



VIEWPOINT: CONCEPTUAL ART

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A pyramid of jumbled rags, a multi-colored wool bear sitting on a plastic sheet, a tumbled bed with dirty sheets. All conceptual art, all accepted as art in museums, galleries, private collections, international exhibitions.

The acceptance of the unexceptional subject has been with us so very long that, observing fly-like in a corner, one can note show-goers examine with solemn, even reverential eyes, the concept made manifest and physical. What do they know of its history?

Looking back several years to notes made on the subject, I've attempted to revisit the origins of the art school.

In the Beginning

Circa 1960: First Decade of the Post-Modernist Era, Stage 1 of Conceptual Art

Art historians usually single out a work by Joseph Kosuth, "One and Three Chairs," 1965, as the prime mover of conceptualism. Now in the collection of MOMA, it consists of a wooden folding chair, a full-size photograph of the chair, and an enlarged photograph of a dictionary definition of a chair. Kosuth is also a writer, so he got to say what he was doing before the ascerbic major critics of the moment began opining. In an essay, "Art After Philosophy," Kosuth pointed out that the work is not an object framed and hung on the wall, but the activity in which the artist is engaged at the time of creation.

What is It?

In conceptual art the artist takes over the critic's job. He differentiates the creative work from "actual works of art [which] are little more than historical curiosities." (Art After Philosophy, *Studio International*, Oct/Nov, 1969)

The final steps in the disappearance of the art object occurs at the same time as conceptual art is created since conceptual art is essentially the presentation of an idea rather than the foundation of a permanent work.

In 1961 an Englishman, Henry Flynt, wrote an essay in which he stated that conceptual art is "an art in which the material is concepts, as the material of...music is sound. Since concepts are closely bound up with language, concept art is a kind of art of which material is language. Implicit in all [forms of conceptualism] is the artist himself performing the critical function during the process of presenting his concept." (Arnason, H.H. *A History of Modern Art*, 1969, p. 703)

"In its present form conceptual art abolishes the art object altogether (whether it is a physical thing or as a performance) as something to be contemplated and appreciated for itself, reducing it to a mere instrument for communicating an idea." (Osborne, Harold, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Winter, 1980, p.6)

It was Osborne who pointed out that the most noticeable component of works of conceptual art was the deliberate banality and triviality of the idea involved. "This fascination of the



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superficial and the banal is, of course, one of the symptoms of the age.” Later in the article, however, he admits that the work of art may have, for example, boredom as its theme but may not itself be boring. He cited “Waiting for Godot” as an example.

The puzzle concerning conceptual art is whether the successful communication of an idea can be considered a work of art. Since many of the artists like Kosuth and Hans Haacke had an established interest in semantics and information theory, it was those interests that dominated their work. But does viewing their work involve an aesthetic experience?

A 1979 piece by Douglas Huebler is explained thusly in a recent Artnet online page: “...the arrangement of typed text next to a blank, black square at first presents viewers with a straight-forward juxtaposition. However, rather than explaining the blank field of color (which is actually a black and white photograph), Huebler’s text speaks of itself in relation to the shape.... The work echoes the conceptual pioneer’s statement that ‘the world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.’”

Ten years earlier, in a better recognized conceptual artwork, Heuber selected the mug shots of a man who may or may not have committed a crime. He created a poster. The viewer was invited to take part in the apprehension of the criminal and had to take on faith that the wanted poster was accurate and thus raised the question about the accuracy of the documentation in the first place. It raised the question also about the meaning of art, about the space a work of art occupies. It is presented in a formalist manner. If the viewer were to capture the man he would be paid \$1,000 (1969 money). Heuber received \$1,000 from the buyer of the

work who was the financier of the operation. There was neither loss nor gain. The piece aimed at being non-profit.

Among other proponents of conceptualism during its heyday: Dennis Oppenheim, Richard Long, Klaus Rinke, Monica Baumgart, Carl Andre, Lawrence Weiner, Victor Burgin, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Robert Barry.

If a work of art enhances our awareness then, certainly Conceptualism is art. In traditional art the artist is considered a craftsman who created an object for the aesthetic enjoyment of viewers. It is expected that the observer shares to some extent by bringing to his viewing a certain cooperation. “He must exercise a skilled faculty of perception to become aware of the art work latent in the object or event presented to his attention.” (Osborne, p. 17)

Conceptual art has been deeply involved with language, semantics, information theory and, upon occasion, these interests dominate the work. Therefore, it seems to me that it is these types of pieces that can be called works of art (Osborne would disagree) without being dubbed aesthetic objects. The experience of viewing these works may not be an aesthetic one at all.

For Instance

For instance, regard the works of conceptual art currently on display on the grounds of the Summer Olympic venue in London. Created by Ackroyd & Harvey, the work consists of art designed bronze and steel rings, each suspended around a tree in the park. The physical sculpture relates to Lucy Harrison’s project involving audio recordings with people who live or work near to each of the ten trees planted as part of the A&H



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commission. Visitors stop at a tree and download the track that applies to that tree. There is an explanation by A&H, in part, "Trees mark the passing of time through their yearly ring growth. They will transform as the seasons change....."

What are some better known conceptual works? On Kawara once selected a pre-stretched canvas from his daily work, a carefully painted monochrome on which is noted the day's date. If the painting wasn't finished by midnight it was destroyed. By October 31, 1970 eight hundred and twenty three of these works had been completed.

Vito Acconci stepped up and down from a stool at the rate of thirty steps a minute for as long as he could without stopping. John Baldessari wrote "I will not make any more boring art" in endless columns.

In 1979 Walter de Maria exhibited "The Broken Kilometer" in a large West Broadway gallery filled with five hundred solid brass rods of the same length that added together totaled a complete kilometer. It was extensively publicized. Beginning not long after that period of easily recognizable, highly touted and much written about conceptual art, the mission of conceptual art may have been blunted through the very process it was created to oppose – commodification.

In 1984 an exhibition: "Difference: On Representation and Sexuality" was presented at the New Museum. Primarily a show of conceptual art, it was met with hostility. By this time the style of combining machine printed photographs and typewritten pages, promoting content over expression, had become old hat since it had first been presented in America in 1970.

At present there is an exhibition of conceptual art at the Hayward Gallery in London that may prove memorable to future art historians – every piece of art inside the gallery is invisible. At approximately \$15 a pop, visitors are privileged to stare at 50 works of invisible art by Andy Warhol, Yves Klein, Yoko Ono, Tom Friedman, Jeppe Heine and Jay Chung, the last named being the director of a movie which he spent two years shooting with no film in his camera. As the gallery director mused: "This exhibition highlights that art isn't about material objects, it's about setting our imaginations alight, and that's what the artists in this show do in many varied ways."

Concept Redux

Reviewing commentaries written over the years, I came on an article by Ian Burn in *FlashArt* of Nov/Dec 1988 in which he conjectures that "around the mid-sixties there was a moment when it was realized that perception wasn't just a factor to be manipulated, that instead the act of perception itself could be forced to become a more self-conscious process." He offered the idea that conceptual art came about when artists tried to reclaim power over their own practices, power which they sensed was being eroded. They wished to achieve some degree of aesthetic self-determination and link art to real politics and create a more democratic form of art. By the 70s conceptual works represented a rejection of the commodity form of art and the confinement of art within an institution, separated by everyday life.

According to the critic-writer Max Kozloff "...a major proposition of this retreat Dadaism is the longing to be free of art history. The tradition of art, after all, is culture-bound, and where is there a more



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affective way for the artist to declare himself independent and liberated from culture than to announce that he has disassociated himself from art history. The history of modern art is replete with artists who announced themselves impervious to historical categories." (*Artforum*, September, 1972, "The Trouble with Art as Idea")

To have an idea of what the artists themselves think of conceptual art, one looks to their very words: ".....as what I do becomes art history the minute the culture accepts it, so it stops being Art." (*Avalance*, Spring 1972)