Our desire to learn and the pleasure we get when we correctly identify something or when we solve some problem is no secret in philosophy. Many philosophers have commented on this, from Aristotle in his first sentence of the *Metaphysics* where he writes, “All men by nature desire to know”\(^1\) to C.S. Pierce’s much quoted sentence, “Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief; while the latter is a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change to a belief in anything else.”\(^2\) To not know something causes us anxiety, whereas to believe we know (of course quite distinct from actually knowing) gives us real satisfaction. This fact is a great motivator. Correctly identifying an object, figuring out a difficult problem, recognizing a pattern, etc., are sources of pleasure for us not as a result of some kind of conditioning to which we’ve been subjected but, arguably, instinctually so. Each of us, so it seems, are hard-wired to enjoy getting things right. Knowing gives us pleasure and, in turn, the desire for pleasure motivates learning.

This kind of knowledge acquisition has generally been thought to be associated with such things as scientific facts or other propositional claims about the world.\(^3\) Art, on the other hand, has not traditionally been associated with knowledge acquisition. Though it has been associated with pleasure it is not generally thought of as the sort of pleasure that motivates or gives us knowledge about the world. Art is not generally thought to give us information about things in the world in the way that a scientific fact does or even in the way a historical or sociological explanation does; it does not give us information in the way that a proposition such as “I know that the ball drops because of gravity” gives us discrete and useful information about the world. Art is thought of as doing something else.

Explanations regarding what it is that art is doing have varied, historically, both between disciplines and within them as well, though the point that is important is the negative one: there is a general consensus regarding what art is not doing. In the realm of art history, the traditional view has been that the activity of looking at art was an act of “appreciating” not of “understanding.” Connoisseurship might

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3. Propositional knowledge is a kind of knowledge that we get from semantic statements that give us propositions about the world; for example, Mary knows that carbon dating establishes the age of an organic material. They are “that” statements. On this view, we count some propositional statements as knowledge because we have true and justified belief. Part of the intent of this chapter is to discuss the delimiting that results from that view of knowledge. The problem is not located in notions of justified or true, but in limiting knowledge to only the kind that can be phrased as semantic claims.
discern sensory subtleties, but it did not discover truths about the world. In philosophy, competing theories placed art as mimetic, or cathartic, or expression, or an instantiation of beauty, etc., but again the overlap is their consensus excluding art as a kind of knowledge acquisition. Thus, in both art history and philosophy, art has generally been thought of as specifically not trading in this currency of knowledge acquisition, particularly not in a way similar to other disciplines such as the sciences or even the humanities.

In general, this recurring view of art as non-epistemic still holds sway despite the fact that much of the art of the last sixty years or so has practiced a critique of society and of art itself. To reiterate common knowledge: the project of modernism, felt to be exhausted by the 1960s, was replaced by pluralistic post-modernism, which arguably shifted the role of the viewer from passive appreciator to active participant in post-modernism’s critique of society and art’s role within society. From 1960s Pop and early conceptual to the current art-fair world of infinite choices, the art after modernism has framed itself as commenting on and engaging with the world. In this, modernism’s patricidal over-throwing of yesterday’s avant-garde style was replaced by post-modernism’s inward criticality; art shifted from signature styles and sequential stylistic movements to the presentation of investigations and critiques.

This accomplishment though has still not been reflected in either the philosophical or theoretic underpinnings of art or in its societal status; art’s relationship to knowledge acquisition continues to be problematic. Epistemic functions continue to be seen as limited to cognitive activities associated with facts and propositions, such that when we say we “learned something” we are referring to gaining knowledge of something that is asserted about the world or about some object in the world independent of our subjective and embodied experience, e.g., that experience that depends on the body’s sifting of reality. Hence, we tend to believe

4 Recent philosophy, particularly perhaps analytic philosophy, often still equates art to beauty, concomitantly excluding it from truth claims, and though there are a few instances of writers seeing art as a kind of epistemology, the view has not been widely advanced.

5 I approach this topic not only from the point of view of a philosopher, but also from the point of view of both an artist and a former art critic. Thinking and doing have usually been thought to be radically different activities, with thinking ascertaining the truth and doing focused on the craft of implementation. Part of my general critique revolves around this false bifurcation, and it is one I am problematizing. Much of making is a kind of thinking; see footnote number 16 for further writing that I’ve done on this topic. My art practice also revolves around the disruption of this false bifurcation between doing and thinking.

6 The major art fairs, including Basel, NY’s Armory, London’s Frieze, Miami’s, have been joined by innumerable others in smaller locations, and they all share in the shopping mall experience, offering viewers/buyers a smorgasbord of choices.

7 In that notion of an embodied self, where the human mind is determined by the existence and experience of the human body and sensory experience is fundamental to both our existence and our identity, the division between the subject and the world of
that we are doing something fundamentally different when we view a scientific
demonstration than when we view an artwork, and the cognitive functions that
deliver reality to us are accomplished through the former and not through the latter.
Art, though thought of as a means to pleasure, is not, yet, thought of as the sort of
pleasure that Aristotle and Pierce were referring to when they were discussing what
it is we do when we learn something or consent to a proposition. Art is instead a
different sort of pleasure and one that cannot give us epistemic access to the world.

This is wrong. Art is an essential way that we gain knowledge of the world
and that gaining of knowledge is motivated by the same pleasure in learning that we
experience in other realms. I will in this book argue that art is an epistemic practice
that allows us to construct a world in the face of a bombardment of vast amounts of
sense data, and associated mental responses to that data. And I will also argue that
art, as an epistemic experience that maintains our identity as embodied subjects, is,
importantly, one of the main ways we get our bearings in that world; one of the main
ways we “cope with” the world. My claim is not a normative one; I am arguing that
this has always been the function of art, though it is the art of the last half-century or
more that has revealed the inherent epistemic function in art. For it is in
postmodernism that we find institutional acceptance of art as an activity that
explicitly dissect and comments on non-art activities in the world i.e., politics, self-
identity, culture, or the mechanisms of the artworld itself, and thus the epistemic
function inherent in art has begun to be more evident.  

The full account of my view of the ontology behind this experience is given in
§2.1 A Plethora of Ontological Data, but a general description to serve present
introductory purposes is as follows. Each individual confronts a sandstorm of data,
so to speak, such that our absorption of the world is neither straight-forward nor is
it easily systematized into a formulaic structure. We do not absorb everything that
comes at us nor is our consciousness a mirror reflection of that external data; data is
filtered. Some of the multitude of sensory data or qualia makes it into our
consciousness and some doesn’t; sometimes the data concatenates in one way
forming into a particular object, whereas with a different teleological purpose in
mind it will form into a different object. To give an example from ordinary

external data (or the “object”) is less clear. But this is not the case for so-called
“objective” knowledge or propositional knowledge. To have knowledge claims that are
independent of an individual’s embodied experience is to have knowledge claims that do
not, by definition, depend upon any particular person’s experience; therefore the claim to
abstract and general knowledge.

While it is true that in the past individual artists had used their art to make critical
statements about the world – Goya of course first comes to mind, though certainly the
Russian Constructivists and the Dadaist would also qualify – it wasn’t until
postmodernism that criticality about the world became incorporated into the general
approach to visual art practice. Therefore, it is the art of today that makes the
philosophical demands imperative, and those demands must be stated within an
epistemological and ontological framework able to explain the logical mechanics of the
art experience.
perceptual experience: the small bit of light reflecting off the leaf that I am now looking at could have been noticed by me or it could not have been noticed; if it is noticed it can be sorted as the phenomenal experience of the color whitish/green, or it can be sorted as part of the object called a “leaf”, or as part of the grape vine, part of the garden, etc. Or it can be seen in terms of chemical processes or environmental systems, etc. This ability of ours to edit, sort, and categorize the uncountable number of discrete bits of information – how many bits of information are coming in at me from the few seconds’ glance into the garden? – is the basic mechanism of our epistemological experience, and the ontological reality underlying that epistemology is a world that does not come pre-chunked, as it were. Entities are not pre-structured prior to our usage, and discovering takes a back seat to constructing. We are constantly choosing and editing out, noticing and failing to notice, valuing and refusing to value.

Thus, perceiving the world around us is not a passive act, but an active act of first noticing, then sorting, and then valuing. These myriad acts of knowing the world construct our world, forming what is worth our notice – for to value something is possible only consequent to noticing it – and in doing so enabling our parsing of that barrage of data. And art is a very significant way in which we do this.

To give an example not from ordinary perceptual experience but from art instead: Rachel Whiteread’s piece entitled “Untitled (Mattress)” from 1991 is part of the permanent collection at New York’s MoMA and forms an installation with two other pieces – “Untitled (Nets)” from 2002 and a series of 4 photographs of mattresses or furniture.

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10 The passive model underwriting strict empiricism has of course been commented upon by others, and it should go without saying that I reject that model as well. This notion of truth is too often parasitic on a debunked view of our relationship to the (empirical) world that relies on a clear-cut correspondence theory of truth. In that view of truth we, as organisms that accurately absorb the data from the world, stand apart from the external world and simply take that data in through our senses, register it “objectively” and then we name it.
But it is the central large sculpture “Untitled (Mattress)” that draws the viewers’ attention. In this sculpture, what is being pointed to isn’t normally what we’d call a thing. The plaster has four holes in it at approximately the corners of the rectangle, and though they do not go all the way through the plaster they are clearly reminiscent of the four corners of a bedpost. The size is almost right for a mattress, showing the presence of its former owners in the echo of their most vulnerable and intimate moments. Like Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ famous photograph of the empty bed, embedded in which was a cry against AIDS,\(^{11}\) it is the thing that is absent that is being pointed to, though in the Whiteread piece, absence is being pointed to not only in the Gonzalez-Torres way, but in more philosophically complex ways as well.

The plaster sculpture, seemingly pointing at first to what is familiar and named e.g., a mattress, is really pointing to something else instead.\(^{12}\) It is pointing to what we don’t normally name and isolate for view: the space under the mattress; that is what the plaster cast is of. Now we are looking at that and thinking of what that means. Whiteread has edited reality for us, pointing to things we wouldn’t have noticed and named, telling us to value them. Our world now has an additional constituent entity that it did not have before – the formerly un-named and not thought-of is now an entity: the space under the bed is now the-space-under-the-bed – it is one thing, united into an entity; it has been circumscribed off from contiguous bits of information and pointed to and named as one unit. Furthermore and importantly, we are told how to view it: more forlorn than even the un-made bed itself, this space records, too, the former inhabitants but records them as ghosts whose physical impact on negative space echoes silently in their absence.

This brief critical analysis of a specific piece demonstrates that it is, significantly, our social practices of art that constitute and frame our choices of what to notice in the world, what bits of data to join together and then to name, and how it is that we view that newly formed thing, making art an important way with which we learn to concatenate and, ultimately, value the world. Art tells us what to notice, singling out this or that bit of data and combining it with others, forming it into a unit, and pointing to that newly formed unit as an entity worth noticing. Art gives us a first person account of experience – it gives us specifically the artist’s first-person account – and gives us, the viewer, that first-person account of the artist’s embodied experience – e.g., an individual’s experience of reality as he or she sifts it through his or her body – of the world. It allows us, however briefly or incompletely, to see the

\(^{12}\) If one were an uninitiated viewer unfamiliar with Whiteread’s work, the perplexity would at this time probably set in: not only does this part not make sense but it’s clear that the plaster is too thick to be only the cast of a mattress. This is where the educational function of museum’s plaques are useful and it in part reads: “...plaster casts of the space beneath an ordinary double bed, with the four round holes demarcating the space once occupied by the bed’s legs...inviting us to see what is not there or to notice details that are normally hidden.” If one didn’t know before, one now knows. This is one of the ways that consensus is built.
world as that artist saw the world. (A fuller account of this is in §3.1 The Embodied Person and §3.1.1 First Person Experience.) I now see and value that space under the bed, and see in that normally un-named, private, and neutral geography a new realm imprinted by absented and vulnerable humans, a realm of things once there but no longer there, of time as it relentlessly erodes bodies. The sadness and embarrassment of an unmade bed multiplied by a factor of ten.

And when I understand all of this, I am pleased. I understand something about my relation to the world and about the world itself that I hadn’t really ever understood before. The constituent parts of the world have changed as a result of adding this new entity; in that, my definition of “the world” has changed. But I have not merely added a new entity but a new framework with which I viewed that entity and that affects not only that entity but the view seeps into other experiences as well. The epistemological consequences are clear: after viewing Whiteread’s piece I am more aware of larger issues such as fleeting mortality, the intimacy of two humans in a double bed, and the general notions of love and loss. These ideas are not only applied to this new entity in my world – the-space-underneath-the-bed – but to many other entities in my world as well. Like vapor spreading in a room, this framework with which I viewed the Whitehead piece now can influence many other facets of my experience and my world. In other words, this epistemological experience creates in me a new awareness of the ontology of the world as I now see and notice other things that I had not before, and in that constructionalism, I am thus creating that ontology. As an inextricable part of that ontology-building, I also value things I had not before. To repeat, I care about “absented and vulnerable humans, a realm of things once there but no longer there, of time as it relentlessly erodes bodies.” The vapor spreads and the constituent elements of the world as I experience it have also grown, and I have learned to care in ways I had not before. I have learned something and I walk away knowing things I didn’t know before.

Thus, our viewing of art is motivated by the desire for pleasure, and in acknowledging this fact it is important to note that the greatest pleasure doesn’t necessarily come from the most abstract learning. Propositional knowledge traffics in abstraction as general statements about things in the world are by definition stripped of their first-person connotations. But art can afford to be specific about the information it gives as it is speaking through the voice of an individual’s embodied experience – both the sensory experience and the artist’s mental reflection on that sensing. Art does not lead us only into the realm of abstract generalities, but rather maintains us in the realm of particular concrete experience and gives us an understanding of ourselves as embodied living beings and as others as similarly so construed. Importantly, it does all this while staying within the reference points of the individual embodied experience. The pleasure is intense.

In this analysis I am implicitly making use of a distinction between conceptualized (including, but not limited to, naming) and unconceptualized reality, and I should briefly make that point explicit. The distinction exists elsewhere;
Classic Indian philosophy\textsuperscript{13} calls it “nirvikalpaka” (unconceptualized) and “savikalpaka” (conceptualized). The distinction is in how we perceive something not in the content of the perception itself: thus, in the unconceptualized experience we can have an inchoate awareness of an object or we can view that same object as a singularly named e.g., conceptualized, perception.\textsuperscript{14} It is not the content of perception that shifts but rather our reception of/formulation of the sensory information. Related to this notion of what we cognitively add to the thing experienced is Kant’s (as well as others’) distinction between the phenomenal object, which has been concatenated by us – a concatenation implemented by the additional functions supplied by of our own cognitive faculties – and the noumenal object, which is the object as it must exist independent of our experience of it. In these views, as well as in my own, what we bring to the world – e.g., our cognition of the world – is also a measure of the limits of that cognition. The world is a vortex of information and our absorption of it/concatenation of it/ conceptualizing of it\textsuperscript{15} – is an active process on our part and it fundamentally alters and constructs the nature of the entities so perceived. Again, the point is that the world does not come pre-chunked. It is social practices and the inductive habits associated with them that are the primary way humans sort information into useful packages.

This move from unconceptualized experience to conceptualized experience is, in large part, driven by language. Having a conceptual awareness of a thing as an object with a name attached to it is quite distinct from simply being aware of the phenomenal experience of sensory data; as Quine pointed out things don’t wear their names on their sleeves. We have to put the names there. And that act of putting a name to something is a distinct and separate act from experiencing the sensory data itself. Naming objects forces individual bits of data to cohere into membership with one another and to set themselves off from the contiguous data around them: when I look at the chair, for instance, all the phenomenal data emanating from that physical space congeals into that one object called “chair”. Or, to return to the Whiteread piece, I think of the-space-underneath-the-bed and I think of something I

\textsuperscript{13} Cf. Nyaya-Sutras.

\textsuperscript{14} If anyone has ever had the experience of seeing a machine or a piece of hardware with which they are unfamiliar, they will have had an encapsulated version of this process of initially viewing the visual information an unconceptualized: the colors and the shapes one would have noticed, but the distinct entities – un-named and un-related – would not have formed together as a functioning unit; the object would have been as yet not, as it were, “glued” together e.g., not been conceptualized into an object with a name. As one came to know the machine one’s view of it would change; one’s phenomenal experience would have shifted from a non-specific and disordered view into a view of the object with functional, inter-related and hence named parts. The same is true when one learns any kind of socialized or habituated process; the individual bits of information gradually congeal into larger and more manageable units.

\textsuperscript{15} This is not meant to blur these three different kinds of views or to make them synonymous. They do only share in the view that we construct, at least in part, our reality as we process and know that reality.
hadn’t before seen as an entity. And as I focus on that object it forces from consideration other objects around it; this is the primary figure/ground relationship. Naming is one of the common ways that we select out and order the bombardment of data that comes at us. Language and naming gives us a culture of pre-selected choices, which governs our perception and negotiates our bodies’ relationship to the things and people around us, serving as a device that pre-selects bits of ontological data: others have named it and pointed this object out to me and now my consciousness separates out that bit of data and (without my conscious input into this process) and reiterates it as “object X”.

But language has its limits. Philosophers have usually expounded upon the glories of our language capabilities, but its limitations also deserve to be noted. However smoothly and easily acquired this kind of semantic knowledge seems to be, it is not a full account of what it is that we know. In other words, not all knowing is governed by naming and the class of things we know about the world is not identical to the class of things that we can name; we know much more than we can name.

Distinguishing the category of what we know from what we name demands some articulation of what we count as knowledge, and epistemological disagreement about this has been the cornerstone of the discipline. I do not intend to present all the options in order to argue for my own; I will only point out the technical ends of the spectrum, as it were, illuminating that view that limits knowledge to semantic articulation and contrasting that with a broader notion of knowledge. 16 Thus, at the more limiting end of the epistemological divide is the semantically-based demands of propositional knowledge – where a knowledge claim is able to be expressed in the form of Person A knows that-p, where “that-p” is a statement in a propositional form where a predicate is asserted or denied about a subject. For example, Peter knows that the earth is round. A fairly common approach by analytic philosophers, propositional knowledge thus encompasses and makes conspicuous those instances whereby we point to something in the external world that is able to be mutually experienced by others – thereby constituting what is generally called “objective” knowledge and thus claims to truth. Stripped of personal associations and the burden of intensions and connotations, propositional knowledge gives us (or claims to give us) concrete facts.

Thus, though propositional knowledge singles out things that can be known empirically and by ostension, (e.g., by pointing, as it were), it also sets aside other kinds of experience. Excluded from that realm of facts are things that cannot make

16 I am not slicing this distinction according to historical divisions in line with epistemological schools of thought. In that, the basic divide between the rationalists and the empiricists, which subdivides into several others and then in the twentieth century further re-divides into such groupings as coherentist, reliabilist, etc., is not being followed here. For the purposes of this chapter in particular what is being pointed to is not an argument for a particular kind of epistemology, but rather for the tools that would construct an epistemology. The choice being discussed in the present chapter is between the tool, so to speak, of propositional statements, versus a tool that would not sort knowledge on semantic grounds.
the transition to public knowledge. This is generally expressed as follows. The dyadic relationship between the subject and the proposition\(^\text{17}\) excludes such things as knowledge by acquaintance, (e.g., acquaintance of a friend – “I know my friend” is a different kind of “know” than “I know that gravity is a force”), as well as interior mental beliefs and, additionally, what is called “procedural knowledge”, which would include such things as how to play basketball or how to drive a car.\(^\text{18}\) For example, I cannot take my particular knowledge of how to drive a car and point to it in the way that I can point to the car and make assertions about it. My knowledge is private and though I can, in part, transfer that know-how to someone else I cannot refer to my knowledge by ostension. In this way, the interior remains interior.\(^\text{19}\)

Therefore, though naming in general and propositional knowledge in particular delimits parts of reality making those things easily seen and negotiated (controlling to some degree the bombardment of ontological data) there are many other kinds of experiences and many other things that we experience – and might very well want to claim that we know – that do not fall within the purview of this kind of knowledge. This would include those things just mentioned but it would also include perhaps peripheral awareness of things that are not fully known\(^\text{20}\) as well as

\(^{17}\) In the use of the word “proposition” I am here neutral concerning whether “proposition” is thought to be the nominalist notion of a specific kind of sentence embedding a “that” statement about the world, or – perhaps more commonly – whether “proposition” is defined as an abstract idea. I am neutral in this context about this debate because both options are parasitic on the divide between subject and object, concerning themselves only with the nature of the external object, and in this they maintain that divide. I, on the other hand, am arguing for the different paradigm of the body as more porous to the external world in such a way that the divide between the body and the external world is not complete, resulting in a description of the subject as constantly being reconstituted by the absorption of the external data, and of the object as constructed by the phenomenological experiences of the subject.

\(^{18}\) There has been much debate in the philosophy regarding the relationship between “how” statements and “that” statements, particularly since Gilbert Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* (1949), wherein he argued that “how” knowledge is independent of and not the result of “that”-statement knowledge; in other words, we don’t know how to do something as a consequence of knowing the intellectual rules embedded in “that” statements. This move on Ryle’s part has to be seen in the historical context of other philosophers’ mid-century views articulating the importance of induction, particularly Wittgenstein’s view that knowing how to do something is an inductive process that is not necessarily able to be articulated in a semantic rule. Much of my thought is in line with these perspectives.

\(^{19}\) Cf. the essay I co-authored with the University of Pennsylvania neurologist Dr. Anjan Chatterjee on the distinction between procedural memory functions and semantic memory functions and how it relates to artists’ ability to describe their own practices: “Those Dumb Artists!” in *Structural Analysis* (NY: Novapublishing, 2010).

\(^{20}\) Things that are not fully know includes an array of things, including what it is to recall at a later date something one had not earlier recalled. There is a vast and interesting amount of literature on eye-witness accounts, most notably the nineteenth century writings of Jeremy Bentham. How much we notice, how much we remember of what we
tacit knowledge and, importantly, such things that one experiences and has full knowledge of and yet cannot meaningfully translate into words – e.g., one’s own pain, the experience of intense love or fear, and experiencing an artwork.

A quick but pertinent aside to last point should be made. The reference point is the experience of the artwork and not the artwork itself. I can describe the art object whether it be a Whiteread or a Monet or a Rembrandt; I can detail the colors and the shapes, and I can even translate some of that into words that describe the piece’s meaning. For example, I can posit that the Whiteread piece means sadness or loss, or something like that. But to articulate what my bodily and mental experience itself was – what it felt like to stand in front of it and go from the state of not-knowing the piece to the state of knowing it, to put into words the intense feeling of pleasure when that happened and when I appreciated and “fell for” what was being said – that is a very different matter. (It is a bit like “falling” for a person perhaps; that’s why people say they “love” a piece of art or a piece of music with the same intensity. And in a similar fashion, one might describe the virtues of one’s beloved, detailing their character or physical traits, but one would be hard pressed to describe the love itself. Describing and experience and describing the thing itself are two entirely different things.) Experiencing an artwork is then one instance of gaining access to something – that is, knowing something – that is a kind of relationship one has to the world.

And clearly it is more complex than what a that-proposition can encompass. The view that limits knowledge to the realm of propositional statements limits then knowledge to that small range of experience that can be formulated as a “that” statement. Clearly, limiting one’s epistemology to such narrow requirements means originally noticed, or how it is that we might be able at a later date to recall additional details initially forgotten – are all questions that illustrate not only the witness’s vulnerability to error but the epistemological experiences that underlie knowledge claims. Usually the knowledge claims assert how our consciousness attends to some parts of an experience and not to others, but I would argue instead for a view that emphasizes how our consciousness attends in varying degrees. In other words, the problem isn't so much that there is a strict bifurcation between what we see and what we don’t see – the famous psychology experience of people not seeing the gorilla on the basketball court certainly points to this (http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/But-Did-You-See-the-Gorilla-The-Problem-With-Inattentional-Blindness-165589646.html). I would argue instead that perception actually falls on something more like a grey scale, such that not all recall falls so neatly into the two categories of noticing and not-noticing. In many instances, our recall varies from one attempt to the next, pointing out that our access to the original experience is not static; sometimes we can pull up greater number of details and sometimes not – the access to memory is stochastic. Thus, noticing and not-noticing are not so strictly divided, leaving instead in its wake a category of data that varies probabilistically; at some moments it is available to the conscious brain and at some moments not. We naturally filter out much, fail to notice other bits of data, and fail to remember much of what we have noticed. What we can say we “know” thus corresponds not even roughly to what the environment has given us; it is at best a small subset.
fundamentally not addressing the myriad other ways that we dispel doubt, which is the very essence of claims to knowledge. To refer again to the opening quote by C.S. Pierce, “Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief…” The purpose of the epistemological enterprise is to provide an answer to how it is that we go from doubt to belief, and as we travel that chasm in various ways and in a myriad of contexts it is imperative that our theory is able to address them all.

Furthermore, the argument for viewing the category of knowledge more broadly than what the narrow claims of propositional knowledge would give us can be argued for on grounds other than the fact that we might be able to address more instances of experience. The additional argument is based on the futility found in the practice of limiting claims to semantic-based propositional knowledge. For even if one were to accept a limitation on knowledge claims and agree that the category should be confined to propositional claims, the difficulties still abound. Primarily, as many philosophers in the mid-twentieth century analytic tradition pointed out, there is uncertainty at the heart of the scientific enterprise due to science’s necessity for revision.\(^{21}\) Yesterday’s facts are discarded in favor of new facts – i.e., Newtonian physics is replaced by Einstein’s view, schizophrenia has genetic and physiological causes not bad mothering, etc., and epistemological certainty is the baby thrown out with that bathwater. This necessity of constantly revising the specific facts and sometimes the more general laws that tie them together has the unintended consequence of turning what was a knowledge procedure that was guaranteed to give certain knowledge (i.e., found in the limitation to propositional knowledge), now instead giving only provisional claims that cannot be asserted as absolutely and unchangingly certain. This of course leaves unprotected the sacrosanct claims of objective truth; for induction guarantees that today’s “facts” will be overturned tomorrow, giving us little reason to believe in the indubitability of those so-called facts. Thus, even if we limit knowledge claims to “knowledge-that” statements, those claims must be viewed as contingent as they are always open to revision, making, in turn, knowledge itself provisional.\(^{22}\)

Thus, then, we look for a better solution. Wanting ways to slice the pie that do not eliminate important kinds of experience that exhibit the process of going from doubt to belief, we look for criteria that expand beyond semantic propositions. At the broader and less limiting end of the technical tools employed in the

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21 Cf. Quine, Goodman, Searle, etc.
22 This is ultimately only proving that arguing for propositional knowledge as the only legitimate realm of knowledge claims cannot provide a foundation of certainty; it does not argue in and of itself against the legitimacy of so doing nor does it argue for broadening the notion of what counts as knowledge. But, by proving that founding one’s epistemology on propositional knowledge gives a weak structure of claims about how we know the external and shared world while at the same time radically refusing to address all other kinds of knowing, the argument does make evident that the choice of limiting one’s epistemology to propositional knowledge is a poor candidate for answering how it is that we solve our pressing issue of doubt and thus move from doubt to belief.
epistemological spectrum is the use of the more general term “episteme”, which counts a larger category of experience as instances of knowledge than does the use of propositional statements. Originally distinguished in ancient Greek philosophy from the arts and crafts (which fell under the term “technē”), “epistêmê” can be used to refer to larger bodies of thought than just propositional knowledge, sometimes including knowledge of how to do things (“knowledge-how”) in addition to “knowledge-that” (though, again, disputes abound). In this broader conception of knowledge there are kinds of knowing that are not tied to semantic naming and would include those categories that advocates for propositional knowledge would exclude from purview.

This is not to argue that the adoption of this term would solve all the philosophical problems in epistemology or even those more specific problems entangled in understanding how it is that we experience art. It is only to point the general way, which would be away from limiting knowledge to propositional statements, and to instead point the way to knowledge that is not semantically named. A term like “episteme” is useful despite the fact that the term originally distinguished knowledge from the arts, partially because “episteme” can be used to refer to the social system of culturally accepted views. The more detailed version of the epistemological theory I am advocating is articulated in §3.3 Induction and Epistemology, but for present purposes I will reiterate that the core mission for epistemology is to explain how we go to from doubt to belief. That process – or that mental and bodily journey – is accomplished in many myriad kinds of instances including the ascertaining of scientific claims (however open to revision they might necessarily be), to adopting the narrative of a historical event, to concluding that a certain artwork is successful, or to explaining how art can give us knowledge. In all these situations, plus innumerable others, the subject (or thinker, or one experiencing the phenomena, etc.) has managed his or her way through the bramble of doubt and come into the calming state of belief. It is epistemology’s job to explain that journey.

Clearly, then, one must turn to a broader notion of knowledge and at least temporarily tolerate a lessening of precision in exchange for an increase in range and explanatory values, for to abandon the attempt to explain the full range of epistemological doubt and its cessation (as limiting knowledge to propositions does) would be to abandon the job of philosophy. Even worse, to claim precision (as do advocates for propositional knowledge) to an artificially restricted and thus radically incomplete realm is thus no precision at all; for precision to be claimed it must be applicable to the whole. To precisely locate and screw in one screw in a sinking boat is no act of great workmanship; it is myopia at its worse.

On the other hand, vagueness has its demons, too, and the complaint of obfuscation and general hand-waving that has been lobbed at non-analytic philosophers is, in many ways, worth considering. As Aristotle noted in his Nichomachean Ethics, the precision demanded of the inquiry should correspond to the thing being investigated; hence, in his view, the precision found in ethics would not equal the precision found in mathematics. Proceeding with this view, the
epistemological foundation of aesthetics would then require the precision found in
the demands of truth – dovetailing with the cessation of doubt – as it is applied to
the experience of art. Thus, a pragmatically productive model would be to expect
that the precision involved would, to borrow a legal perspective, be neither overly
broad nor too narrowly construed, instead making the theory applicable to the
complete range of epistemological experiences while also thoroughly explicating the
step-by-step process involved in each of those types of epistemological experiences.

As the present concern of this book is with the epistemological function of
art, we are then charged with articulating an epistemology that can explain the
process of understanding the world through the experiencing of art, and that
epistemology must then correctly calibrate the two distinct entities of firstly, the
world, and secondly, the individual. How that divide is placed becomes central to the
theory.

In the continental tradition, the divide has been one of debate. According to
many of these thinkers from Heidegger on, we cannot separate out our inner life
from the external world and that it is the very process of abstraction away from the
concrete specificity of things that gives us a false and unreal view of the world. In
line with this, many philosophers have argued that the tradition most famously
exemplified by Descartes, which assumed that one could construe as isolated and
separate from the world, was misguided. In addition, many of these non-analytic
philosophers would also argue that problems cannot be approached as discrete
individual issues and that instead history and culture radically affect how we view
the world, making our views inextricably communal in nature.

I would argue somewhat for the latter view, particularly the importance of
communal consensus in establishing what counts as reality. What we count as real in
the world is an agreed-upon construct, and the epistemology that underwrites that
process has to account for the accretion of belief embedded in consensus.
Additionally, the epistemology must account for those kinds of knowledge that are
importantly part of the embodied experience. Thus the category of things that can
be known must be broadened to include such things as how-statements in addition
to the more challenging categories of one’s own pain and of course the experience of
art. Concomitantly, then, the category of what we know, now broadly construed,
would then more easily separate itself from the category of what we name. And with
this separation of the two categories it becomes easily evident that there are kinds of
knowing that are in addition to what is found in naming; art is but one of them.

A further and final point about naming needs to be made at this juncture.
There is a common misconception about what happens when we name things, a
misconception that relies on the Cartesian mistake of assuming an absolute
separation between the inner workings of a human being and the external world. In
this view, naming things separates objects from the geographical position of our
own bodies and underwrites the conception of reality as being composed of a
subject separate from the object. Our own existence, on that version of the
subject/object relation, is a self-contained and discrete entity that is able to stand
back and observe – without affecting it – the separate reality of the external world.
In this view, ontology is thus prior to and separate from epistemology; our act of knowing the world is synonymous with discovering the world and our looking does not alter what is there. Epistemological experiences, if they are accurate, are a simple mirroring of that antecedent reality.

This is an old debate – whether the world is mind-independent or not. Phrased differently, the question is whether the world exists apart from our perception of it. Firstly, as in many other debates in philosophy, the problem is in the articulation of the possibilities and the cul-de-sac limitations found in that articulation. Ontology, as the answer to what exists in the world, must – it is thought – exist prior to epistemology, as epistemology is the answer to how we know what is in the world. On the one hand, ontology of course exists prior to epistemological experiences, for the thing to be known necessarily exists (logically) prior to the act of knowing that thing; in this conception of ontology one is conceiving of reality as the whole of reality that logically must precede any human act of perception and knowing.

And yet, on the other hand, our epistemological experiences formulate our conception of that reality. For while reality, conceived as a totality, must necessarily exist logically prior to or experience, it is not though the case that we experience the totality of reality. We experience instead in discrete and temporal sequences, and those truncated bits of reality are infused with editing and choice. In other words, our notions of the ontology cannot, necessarily, ever be compared to the ontology unperceived. We cannot compare – side by side, as it were – our conception of our perceived world next to the un-perceived conception, and then check those two versions for inconsistencies and inaccuracies. We only have the perceived version. Hence the debate is a futile one, and only results from the poorly constructed articulation of possibilities. Once conceived properly, the problem disappears. The fact that our perception concatenates the data for us does not make the ontology itself mind-dependent; without us the world would still exist, it is just that a world unperceived cannot be perceived. Looking changes it. At least it changes it for the perceiver.

Secondly, the question as to whether the world is mind-independent as well as the question regarding the role played by our epistemological choices, including the epistemological choices made when we view art, is revealed in the notion of naming that presupposes a strict bifurcation between subject and object. While it is true that we have a natural proclivity for naming, that proclivity does not necessarily entail a view of our relationship to the world that either depends upon or establishes as fact a strict separation of subject from object. It is a distinction, which while allowing for the “that” statement to function, also prevents us from

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23 It was this reasoning that presumably led Kant into the noumenal world – what I would call a mystification; I am not arguing for the romance of such a transcendence.

24 This view, embedded in traditional rationalist epistemologies, was also posited by Locke in his tabula rasa empiricism, but was, perhaps unintentionally, undermined by Hume’s empiricism and ultimately buried – again, unintentionally – by the Logical Positivists who discovered that the empirical ‘given’ had a way of evaporating under investigation.
viewing ourselves, for, on that account, knowledge is defined as knowledge of an external phenomenon. In other words, to have knowledge “of the world” is to have knowledge separate from one’s own bodily parameters, and it is also not to have a similar kind of knowledge of oneself.

The strict bifurcation between subject and object is a view that has nested inside it the deeper view that sees our bodies as circumscribed and self-contained entities separated out from the external world that contains data that can be negotiated, named, and known. And correspondingly it is a view that does not see the body as a porous entity, absorbing information and giving off data, constructing reality in the process of existing. It is not a coincidence that the items I mentioned several paragraphs back – i.e., one’s love for the beloved, one’s experience of an artwork, or one’s own pain – are all exceedingly hard (if not fully impossible) to describe. Knowledge of one’s own embodied condition, which these three are all instances of to some varying degree or other, are not examples of knowledge of the world. They are examples of what it is like to experience life as an embodied creature.

In this book I am arguing for a different view of both subjects and objects. In the view I am putting forth, our bodies, porous to the world, also construct that world. Not absolutely and without limits, but it is our editing and building that constructs what it is that we then deem as real. It is our bodies’ sensorial absorption of information and the mental constructs that are consequent to that absorption that construct reality, a reality experienced piecemeal and its construction the result of social induction and consensus.

I am arguing for the different paradigm of the body, one that is more porous to the external world in such a way that the divide between the body and the external world is not complete, resulting in a description of the subject as constantly being reconstituted by the absorption of the external data, and of the object as constructed by the phenomenological experiences of the subject. And thus our notion of the real shifts like sand, making our notion of the “objective” world merely the sum total of the vast majority of our individual views. Consensus looms large in reality-construction, making reality fungible and constructed by us.

In that view, art takes on a particular and important role. But it is a complex role as art is also about telling the viewer not only what to notice but how to view it and thus value it as well. This process is incremental though probably something close to exponential. As Bruno Latour wrote, “We need, in other words, to look at the way in which someone convinces someone else to take up a statement, to pass it along, to make it more of a fact, and to recognize the first author’s ownership and

25 This is true across disciplines – dark matter is now thought to be a fact of the world, a nod to the work of Vera Rubin who, in 1950s argued for it only to be ridiculed; human rights exist in a way they didn’t a hundred or a thousand years ago and are thus thought to be real and not merely imagined, etc.

26 This is of course the explanation behind the endless revision of science, for what is scientific “fact” changes according to the consensus view and that view is always open to revision.
originality.”27 One person convinces a few other people of the value of some artist's view and if the convincing is spread far enough to enough people, the point of view is socially adopted. Thus, how art makes epistemological changes in the larger social consensus is seen through the incremental adoption by individuals of the legitimacy and truth of the particular view being presented by a particular artwork.

Because art maintains us in a world of particular concrete experience, it conveys to each of us – as a viewer – that particular embodied experience of the world and at the same time conveys the appropriate interpretation of that experience. We look at the subset of data that the artist has chosen for us – that subset that is selected out from the sandstorm of data confronting us at any given moment – and in that subset were are given data that is legible and meaningful. It is not abstract knowledge; rather, it is a version of lived and interpreted sensorial experience. And as a particular artistic view takes hold in the world, more and more people adopt that experience as now, at least partially, their own. The process of exponentially larger numbers of people accepting the view presented by an artwork is an example of the process of consensus in society. And it is the process of reality building.

Art is thus a kind of knowledge acquisition. Viewers' adoption of the artist's point of view is not just an act of pleasurable relaxation; it is a way of accessing and accepting a set of beliefs. This set of beliefs is found in the embodied and highly specific experience that the artist has re-iterated for the viewer; in all the possible things to select and emphasize, the artist has selected out a package of sensorial data and has made it coherent.

This process of artists' taking a subset of data and making it meaningful can perhaps best be described as “transduction”: a term used in science to mean the transference of material from one state or location to another, often used in physiology to refer to the transference of genetic material from one microorganism to another by a viral agent. This is what art does: it takes a selection of material, places it in the delivery packet of art, and hands it over to the viewer, enabling the viewer to see – at least partially – the world from the artist's perspective, through the scrim that is the artist's reality.

As recipients of others' creations, we see the world through the artists' transductions – through their sieve, as it were, as they sort the data – and hence are able to differently parse reality and understand reality itself more fully than before. We are able to parse reality differently because we've been exposed to the very direct epistemological choices conveyed by someone's art. We have been exposed to someone else's choices. Art matters because it gives us the pleasure of knowing ourselves, others, and reality itself.