

Layered Imaginative Acquaintance: A Roadmap

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This paper explores the role of imagination in aesthetic appreciation, distinguishing between its function as a medium of basic acquaintance and as a surrogate. While imagination has long been acknowledged as essential for experiencing aesthetic qualities, its status in the debate surrounding the Acquaintance Principle remains controversial. The aim of this paper is to clarify the distinction between basic and surrogative acquaintance through imagination. It argues that the most promising way to make sense of the distinction is to appeal to the artwork-specific standards, such that it is a matter of artistic context as to whether imagination counts as a medium of basic acquaintance or surrogative acquaintance, or whether it is not suitable as a medium of acquaintance at all. The resulting view accommodates the variety of ways in which imagination figures in warranting aesthetic judgment and draws together the two strands of literature in which the aesthetic role of imagination has been discussed, in the context of first-hand experience and in the context of surrogates. This provides a unified account of how imagination figures in aesthetic appreciation, both in its basic and in its surrogative capacity.

Keywords: Acquaintance Principle, imagination, aesthetic appreciation, aesthetic properties, artistic prescriptions, aesthetic judgment

1. Introduction

It is a truism in aesthetics that participation in aesthetic practices generally involves experiential encounters with objects of aesthetic interest. Paintings and movies are for watching, novels and stories are for reading, concerts and exhibitions are for attending in person, and so on. It should not therefore be surprising that some philosophers have given such encounters a necessary role in aesthetic appreciation. It has been suggested that one needs to have first-hand experience with an artwork to make knowledgeable or warranted aesthetic judgments about it (Wollheim 1980, 233). This requirement has been known as the Acquaintance Principle (AP in short).

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The interpretation of AP is highly contentious (Livingston 2003; Budd 2003). It is debatable whether it is impossible to acquire aesthetic knowledge or warrant without any first-hand experience or whether testimony of aesthetic experts could also put one in that position (Meskin 2004; McKinnon 2017; Robson 2018). Even its status as an epistemic principle can be disputed and some have argued that it instead presents a non-epistemic requirement for the proper formation of aesthetic belief (see Hopkins 2011). In this paper, I won't take a stand on those debates.

Instead, the question of this paper is in what ways *imagination* as a mental capacity figures in aesthetic appreciation as a medium of acquaintance. On the one hand, that the appreciation of beauty and other aesthetic qualities requires imagination has been a common motif in aesthetics at least since the Early Modern age (e.g., Addison 1712; Kant 1987) and continues to be often acknowledged in the present day as well (Walton 1990; Savile 2006; Elliott 2006; Scruton 1974). On the other hand, in the debate over AP, the role of imagination has also been raised, but not as something that constitutes or contributes to first-hand aesthetic experience but as a candidate *surrogate* for aesthetic acquaintance.

It seems highly plausible that an experience of the artwork's surrogate—e.g., a photo, a documentary—also allows the subject to make warranted aesthetic judgments about it (Robson 2013, 237). If I judge the aesthetic merits of a painting by inspecting a reproduction, for instance, then this judgment can be warranted. A proponent of the AP can try to accommodate surrogates by arguing that the experience of a surrogate replicates the first-hand experience with the properties of the work. Insofar as experiencing the surrogate of the work puts the agent in a position to recreate the experience of its aesthetic properties or the properties upon which its aesthetic properties supervene, she can form aesthetic judgments about the work in accordance with the AP (see Tormey 1973).

It has been suggested by different authors that, aside from material surrogates, also a sufficiently detailed *imagining* can serve as an adequate surrogate (Budd 1995, 12; Lord 2016, 30; Hopkins 2006, 93; Robson 2013, 242).¹ There is some *prima facie* plausibility to the idea that imaginings can serve as proper surrogates for first-hand aesthetic experience. According to a rather popular view, imaginings recreate or simulate their counterpart reality-oriented mental states (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002; Arcangeli 2018). For instance, sensory imaginings recreate perceptual states: when I imagine seeing an apple, I generate in me a mental state that is in relevant ways similar

¹ Grant (2013, 30) has suggested that the author can use imagination to appreciate the artwork that they have created. Here I focus solely on the consumer's side of appreciation, in contrast with the author's.

to the first-hand perceptual experience of seeing an apple. It is therefore not surprising that some have thought that perhaps imaginings, in virtue of simulating the first-hand experience, can make the object's relevant properties available for aesthetic experience and judgment.²

In the acquaintance debate, when imagination has been discussed, it has thus usually been in the context of the discussion of whether it is a candidate for being a surrogate. What has been somewhat overlooked in the Acquaintance debate, but not in aesthetics more broadly, is how imagination does not always function as a candidate for a surrogate in grounding aesthetic judgments. Instead, it is often assumed to be a crucial mental faculty for basic acquaintance or first-hand experience with the work, not just a surrogate for such experience. The examples of Addison, Kant, Walton, Scruton, etc. were meant to illustrate this.

The aim of this paper is to clarify the distinction between basic and surrogative acquaintance through imagination. I will argue that the most promising way to make sense of the distinction is to appeal to the artwork-specific standards, such that it is a matter of artistic context as to whether imagination counts as a medium of basic acquaintance or surrogative acquaintance, or whether it is not suitable as a medium of acquaintance at all. The resulting view accommodates the variety of ways in which imagination figures in warranting aesthetic judgment and draws together the two strands of literature in which the aesthetic role of imagination has been discussed, in the context of first-hand experience and in the context of surrogates. This provides a unified account of how imagination figures in aesthetic appreciation, both in its basic and in its surrogative capacity.

A few qualifications are in order. First, I take acquaintance to be primarily a relation between an agent and the *properties* of an artwork (cf. Lord 2016, 12). When one claims that a reproduction can serve as a surrogate for acquaintance with a painting, for instance, then this means that the reproduction can put an agent in a position to be acquainted with the aesthetically relevant properties and thereby form adequate judgments about the work. Thus, in what follows, when I use the expression "acquaintance with the object", it should be understood as a shorthand for "acquaintance with the object's properties".

Second, I treat the acquaintance relation functionally, as whatever experiential relation between the agent and the artwork's properties that warrants

² In what follows, my starting point is perceptual imagination in particular, in line with the traditional view that aesthetic judgments are primarily based on perception. As we proceed, I will extend the inquiry to non-perceptual forms of imagination as well. In the end, the account of aesthetic acquaintance through imagination is meant to include both perceptual and non-perceptual imagination.

the agent's aesthetic judgments about the work. This functional approach contrasts with a substantive approach that takes the acquaintance relation to consist in a specific kind of experiential relation, e.g. perception of the relevant properties or Russellian acquaintance with them. The reason for preferring the functional approach is that assuming a more substantive relation would be question-begging against those accounts of aesthetic surrogates that accommodate a variety of vehicles. It shouldn't be settled in advance of our investigation what can and cannot be a surrogate for acquaintance.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the next section, I will analyze what it is for imagination to provide basic, non-surrogative acquaintance with an artwork's properties. I will argue that whether imagining counts as a form of basic acquaintance is determined by the artistic standards that pertain to the work, and I will articulate those standards in terms of the prescriptive frame that is constitutive of the work. Then, in Section 3, I will turn to surrogative acquaintance and argue the condition for imagination to count as a form of surrogative acquaintance are also determined by the standards and the frame of the work, but in a different way. Finally, in Section 4, I will analyze some artistic contexts in which imagination is poorly suited to play a role of the surrogate, to reinforce the claim that the possibility of imaginative aesthetic acquaintance is a highly context-sensitive issue.

2. Basic acquaintance and imagination

Let's start from some examples in which imagination provides basic acquaintance with an artwork's aesthetic properties or properties upon which its aesthetic properties supervene. There are some aesthetic properties, for instance, which arguably can only be grasped through imagination, and in those cases, imagination provides acquaintance of the basic kind. Take, for instance, the concept of *yūgen* in Japanese aesthetics, sometimes translated as "mysterious grace", and which refers to the depth of the world that is not immediately perceptible and requires imagination to be appreciated (Koshiro 1995; see also Tsubaki 1971).³ In the case of *yūgen*, there is arguably no other way to access it without the employment of one's imagination because it is neither perceptually given nor intellectually grasped. More broadly, the properties of being *allusive* or *suggestive* often require imagination for their appreciation because what makes an artwork allusive or suggestive escapes direct perception while also not yielding to the intellectual grasp.⁴ Only (or

³ "When looking at autumn mountains through mist, the view may be indistinct yet have great depth. Although few autumn leaves may be visible through the mist, it is alluring. The limitless vista created in imagination far surpasses anything one can see more clearly." (*Kamo no Chomei*, quoted in Koshiro 1995, 254).

⁴ On allusion, see (Sorensen 2012); on suggestion, see (Lamarque 1989).

at least mainly) by imagining the alluded or suggested meanings can one experience the allusive or suggestive nature of the work.

The cases in which an imagining constitutes basic first-hand experience are not limited to highly specific contexts. Another possible aesthetic domain where imaginings constitute first-hand access to aesthetic features is the appreciation of expressive properties. For instance, Paul Noordhof has argued that the attribution of expressive properties to artworks is enabled by sensuous imagination of the creative process that produced that work and considering the mental state that guided that process (Noordhof 2008). For instance, one takes a piece of music to express joy when one imagines the piece having been created in a joyful state of mind, whether or not the author was actually feeling joy when they created it. Similarly, Tom Cochrane has suggested that musical expressivity is made possible by listeners simulating emotions when they listen to the music (Cochrane 2010). If such a conception of expressive properties is on the right track, then one of the most fundamental avenues of aesthetic appreciation is essentially imaginative and the relevant imaginings constitute basic acquaintance with expressive properties.

Imaginings can thus constitute basic acquaintance with the aesthetic features of artworks. In such contexts, imagination is not put to surrogative use. Instead, it functions as the basic vehicle of acquaintance. But what exactly constitutes the difference between basic and non-basic acquaintance?

One suggestion is that an imagining constitutes basic acquaintance just in case the agent at the time of imagining also has perceptual access to the object, and that it constitutes non-basic (surrogative) acquaintance when the agent lacks such access. Our examples above have concerned appreciative contexts in which the agent perceives the artwork *and* imagines certain features above and beyond the perceptible properties. Arguably, in none of those cases does the exercise of imagination stand free of perceptual engagement. One possibility of how to understand basic acquaintance through imagination is therefore in terms of whether the imagining accompanies perceiving the aesthetic object or not. Something along these lines has been suggested by Hopkins, although he does not put in terms of basic acquaintance:

Where imagining figures in our appreciation of visual art, its role is often to enrich perception, and it is perception, not imagining, that supplies the object with which we engage. (Hopkins 2024, 221)

A worry with this idea is that there can be cases in which one *does* have concurrent perceptual access to the artwork *and* imagines its properties, but the imagining does not constitute first-hand experience. For instance, we can imagine a case in which someone perceives a painting and imagines its

extra-perceptual properties while her imagining develops independently of her perception. Admittedly, this is an unusual case, given that concurrent imagining and perceiving tend to be causally entangled. Nevertheless, it is plausible that for an imagining to count as a basic form of first-hand experience with O, it should not just accompany perception, it should also be guided by the perception of O. For instance, a painting would not be appropriately experienced as instantiating *yūgen* if its visual properties weren't configured in a particular way. Minimally, there must be some kind of causal or at least counterfactual constraints such that if O's perceptual properties had been different, aesthetic imagined properties would have been different as well.

But isn't it possible for there to be an aesthetic object, first-hand experience of which is based on imagination without there being any perceptual access to the object? At least one real-life candidate comes to mind. In 2021, Italian artist Salvatore Garau sold his invisible sculpture *I Am* in 2021 for \$18,000 which, according to him, only existed in his and others' imagination.⁵ Aside from *I Am*, he has "made" other invisible sculptures like *Buddha in Contemplation* and *Aphrodite Cries*. Admittedly, the latter two had perceptual markers, a square tape on a walkway and an empty white circle in front of New York City stock exchange, respectively, but the perceptual contribution to the appreciation of such an artwork still seems rather minimal and there doesn't seem to be any robust counterfactual dependence between perception of those markers and what is imagined.

If we accept that *I Am* can be appreciated through imagination, does this mean that the perceptual dependence criterion for imagination to count as first-hand experience should be rejected? Perhaps not. An objection could be raised that not every case in which someone proclaims what the proper form of engaging with an artwork is determines that the proclaimed form is constitutive of basic acquaintance. There are cases in which the author is simply bullshitting and shouldn't be taken seriously. In such a case, the author should not be treated as an ultimate authority in determining what counts as basic acquaintance. Maybe, then, Garau's invisible sculpture can be dismissed. Admittedly, there are reasonable doubts as to whether Garau's interpretation of the work's meaning should be taken seriously.⁶

We should be cautious about this objection, however, because embracing it would commit us to an excessively uncharitable stance towards the proclamations of artists about their works. Even if in the cases of Garau, the skep-

⁵ <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/italian-artist-auctioned-off-invisible-sculpture-18300-literally-made-nothing-1976181> (last time accessed: 06.07.2026).

⁶ See the various, seemingly incoherent, interpretations that Garau gave to his work, discussed in (Hick 2023, 148).

tical stance towards his interpretations is justified, excluding the possibility of an artwork in which the prescribed imaginings are not counterfactually dependent on its perceptual features seems unjustifiably restrictive. We can think of a possible artwork in which imagining does constitute first-hand access without any perceptual acquaintance. Consider a possible situation wherein an artist creates an invisible “painting” which prescribes to the agent to form a series of detailed imaginings of sensory properties of that work.⁷ If an agent follows that prescription, doesn’t this count as a first-hand experience with the artwork? It is unclear why it shouldn’t, given that the proper way of engaging with such an artwork seems to be constituted by imaginings, although they do not satisfy the condition of perception-dependence. It still seems that imagining such a piece is a form of first-hand experience with it, given that it is accessed through imaginings which constitute the experience of that work.

The counterexample can also be reformulated in a way that does not treat author’s intentions as the sole determining factor in how a work should be appreciated. We can imagine an artistic community in which there is a shared assumption about a specific art kind that works of that kind are such that the proper way of engaging with them consists of imaginings, not in response to perceptual features of those works but in response to instructions that those works express.⁸ It thus seems that perception-dependence is not necessary for an imagining to constitute basic acquaintance.

If the criterion of perception-dependence is not satisfactory, what could be an alternative? My proposal is that an imagining constitutes basic first-hand access just in case the accessed property is such that imagining of that property is the standard way of gaining access to it. For instance, merely imagining the surface properties of the painting, instead of perceptually inspecting them, is not the standard way of gaining access to those properties, and this is why imagining does not constitute basic first-hand access to those properties. On the other hand, imagining *yūgen* is arguably the standard way

⁷ One candidate for an actual artwork that has such an appreciative profile is Yoko Ono’s 22 *Instructions for Paintings*. The work consists of sets of instructions for how to compose various paintings. Arguably, it is enough to just imagine following those instructions to properly engage with the work. <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/61> (last time accessed: 14.04.2025).

⁸ As the reader probably notices, this kind of artform is very similar to Kendall Walton’s (1990) (see also García-Carpintero 2019) notion of fiction in general. According to Walton, fictions are works that are defined by prescriptions to imagine, without those imaginings always counterfactually depending on the perceptual features of those works. By considering engagement with fiction, we have strayed away from perceptual imagination because it is hardly plausible that engagement with fiction always involves mental imagery. Instead, what plays the relevant role is *propositional imagination*.

of gaining access to that property, and this is why imagining constitutes basic first-hand access to it. Imagining the invisible painting also seems to be the standard way of getting access to it, because that is what it is expected from its audience.

Let's look a bit more closely what distinguishes standard and non-standard ways of gaining access to an artwork. Arguably, artworks are normative kinds, in that they are partially constituted by certain norms regarding how they should be engaged with and how they should be experienced.⁹ Thi Nguyen has articulated this in terms of "prescriptive frame" (Nguyen 2020, 125f; see also Saito 2007; Saito 2001). According to Nguyen, artworks constitutively involve prescriptive frames that define the appropriate and inappropriate ways of engaging with them. For instance, (traditional) paintings carry with them a prescriptive frame according to which the appropriate way of experiencing them is looking at them from a range of admissible distance, while disregarding the backside of the painting. Without a prescriptive frame, an object does not count as an artwork because for every artwork, we can discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate ways of engaging with it and it is the prescriptive frame that makes such discriminations possible. This is not to say that the relevant prescriptions are very specific. Artworks having a prescriptive frame is consistent with the idea that appreciators have a lot of freedom in choosing how to engage with them.¹⁰

My suggestion now is that the standard way of gaining access to an artwork and its aesthetic properties is best understood in terms of the prescriptive frame of the work. Whether imagining a work counts as a standard way of gaining access to its aesthetic properties and thereby counts as basic acquaintance, is determined by the work's frame. For instance, in the case of sensory features of things and characters in a piece of fiction, whether imagining those features is a standard way of gaining access to the aesthetic

⁹ These prescriptions may sometimes be constituted by the artistic conventions prevalent in the aesthetic practice in which the artwork is embedded, but may also be constituted by the artists' intentions regarding how her work should be engaged with. Arguably, intentions are genealogically more fundamental, given that an artistic category is formed when certain artistic intentions get conventionalized. That being said, I take it that it depends on the context as to whether the prescription is constituted by the artistic convention or the artist's intention.

¹⁰ An idea similar in spirit to the prescriptive frame is that artworks are constitutively involve what Sherri Irvin calls "sanctions", i.e., artists' acts of endowing a work with a normative status that allows for some ways of engaging with it and disallows others (Irvin 2005; Irvin 2022). Artist's sanction regarding a work that is constitutive of its appreciation-relevant features does not determine the correct interpretation of the work but delimits the range of eligible interpretations (Irvin 2005, 317). It thus plays the similar functional role as prescriptive frame does in Nguyen (and Saito).

properties that supervene on those features is dependent on what the work's frame prescribes.¹¹

It could be objected that accounting for basic acquaintance with an artwork in terms of the standard way of engaging with it makes the notion of acquaintance trivial. If the acquaintance principle is meant to say something substantial about what the proper way of making judgments about artworks is, then it seems rather unsatisfactory to say that the proper way of making aesthetic judgments about an artwork is through the standard way of gaining access to the work and its aesthetic properties. But this does not seem to illuminate our notion of acquaintance, let alone imaginative acquaintance.

In a sense, I agree that the account is somewhat trivial. It deflates the notion of acquaintance, imaginative acquaintance included, by treating it as a matter of convention (or perhaps author's intention) and not as a deep characteristic of the aesthetic domain. However, this shallowness is a feature, not a bug, because by relativizing what counts as basic acquaintance to the standards that govern a particular work at issue it is possible to investigate different ways in which different kinds of artworks allow for basic acquaintance through imagination. Given the immense variety of different art kinds and artistic practices with their specific standards of appreciation, it makes sense to treat it as frame-relative issue such that the frame of the work can define differentially what counts as basic imaginative acquaintance with the work. I deem it as a virtue of my account that the boundaries of the prescriptive frame and what counts as a standard way of gaining access are somewhat porous, in that, depending on the art historical contingencies and even decisions of particular artists, whether some mode of access constitutes legitimate basic acquaintance varies.

In this section, I argued that for imagination to provide basic aesthetic acquaintance with an artwork, imaginative engagement with the work must constitute a standard way of engaging with it and forming judgments about it. Determining exactly which artworks are such that imaginative engagement constitutes the standard way of engaging with them is something for art theorists to study and for art practitioners to determine and can't be fixed *a priori*. Depending on the prescriptive frame of the work, imagination may count as a form of basic acquaintance or not. As I will argue in the next section, this kind of approach also allows us to analyze what counts as a surrogate acquaintance in a way that opens up a nuanced investigation into the status of imagination in aesthetic appreciation and judgment.

¹¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this as an example.

3. Imagination as an adequate surrogate

What does it mean for imagination to provide surrogative acquaintance with an artwork? I take it that a proper surrogate of an artwork is such that, although experiencing it does not constitute a standard way of gaining access to it, it nonetheless puts the agent in a position to make warranted judgments about its aesthetically relevant properties. Arguably, by inspecting an accurate reproduction of a painting with sufficient attention it is possible to gain access to the aesthetically relevant features of the painting and make aesthetic judgments about it because the distribution of properties that painting instantiates is also instantiated by the reproduction. For an imagining to play an analogous role, the unfolding of its content must be such that it represents the distribution of the properties that work instantiates and that the agent can inspect that distribution in their imagination.

Imagination that is a form of recreating an experience seems to be exactly such a capacity that is in principle suitable for providing surrogative acquaintance. If by imagining the experience of an artwork, we gain some understanding what it is to experience that artwork, then in such cases, imaginings surely allow for surrogative acquaintance with the work's aesthetically relevant properties. I take it that this is the basic idea that is in the background of the suggestion that imagination can be an adequate surrogate.

However, given that I articulated the difference between basic and non-basic acquaintance in terms of the standard way of gaining access to the work's properties and the prescriptive frame, this is also relevant when trying to make sense of something providing surrogative acquaintance. Presumably, for surrogative acquaintance with an artwork to be possible, it must be allowed by the rules of engagement. In other words, there must be some forms of non-basic acquaintance that are *permissible*, although they are not the standard ways of gaining access to the work. For instance, for looking at an accurate reproduction or a high-resolution photograph of a painting to count as a legitimate way of gaining access the painting, it must be deemed as a permissible way of gaining such access. It is thus plausible that what determines the standard way of gaining access to the work's properties, i.e., the prescriptive frame, also determines whether something counts as a proper surrogate or not. The suitability of the imagination to play the role of a surrogate is thus relative to a particular artwork and the frame that constitutes it.

The assumption here is that among the non-standard ways of gaining access to the work, there are some that are permitted by the frame that is constitutive of the work. This goes further from the original conception of a prescriptive frame which did not include permissions. However, it is reasonable to think that there are ways of making an adequate judgment about

an artwork by being exposed to its aesthetically relevant properties which do not amount to a standard basis for making those judgments, but which are still legitimate in the sense of being permissible. A form of acquaintance is non-basic but permissible if it results from a kind of engagement with the work that the artist or the tradition in which the work is embedded do not consider as normal, but which is not deemed inappropriate either. Surrogative acquaintance with a work's aesthetic properties is gained through means of access that are deprioritized but still allowed by the frame of the work

What is curious about imagination is that, unlike material surrogates, it is not a medium whose status in providing surrogative acquaintance has been a salient issue in art history, in contrast with reproductions or photographs, for instance. This is presumably because imagination has not generally been considered as a distinct artistic medium. Therefore, the answer to the question of whether imagination can provide surrogative acquaintance with an artwork remains undecided. I take it therefore that it is up to the artist and the artistic community in which the work is embedded to decide as to whether imagination can provide surrogative acquaintance with the work. As with the conditions for basic acquaintance, this can't be settled *a priori* by philosophical reflection.

A crucial implication here is that it is not within the authority of philosophers to decide whether imagination constitutes a medium for surrogative aesthetic acquaintance. Rather, it depends on the particular artistic context in which the work is embedded. If imagining the artwork is not permitted by its frame, there can be no imaginative acquaintance, either basic or non-basic. That said, it is probably a default assumption that if the imagining in question is detailed enough, then it can constitute a form of surrogative acquaintance because it may recreate the experience of the work that constitutes basic acquaintance and is thereby permitted by the frame of the work.

One plausible case of a surrogative use of imagination concerns musical works with written scores that are meant to be enjoyed in live performance. Someone with sufficient musical competence should be able to appreciate such a work by imagining what it would sound like and by attending to how its sonic structure would unfold. Auditory imagination is arguably a permissible way of accessing the aesthetically relevant properties of these works, even when the agent has not listened to their performance. As Lord notes, "musicians can come to gain appreciative knowledge of the aesthetic features of a work by imagining what the work sounds like" (Lord 2018, 90). Plausibly, this way of gaining access is not limited to musicians, but extends to anyone with a sufficiently trained ear, a good capacity for auditory imagery, and the relevant background knowledge of the work. However, insofar as it is the kind of music that is primarily meant to be listened to in the form of

live performance, this mode of appreciation is surrogative: it is permissible, but not basic.¹²

What is interesting in the present context is that the surrogative use of imagination also faces some challenges that are peculiar to imagination. In the remaining part of the paper, I am going to consider some of the more salient challenges

4. Challenges to surrogative acquaintance

We have now specified the conditions for an imagining of the experience of an artwork to count as a form of surrogative acquaintance with the work's properties. In this section, I will delineate some challenges that are specific to imagination as a candidate for aesthetic surrogacy. Since the eligibility of something to play a surrogative role is frame-dependent, there are kinds of artworks whose prescriptive frames are such that imagination is not suitable as a surrogate for aesthetic acquaintance with them.

4.1 The frame of mind needed

The challenge for imagination's surrogative uses comes from those artworks and art kinds whose prescriptive frame calls for a mental disposition that is in tension with the frame of mind that imagination embodies. As a result, merely imagining the work is not just a non-standard way to approach it; it at least sometimes is impermissible. In particular, when it comes to artworks whose rules of appreciation preclude the discretion of the appreciator then imagination as a will-dependent activity arguably cannot play the role of an adequate surrogate for aesthetic judgment.

What do I mean by imagination being will-dependent? By this I mean that the unfolding of its content of the imagining is under the agent's control, in that she is always in a position to interfere in that unfolding in virtue of her intentions.¹³ Furthermore, while the experience of a material surrogate is stimulus-dependent in that its content depends on the perceptual stimulus that the surrogate provides, imagination in the non-basic or surrogative

¹² There are interesting questions as to what aspects of performance imaginings formed in response to reading the score have to recreate in order to put someone in a position to appreciate the musical work. For instance, is imagining the pitch and rhythm sufficient or does one also have to be able to imaginatively recreate the timbre of the instruments? For a parallel discussion of what needs to be instantiated in an authentic performance, see (Dodd 2007, 201–239).

¹³ That imaginings are will-dependent is consistent with the idea that their content is externally determined (for an argument for the latter view, see Munro and Strohminger 2021). The present claim is about the way in which an agent can interfere in and shape the imagined scenario, in contrast with her inability to interfere in and shape in the similar way what she perceives.

context is stimulus-independent, in that the way its content unfolds is not constrained by the environmental stimuli. Unlike perception which is under the control of incoming sensory information (Phillips 2019; Beck 2018), imagination is not.

Why does this difference matter? It is significant because in many cases, proper aesthetic appreciation of an artwork involves letting oneself be guided by the aesthetic properties of the work. In letting herself to be guided, the agent treats those properties as independent of her and as constraining her appreciative responses. As a result, aesthetic appreciation can be a matter of discovery and revelation. There are artworks in which it is very explicit that one's appreciative experience requires a receptive frame of mind and giving up one's control of how the experience unfolds. Imaginings as will-dependent mental activities are ill-suited for adopting such a frame of mind.

Take, for instance, the color field paintings of Mark Rothko. Rothko intended his paintings to evoke deep emotional responses through their scale and colour. The viewer is encouraged to approach closely, remain still, and allow the work's affective qualities to unfold. This kind of aesthetic engagement requires letting go of interpretive control and being open to whichever emotional states the work might elicit. Imagination, by contrast, as a will-dependent capacity does not support this kind of openness. One can always alter or abandon an imaginative experience, which undermines the passivity that Rothko's paintings call for.

A similar point applies to Antony Gormley's *Field*, an installation of thousands of small, hand-made terracotta figures. The presence of these figures in physical space creates a reversal through which the viewer becomes the one who is observed. As Gormley himself says: "It is a turning of the tables—here the viewer is made the subject of the art's gaze. The eyes are asking what kind of world are you making?".¹⁴ This sense of being addressed is not something that can be replicated through imagination alone because the viewer cannot fully simulate the confrontation and the feeling of being seen. Because imagination unfolds on the terms set by the imaginer, it lacks the resistance and external constraint that makes such an encounter meaningful in the way the artist intended.

In both cases, what the artworks demand is a receptive stance—one that treats the aesthetic object as something to be encountered, not constructed. Imagination as a will-dependent capacity is in tension with this kind of aesthetic openness. As such, it does not seem to be a suitable surrogate for the kind of direct, perceptual engagement that these works require.

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/nov/15/antony-gormley-work-of-40000-terracotta-figures-goes-on-show> (last time accessed: 05.04.2025).

One way to put this is to appeal to the idea that adequate aesthetic appreciation requires what Noël Carroll calls “sympathetic attention” to the object. According to Carroll (1999, 171), “attending sympathetically involves placing yourself in the hands of the maker of the object—going wherever she bids you, and attending to whatever she makes salient.”¹⁵ I take sympathetic attention to be a frame of mind which involves letting one’s inspection of the artwork be guided by the work itself. In entering that kind of frame of mind, the agent treats the features in question as independent of her and not as something open to her direct control.¹⁶ Self-generated imaginings, however, are *prima facie* not good candidates for sympathetic attention because the unfolding of those imaginings is not constrained by something external to and independent of the agent.

That aesthetic engagement requires at its core exploratory openness to an object that reveals its facets through perceptual exploration has also been noted by Robert Hopkins who frames this in terms of pleasure in aesthetic properties. As he says:

In motivating observation, pleasure in perceived beauty leads inevitably to discovery. It sets us the end of extending perceptual awareness, where at least often the goal is merely to prolong an awareness we already have. But in doing so it leads, more or less inexorably, to our becoming aware of features that escaped us before. (Hopkins 2024, 207)

Hopkins explicitly contrasts exploratory openness provided by perception with the foreclosedness of merely imagining the aesthetic object. In imagining, the pleasure taken in the imagined object motivates changing the imagined object if changes to the imagined perceptual relations cause disappointment or boredom. In imagining, the imagined object cannot reveal anything that is over and above what we ourselves have intentionally constituted. Insofar as we can talk about discovery in that context, it is at best superficial. By avoiding unwanted discoveries, imagination does not offer the kind of vulnerability and risk that genuine perceptual engagement provides.¹⁷

¹⁵ Even if Carroll’s observation does not generalize to all artworks, it seems crucial for some. In that sense, my point is more limited than his.

¹⁶ Yet another way to put this is that the agent is in an autonomous position with respect to her judgment regarding the imagined object in a non-basic context, but aesthetic judgment involves a heteronomous aspect of being led by the object (i.e., by its aesthetic properties). This might seem surprising, given that the realm of aesthetics is often seen as a realm of autonomy (see Nguyen 2019). However, one can agree that aesthetic engagement and appreciation are autonomous in that it should not rely on other agents, while still maintain that it should be guided by and stay true to the object.

¹⁷ In contrast, in the basic context of acquaintance, the spontaneity of the imagining is not in tension with the appreciative frame of mind because allowing one’s imagination to wander can be in accordance with the standard way of engaging with the work.

Ultimately, the tension between the frame of mind required for imagination and that required for aesthetic appreciation probably does not apply across all artworks. In that sense, I do not assume that Carroll's or Hopkins's observations are universally applicable. For instance, as the surrogative use of imagination in the case of imagining a musical work on the basis of reading a score demonstrated, it is in principle possible to let one's imagination be guided by the work. However, at least in some cases, this tension seems quite explicit. Artworks that demand a receptive, open, and exploratory engagement are in tension with the will-dependent nature of imagination, making it an unsuitable surrogate for direct aesthetic experience.

4.2 Embodiment

We can also make the case that there are at least some kinds of artworks that do not lend themselves well to surrogative imaginative acquaintance. These are works of art whose appreciation demands direct, embodied engagement. The crux of the issue lies in the fact that attempts to use imagination to recreate the direct, embodied experience of a work are inevitably limited. In imagining, we are not committed to the actual embodied presence of the object; surrogative imagination, by its very nature, lacks the sensory, physical immediacy that defines our real-world interactions with artworks. This means that the properties of certain artworks—particularly those demanding an embodied response—cannot be adequately recreated by imagination.

Consider the example of Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present* (2010), a performance piece that required viewers to sit face-to-face with the artist in silence. In this setup, the participant was not simply observing Abramović, but also engaging with her emotionally and physically, allowing themselves to be affected by her presence while being open to her emotional response. This encounter arguably cannot be replicated in imagination. The emotional charge of the live real-time nonverbal communication and the physical proximity to the artist were all critical components of the artwork's impact.

Similarly, take *The Gates* (2005) by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, an installation consisting of 7,503 gates that stretched over 23 miles of walkways in Central Park. The work called for an immersive experience: visitors were invited to walk through the gates and absorb the vastness of the installation in a way that was rooted in their physical movement through the environment. To imagine this experience in a disembodied manner, detached from the act of walking, would ignore the point of the work. Imagination arguably cannot reproduce the felt embodied experience of navigating through the gates and responding to the shifting visual and spatial relations as one moves through the installation.

In both cases, imagining the aesthetic properties of the work seems to be at odds with the normative conditions of its appreciation as the work's frame requires. Embodied artworks, in this sense, present a challenge to the surrogative use of imagination as a means of achieving aesthetic acquaintance.

It could be asked if the issue with the artworks that demand embodied engagement is not that imagination is incapable of providing acquaintance in such cases but rather that in the cases under discussion, there is no available material surrogate or a description. If such a surrogate was made available, wouldn't one be able to appreciate the work through simulating the embodied experience of the work in imagination?¹⁸ In response, I would insist that in cases where an elaborate model is available, appreciating the work may become possible but it is then grounded in the experience with the model and not in imagining. Where a model successfully supports appreciation, it does so by providing an alternative locus of embodied experience. As a result, such cases do not undermine the claim that imagination, by itself, is insufficient to provide acquaintance with artworks whose appreciation essentially depends on embodied engagement.

This raises the question of how far this challenge extends. Could imagination ever be an unsuitable vehicle for surrogative acquaintance with more conventional, seemingly non-embodied artworks, such as paintings? One plausible argument can be found in Barbara Savedoff's 1993 paper, where she critiques the use of photographs in appreciating paintings. Savedoff argues that even high-resolution photographs fail to capture crucial aspects of the work, such as the texture and thickness of the paint on the canvas, or the scale of the painting in relation to its environment. These are not incidental details but features that are integral to the artwork's full appreciation and require direct physical presence to be fully apprehended. Savedoff suggests that even the best photographs fall short of allowing us to experience these aspects of the work because they strip away the immediate, sensory interaction that the viewer would have in the same physical space as the painting (Savedoff 1993, 457ff). Savedoff's points can be plausibly extended from photographs to imaginings as well.

Arguably, imagination can also compensate for some of the features that a photograph misses. For example, Savedoff points out that photographs often fail to convey the surrounding architectural context or the wall on which the painting hangs. This is something that an informed imaginer could remedy. If we possess enough background knowledge, we can imagine the painting in its proper spatial context, filling in the details that a photograph omits. Similarly, photographs do not allow for the possibility of physically approaching or distancing oneself from the painting, which is an important

¹⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this question.

part of the experience for some viewers. But once again, imagination can mitigate this problem. A sufficiently informed imaginer could simulate the experience of moving closer to or farther away from the artwork and thus recreate in their mind the shifting perspectives that occur in the act of physical movement.

That being said, what this discussion again confirms is that the question of whether imagination can serve as a fitting surrogate for first-hand experience is context dependent. In some cases, imagination can fill in the gaps left by photography, providing a kind of surrogate acquaintance with certain works of art. In other cases, such as those involving embodied engagement, imagination falls short. We cannot always rely on imagination as an adequate surrogate for engagement with a work, especially when the work requires physical presence or embodied participation to be fully appreciated.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I brought together two strands of discussion about the role of imagination in providing aesthetic appreciation, usually discussed separately in the literature: its role in providing basic imaginative acquaintance in the case of many artworks and its role as a surrogate. I argued for an approach that treats what counts as basic and what counts as surrogate acquaintance as dependent on relevant artistic standards and as frame-relative. Whether and in what way imagination can serve as a vehicle for acquaintance, be it surrogate or basic, cannot thus be given a substantial uniform answer that is applicable to all artworks and art kinds.

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