

unwritten histories of conceptual art

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Historical objectification ought to be sped up while there is still a collective experience and memory which can assist in the clarity of an analysis while, simultaneously, opening up a space to ask fundamental questions regarding history-making.

—Michael Asher, 1989¹

Almost every work of serious contemporary art recapitulates, on some explicit or implicit level, the historical sequence of objects to which it belongs. Consciousness of precedent has become very nearly the condition and definition of major artistic ambition. For that reason artists have become avid, if unpredictable, consumers of art history. Yet the organized discipline of the history of art remains largely blind to the products of this interest and entirely sheltered from the lessons that might accrue from them.

That art historians of a traditional cast should display little interest in new art, however historically informed, is of course a familiar story: within living memory, all art produced since 1600 was merged into the single category of “post Renaissance.” But recent changes in art history have not greatly altered the situation, despite the growing prominence in the discipline of theorists pursuing a postmodern vision of culture. Their particular postmodernism has not

grown from within visual art itself, but derives instead from the contentions within literary theory, most of all the drive to relax the distinctions between a canon of great authors and the universe of other texts once excluded from the teaching and learning of literature. Influential voices, impressed by that example, have lately recommended that the idea of a history of art be set aside, to be replaced by a forward-looking “history of images,” which will attend to the entire range of visual culture. One benefit of such a change, the argument goes, will be that “the cultural work of history of art will more closely resemble that of other fields than has been the case in the past,” and that transformation temptingly “offers the prospect of an interdisciplinary dialogue . . . more concerned with the relevance of contemporary values for academic study than with the myth of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.”²

This is a fair definition of what postmodernism has come to mean in academic life. But as a blueprint for the emancipation of art history, it contains a large and unexamined paradox: it accepts without question the view that art is to be defined by its essentially visual nature, by its working exclusively through the optical faculties. As it happens, this was the most cherished assumption of high modernism in the 1950s and 1960s, which constructed its canon around the notion of opticality: as art progressively refined itself, the value of a work more and more lay in the coherence of the fiction offered to the eye alone. The term visual culture of course represents a vast vertical integration of study, extending from the esoteric products of fine-art traditions to hand bills and horror videos, but it perpetuates the horizontal narrowness entailed in modernism’s fetish of visuality. Its corollary in an expanded history of images (rather than art) likewise perpetuates the modernist obsession with the abstract state of illusion, with virtual effects at the expense of literal facts.³

What is plainly missing in this project is some greater acknowledgment of the challenges to modernist assumptions that changed the landscape of artistic practice from the later 1950s onwards. The postmodern art historian of the 1990s cites for support “consequences of the theoretical and methodological developments that have affected other disciplines in the humanities.”⁴ But the revival of Duchampian tactics in the hands of artists like Jasper Johns, Robert Morris, and Donald Judd long ago erased any effective elite/vernacular distinctions in the materials of art, while at the same time opening contexts and hidden instrumental uses of art to critical scrutiny. The great theoretical advantage of this activity, as opposed to doctrines imported from other disciplines, was its being made from existing art and as such requiring no awkward and imprecise translation in order to bear upon the concerns of art history. Nor could these practical artistic ventures be contained within the category of the image, a fact which a succeeding generation of overtly conceptual artists then took as fundamental. The “withdrawal

of visuality” or “suppression of the beholder,” which were the operative strategies of conceptualism, decisively set aside the assumed primacy of visual illusion as central to the making and understanding of a work of art.⁵

During the early 1970s, the transitory, hazardous, and at times illegal performances staged by Chris Burden remained, apart from a select group of collaborators, unavailable to spectatorship.⁶ The photographic documentation by which such events were subsequently publicized serves to mark the inadequacy of recorded image to phenomenon. Conceptual work of a materially substantial and permanent character was no more amenable to the category of visual culture. Works like the *Index* of the Art & Language group dared the spectator to overcome a positively forbidding lack of outward enticement in order to discover a discursive and philosophical content recorded in the most prosaic form possible.

Even in discrete objects in traditional formats, there is something of a tradition—stretching from Elaine Sturtevant to Sherrie Levine—whereby the visual appeal of painting or photography is acknowledged but expelled by tactics of replication.⁷ Perhaps as revealing as any theoretical exegesis is a bantering remark made in a recorded conversation between two collectors, both perceptive enough to have supported Sturtevant:

I am sure that you have often noticed that visitors to your apartment—like the visitors to our loft—shrug off the Warhol or the Stella before you tell them that it is Sturtevant. Watch how their eyes roll! Their hair stands on end! Their palms collect sweat! Over and over they fall to fighting, arguing, debating. If this isn't the shock of the new, then the term is meaningless. Art is involved with so much more than visual appearance, as television has very little to do with the eye, or radio with the ear.⁸

His interlocutor replies, with equal accuracy and equal heat, that Sturtevant suffered abuse and ostracism during the 1960s and 1970s for having so acutely defined the limitations of any history of art wedded to the image. Those now defining themselves as historians of images rather than art have so far shown little capacity to grasp the practice of artists on this level, certainly none that adds anything to that already achieved by the practitioners themselves. Instead, they reproduce the exclusions traditional to their discipline, validating the past centrality of painting and its derivatives, which are most easily likened to the image world of the modern media and to unschooled forms of picturing.

But Conceptualism, which long anticipated recent theory on the level of practice, can be encompassed only within an unapologetic history of art. Its arrival in the later twentieth

century recovered key tenets of the early academies, which, for better or worse, established fine art as a learned, self-conscious activity in Western culture. One of those tenets was a mistrust of optical experience as providing an adequate basis for art: the more a painting relied on purely visual sensation, the lower its cognitive value was assumed to be. The meaning of a work of art was mapped along a number of cognitive axes, its affinities and differences with other images being just one of these—and not necessarily the strongest. Art was a public, philosophical school; manipulative imagery serving superstitious belief and private gratification could be had from a thousand other sources.

It was only in the later nineteenth century that the avant-garde successfully challenged a decayed academicism by turning that hierarchy on its head: the sensual immediacy of color and textured surfaces, freed from subordination to an imposed intellectual program, was henceforth to elicit the greater acuity of attention and complexity of experience in the viewer. The development of conceptual art a century later was intended to mark the limited historical life of that strategy, but postmodern theory has had the effect of strengthening conventional attachments to painting and sculpture. The art market quite obviously functions more comfortably with discrete, luxury objects to sell; and the secondhand, quotation-ridden character of much of the neotraditionalist art of the 1980s has been well served by theorists (Jean Baudrillard being a leading example) who have advanced the idea of an undifferentiated continuum of visual culture.

The aspirations of Conceptualism have been further diminished by a certain loss of heart on the part of its best advocates, who are united in thinking (amid their many differences) that the episode is essentially concluded. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has voiced this general conclusion when writing that Marcel Broodthaers

*anticipated that the enlightenment-triumph of Conceptual Art, its transformation of audiences and distribution, its abolition of object status and commodity form, at best would only be short-lived and would soon give way to the return of the ghost-like re-appearances of (prematurely?) displaced painterly and sculptural paradigms of the past.*⁹

Charles Harrison, editor of the journal *Art & Language*, laid down the requirement for any Conceptual art aspiring to critical interest that it conceive a changed sense of the public alongside its transformation of practice. But on precisely these grounds, he finds the group's own achievement to be limited: "Realistically, *Art & Language* could identify no *actual* alternative public which was not composed of the participants in its own projects and deliberations."¹⁰

In Jeff Wall's view, that isolated imprisonment was the cause of the pervasive melancholy of early Conceptualism: both "the deadness of language characterizing the work of Lawrence Weiner or On Kawara" and the "mausoleum look" embodied in the gray texts, anonymous binders, card files, and steel cabinets of Joseph Kosuth and *Art & Language*. "Social subjects," he observes, "are presented as enigmatic hieroglyphs and given the authority of the crypt," pervasive opacity being an outward betrayal of art's rueful, powerless mortification in the face of the overwhelming political and economic machinery that separates information from truth.¹¹ The ultimate weakness of this entire phase of art for him lies in its consequent failure to generate any subject matter free from irony. For both Harrison and Wall, their pessimistic verdicts on the achievements of Conceptual art have led them to embrace monumental pictorialism as the most productive way forward, a move that sustains the idea of an encompassing visual culture as the ultimate ground for discussion.

These three names represent the most formidable historians of Conceptual art, and their strictures must be treated with all possible seriousness. If the history of Conceptual art is to maintain a critical value in relation to the apparent triumph of visuality, it must meet the conditions implied in their judgment on its fate: 1) it must be living and available rather than concluded; 2) it must presuppose, at least in its imaginative reach, renewed contact with lay audiences; and 3) it must document a capacity for significant reference to the world beyond the most proximate institutions of artistic display and consumption.

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NOTES

1. From text by Michael Asher in Claude Gintz, ed., *L'Art conceptuel, une perspective* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989), p. 112.
2. Editors' introduction in Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey, eds., *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994), p. xvii.
3. The classic polemic advancing this position is Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art* (New York: Dutton, 1968), pp. 116–147.
4. Bryson et al, *Visual Culture*, p. xvii.
5. These two formulae are the coinages of Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Charles Harrison respectively.
6. The most notorious instance is *Shoot* (1971), to which could be added *TV Hijack* (1972),

747, *Icarus* and *Trans-Fixed* (1973); see Anne Ayres and Paul Schimmel, eds., *Chris Burden: a twenty-year survey* (Newport Beach, Calif.: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1988), pp. 53–54, 59–60, 66.

7. See the discussion in Crow, “The Return of Hank Herron: Simulated Abstraction and the Service Economy of Art,” in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 69–84.

8. Douglas Davis in Eugene W. Schwartz and Davis, “A Double-Take on Elaine Sturtevant,” *File*, December 1986, n. p. Davis also relates the remarkable story of Duchamp’s reaction, in the year before his death, to Sturtevant’s restaging of his performance *Relache*.

9. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique,” in Gintz, *L’Art conceptuel*, p. 53.

10. Charles Harrison, “Art Object and Artwork,” in Gintz, *L’art conceptuel*, p. 63.

11. See Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1991), p. 19. William Wood offered helpful comments on this and other points in this essay.

This essay first appeared in Catherine Gudis, *Oehlen Williams 95* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1995), and was subsequently included in Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 212–242.