

CONCEPTUAL ART:
A PROBLEM IN ART CRITICISM

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With Conceptual art, a point has been reached at which judgement and criticism of art has become a difficult task. Criteria for the evaluation of art reach back well over twenty-five centuries. Although they have changed, as has the vocabulary of the artist, one of the most important of those criteria has always been content. This paper will explore the actual role of content in the evaluation of Conceptual art. Conceptual art emphasizes the elimination of art objects, or at least, as in the case of earthworks, of art objects as marketable commodities. Many art movements which emerged in the 1960s and continued through the 1970s, such as body art and performance art, because they involve questions about the nature of art and attempt to expand its boundaries, can also be called Conceptual. The work of the Conceptual artist will be considered in detail, although there are process artists and minimal artists that could also be taken into consideration. The Conceptual artist allows for an evident structure on which to base the discussion of less obvious content and the difficulties which arise in evaluating this work. Conceptual art is one of the more difficult movements to criticize and presents one of the strongest cases for a new manner of criticism and evaluation in art.

Western criticism had as its birth the Platonic mimetic theory, a theory which challenged the very validity of art. Nature was supreme in its creations and

the artist was merely an imitator of the perfection that was nature. From that early criticism of art, a lengthy and complex period of time and of the evolution of art has led to the present, intricate studies of art movements and of individual artists.

It was in the nineteenth century that the role of the critic was first formulated as it is recognized today, and was established as an integral component of art itself. It was at that time that art, which had always belonged primarily to the aristocracy, the wealthy and the connoisseur, was brought out of those confines into a more generalized availability. A beginning attempt was made to open art to the more or less untutored, the unspecialized eye, and as that situation grew, so grew the need for an intermediary. It was necessary that there be one who could do more than simply judge a work of art, one who could interpret and explain and who could permit unspecialized eyes to understand and appreciate that work of art. Thus, the role of the critic was double. He could evaluate and judge, but at the same time, he was also needed to interpret and to explain in those first years of the popularization of art.

Inherent in the statement that the critic is needed to explain the art, is the idea that there is meaning and content in art. Artists are attempting to communicate, to say something about life, the world or their own

opinions and emotions. The philosopher Georg Wilhelm Freidrich Hegel, in the The Philosophy Of Fine Art states that

"Fine art is not art in the true sense of the term until it is also thus free ('in its aim and its means'), and its highest function is only then satisfied when it has established itself in a sphere which it shares with religion and philosophy, becoming thereby merely one mode and form through which the Divine, the profoundest interests of mankind, and spiritual truths of widest range, are brought home to consciousness and expressed."¹

The sensuous qualities of art are, for Hegel, thus superseded by the spiritual. And again, another philosopher, John Dewey in his Art As Experience states that, "The real work of art is the building up of an integral experience out of the interaction of organic and environmental conditions and energies."² Thus, with both men, a concern is apparent which centers more predominantly upon a meaning in art.

In a situation such as this, where the content of art assumes equal importance with the visual aspect, there is a greater need for the critic, and his role is more important. From this arose the power of the critic to instigate the acceptance of art movements and of making individual artists more known to the general public.

The role of the critic as interpreter reached a peak in the early twentieth century when the Freudian theories of sub-conscious levels of thought and of unconscious

motivation became popular. It was at this time that Dada and Surrealism came into being. Both of these schools of art afforded a vast area open to interpretation and especially to Freudian symbolism, and it was a simple task for the critic to link the two schools with this symbolism. The Dada artists attempted to destroy everything rational and logical in art by taking art to the stage of supreme irrationality and of supposedly subconscious matter, thereby creating the extreme and the exaggerated. The Surrealist movement, with its internal as well as covertly obvious symbolism, was a storehouse for interpretation. "The ambition of Surrealism was to reinterpret on the poetic level Marx's famous aphorism, 'We have sufficiently explained the world; it is time to transform it.' To the Surrealists this involved overcoming the contradiction reality-dream by creating a super-reality."³ Consequently, these two art movements were precipitous in maintaining the importance of meaning and content in art.

It was difficult for critics to leave the established order of judgement when Abstract Expressionism, with its primary emphasis placed upon the texture, color, and action in the process of creating the work of art, came into existence. Attempts were still made to interpret Abstract Expressionism in the same manner in which Dada and Surrealism had been interpreted, but the task was certainly a much more difficult one.

With the advent of Pop Art, a situation arose which could not easily be handled by the critics. The imagery and the content of Pop Art were so blatantly obvious that no interpretation could be read into a piece without seeming too obvious in its anxiety to interpret. Thus, we find writings such as this by Nicolas Calas, which question the barrier thrown up by the Pop artist between himself and the critic. "Unlike the Surrealists, who plunge into their souls, Pop artists 'look out upon the world' (Lichtenstein), boasting of their detachment. The Pop artists' approach poses a serious question: If new art is no longer the reflection of the unconscious or an expression of emotion, can it claim to be a manifestation of modern art? Is it not modern art's great glory to have substituted 'inner truth' for Truth (of perspective or reality)--and the uniqueness of an individual's experience to knowing how to see?"⁴ Critics, in attempting to write about Pop Art and artists, exhibited a strained quality, a marked removal from their subject, or the only talk about working methods, such as this by John Rublowsky in his book, Pop Art: "A careful craftsman, Lichtenstein approaches his paintings in a workmanlike manner. He generally sets up a series of related paintings at the same time. The production-line method saves time and effort."⁵ Another, Mario Amaya, also in speaking of Lichtenstein, aims at wrenching, from the most unlikely sources, an astonishing array of formal

designs.⁶ We can compare them to the definition of Surrealism by Andre Breton in 1924: "Surrealism is pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express verbally, in writing, or by any other means, the real process of thought. It is thought's dictation, all exercise of reason and every aesthetic or moral preoccupation being absent."⁷

Though the critic was obviously having problems in writing under this new and difficult phenomenon, which was the desire of the artist to have his work viewed as an object, existing only within its own confines, he was still following the artist's lead. The critic was limiting himself to the structure of art and the vocabulary of the artist, with no attempt to interpret this for the public.

Today, with the emergence of groups such as the Conceptual artists, it is an even more difficult task for the critic to speak clearly and positively of art. This situation is most prevalent with the conceptual artist, although several groups have established the case in point.

The Conceptual artist is an artist who is concerned totally with the conception of an idea, the carrying out of which is either of a very minimal importance or nonexistent. His ideas are, for the most part, neither social, political or normal. He tends to deal in the realm of the totally abstract, leaving one sometimes even

without an object to view. One of these artists, Joseph Kosuth, never literally creates an object. Rather, he photostats, or places in a publication, a definition of a word, or, as in his more recent works, a group of synonyms and antonyms from the thesaurus. He calls his work "Art As Idea As Idea", and each piece is given that title. In an interview for Arts magazine he stated, "Just as the shape and color of a work could be considered its art information--so the words are the art information."⁸

Kosuth takes a word and turns the primitive idea behind that word into his art. It is a totally simplistic approach, and yet, if viewed as he has intended it to be viewed, complex enough to warrant a complex involvement in return. If a critic attempted to interpret Kosuth's work, he would be stopped by the absolute, already recognized existence of whatever work Kosuth had chosen. The formidable difficulties of judging such a work are many.

Another conceptualist, Douglas Huebler, working in much the same vein as Kosuth, marks out a plot of ground, documents it, maps it, and calls it "site sculpture"; a description of space located by small markers which actually disappear with time. Huebler says of his work, "there is no possible way in which this piece can be experienced perceptually. It can be totally experienced only through its documentation."⁹ Huebler is thus

proposing a concept and only then attaching to that concept a substance; the dirt site and its documents and maps. This is one of the primary aspects of the Conceptual artist, that he provide a concept and after that initial act he recedes, allowing the concept to expand and take form in the viewer's mind.

These artists use a very minimal amount of substance to make their work exist. Robert Barry, in talking about his thin, transparent nylon monofilament -- which was virtually invisible, stated that, "It was at this point that I discarded the idea that art is necessarily something to be looked at. By just being in this show I am making known the existence of this work -- presenting these things in an artistic situation."¹⁰ Robert Barry goes into even further dimensions of Conceptual art by eliminating such things as documents and photographs. His work is with the non-visible in realms such as ultrasonic sound, radiation and radio waves. He states, "There are many other possibilities which I intend to explore -- and I'm sure exist in the space around us, and, though we don't see or feel them, we somehow know they are out there."¹¹ Robert Barry is making known new areas of which we are not yet aware, and that is one of the elements most common to the Conceptual artist. Barry has said that the idea of art as something merely to be looked at, (or heard or read), is no longer valid as once it was. Kosuth says, "Being an artist now means to

question the nature of art."¹² And the nature of art today is such that it incorporates every perceivable and conceivable phenomena, either as they exist or shaped to some degree by the artist. Kosuth again says, "Where an intellectual interest doesn't exist on the part of the viewer, a physical(sight or touch) one is desired. Non-artists often insist on something along with the art because they are not that excited by the idea of art."¹³ Conceptual art inherently demands a receiver if it is to exist as Art rather than as the artist's personal concept. If this is to occur, the first Conceptual artists must increase the sensibilities of individuals toward a less finite mode of perception, that is, of necessity one not limited to experiencing art in pigment or its construction is being replaced, (by a few) with non-labeled, at times non-perceivable existant.

Here we find one of the problems which arises in dealing with the value of a Conceptual work. If the perceiver himself is to be so vitally important to the full extension of a Conceptual piece, (in essence the receiver would be using the flexibility of the piece to whatever degree his own capabilities allow), then the manner of final judging on a work's value must be changed to some degree. As the nature of art is questioned and challenged to such an extreme degree, so must the need for a new basis for evaluation grow.

Susan Sontag, in her essay, "Against Interpretation" says, "In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the Philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable."¹⁴ Conformable might be a key word in that statement when one is attempting so deal with the work of a Conceptual artist. In the work of Joseph Kosuth for example, by the very act of using a word as his "Art As Idea As Idea", he absolutely denies any kind of conformability to the idea of art as an object with content and meaning. The word itself will engender opposing reactions in different receivers. There can be no basis for judging the value of that word as an art form (as it stands isolated in the context of an art form), other than the reaction of the viewer.

A philosopher, Paul Ziff stated that "criticism is primarily designed (or ought to be) to indicate what we may appreciate in particular works of art. The point of criticism is to indicate what to look for, what to view."¹⁵ If that is truly the point of criticism, then today there is no point at all in criticism. The very reason behind Conceptual art is that it creates new and more open realms of experience, new ways of perceiving. The critic cannot tell one how to react to Barry's room

filled with ultrasonic sound. He cannot tell one how to experience and to perceive a site sculpture. If he does then he does nothing but destroy the very possibilities of experience which these artists attempted to open. And reaching even further than that initial experience and perception, one would agree with Robert Morris that "once a perceptual change is made, one does not look at it but uses it to see the world. It is only visible at the point of recognition of the change. After that, we are changed by it, but have also absorbed it."¹⁶

I experienced this perceptual change in looking at the work of another Conceptual artist, one who deals with "obstructions", Ludwik Turzanski. Turzanski essentially attempts through physical means, or through implication, to obstruct such things as theatrical performances, landscapes, passageways etc. One aspect which seemed to bring his work into perspective for me was an obstruction of a doorway. The obstruction consisted of ten foot wooden planks placed squarely before a doorway, that I was familiar with and that I used quite frequently. The physical obstruction was insignificant in itself, but as I experienced the piece, I slowly became aware of negative and positive obstructions. This obstruction of an opening into a room was itself an obstruction. Door, windows, walls, actions, human beings were all, in a sense, an obstruction of sorts, or could be in any given

situation. The idea of Turzanski obstructions opened into a world filled with overt and covert obstructions.

Obviously, the physical obstruction itself was meaningless. The boards could have been left by carpenters, but seeing that obstruction, in an artistic situation, prompted certain new thought processes. I did view the world in a different manner and had essentially absorbed the idea of Turzanski's obstructions.

Allen Leepa, in his article "Anti-Art and Criticism", states that,

"by discussing the content of what the artist does within the context of how he does it, the critic can help clarify how, why, and what the artist is saying about the times in which men live. The most significant directions in criticism are those that help reveal the content of art as it comments and reveals the present condition of man."¹⁷

Inherent in that statement is the attitude that the artist wishes to reveal the present condition of man. That this has been true for a long period of time is unquestionable, but as the artist of the 20th century demanded more and more that his art become an object to be looked at rather than into, the statement became less and less true and meaningful. As Kosuth said, the very nature of art is being questioned. Art is no longer a vehicle for a man's personal statement concerning either himself or the world about him. Art is an object created with the specific intention of perceptual reaction, sometimes even a non-visual object.¹⁸

A Conceptual artist has the desire and the ability to change and to free the observer's/participant's outlook. The initial act is made by the artist. From that point the observer/participant will perhaps possess another manner of seeing and he himself will look at the world about about him and make for himself the comments once set down for him by the artist, just as I became aware of negative and positive obstructions in Turzanski's work. It is just this, the ability of the conceptual artist to change and to increase the levels of awareness in the observer/participant, that brings with it the demand for a totally unobstructed confrontation between the observer/participant and the art.

It is true that, through the ages, if a work of art could not affect one in any way, it was to a great degree meaningless. The exaggerated style of Goya's Horrors of War was strong and provocative, but it became even more provocative in the context of his subject, the very real horrors of war and its effect upon people and the world. With Conceptual art, one seldom finds an artist who uses specific subject matter. The artist no longer deals with emotions, or issues, social or historical. Rather, the artist of today deals with an abstract world, a world of exploration and of unknown quantities. Very few people have been exposed to Barry's ultrasonic sound in an artistic situation, but if they are told it is there, it will precipitate a reaction in

them. It is of supreme importance, especially in conceptual art, that these unknown quantities be given to the viewer in a manner which will place the viewer in confrontation with them. It is equally important that the artist, in his exploration and challenging of present existents, obvious or not, shows one a new manner of seeing those existents.

It is this ability of the artist today, that of allowing one to experience new and unknown ways of seeing, that is the quality by which art must now be judged. The actual piece, the object, rarely exists in conceptual art. One can no longer judge altogether by visual standards as once one did. Rather, one must judge the value of a work of art by its ability to change one's outlook and, or, visual awareness.

The critic's task now is to find a new way of writing about such works. If he is to be merely an information agent, then the power and the importance he does hold must, of necessity, diminish. Obviously, criticism must change as rapidly as art changes. The critic must be willing to relinquish his past attitude of molding the art public's eyes and opinions and be ready to simply and honestly expose his own reactions to art work. Only then will the viewer be able to approach a piece of work with a clear and untrammelled readiness, open to any new perceptual experiences which might await him.

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2. John Dewey, Selections from Art As Experience, Philosophies of Art and Beauty, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (New York: Random House, Inc., 1964), p.607.
3. Nicolas Calas, "And Now the Sphinx", The New Art, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1966) p.180.
4. Ibid, p. 181.
5. Susan Sontag, "Non-Writing and the Art Scene", The New Art, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: The Viking Press Inc., 1966) p. 152.
6. Mario Amaya, Pop Art and After, (New York: The Viking Press Inc., 1966) p. 87.
7. Bernard S. Myers, Modern Art In The Making, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1959) p. 370.
8. Arthur R. Rose, Arts Magazine, February, 1969, Volume 48, #4, p.23.
9. Ibid., p.22.
10. Ibid., p.22.
11. Ibid., p.22.
12. Ibid., p. 23.
13. Ibid., p. 23.
14. Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation, (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1966) p. 19.
15. Paul Ziff, Appreciation and Evaluation, Philosophy Looks at the Arts, Joseph Margolis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962) p. 160.
16. Robert Morris, "Notes", Artforum, April, 1969, volume 7, #8, p. 53.
17. Allen Leepa, "Anti-Art and Criticism", The New Art, (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1966) p. 150-151.
18. Kosuth, Selections from What Happens in Art, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1965), p. 80.

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