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CONCEPTUAL ART AND THE CONTINUING QUEST FOR A NEW SOCIAL CONTEXT

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In order to understand the meaning of artistic products, we have to forget them for a time, to turn aside from them and have recourse to the ordinary forces and conditions of experience that we do not usually regard as aesthetic. We must arrive at the theory of art by means of a detour (Dewey, 1934).

In challenging the notion of formalist aesthetic taste during the late sixties, a scattered group of artists, centered primarily in New York City, began to reveal the wider implications of art which had been largely ignored by galleries and museums. Their efforts suggested that objects made and distributed within a somewhat limited art context become part of a much larger social context; that, although art reflects the concerns of a society at a particular time and through a particular artist's interpretation, its attachment to that society is eminently clear. Whether art works exist in the form of objects, installations, propositions, or events, they have the power to effect and to be effected by the social structure which attributes meaning to them.

A decade ago, conceptual artists became the new mediators between information and culture. They chose to create statements instead of objects. These statements were presented in the form of language which translated their intentions into ideas. Language was also a vehicle of criticism for evaluating the content, often depleted, in the production of art objects. This further involved the task of examining the role of art in relation to the social and political structure--whether or not this structure was a conscious part of the work in terms of formal intent.

In retrospect, conceptual art may be seen as a polemic gesture--a series of attacks which disturbed the seemingly rational aesthetics of critics who sought to dictate formal taste as historical fact. The subtle incentives which dealers began to impose upon artists as a result of these criteria--beginning with the advent of abstract expressionism as big business--was mistakenly correlated with substantive aesthetic value. Regardless of how abstract these images appeared or how much raw emotion was displayed, they ultimately became symbolic representations of a lucrative and powerful social investment which needed the reinforcement of aesthetic taste.

The alternative, for the conceptualists, was to induce a form that could exist beyond the necessity of object-making altogether. Form might then be evaluated in platonic terms, that is, in its pure idea state, without the interference of conventional containers (objects) that were presumed to hold sensory and/or formal qualities. The Modernist complicity between viewer, critic, and object could be replaced by recalling attention to the artist's mode of inquiry. The viewer's patience or

delight (as the case may be) could be shifted to the consciousness of the receiver; that is, the person receiving and evaluating the information on a visual-thought basis, rather than on a strictly formal basis. The role of the critic-historian was regarded as an unnecessary hybrid that tended to usurp the responsibility of communication from the artist. The credibility of the artist's mode of inquiry would still be dependent upon an informed audience with a willingness to unravel the cognitive aspects of the work.

Joseph Kosuth once argued that the basis of conceptual art was its "infrastructural analysis" of those issues which other contemporary artists chose to ignore (1975, p. 89-90). He believed that art existed as a tautology--a language of its own making, an artist-intended structure--and that taste was an irrelevant factor. The substance of art could be evaluated in terms of its public (social context), but the intrinsic fact of the work was simply the information that it communicated.

In reflecting upon the development of conceptual art during the middle to late sixties, Kosuth believed it to be an expression of social turmoil and political unrest. The extremes of this era were epitomized by Modernism on the one hand, and conceptual art on the other. Kosuth remarked:

The myth of Modernism, which includes painting and sculpture, collapsing at our heels, left only its shock waves--the sense of a more direct relationship with the cultural bias of western civilization. . . . Perhaps there is some interwoven nature to the myth of America and the myth of Modernism, and when both have been sufficiently unwoven the autonomy of art may be seen for what it was: one colored strand and part of a larger fabric (1975, p. 94).

The need for a greater awareness of the cultural bias used in determining the validity of art works (as art) has become a lingering issue among younger artists currently working in England, Europe, South America, and the United States. The British artist-photographer, Victor Burgin, has written about this problem in evaluating art from the point of view of semiotics. Burgin, whose thinking is derived from that of the French critic, Roland Barthes, understands semiotics as the relationship of cultural signs as revealed through language (i.e., photography = visual language) to the identification of an ideology within the culture (1977, p. 37).

Rather than being a phenomenon unique to contemporary art, Burgin sees the ideology of Modernism as a development of stale aesthetic attitudes leftover from the Nineteenth Century. He feels that conceptual art was important because it "administered a rebuff to the Modernist demand for aesthetic confections and for formal novelty for its own sake (1976, p. 18)". Burgin further suggests that semiotics may replace Modernism as a viable artistic process. In so doing, it would serve as a vehicle to "unmask the mystifications of bourgeois culture by laying bare its codes, by exposing the devices through which it constructs its self-image (1976, p. 24)".

The synchronization of art and culture has become a tenuous issue. Although dependent upon each other, neither exists as the sole cause of the other. Burgin seems to conclude that if art works are to have any real significance in effecting social change, there should be a topical inference built into their presentation. This point of view is perhaps more radical in theory than the majority of works presented by conceptualists in America during the sixties.

Whereas Ad Reinhardt's much quoted tautology exclaims "Art in art is art," Burgin seems to align art directly with culture for the purpose of revealing social attitudes which are designated outside the framed image. More specifically, Burgin perceives the social context of art as expressing the dogma of a past culture held in solemn reverence by the middle class. His polemic is, therefore, directed against Modernist art that signifies the past.

The relationship of art to the social and political protests of the late sixties was an underlying concern among the Fluxus artists in New York. Although less ideologically cohesive than the conceptualists, Fluxus influenced the important Guerilla Art Action Group which demonstrated or performed, as the case may be, vehement protests against the art establishment (museums, galleries, etc.). On January 10, 1970, they issued a statement which declared:

Art is satisfied with being an aesthetic/machinery, satisfied with being a continuum of itself and its so-called history, while in fact, it has become the supreme instrument through which our repressive society idealizes its image. Art is used today to distract people from the urgency of their crises. Art is used today to force people to accept more easily the repression of big business (Hendricks, et. al., 1973, p. 79).

This document by Jon Hendricks, Poppy Johnson, and Jean Toche foretells Kosuth's explanation five years later that conceptual art was "the art of the Vietnam war era" (Kosuth, 1975, p. 94). It was also the era of civil rights demonstrations, Black power, urban uprisings, student protests, assassinations, hippies, communes, and environmentalism. Marshall McLuhan observed that a new awareness of media had brought a change in cultural attitudes, and that these changes were beginning to reach the American public in heavy doses. Whether or not one chooses to accept McLuhan's aesthetic attitude is irrelevant; the fact remains that a number of artists began using electronic and printed media in lieu of painting and sculpture as a more direct and instant means for communicating their ideas.

The Spanish philosopher, Ortega y Gasset, once wrote that "thinking is the endeavor to capture reality by means of ideas; the spontaneous movement of the mind goes from concepts to the world" (no date, p. 34). It was precisely this synapse between thought and action which became the embodiment of a new attitude about art. It was this new attitude that brought the Fluxus group and then the conceptualists, whose work was essentially non-object oriented, into conflict with the existing social order. Conceptual art, as defined by Kosuth and the Art and

Language constituency in Britain, attempted to suspend aesthetic judgment in order to emphasize the existence of ideas. Often their ideas, or the very fact that their work was free of any object association, had social implications that defied the existing infrastructure.

Another side of conceptual art, not entirely in agreement with Art and Language, presented ideas as systems, in order to emphasize their function and active engagement within the course of time. Such artists as Douglas Huebler, Hans Haacke, Agnes Denes, John Baldessari, Yvonne Rainer, Allan Kaprow, Don Burgy, On Kawara, Hanne Darboven, Les Levine, and Daniel Buren, dealt with sequences or linear progressions in their work. Their intentions were diverse and often complexly interwoven, including sources borrowed from science, social science, philosophy, art, economics and technology. In general, these artists focused attention on systems which allowed the repeated examination of patterns, motifs and structures to occur outside of any deliberate aesthetic manipulation.

Some of these systemic works were attempting to depart from the conventional art context where the artist controlled the process or medium. They sought a more literal structure, in order to allow new meanings to evolve through the engagement of social processes. According to critic Jack Burnham, conceptual art existed as an activity in "real time" thus operating concurrently with actual living processes rather than apart from them (1969, p. 50). Burnham defined this orientation as follows:

A major illusion of art systems is that art resides in specific objects. Such artifacts are the material basis for the concept of the "work of art." But, in essence, all institutions which process art data, thus making information, are components of the work of art. Without the support system, the object ceases to have definition; but without the object, the support system can still sustain the notion of art. So we can see why the art experience attaches itself less and less to canonical or given forms but embraces every conceivable experiential mode, including living in everyday environments (1969, p. 50).

Burnham's statement shifts attention from the object as an entity unto itself to that of a cross-cultural matrix upon which art works acquire meaning. As a result of this shift, one might consider his or her aesthetic response to displayed objects as being dependent upon some knowledge of the original culture or sub-culture to which they refer. Brian O'Doherty has pointed out that a "neutral" viewing space never exists within the context of art (1976, p. 26-34). Inevitably, art objects assume a certain level of social mobility which often becomes the basis for their presentation. Therefore, aesthetic response may be obfuscated by those attempts to disguise the relationship of art to culture by imposing neutrality upon objects which may or may not be considered in terms of their decorative appeal. The estrangement of the art object from its cultural setting immediately puts the viewer in suspension and thereby attempts to enforce a social context which is devoid of complex meaning.

By refocusing aesthetic response as a means of thought processing, rather than towards the object as being an end in itself, one may become more aware of the derivation of meaning projected into objects made by

artists. In this way, the experience of time may be felt as an intrinsic condition of aesthetic response and as a coherent part of the context in which the work is produced. Therefore, Burnham's emphasis on real time as a condition for experiencing the artist's idea becomes a critical notion in regard to meaning.

Douglas Huebler has emphasized the presence of time in carrying out various procedures or events which are then documented through the use of photographs, maps, written statements, postal receipts, newspaper articles, letters, legal papers, sketches, and other paraphernalia. Huebler's attitude is one of deliberate detachment from the documents. Although he is engaged in the recording process to the extent that he defines the parameters of an idea, all future control is relinquished in order to allow the functioning of the work itself to reveal his intentions (Note 1). The relationship of time to the interrogation of various social myths is essential to Huebler's construct. He works directly within the social structure. Systems--such as city streets, post offices, news media, elevators, bird calls, etc.--are simply the raw material with which the artist works. The behavior of individuals within these systems continues to function--often unaware of the artist's intention on a level commensurate to that of any behavioral function in real time. In a catalog statement for his 1972 exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Huebler states:

A system existing in the world, disinterested in the purposes of art, may be "plugged into" in such a way as to produce a work that possesses a separate existence and that neither changes nor comments on the system used (Note 2).

In Location Piece No. 6 from that exhibition, for example, the artist solicited articles of "local interest" from various newspapers throughout the United States, which would be used as part of an "information processing cycle" (Note 2). Huebler presented documents (software extensions of the piece) which included press photographs with captions and letters from those editors who agreed to participate. One might interpret Location Piece No. 6 as a clear examination of the social context from which various provincial sub-cultures in America come to perceive themselves. Such a statement would not be likely to occur through the Associated Press; however, through this juxtaposition of images and captions, placed indeterminately in a random grid pattern, the artist represents an idea that is greater than the sum of its parts. This arrangement of documents reveals the social basis by which a work of art is perceived.

Just as the experience of time has been a central concern in Huebler's work, a similar concern possessed the artist Hans Haacke. As early as 1962, Haacke was working with systems in such hydrodynamic works as Rain Tower (Vinkers, 1939, p. 45). One of the artist's major considerations was the representation of time through natural, physical occurrences. Rain Tower appears somewhat minimalistic, consisting of ten acrylic boxes piled one on top of another in a vertical column. Inside these transparent cubes, the viewer perceives water descending from the highest box through a succession of boxes; each water level corresponds in ratio to the sequential position of each box. Given an equal area of interior space within each of the units, the air and water ratio determined itself systematically as evaporation began occurring at the highest level.

Haacke has emphasized the fact that he does not concern himself with the working-out of formal solutions to art problems as a primary issue; rather, his interests are directed toward comprehending the system of a particular phenomenon while observing its transformation by way of "natural time and natural laws" (Vinklers, 1969, p. 46). This comment was directed primarily at the artist's earlier works in which he was associated with the Group Zero in Dusseldorf, and the Groupe de recherche d'art visuel in Paris during the early 60's. Critic Betite Vinklers established that Haacke's use of systems is generally of two types: first, there is the production of a system which incorporates natural laws, such as gravity and evaporation; and secondly, there is the presentation of a system which already exists, but to which the artist responds by tapping into it (1969, p. 49). This latter approach--one which has characterized Haacke's work since 1969--was powerfully evidenced in an exhibition at the John Weber Gallery in New York called The Good Will Umbrella (1977).

Haacke presented seven silkscreened facsimiles of the Mobil Oil placard mounted across one wall of the gallery. Beneath the obtrusive word MOBIL, spelled-out in red and blue across the top of each unit, two pages of text were placed side by side. The major text was an advance copy of an address given by a public relations official representing Mobil Oil Corporation at a 1975 convention for advertizing executives. The address, entitled "Farewell to a Low Profile," indicated that the much-publicized generosity of Mobil Oil during the 70's was a necessary ploy in order to advance their "good will" ideology. It was further implied that while their support of "the arts" appeared altruistic, it was in fact, a necessary diversion used to defend other forms of exploitation. Haacke later had this comment to offer:

Ironically, the ideological stabilization of power in the hands of a given power elite is predicated on the mobilization of the resources for its potential overthrow. If "repressive tolerance" were as smothering as Herbert Marcuse fears, there would be no need to spend enormous amounts of money for propaganda and the public relations efforts of big corporations. These investments attest to the race between an ever more sophisticated public and newly developed techniques of persuasion, in which also art is increasingly used as an instrument (1977, pp. 101-108).

Haacke's recent work may be characterized as metacritical in the sense that it is commenting upon the social, political, and economic strata which continue to sustain Modernist tendencies as institutional parapets for various funding agencies, businesses, and methods of art appreciation in schools and museums. The irony in Haacke's work lies in the contradiction between the nature of his commentary and the conventional commercial dealership which enables his work to be taken seriously within the context of art. Were it not for the fact that The Good Will Umbrella (and related works before and since) was exhibited in a commercial gallery, it is doubtful whether such a statement could sustain its intensity as a viable social criticism. However, it should be noted that Haacke's work is largely effective because it transforms the meaning of art in current times--not by appearance, but according to function--from that of interior decoration to an awareness of its

social signification, thus influencing "personal" tastes and thinking about art. Burnham has viewed Haacke's research into these systems as a succinct alternative to the formal criteria of Modernism. He explains:

Rather than the manipulation of color, gestalts and textual surfaces, he has chosen to define art in terms of open and closed systems, self-regulating, as opposed to run-away systems, and hierarchical organization of physical relationships (1975).

Although objects and events may exist in and of themselves within the context of art, it does not necessarily follow that they will always be understood as existing within that context. Although this problem was introduced via Duchamp's anonymous selection of "readymades", the conceptualists were confronting it in a less subtle, more political manner. Les Levine, for example, believes that most artworks produced today do not go beyond the fringes of traditional aesthetics, i.e., the philosophy of beauty as perceived through the senses, in their consideration of content. Rather than designating art as a vehicle for examining the wider social and cultural nexus from which ideas emanate, the contemporary audience considers art as "a self-generating system which exists within itself and is neither affected by nor effects society or the state of the world" (Note 3).

A number of projects by American artists have shown an increasing interest in the relationship of artworks to the social system. A classic example would be Robert Morris' notarized statement of 1963, entitled, "Statement of Esthetic Withdrawal" (1972, p. 28). The purpose of this gesture by Morris was to suspend any aesthetic reference to a piece of sculpture which he had placed on exhibition. As a result, people were encouraged to examine the work for reasons other than artistic enrichment or enjoyment. The issue, in this case, became the anonymous presence of the form occupying a particular space; the relationship of the viewer to his or her social space became more apparent than the validity of the object as art.

Dan Graham, who over the years has constructed a series of politically conscious video installations that manipulate the existence of social barriers as illusionistic space (1977, p. 52-61), mounted a window display at a non-profit gallery in lower Manhattan in January, 1979. The intent of Graham's piece was to project slides on to a rear screen facing the street, giving an "inside" view of current gallery exhibitions in the neighboring vicinity (Note 4). It just so happens that the neighboring vicinity abounds with artworks, lofts, galleries, artists and dealers. The superficiality of this scene may be epitomized in Graham's photographs of these standardized interiors, each of which presents their artists' works according to code. Although hidden from one another in real space by artificial walls and built structures, the gallery system is revealed as one continuous network of commercial and advertising interests. Graham's installation portrays the art world as reflecting the same set of values found anywhere else within the social structure.

During the present decade, a number of conceptualists have turned their attention directly toward the social and political implications of their art. The advocates of Art and Language (Note 5) continued to attract artists and theorists from America and elsewhere, especially during the early seventies, when conceptual art seemed to have peaked in terms of interest level and publicity. The artists who followed the thinking of Art and Language adopted various hybrids of Marxist philosophy in support of their position against the art establishment. Their attitude was generally anti-formalist and, therefore, cynical about the forced linearity of Modernism in post-war art history. Terry Atkinson maintained a significant influence along these lines and did much to sustain the credibility of his arguments.

The later publication of The Fox (Note 6) by the New York constituency of Art and Language became a vehicle for expressing antipathies against decontextualized exhibitions in galleries and museums. The importance of The Fox in its earlier issues was to offer a neo-Marxist style of aesthetic dissent. In the second issue, Kosuth wrote:

My reading of art history tells me that I now find myself capable of seeing for art (out of art) a tradition independent of and unmolested by a social coloration. . . which describes and reinforces the presently unacceptable social status-quo. In this sense the Marxists are correct when they claim that art cannot be apolitical. When I realize this I must ask myself: if art is necessarily political (though not necessarily about politics) is it not necessary to make one's politics explicit? If art is context dependent (as I've always maintained) then it cannot escape a socio-political context of meaning (ignoring this issue only means that one's art drifts into one). (1975, p. 95)

In an age of rapid transit on both a physical and intellectual level, the availability of art is no secret, that is, the availability of art information. The values are no more available today than they were centuries ago. Kosuth's reasoning is that differences in culture influence the social context in which art objects are seen; therefore only a very private segment of artwork is representative of human culture. The ideas inherent within this private segment (white, upper middle class) may not be as faulty as the push for standardization behind it, which tends to isolate the context. To open up the ground rules for the availability of art as information may indeed transform the aesthetic notion of "quality;" yet it also has the potential of spiritually satisfying those who exist without art yet seek social acceptance on the basis of their equally-refined signs and symbols. If conceptual art failed as a serious challenge to contemporary art history, as the critic Max Kozloff (1972, pp. 33-37) has implied, then it surely succeeded in pointing out the limitations of contemporary culture as a foundation for evaluating "good" art. On the other hand, the extremist position of The Fox has managed to confuse the absence of art production with normative art history in order to substantiate premises for social change. The fact is that real social change is immune to the narrow rhetoric of art. The inevitable stuffiness of such reverberating polemics tends to be overbearing. At a time when conceptual art has been so completely absorbed into the academic mainstream, it would seem that a greater challenge exists for

artists than the kind of cultural high-jumping that has appeared in various counter-art periodicals over the past few years.

Nonetheless, the first phase in the development of a conceptual art has been achieved. It has extended the basic Duchampian notion with regard to alleviating the pseudomystical (economic) attitudes given to static objects in contemporary art. Such myths, involving aesthetic discrimination as an entity detached from the actual perception of objects, has been repudiated. Consequently, the role of appreciative viewer changed to that of active participant--not merely within the context of art, but through a heightened awareness towards self-inquiry. Hence, the reality of ideas became a source for renewed awareness directly linked to autobiographical concerns. Any art that extends the limitations of a shrunken value system tends to reflect the deeper experiences of individuals who question their relationship to it. It will take time before the visibility is clear enough to see the object distinctly. In the meantime, there are some good ideas and some important artists worth considering on the detour.

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Reference Notes

1. Huebler, D. Taped conversation, August 15, 1976, in Truro, Massachusetts.
2. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Douglas Huebler (catalog). Exhibition organized by Christopher Cook in association with the Institute of Contemporary Art, 1972. Artist statements on front inside cover.
3. Levine, L. Catalogue of after art services. New York City, 1974.
4. Exhibition/Exhibitions. Franklin Furnace, New York, January, 1979.
5. Art and Language refers to both a group of artists and a press, founded in Coventry, England, 1968. The group has exhibited their work off and on at the John Weber Gallery, New York. The original title of their publication was Art-Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art, which first appeared in May, 1969, included published works by American conceptualists such as Sol Lewitt, Lawrence Weiner and Dan Graham. The periodical Art-Language has recently (1978) merged with The Fox; thus representing both the British and American constituencies, which have changed membership somewhat in the last ten years.
6. The Fox 1. New York: Jaap Rietman, Inc. (distributor), 1974.

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