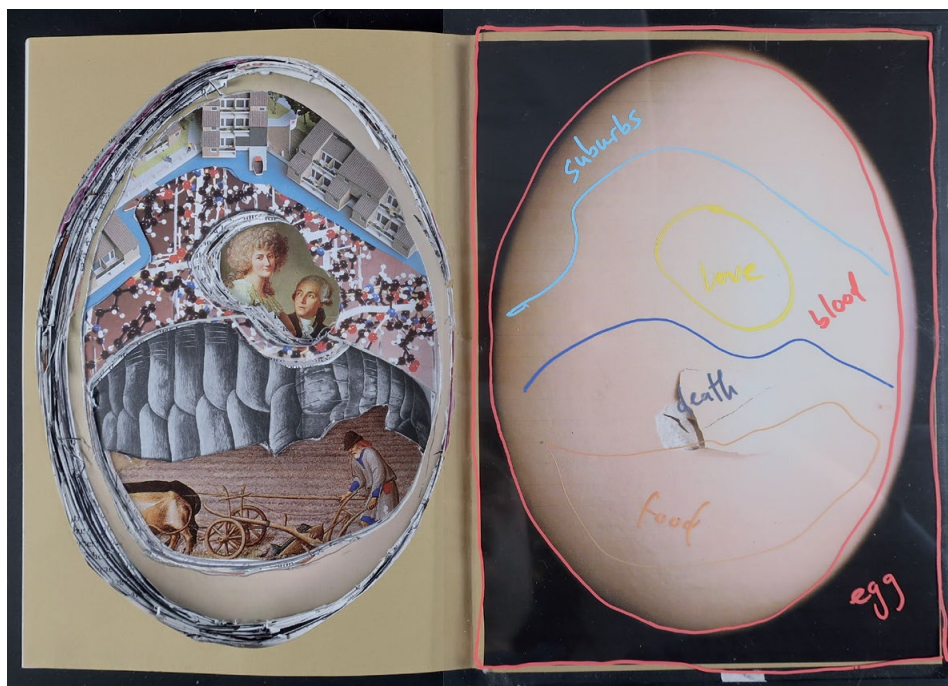


Fig. 2. D. O'Brien. 2020. 'The Suburbs'

them as part of the world of objects, events, and states of affairs with which we are familiar' (p. 86). Piper (2016) argues that we have to be 'comfortable with unsynthesized intuitions' if we wish to engage with contemporary art and 'the bewildered state of wordless confusion, anxiety, and conceptual and conative disorientation it effects' (pp. 91-92). This is the kind of disorientation with which I am concerned, although in the context of cubism and not contemporary art. I now see that the visual disorientation of viewing a cubist painting can be explained by thinking of this visual experience in terms of unsynthesized intuitions. My discovery of Piper's (2016) exploration of Kantian synthesis (78–92) and its relevance to my thoughts on cubism are a pleasing example of one kind of interaction I am suggesting between art and philosophy. I was—or, rather, I thought I was—having a break from philosophy, flicking through the exhibition catalogue of Piper's *A Synthesis of Intuitions*. It turned out, though, that Piper's thoughts on contemporary art have provided me with the Kantian background to interpret the unresolved, or yet to be resolved, jumble of shattered facets of cubist works, before the mind plays its constructive role.

Although Picasso and Braque had not read Kant and were evasive when it came to explaining their work, one can take the act of putting paint on canvas as itself a philosophical move or 'statement'. Artists of various stripes can be seen as pursuing philosophy with their brushes, pencils, glue sticks, and, perhaps, Stanley knives. I am using the latter to create



Fig. 3. D. O'Brien. 2021. 'Age'

a series of carvings of Jonathan Miller's book, *The Body in Question*. Narrative theorists argue that our identities are determined by the stories we tell about ourselves, whether they're focused on our bodies, our relationships or our achievements. The act of book-carving reveals how different narratives can be forged from the same ordered set of words and images and suggests how our lives can be narrated in distinct ways. We can focus on the life of the body, and in 'Blood' the book pulses with corpuscles [fig. 1]. Our idyllic lives in 'The Suburbs'—those of romance, house and garden—are threatened by the flea-driven Plague (parallels of course with today's pandemic) [fig. 2]. Mortality looms large in 'Age'. Rembrandt's series of aging self-portraits peep through the pillars and naves of an imagined mausoleum [fig. 3]. The project is ongoing and carving may reveal more stories hidden within *The Body in Question*, as perhaps there are identities hidden within us.

The intimate relation between artistic thought and the tools and media that artists use to create their works is suggestive of the extended mind thesis. Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1980) introduced this approach with the example of Otto, who habitually uses a notebook to help him navigate the world; his onboard memory lost to Alzheimer's. Such a tool is part of Otto's mind, if it is coupled closely enough with his thought and action. Perhaps art practice suggests a wider range of cognitive extensions. Motherwell is again instructive, playing down our conscious on-board resources and stressing the role of the artists' materials in

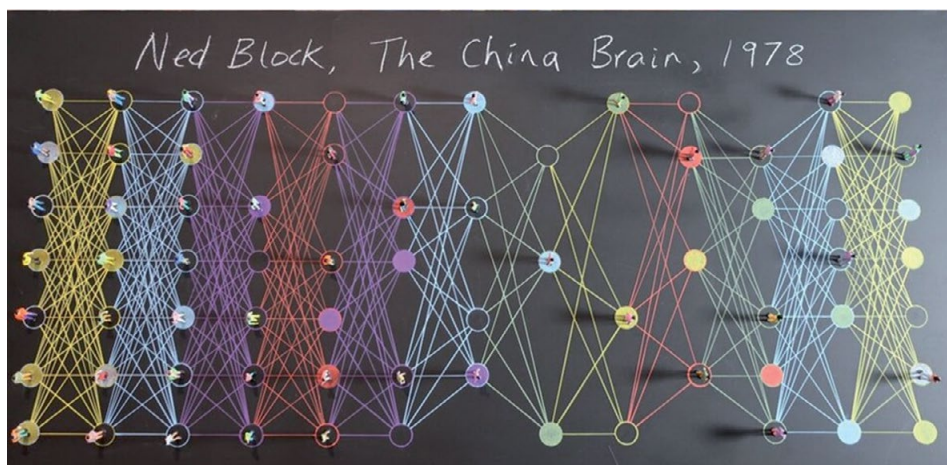


Fig. 4. D. O'Brien. 2020. 'The China Brain'

imagination and creativity. Painting 'is a triadic relation—composed of the artist, the subject and the medium.... The subject does not pre-exist. It emerges out of the interaction between the artist and the medium' (Motherwell, 2007, p. 214).¹¹

All the works I have discussed can and have been used in the teaching of philosophy, but the last works to which I turn also reflect on teaching itself. Various artists and writers comment on the beauty of the pristine canvas, and Mallarmé, the symbolist poet, pauses over the 'anxious white' of his page.¹² The philosophy teacher can also feel this anxiety before her blackboard or whiteboard is populated with text, symbols and diagrams. In co-ordinating a class through the board, one can also perhaps sense one's extended mind. I find myself almost involuntarily drawing diagrams—stick figures, billiards tables, train tracks...—to the point that, without a board, my mind feels stuck, needing the chalk or marker to enable my thoughts to flow. Blackboards have something of a totemic, sacred place in education and—rather embarrassingly—I have found myself at the end of a lecture admiring these records... these traces of thought. That's not to say that my boardwork is artistic in any conventional sense. My blackboards are merely filled with scrawled words and diagrams, but at times I see them as having aesthetic value. Just last week I was pleased to find that I am not alone in this. A recently published book by Jessica Wynne, *Do Not Erase: Mathematicians and their*

¹¹ It is also tempting to interpret Emmanuelle Hincelin's reflections on Picasso's works on paper in terms of extended cognition: 'Paper is not simply a screen on which a sign is placed: it is a material participant in the writing or artistic process' (Hincelin, 2020, p. 49). To my knowledge two art exhibitions have been held with the theme of 'The Extended Mind': Arte Luce, Berlin, 2018; Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, 2020.

¹² See Laraurie (2020, p. 37).

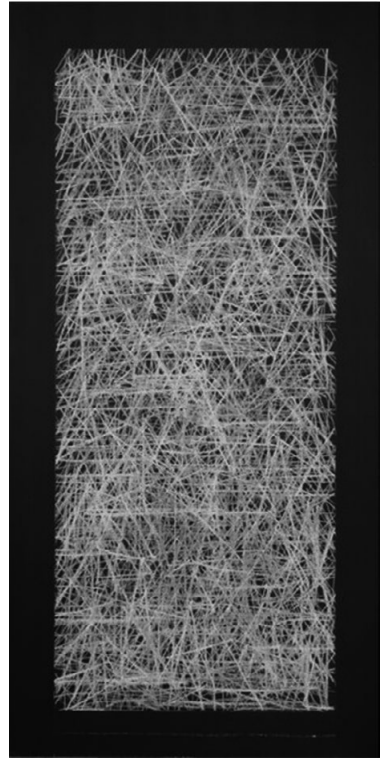


Fig. 5. D. O'Brien. 2020. 'Empiricism'

Blackboards (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), is a collection of photographs of visually striking, sometimes beautiful, mathematicians' blackboards.

Such teaching experiences prompted me to think about a series of 'Blackboard Works' that engage with, what one might call, the phenomenology of the classroom or lecture hall. These also reference artists who have worked with a 'blackboard aesthetic', but whose intentions are distinct in important ways to mine. Cy Twombly's blackboard paintings consist of swirling cursive-like loops, doodles and scribbles, drawn with wax crayon on canvas, but with the appearance of chalk on board, and his '50 Days at Iliam' series (1977–8), based on Homer's *The Iliad*, have the look of whiteboards that are rather the worse for wear. These are not, though, records of lessons on ancient history; they show, rather, according to Gottfried Boehm, 'physical, mental, and intellectual *reactions* to such realities. They elicit effects, immediate fascinations that originate from the broad horizon of the Mediterranean landscape and history' (Storsve, 2020, p. 100). Twombly's paintings are referred to as 'gestural', suggesting that something is wordlessly communicated by the traces of his crayon or brush. It is not clear, though, just what thoughts or emotions are communicated. These paintings may be atmospheric and mysterious, evocative of childhood, perhaps rhythmic—one may feel one's hands or body moving with the looping script—but ultimately they are silent.

My intention, however, is for works to have aesthetic merit alongside determinate philosophical content and pedagogical value. ‘The China Brain’ is in some ways a straight representation of Ned Block’s (1978) thought experiment [fig. 4], but my ‘Empiricism’ series is—or can be—performative, in that the act of creation communicates the philosophical idea. Masking the edges of a blackboard, the teacher proceeds to draw triangles of differing sizes and types (or squares, circles or other shapes). The viewer may focus on a particular triangle that then becomes obscured by line upon line of chalk. The masking tape is removed and the chalk-covered board is magically transformed into an object of aesthetic appreciation [fig. 5]. Further, the jumble of lines communicates triangularity, as other boards communicate squareness or circularity, without there being a particular, unobscured, triangle on which to focus one’s gaze. The idea of ‘triangle’ transcends the tangle of lines, just as, for empiricists, abstract ideas of shape emerge from our ongoing experiences of shapes in the world. I find myself in interesting territory where art and educational life become entwined—on the borderland between teaching and art, illustration and performance. It is, though, a precarious position: become too self-conscious of the artistic dimension and teaching could become distorted. The aim is to communicate a philosophical idea, but also to capture the kind of aesthetic pulse that one receives as one glances at a chaotic blackboard at the end of a class.¹³

Philosophy has never been monolithic. It has been presented in many ways throughout its history, via dialogues, poetry, treatises, journal articles, essays, fiction, science fiction, and recently through films, podcasts, videos, blogs, and cartoons.¹⁴ I hope here to have promoted the rich resources of art history and contemporary art practice. Instead of the hackneyed limerick ‘God in the Quad’, Berkeley’s idealism could be introduced with Bruce Nauman’s ‘Concrete Tape Recorder Piece’ (1968)—a tape recorder encased in concrete with its power flex emerging from a hole at the side (I like to think of the tape as a recording of a tree falling in the forest!). The duck-rabbit could be replaced by Jasper Johns’ *Flag* (1954), seen as a flag or as a painting of a flag. Significantly, Johns does have an interest in Wittgenstein, but he only came across his works after he had first explored such ambiguous images and their importance to perception in his own paintings.¹⁵ Future collaboration between philosophers, art historians and artists should be encouraged, with artworks—from the history of art, contemporary artists, and perhaps those created by students and teachers—becoming catalysts for artistic-philosophical investigation, thus revitalizing the idea of universities embodying ongoing and open-ended conversations.^{16,17}

¹³ One thinks here of *Arte Povera*, the Italian movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. The artists of this movement were searching for ‘unity between life and our art practice’ (Jannis Kounellis, cited in Christov-Bakargiev, 1999, p. 22). *Arte Philosophica* could be the movement that this paper inspires!

¹⁴ Helen de Cruz has a forthcoming volume of iPad paintings of philosophical thought experiments: *Philosophy Illustrated: 40 Thought Experiments to Broaden your Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

¹⁵ ‘What interested me was that you can come to see something through language that you couldn’t come to see through looking. That and the extent to which knowing things influences seeing. That has always interested me and continues to’ (Johns, cited in Donovan, 2017, p. 177). Also see Joseph (2016, p. 143).

¹⁶ For a return to this vision of the university, see Clack (2020).

¹⁷ This project has also started to provide a bridge, not just between art, art history and philosophy, but, for me, between continental and analytic philosophy. My Big Book is *A Treatise of Human Nature*,

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not *Being and Time*, but I have learnt that some of the thoughts that I have explored here already have a home in the continental tradition in the works of Benjamin, Barthes, Merleau-Ponty and others. My reading list has expanded!

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