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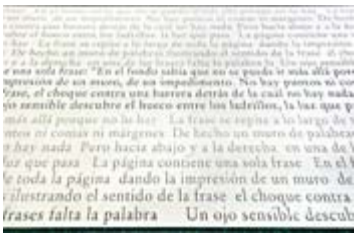

Joseph Kosuth
Una sola frase
2003
Invesart Gallery

Adam Goldberg (with fake Christopher Wool) in *(Untitled)*

Damien Hirst
The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (detail)
1991

IN DEFENSE OF CONCEPTS
by Ben Davis

Is it becoming cool to hate conceptual art? Recently in the *Guardian*, Adrian Searle wrote about being asked to take part in a debate at Oxford University. The proposition under consideration was "This House believes that conceptual art is no art at all." Speaking for conceptual art, Searle describes being stunned by "the general cultural ignorance" on the other side, "the unexamined prejudices, the kneejerk anti-intellectualism and cultural suspicion of contemporary art." What exactly Searle's foes thought the word "conceptual" meant is not totally clear -- it was certainly not limited to the esthetic puzzles of Joseph Kosuth. The term, seemingly, has spread to cover anything that involves an idea at all, and it is often used as an epithet, as if the person speaking really wanted to say "trick art."

The *Guardian* article struck a chord with me, because of a sense I have had lately, a sense of coagulating ignorance surrounding the art world. Maybe I can chalk this up to Twitter, where one can survey the vast, mixed-up spectrum of opinion on art, all in one place. Or maybe it was the trailer for the recent comedy (*Untitled)*, which looks amusing but also seems to be satirizing the pretentions of the art world of 20 years ago (The preview contains a spoof of Robert Gober and, yes, Robert Rauschenberg.)

What is certain is that my uneasiness received a potent kick from a *New York Times* op-ed last month by Denis Dutton, a critic who has been everywhere this year, from the Colbert Report to NPR. Appearing under the oh-so-witty title "Has Contemporary Art Jumped the Shark Tank?," Dutton's *Times* piece was an assault on all things "conceptual," a term he uses in the same loose way as the Oxfordian anti-conceptualists. The California-born, New Zealand-based Dutton is an old-hand at anti-intellectualism -- in the '90s, he was known for his "Bad Writing Contest," holding up academic prose to ridicule -- but he is an informed person. Which makes his essay all the more striking for its "general cultural ignorance, unexamined prejudices, kneejerk anti-intellectualism and cultural suspicion of contemporary art," to use Searle's checklist.

Since Dutton seems to be a figure who has been selected to explain contemporary art to the public, it's worth taking note in detail of the basic errors that he manages to cram into this brief essay:

* Dutton's archetypal examples of the ills of contemporary art are Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons. He uses these two convenient villains to illustrate his thesis: "appreciation of contemporary conceptual art. . . depends not on immediately recognizable skill, but on how the work is situated in today's intellectual zeitgeist." Consequently, Dutton implies, art has become a game for insiders with no connection to popular values of art.

What is comic about this is that Hirst and Koons are probably the two most popularly identifiable contemporary artists. Neither can be summed up as opaquely "conceptual" in the way that Dutton wants to argue. You may or may not like Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility*

Jeff Koons
Flower Puppy
1992

Acheulean Handaxe
ca. 400,000 B.P.
Museum of Anthropology, University of Missouri

Torso of a youth
Roman overcast of a Greek bronze statue of the early 5th century b.c.
Metroplitan Museum of Art

of Death in the Mind of Someone Living or Koons' *Flower Puppy*, but they are both artworks that have an inbuilt "wow" factor. Arguably, a more informed criticism of these two artists would be that they cave in to the need for flashy, immediately legible spectacle. Dutton concludes his essay staring into a jewelry store window, speculating that there is just something about gems that is naturally fascinating. Which is why, of course, Hirst coated his *For the Love of God* with diamonds.

* Dutton's primary concern is to argue that "human beings have a permanent, innate taste for virtuoso displays in the arts," and that "conceptual art" is bad because it neglects this natural affinity (in fact, the article is framed around the conceit that "works of conceptual art have an inherent investment risk," with Dutton seeming to indicate that the art market would do better to reorient around, I kid you not, "Acheulian hand axes.") He completely collapses the notion of "virtuoso display" with handicraft, as if a well-crafted philosophical essay weren't a "virtuoso display" of its own sort. This, in turn, leads him into two cringingly obvious errors.

The first is evidenced in his claim that, as opposed to the insider gamesmanship of contemporary art, "we are still able, as with the great bronzes or temples of Greece or ancient China, to respond directly to craftsmanship." I guess Dutton thinks that the experience of appreciating sculpture is summed up by surveying it and saying, "Nice bronzework!" or "Wow, they really knew how to put together a temple!" In fact, appreciating art of any kind implies a command of the narratives around it; ancient Greek and Chinese art require a great accumulation of cultural knowledge to "get" them. All art is conceptual if by that you mean that actually having a rewarding encounter with it implies something beyond just the brute facts before your eyes.

Dutton gives a dire warning about contemporary art: "Future generations, no longer engaged by our art 'concepts' and unable to divine any special skill or emotional expression in the work, may lose interest in it as a medium for financial speculation and relegate it to the realm of historical curiosity." But my sense is that the average non-specialist visitor walking through the Met's Greek and Roman Galleries appreciates the works there as precisely that: "historical curiosities." They spend about 10 seconds on masterpieces that have had whole books written about them, take a picture, move on.

* A second error, more crucial to understanding specifically contemporary art, comes in Dutton's bold call that we should stop kidding ourselves that craft is "a value left over from our grandparents' culture." I certainly don't believe that craft is a dead issue -- far from it, I love the limpid paintings of my friend René Smith, who I think is a very good painter -- but Dutton seems to believe that nothing significant has changed that might affect our way of appreciating craft, not just from our grandparent's time, but literally since the Stone Age! Arguably, the modern definition of the "artist" comes alive at exactly at the point where "art" is elevated above mere craftsmanship -- the birth of the artist-as-intellectual is the thrust of Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists*.

But you can go further. Presumably, the value of craft in contemporary art will have something to do with how craft is viewed in contemporary society. If one is engaged in craft labor, one is also better placed to appreciate the craft labor of others. Today's culture, however, is characterized by the massive alienation of people from the actual processes that produce almost all the goods that make up their everyday life-world, from food to clothing to entertainment. So *of course* this implies entirely new modes of esthetic appreciation, and gives new shades of meaning to craft when it is employed. People still make themselves things -- cooking themselves meals,

Buddhist stele
Tang dynasty (618–906), ca. 700
Metropolitan Museum of Art

René Smith
Drew and Ex-Girlfriend
2006

Peter Doig
Reflection (What does your soul look like)
1996
$10,162,500
Christie's New York
Nov. 10, 2009

puttering around in the basement, and so on -- but it is just a small part of daily experience. Correspondingly, "craft art" is just one color in a very broad rainbow of esthetic possibilities.

All of this is really basic, first-week-of-art-appreciation kind of stuff. So, why does Denis Dutton get a platform in the *New York Times*? Because he is able to give a sophisticated-sounding argument (Acheulian hand axes!) to something a large number of people feel, justifiably or not. A little while ago, I was sitting on David Cohen's "Review Panel," talking about five diverse pieces of contemporary art. When the question period began, a hand shot up and a woman demanded of the panelists, as if aggrieved, "Don't you think that the artist has an *ethical responsibility* to make their own work? How would you feel as a writer if someone took your words and published them as their own?"

"Well," I replied, "pouring your guts out onto the canvas is one kind of artistic expression. But even within the conventions of things that we normally think of as 'artistic,' it's not the only one: Architects don't make their own buildings, but we still recognize their labor as creative; choreographers don't always dance their own work; and so on." Or something like that. I was proud of the answer as a kind of basic defense of a broad-minded approach to art. Immediately, 20 hands shot up, apparently to challenge me. Sensing that we were hurtling towards a quagmire, our moderator quickly steered us back to the artists at hand.

But maybe we should have finished the conversation, if such a conversation still needs to be had. The funny thing is, of course, that if you look around the professional art scene, you would never really know that there was any need to make the case for "conceptual" art, which is by now an established part of the artistic vocabulary that people treat rather casually. But insularity is itself a problem. It might be worthwhile to establish a criticism that revived the sense of how challenging and thought-provoking idea-based work can be, rather than being blasé about it. "Creative minds say arts fight not only for funds, but relevancy" ran the headline of a recent article in the *Times of Trenton*, reporting on a convention dedicated to "The Arts and the Economic Crisis," and noting that the major challenge arts advocates see in these troubled times is that the broad public might not care about what's going on in the arts at all.

Ultimately, I don't believe that this present debate about "conceptual art" versus "traditional craft" is really about those terms at all. The debate is a distorted reflection of something else, with the word "conceptual" standing as a kind of code word. Searle, for example, notes that one of his foes in the Oxford debate, the artist Mark Leckey, "said he was on the philistine side of the debate because he hated everything the YBAs stand for. He wasn't against conceptual art but what he regarded as the pop version of it." Dutton tellingly fixates on the high prices that Hirst commands at auction, arguing that a romantic love of craft would represent a rebellion against shallow economic calculation (as if Peter Doig wasn't also an auction-house darling).

What people actually mean by "conceptual art" here is art that is not valued on the basis of its real, intrinsic merits, but because of the ideas around it. "Conceptual" is conflated with an "anything goes" mentality, the sense that esthetic values have been compromised by shallow commercial permissiveness. Because "conceptual art" is idea-driven, it is dismissed as a whole as being based on cliquishness and hype. A whole manner of art-making is being conflated with the scene around it, with the specific ends to which some successful artists put it.

On Kawara
18 NOV. 1994
1994
David Zwirner Gallery
Photo by Hiro Ihara

Robert Rauschenberg
Trophy II (for Teeny and Marcel Duchamp)
1960
Walker Art Center

No one, least of all me, is going to dispute the fact that there are a lot of smug, half-assed conceptual gestures out there, produced for an in-crowd audience. But there are also good, committed conceptual artists. I've always appreciated the Zen-like gravitas of On Kawara, despite having little luck explaining him concisely during my days as a docent for children at the Walker Art Center. (On the other hand, you know what artist kids do love, spontaneously? Rauschenberg. He connects with their love of making a mess.) In this, conceptual art is no different from "traditional" art: There is plenty of interesting painting and sculpture today; there is also plenty of boring, derivative painting and sculpture.

What's notable about the present attack on "conceptual" art by Dutton and many, many others is that it is a symmetrical, distorted reflection of the very critique of "traditional" art that led artists to adopt diverse "conceptual" strategies in the first place. A great many of these (e.g. process art, abject art, performance art) attracted the zeal of their purveyors in the '60s, '70s and '80s because they seemed to promise some kind of critique of the art market. Traditional art forms like painting and sculpture were -- and still are, in some circles -- considered to be corrupt, because the objects they produce lend themselves to being sold, owned and traded. Barbara Rose expressed this silly conception in a particularly hyperbolic passage from the *Partisan Review*: "For some time now I have felt that the radicalism of Minimal and Conceptual art is fundamentally political, that its implicit aim is to discredit thoroughly the forms and institutions of dominant bourgeois culture."

The fact that such strategies devolved inexorably into their own sort of market-friendly style just proves a point. On both sides, "traditional" and "conceptual," the perceived ill of the other is actually just the displaced face of the market itself, with its tendency to transmogrify and vulgarize everything. Which should provide a lesson for critics about the kind of promises they make for art: There are no formal or esthetic solutions to the political and economic dilemmas that art faces -- only political and economic solutions. Consequently, the only critical temperament that makes any real sense is an eclectic one that doesn't build up one or the other side into the answer for problems that they both share.

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