

Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972: a cross-reference book of information on some esthetic boundaries: consisting of a bibliography into which are inserted a fragmented text, art works, documents, interviews, and symposia, arranged chronologically and focused on so-called conceptual or information or idea art with mentions of such vaguely designated areas as minimal, anti-form, systems, earth, or process art, occurring now in the Americas, Europe, England, Australia, and Asia (with occasional political overtones), edited and annotated by Lucy R. Lippard.

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ESCAPE ATTEMPTS

Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach . . . Illogical judgements lead to new experience. —Sol LeWitt, 1969¹

I. A Biased History

The era of Conceptual art—which was also the era of the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, the Women's Liberation Movement, and the counter-culture—was a real free-for-all, and the democratic implications of that phrase are fully appropriate, if never realized. "Imagine," John Lennon exhorted us. And the power of imagination was at the core of even the stodgiest attempts to escape from "cultural confinement," as Robert Smithson put it, from the sacrosanct ivory walls and heroic, patriarchal mythologies with which the 1960s opened. Unfettered by object status, Conceptual artists were free to let their imaginations run rampant. With hindsight, it is clear that they could have run further, but in the late sixties art world, Conceptual art seemed to me to be the only race in town.

On a practical level, Conceptual artists offered a clear-eyed look at what and where art itself was supposed to be; at the utopian extreme, some tried to visualize a new world and the art that would reflect or inspire it. Conceptual art (or "ultra-conceptual art," as I first called it, in order to distinguish it from Minimal painting and sculpture, earthworks, and other grand-scale endeavors which appeared in the early sixties as abnormally cerebral) was all over the place in style and content, but materially quite specific.

Conceptual art, for me, means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or "dematerialized." Sol LeWitt distinguished between conceptual art "with a small c" (e.g. his own work, in which the material forms were often conventional, although generated by a paramount idea) and Conceptual art "with a capital C" (more or less what I have described above, but also, I suppose, anything by anyone who wanted to belong to a movement). This has not kept commentators over the years from calling virtually anything in unconventional mediums "Conceptual art." And this book muddies the waters as well, since it documents the whole heady scene that provided my narrower definition of Conceptual art with its context.

There has been a lot of bickering about what Conceptual art is/was; who began it; who did what when with it; what its goals, philosophy, and politics were and might have been. I was there, but I don't trust my memory. I don't trust anyone else's either. And I trust even less the authoritative overviews by those who were not there. So I'm going to quote myself a lot here, because I knew more about it then than I do now, despite the advantages of hindsight.

The times were chaotic and so were our lives. We have each invented our own history, and they don't always mesh; but such messy compost is the source of all versions of the past. Conceptual artists, perhaps more concerned with intellectual distinctions in representation and relationships than those who rely on the object as vehicle/receptacle, have offered posterity a particularly tangled account. My own version is inevitably tempered by my feminist and left politics. Almost thirty years

later my memories have merged with my own subsequent life and learnings and leanings. As I reconstitute the threads that drew me into the center of what came to be Conceptual art, I'll try to arm you with the necessary grain of salt, to provide a context, within the ferment of the times, for the personal prejudices and viewpoints that follow. I'm not a theoretician. This is an occasionally critical memoir of a small group of young artists' attempts to escape from the frame-and-pedestal syndrome in which art found itself by the mid-1960s.

When the decade began I was a free-lance researcher, translator, indexer, bibliographer, and would-be writer in New York. I began to publish regularly in 1964. The mid-to-late sixties were one of the most exciting times of my life on every level: I began to make a living from free-lance writing (at almost the exact moment my son was born). I curated my first exhibition, gave my first lectures, published my first two books, began to travel, wrote some fiction, got unmarried, got politicized. Conceptual art was an integral part of the whole process. I came to it, as did most of my artist colleagues, through what came to be called Minimalism. But we converged from very different directions and eventually went off again in others.

The word Minimal suggests a *tabula rasa*—or rather the failed attempt at a clean slate, a utopian wish of the times that never came true but was important for the goals and desires it provoked. It was and still is an idea that appeals to me, though not for its reality quotient. In graduate school I had written a long paper about a *tabula rasa* swept clean by the Zen monk's broom and Dada's vitriolic humor. I saw materialist echoes of these impossible longings in the paintings of Robert Ryman and Ad Reinhardt. From 1960 to 1967, I lived with Ryman, who was never called a Minimalist in those days because the roots of his white paintings from the late fifties were in Abstract Expressionism; he was "discovered" around 1967 through the advent of the messier "process art" and was included in a surprising number of "Conceptual art" shows, although the term is really inappropriate for his obsession with paint and surface, light and space. We lived on Avenue A and Avenue D and then on the Bowery. Sol LeWitt was a close friend of ours, and my major intellectual influence at the time. (We had all worked at The Museum of Modern Art in the late fifties. Ryman was a guard; LeWitt was at the night desk; I was a page in the library.)

On and around the Bowery, an art community formed that included LeWitt, Ray Donarski, Robert Mangold, Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Frank Lincoln Viner, Tom Doyle, and Eva Hesse. My own history of Conceptual art is particularly entwined with that studio community, and with LeWitt's work and writings; through him, around 1965–66, I met or saw the work of Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, Hanne Darboven, Art & Language, Hilla and Bernd Becher, Joseph Kosuth, and Mel Bochner.

Around 1964–65, Kynaston McShine and I had begun work at The Museum of Modern Art on what became the "Primary Structures" exhibition he curated for The Jewish Museum in 1966. That year I also wrote the catalogue for The Jewish Museum's retrospective of Ad Reinhardt, the reluctant hero of one branch of what was to become Conceptual art. Joseph Kosuth's storefront Museum of Normal Art was "dedicated" to him. Around the same time, I met Carl Andre, whose poetic detours around art-as-art made him a cantankerous part of the Conceptual community in spite of himself; he never liked or sympathized with the products, although he hung out with the artists. Donald Judd was also a powerful figure, an obdurately blunt artist and writer who was a model for many younger artists. And Robert Morris, elusive and virtually styleless, was the progenitor of many soon-to-be "seminal" concepts.

In 1967, John Chandler and I wrote the article on "The Dematerialization of Art"

that was published in the February 1968 *Art International*, in which we saw “ultra-conceptual art” emerging from two directions: art as idea and art as action. In late 1967, I went to Vancouver and found that Iain and Ingrid (then Elaine) Baxter (the N. E. Thing Co.) and others there were on a wavelength totally unconnected yet totally similar to that of many New York friends. This and later encounters in Europe confirmed my belief in “ideas in the air”—“the spontaneous appearance of similar work totally unknown to the artists that can be explained only as energy generated by [well-known, common] sources and by the wholly unrelated art against which all the potentially ‘conceptual’ artists were commonly reacting,” as I once described the phenomenon.

The question of sources has since become a sore point. Marcel Duchamp was the obvious art-historical source, but in fact most of the artists did not find his work all that interesting. The most obvious exceptions, perhaps, were the European-connected Fluxus artists; around 1960 Henry Flynt coined the term “concept art,” but few of the artists with whom I was involved knew about it, and in any case it was a different kind of “concept”—less formal, less rooted in the subversion of art-world assumptions and art-as-commodity. As responsible critics we had to mention Duchamp as a precedent, but the new art in New York came from closer to home: Reinhardt’s writings, Jasper Johns’s and Robert Morris’s work, and Ed Ruscha’s deadpan photo-books, among others. Duchampian “claiming,” however, was an occasional strategy: the N. E. Thing Co. categorized its work as ACT (Aesthetically Claimed Things) or ART (Aesthetically Rejected Things); Robert Huot, Marjorie Strider, and Stephen Kaltenbach all did pieces that “selected” art-like objects from real life in the city.

In my own experience, the second branch of access to what became Conceptual art was a jurying trip to Argentina in 1968. I returned belatedly radicalized by contact with artists there, especially the Rosario Group, whose mixture of conceptual and political ideas was a revelation. In Latin America I was trying to organize a “suitcase exhibition” of dematerialized art that would be taken from country to country by “idea artists” using free airline tickets. When I got back to New York, I met Seth Siegelau, who had begun to reinvent the role of the “art dealer” as distributor extraordinaire through his work with Lawrence Weiner, Douglas Huebler, Robert Barry, and Joseph Kosuth. Siegelau’s strategy of bypassing the art world with exhibitions that took place outside of galleries and/or New York and/or were united in publications that were art rather than merely *about* art dovetailed with my own notions of a dematerialized art that would be free of art-world commodity status. A practical man, unencumbered at the time by addiction to ideology or esthetics, Siegelau went right ahead and did what had to be done to create international models for an alternative art network.

On my return from Latin America I was also asked to co-curate (with painter Robert Huot and political organizer Ron Wolin) an exhibition of important Minimal artworks against the Vietnam war, as a benefit for Student Mobilization and the opening show at Paula Cooper’s new Prince Street space. (It included LeWitt’s first public wall drawing.) In January 1969 the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) was formed on a platform of artists’ rights which was soon expanded into opposition to the Vietnam war. (Anti-racism and then anti-sexism were soon added to the anti-war agenda.) The AWC provided a framework and an organizational relationship for artists who were mixing art and politics that attracted a number of “Conceptual artists.” Kosuth designed a fake membership card for entrance to The Museum of Modern Art—one

of our major targets—with AWC rubberstamped in red across it. Andre was the resident Marxist. Smithson, Judd, and Richard Serra were skeptical, non-participating presences. The Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG), consisting at that time of Jean Toche, Jon Hendricks, Poppy Johnson, and Silvianna, was a major force in the AWC's Action Committee, though maintaining its own identity. While GAAG's almost Dada letters to President Nixon ("Eat What You Kill") and other world leaders were in the spirit of the general "Conceptual movement," their blood-and-guts performance style and their connections to Europe, via Fluxus and Destruction Art, separated them from the cooler, Minimal art-oriented Conceptual mainstream.

Concept art is not so much an art movement or vein as it is a position or worldview, a focus on activity. —Ken Friedman, formerly head of Fluxus West, San Diego, 1971

So "Conceptual art"—or at least the branch of it in which I was involved—was very much a product of, or fellow traveler with, the political ferment of the times, even if that spirit had arrived belatedly in the art world. (A small group of artists, including Rudolph Baranik, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, and Judd had been organizing against the war for several years by then. Even earlier, Reinhardt had also spoken out and demonstrated against intervention in Vietnam, but the Reinhardtian attitude remained that art was art and politics were politics and that when artists were activists they were acting as artist citizens rather than as esthetic arbiters.) The strategies with which we futilely schemed to overthrow the cultural establishment reflected those of the larger political Movement, but the most effective visual antiwar imagery of the period came from outside the art world, from popular/political culture.

For me, Conceptual art offered a bridge between the verbal and the visual. (I was writing abstract, conceptual "fiction" then; at one point I tried alternating pictorial and verbal "paragraphs" in a narrative; nobody got it) By 1967, although I had only been publishing art criticism for a few years, I was very aware of the limitations of the genre. I never liked the term critic. Having learned all I knew about art in the studios, I identified with artists and never saw myself as their adversary. Conceptual art, with its transformation of the studio into a study, brought art itself closer to my own activities. There was a period when I saw myself as a writer-collaborator with the artists, and now and then I was invited by artists to play that part. If art could be anything at all that the artist chose to do, I reasoned, then so could criticism be whatever the writer chose to do. When I was accused of becoming an artist, I replied that I was just doing criticism, even if it took unexpected forms. I organized my first exhibition ("Eccentric Abstraction") at the Fischbach Gallery in 1966, when critics rarely curated, and considered it, too, just another kind of "criticism." (At the height of my conceptually hybrid phase, Kynaston McShine asked me to write a text for The Museum of Modern Art's Duchamp catalogue. I constructed it of "readymades" chosen by a "random system" from the dictionary, and to my amazement, they used it.)

I also applied the conceptual freedom principle to the organization of a series of four exhibitions which began in 1969 at the Seattle Art Museum's World's Fair annex. They included wall works, earthworks, and sculptural pieces as well as more idea-oriented pieces. Three aspects (or influences) of Conceptual art were incorporated in these shows: the titles ("557,087" in Seattle) were the current populations of the cities; the catalogues were randomly arranged packs of index cards; and with a team of helpers, I executed (or tried to) most of the outdoor works myself, according to the

artists' instructions. This was determined as much by economic limitations as by theory; we couldn't afford plane fare for the artists.

When the show went to Vancouver, it acquired a new title ("955,000"), additional cards, a bibliography, and many new works, which were shown in two indoor locations (the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Student Union at the University of British Columbia) and all over the city. My texts in the card catalogues included aphorisms, lists, and quotes and were mixed in, unsequentially, with the artists' cards. The idea was that the reader could discard whatever s/he found uninteresting. Among my cards:

Deliberately low-keyed art often resembles ruins, like neolithic rather than classical monuments, amalgams of past and future, remains of something "more," vestiges of some unknown venture. The ghost of content continues to hover over the most obdurately abstract art. The more open, or ambiguous, the experience offered, the more the viewer is forced to depend upon his [sic] own perceptions.

The third version, in 1970, was a more strictly conceptual and portable exhibition that originated at the Centro de Arte y Comunicación in Buenos Aires as "2,972,453"; it included only artists not in the first two versions: among others, Siah Armajani, Stanley Brouwn, Gilbert & George, and Victor Burgin. The fourth version, in 1973, was "c. 7,500"—an international women's Conceptual show that began at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California, and traveled to seven venues, ending in London. It included Renate Altenrath, Laurie Anderson, Eleanor Antin, Jacki Apple, Alice Aycock, Jennifer Bartlett, Hanne Darboven, Agnes Denes, Doree Dunlap, Nancy Holt, Poppy Johnson, Nancy Kitchel, Christine Kozlov, Suzanne Kufler, Pat Lasch, Bernadette Mayer, Christiane Möbus, Rita Myers, Renee Nahum, N. E. Thing Co., Ulrike Nolden, Adrian Piper, Judith Stein, Athena Tacha, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and Martha Wilson. I list all these names here, as I said on a catalogue card at the time, "by way of an exasperated reply on my own part to those who say 'there are no women making conceptual art.' For the record, there are a great many more than could be exhibited here."

The inexpensive, ephemeral, unintimidating character of the Conceptual mediums themselves (video, performance, photography, narrative, text, actions) encouraged women to participate, to move through this crack in the art world's walls. With the public introduction of younger women artists into Conceptual art, a number of new subjects and approaches appeared: narrative, role-playing, guise and disguise, body and beauty issues; a focus on fragmentation, interrelationships, autobiography, performance, daily life, and, of course, on feminist politics. The role of women artists and critics in the Conceptual art flurry of the mid-sixties was (unbeknownst to us at the time) similar to that of women on the Left. We were slowly emerging from the kitchens and bedrooms, off the easels, out of the woodwork, whether the men were ready or not—and for the most part they weren't. But even lip service was a welcome change. By 1970, thanks to the liberal-to-left politics assumed by many male artists, a certain (unprecedented) amount of support for the feminist program was forthcoming. Several men helped us (but knew enough to stay out of the decision-making) when the Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee (an offshoot of the AWC) launched its offensive on the Whitney Annual exhibition. The "anonymous" core group of women faked a Whitney press release stating that there would be fifty percent women (and

fifty percent of them “non-white”) in the show, then forged invitations to the opening and set up a generator and projector to show women’s slides on the outside walls of the museum while a sit-in was staged inside. The FBI came in search of the culprits.

One of the reasons we were successful in forcing the Whitney to include four times as many women as before in that year’s sculpture show was the establishment of the Women’s Art Registry, initiated in angry response to the “There-are-no-women-who . . .” (make large sculpture, Conceptual art, kinetic art, etc., etc.) syndrome. As a freelance writer I was unaware of personal gender discrimination (it’s hard to know what jobs you don’t get), but it was easy enough to perceive when it came to women artists, who were virtually invisible in the mid-sixties, with a very few exceptions: Lee Bontecou, Carolee Schneemann, and Jo Baer being practically the only ones around my age; the others were older, second-generation Abstract Expressionists. A brilliant horde was waiting in the wings.

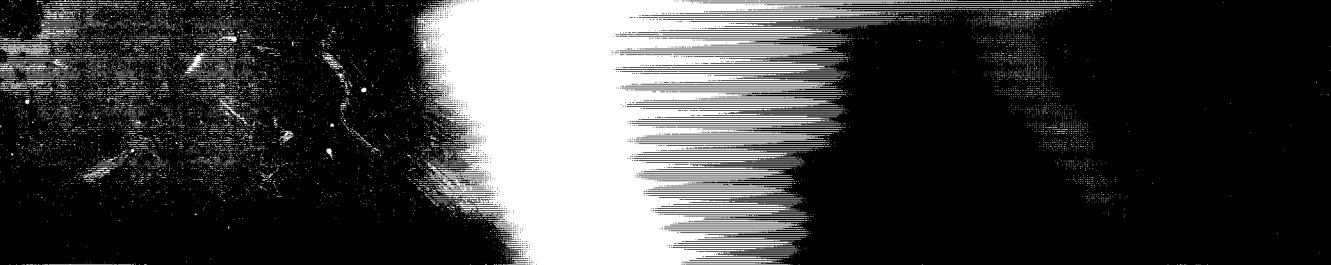
In terms of actual Conceptual art, the major female figure in New York in the 1960s was Lee Lozano, who had shown her huge industrial/organic paintings at Dick Bellamy’s cutting-edge Green Gallery. She was making extraordinary and eccentric art-as-life Conceptual works in the late sixties: a “general strike piece,” an “I Ching piece,” a “dialogue piece,” a “grass piece,” and “infofictions.” “Seek the extremes,” she said, “That’s where all the action is.” (When the Women’s Movement began, Lozano made the equally eccentric decision never to associate with women.)

Yoko Ono, who had participated in Fluxus since the early 1960s, continued her independent proto-Conceptual work. In 1969 Agnes Denes began her *Dialectic Triangulation: A Visual Philosophy*, involving rice, trees, and haiku as well as mathematical diagrams. Martha Wilson, still a student at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, began her examinations of gender and role playing that evolved into performance and continue today in her “impersonations” of Nancy Reagan, Tipper Gore, and other friends of the arts. Christine Kozlov, who was also very young, was Joseph Kosuth’s collaborator in the Museum of Normal Art and other enterprises and did her own rigorously “rejective” work. Yvonne Rainer’s drastic alterations of modern dance were also very influential. On the West Coast, Eleanor Antin pursued the whimsical, narrative vein that was to lead her to neo-theatrical performance and filmmaking, especially with her cinematic *100 Boots* postcards (1971), in which pairs of rubber boots wandered out of the gallery to explore the real world, traveling through the U.S. mails.

By the end of the decade Adrian Piper (also very young then) had made a series of mapping pieces and intellectual actions that explored philosophical/spatial concepts, somewhat reminiscent of LeWitt and Huebler. By 1970 she had launched into her own totally original identity works—the Catalysis series, in which she recreated or destroyed her own image/identity in bizarre public activities. Conceptual art has continued to be the basis of much important postmodern feminist work, from Piper, Antin, Martha Rosler (who was making photo-text pieces in Los Angeles in 1970), Suzanne Lacy, Susan Hiller, and Mary Kelly to Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Lorna Simpson, among others.

II. Outside the Frame

For years people have been concerned with what goes on inside the frame. Maybe there’s something going on outside the frame that could be considered an artistic idea. —Robert Barry, 1968



Ideas alone can be works of art; they are a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical. . . . The words of one artist to another may induce an idea chain, if they share the same concept. —Sol LeWitt, 1969

I was beginning to suspect that information could be interesting in its own right and need not be visual as in Cubist, etc. art. —John Baldessari, 1969

Although Conceptual art emerged from Minimalism, its basic principles were very different, stressing the acceptively open-ended in contrast to Minimalism's rejectively self-contained. If Minimalism formally expressed "less is more," Conceptual art was about saying more with less. It represented an opening up after Minimalism closed down on expressionist and Pop excesses. As Robert Huot said in a 1977 billboard piece: "Less Is More, But It's Not Enough."

I'm often asked by younger students of the period why I talk about Conceptual art in political terms when, looking back, most of it seems supremely apolitical. Part of the answer is relative. With a few exceptions, the art was apolitical, but in an art world that still idolized Clement Greenberg (who in turn publicly abhorred Pop and Minimal art), that denied even the presence of political concerns, and offered little or no political education or analysis, Conceptual artists—most of whom were then in their twenties and thirties—looked and sounded like radicals. Now, with a few exceptions, their art looks timid and disconnected in comparison to the political activism of the sixties and the activist art of the late seventies and eighties, much of which is Conceptually aligned. The prime exceptions were GAAG and the work of the Uruguayan expatriate Luis Camnitzer.

Writing from a consciousness almost non-existent in the American art world, Camnitzer wrote in 1970 that despite the fact that so many people in the world were starving to death, "artists continue to produce full-belly art." He mused about why the phrase "Colonial Art" was art-historically positive, and applied only to the past, because "In reality it happens in the present, and with benevolence it is called 'international style.'" In perhaps the most inspired political Conceptual artwork, *Orders & Co.* (Camnitzer) sent a letter to Pacheco Areco, president of Uruguay in 1971, ordering him to do things he could not help doing, so as to expose the dictator to dictatorship: "The 5th of November you will simulate normal walking but you will be conscious that for this day *Orders & Co.* have taken possession of every third step you take. It is not necessary for you to obsess yourself with this."

Around the same time, Hans Haacke wrote:

Information presented at the right time and in the right place can potentially be very powerful. It can affect the general social fabric. . . . The working premise is to think in terms of systems: the production of systems, the interference with and the exposure of existing systems. . . . Systems can be physical, biological, or social.²

One could argue that art is rarely in the right place, but Haacke's statement was sharpened when his 1971 exhibition of systems was canceled by the Guggenheim Museum (his champion, curator Edward Fry, was also fired). The offending piece was "social," a thoroughly-researched work on actual absentee landlords, with whom the Guggenheim apparently shared an intense class-identification. Censorship sent

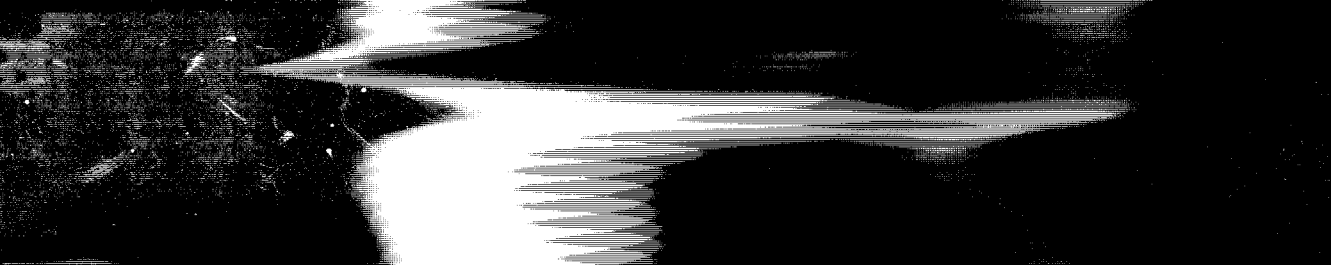
Haacke's art in a more political direction, his "museum-quality" resistance eventually providing a bridge between Conceptualism, activism, and postmodernism.

However, it was usually the form rather than the content of Conceptual art that carried a political message. The frame was there to be broken out of. Anti-establishment fervor in the 1960s focused on the de-mythologization and de-commodification of art, on the need for an independent (or "alternative") art that could not be bought and sold by the greedy sector that owned everything that was exploiting the world and promoting the Vietnam war. "The artists who are trying to do non-object art are introducing a drastic solution to the problems of artists being bought and sold so easily, along with their art. . . . The people who buy a work of art they can't hang up or have in their garden are less interested in possession. They are patrons rather than collectors," I said in 1969. (Now *that's* utopian . . .)

It was also becoming clear how authorship and ownership were intertwined. In Paris, in 1967, Daniel Buren (whose first striped works had been made in 1966), Olivier Mosset, and Niele Toroni invited reviewers to make or claim their paintings: "In order to discuss a forgery," wrote the critic Michel Claura, "one must refer to an original. In the case of Buren, Mosset, Toroni, where is the original work?" In Holland, in 1968, Jan Dibbets, who had stopped painting in 1967, said: "Sell my work? To sell isn't part of the art. Maybe there will be people idiotic enough to buy what they could make themselves. So much the worse for them." Carl Andre said of his outdoor line of hay bales at Windham College in Vermont in 1968 (another Siegelau enterprise) that it "is going to break down and gradually disappear. But since I'm not making a piece of sculpture for sale . . . it never enters the property state." This attack on the notion of originality, "the artist's touch," and the competitive aspects of individual style constituted an attack on the genius theory, the hitherto most cherished aspect of patriarchal, ruling-class art.

Some Conceptualists took a page from Pop (imagery and techniques) and Minimalism (fabrication out of the artist's hands) by assuming an "industrial" approach. Ruscha had said, early on, that his photographic artist's books were not "to house a collection of art photographs—they are technical data like industrial photography." He eliminated text so the photos would become "neutral." There was a cult of "neutrality" in Minimalism, applied not only to the execution of objects but to the ferocious erasure of emotion and conventional notions of beauty. (Morris's 1963 *Card File* and *Statement of Esthetic Withdrawal* were precedents.) In 1967, LeWitt said "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art." Bochner curated an exhibition of "working drawings" at the School of Visual Arts, which included "non-art" as well as businesslike art diagrams. Andre explained his work, based on "particles" of material, in Marxist terms. Dennis Oppenheim did two large-scale earthworks that were about (and resulted in) wheat production. In Germany, Hilla and Bernd Becher were offering a new framework for documentary photography with their frontal, unmodulated images of industrial sites. And in England John Latham initiated the Artists Placement Group (APG), which placed artists in "real world" workplaces. Frequently perceptible beneath the surface of such statements was the need to identify art with respectable work, and on a more superficial level, with the working class.

A related notion, also designed to avoid the isolation of art from the "ordinary" world, was a new angle on style and authorship, which led to post-Dada appropriation. Reviewing "557,087" in *Artforum*, Peter Plagens suggested that "There is a total style to the show, a style so pervasive as to suggest that Lucy Lippard is in fact the

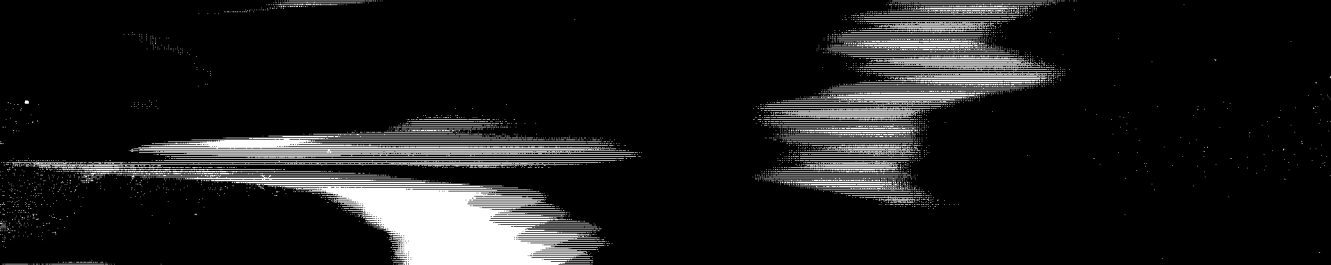


artist and that her medium is other artists." Of course a critic's medium is always artists; critics are the original appropriators. Conceptual artists followed the Dadas into this territory. Starting from their Duchampian notion of "claiming," appropriation in the 1960s became more political as art-world artists borrowed John Heartfield's classic poster-makers' technique or co-opting media and other familiar images for new and often satirical ends (the "corrected billboard" of the later 1970s expanded this idea). Information and systems were seen as fair game, in the public domain. The appropriation of other artists' works or words, sometimes mutually agreed-upon as a kind of collaboration, was another Conceptual strategy. A combative attitude toward art as individual product was also implied, in line with the general sixties appeal of the collective act. Barthelme took on the alter ego James Robert Steelrails; a pseudonymous Arthur R. Rose (a multiple pun, perhaps, on Rose Sélavy, Barbara Rose, Art, Author/ity, tumescence, etc.) interviewed artists; I quoted the mythical Latvan (later Latviana) Greene. In 1969, the Italian artist Salvo appropriated the letters of Leonardo da Vinci to Lodovico il Moro. In 1970, Eduardo Costa mocked the art world's first-come-first-served bias in *A Piece That Is Essentially The Same As A Piece Made By Any Of The First Conceptual Artists, Dated Two Years Earlier Than The Original And Signed By Somebody Else*.

In *Robert Barry Presents A Work By Ian Wilson* (July 1970), the work was *Ian Wilson*, a fragment of the elusive "Oral Communication," which Wilson once described as taking "the object or the idea of oral communication out of its natural context" and putting it in an art context, by speaking it, at which point "it became a concept." In another work from this series of "presentations" of others' work, Barry kidnapped three of my card catalogues and a review as the total contents of his 1971 Paris exhibition. In one particularly convoluted interchange, I wrote something about all this mutual appropriation, much enjoying the twists and turns on art, plagiarism, and criticism encountered, and my text became simultaneously part of two different artworks—by Douglas Huebler and David Lamelas. "It's all just a matter of what to call it?" I asked rhetorically. "Does that matter?" (I still wonder and I still try to blur the boundaries between art and everything else as much as possible.) This is as close as Conceptual art came to the meaningful play of Dada, and these were, actually, political questions that affected the whole conception of what art was and what art could do.

The root word "image" need not be used only to mean representation (in the sense of one thing referring to something other than itself). To re-present can be defined as the shift in referential frames of the viewer from the space of events to the space of statements or vice versa. Imagining (as opposed to imaging) is not a pictorial preoccupation. Imagination is a projection, the exteriorizing of ideas about the nature of things seen. It reproduces that which is initially without product. —Mel Bochner, 1970

For artists looking to restructure perception and the process/product relationship of art, information and systems replaced traditional formal concerns of composition, color, technique, and physical presence. Systems were laid over life the way a rectangular format is laid over the seen in paintings, for focus. Lists, diagrams, measurements, neutral descriptions, and much counting were the most common vehicles for the preoccupation with repetition, the introduction of daily life and work routines,



To be a teacher is my greatest work of art. The rest is the waste product, a demonstration. . . . Objects aren't very important for me any more. . . . I am trying to reaffirm the concept of art and creativity in the face of Marxist doctrine. . . . For me the formation of the thought is already sculpture.

Verbal strategies enabled Conceptual art to be political, but not populist. Communication between people was subordinate to communication about communication. "Whereas it took years to get a work to Europe or California [from New York]," said Siegelau, "now it takes a telephone call. These are significant differences. The idea of swift communication implies that no one has anything." In the era of faxes and the Internet, this seems quaint, but at the time the adoption of telex technology by N. E. Thing Co. and Haacke seemed daringly "beyond art."

Occasionally the content seemed relatively accessible, as in James Collins's Introduction Pieces of 1970–71, in which he introduced two total strangers in a public place, photographed them shaking hands, then asked them to sign an "affidavit" on the transaction. However, there was also a "semiotic" component to these works that effectively academicized them: "That the message functioned *disjunctively* culturally was employed as a device to re-align the recipients' relationship to the message, as a theoretical construct."

For the most part communication was perceived as distribution, and it was in this area that populist desires were raised but unfulfilled. Distribution was often built into the piece. Weiner offered the most classic and concise examination of this issue in the stipulations for "ownership" (or for avoiding ownership) that accompanied all of his works:

1. *The artist may construct the piece.*
 2. *The piece may be fabricated.*
 3. *The piece need not be built.*
- Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.*

Since novelty was the fuel for the conventional art market, and novelty depended upon speed and change, Conceptual artists gloried in speeding past the cumbersome established process of museum-sponsored exhibitions and catalogues by means of mail art, rapidly edited and published books of art, and other small-is-better strategies. "Some artists now think it's absurd to fill up their studios with objects that won't be sold, and are trying to get their art communicated as rapidly as it is made. They're thinking out ways to make art what they'd like it to be in spite of the devouring speed syndrome it's made in. That speed has not only to be taken into consideration, but to be utilized," I told Ursula Meyer in 1969; "the new dematerialized art . . . provides a way of getting the power structure out of New York and spreading it around to wherever an artist feels like being at the time. Much art now is transported by the artist, or *in* the artist himself [sic], rather than by watered-down, belated circulating exhibitions or by existing information networks."

Communication relates to art three ways: (1) Artists knowing what other artists are doing. (2) The art community knowing what artists are doing. (3) The world knowing what artists are doing. . . . It's my concern to make it known to multitudes. [The most suitable means are] books and catalogues. —Seth Siegelau, 1969

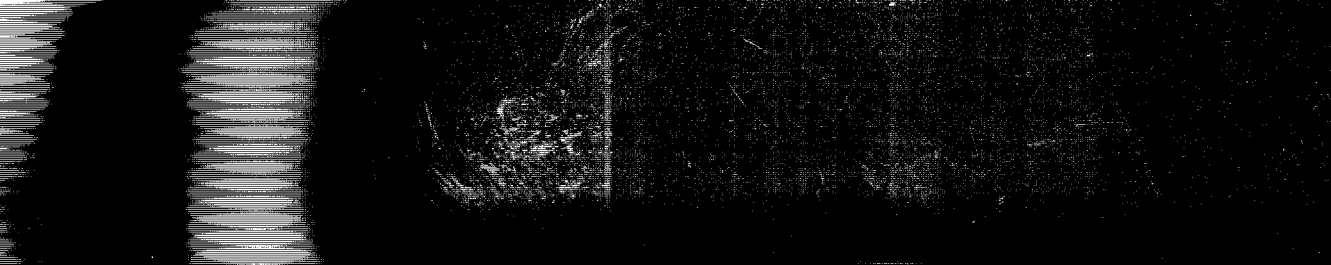
One of the things we often speculated about in the late sixties was the role of the art magazine. In an era of proposed projects, photo-text works, and artists' books, the periodical could be the ideal vehicle for art itself rather than merely for reproduction, commentary, and promotion. At one point I recall brainstorming with friends about a parasite magazine, each "issue" of which would appear noted as such in a different "host" magazine each month. The idea was to give readers first-hand rather than second-hand information about art. (Kosuth, Piper, and Ian Wilson published works as "ads" in newspapers at the time; in the 1980s this strategy was revived by Haacke and Group Material.)

In 1970, Siegelau, with the enthusiastic support of editor Peter Townsend, took over an issue of the then lively British journal *Studio International* and made it a kind of magazine exhibition with six "curators" (critics David Antin, Germano Celant, Michel Claura, Charles Harrison, Hans Strelow, and myself). We were each given eight pages and could fill them however we liked, with whatever artists we liked, doing whatever they liked. Claura chose only Buren, who striped his pages in yellow and white; Strelow chose Dibbets and Darboven; the rest of us chose eight artists with a page each. My "show" was a round robin. I asked each artist to provide a "situation" within which the next artist was to work, so the works created one cumulative, circular piece. (For example: Weiner to Kawara: "Dear On Kawara, I must apologize but the only situation I can bring myself to impose upon you would be my hopes for your having a good day. Fond Regards, Lawrence Weiner." Kawara replied with a telegram: I AM STILL ALIVE, sent to LeWitt, who responded by making a list of seventy-four permutations of that phrase.)

Decentralization and internationalism were major aspects of the prevailing distribution theories. This sounds odd now, when the "art world" extends to most of the western world (though "global" is still out of reach, "Magiciens de la terre" and the Bienal de La Habana notwithstanding). In the sixties, however, New York was resting in a self-imposed, and self-satisfied, isolation, having taken the title of world art capital from Paris in the late fifties. At the same time, the political struggles of the sixties were forging new bonds among the youth of the world. (The Parisian Situationists, though rarely mentioned in the Conceptual art literature, paralleled its goals in many ways, although the French focus on media and spectacle was far more politically sophisticated.)

The easily portable, easily communicated forms of Conceptual art made it possible for artists working out of the major art centers to participate in the early stages of new ideas. Huebler, for instance, one of the most imaginative and broad-ranging early Conceptualists, lived in Bradford, Massachusetts. They could also carry their work with them as they moved around the country or world. When artists travel more, I argued at the time—not to sightsee, but to get their work out—they take with them the ambience, stimulus, and energy of the milieu in which the work was made (New York was still implied as the prime source of that energy): "People are exposed directly to the art and to the ideas behind it in a more realistic informal situation." (This was before the "visiting artist" lecture series became an American academic institution; with the artists' slide registry, which came out of the Women's Movement, such series transformed the American art student's education and voided the curatorial excuse, "there are no good artists out there.") Spirits were high. In a de-commodified "idea-art," some of us (or was it just me?) thought we had in our hands the weapon that would transform the art world into a democratic institution.

By the end of the decade, connections had been made between "idea artists" and



their supporters around the United States and in England, Italy, France, Germany, Holland, Argentina, and Canada (Vancouver and Halifax in particular). By 1970 Australia (the Inhibodress group in Sydney) and Yugoslavia (the OHO group) had also kicked in. We began to see that Europe was more fertile ground than the United States for these new networks and means of dissemination. As younger American artists were invited to Europe, younger European artists began to show up in New York independently, making contact with their peers, cooking up inexpensive but expansive international "projects" unaffiliated with the commercial gallery system; French was the lingua franca, as few then spoke good English. The generous government funding in Europe (and more curatorial sympathy on the intellectual/political level) and, in Germany, the Kunsthalle system made more and quicker experimentation possible. The New York art world was so full of itself that it didn't need to pay much attention to the Conceptual gnats nipping at its fat flanks. The British critic Charles Harrison pointed out that in the late 1960s, Paris and the various European cities were in the position that New York was around 1939: a gallery and museum structure existed, but it was so dull and irrelevant to new art that there was a feeling that it could be bypassed. "Whereas in New York," I said, "the present gallery-money-power structure is so strong that it's going to be very difficult to find a viable alternative to it."

Kynaston McShine's fully international "Information" show at The Museum of Modern Art in the summer of 1970 was an unexpected exception. Born of an art-oriented interest in systems and information theory, and then transformed by the national rage attending Kent State and Cambodia, it became a state-of-the-art exhibition unlike anything else that cautious and usually unadventurous institution had attempted to date. The handsome catalogue looked like a Conceptual artist's book, with its informal "typewritten" text and wild range of non-art imagery from anthropology to computer science, and an eclectic, interdisciplinary reading list. I am listed in the table of contents with the artists because of the weird critical text I contributed (from Spain, where I was writing a novel deeply influenced by Conceptual art), and elsewhere as a "critic" (in quotation marks). Many of the artists might have preferred the quotation-marks treatment too, as a way of distancing themselves from predictable roles. Another departure for the time: films, videos, books, and John Giorno's Dial-A-Poem were among the exhibits. Adrian Piper's contribution was a series of notebooks filled with blank pages in which the viewers were

requested to write, draw, or otherwise indicate any response suggested by this situation (this statement, the blank notebook and pen, the museum context, your immediate state of mind, etc.)

III. The Charm of Life Itself

At its most inventive, it has the mystery and charm of life itself. It is the toughness of art that is lacking. —Amy Goldin on Conceptual art, 1969.

Inevitably, the issues of Conceptual art as "not art," "non-art," and "anti-art" was raised in the face of all these typed and xeroxed pages, blurry photographs, and radical (sometimes preposterous or pretentious) gestures. Frederick Barthelme (who later gave up his cantankerous forays into "visual" art to become a well-known novelist) rejected the notion of [art] by refusing to say the word:

I do not agree that by putting something into an context one admits to making I do not like the word . I do not like the body of work defined by the word . What I do like is the notion production. I produce in order to pass the time.

It was sometimes a question of who was an artist and to what extent art is style. The late Australian artist Ian Burn, who was an early member of Art & Language, stated the anti-style position of many Conceptualists when he said in 1968: "Presentation is a problem because it can easily become a form in itself, and this can be misleading. I would always opt for the most neutral format, one that doesn't interfere with or distort the information."

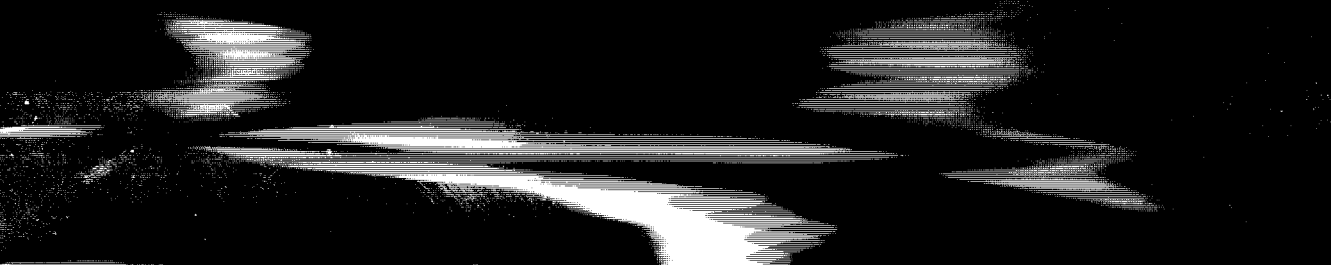
There is something about void and emptiness which I am personally very concerned with. I guess I can't get it out of my system. Just emptiness. Nothing seems to me the most potent thing in the world. —Robert Barry, 1968

One of the suggested solutions was a tabula rasa. In 1970, John Baldessari cremated all his art dated May 1953 to March 1966, thereby giving himself a fresh start. Kozlov showed an empty film reel, and made rejection itself her art form, conceptualizing pieces and then rejecting them, freeing herself from execution while remaining an artist. In England, Keith Arnatt titled a work *Is It Possible For Me To Do Nothing As My Contribution To This Exhibition?* and mused on "Art as an Act of Omission." In Australia, Peter Kennedy made a ten-minute piece that transferred bandages from a microphone onto a camera, forming a doubly muted transition between silence and invisibility.

In 1969 I organized an exhibition at the Paula Cooper Gallery, a benefit for the Art Workers Coalition, in which the symptoms of dematerialization were well advanced: an (apparently) "empty" room contained Haacke's *Air Currents* (a small fan), Barry's invisible *Magnetic Field*, Weiner's *Minute Pit In The Wall From One Air-Rifle Shot*, Wilson's "Oral Communication," a "secret" by Kaltenbach, a small black blip painted on the wall by Richard Artschwager, Huot's "existing shadows," and a tiny cable wire piece by Andre on the floor. The smallest room was, by contrast, crammed with printed matter—photo, text, xerox, and otherwise shrunken art.

This was a relatively conservative statement. Barry rejected the closed claustrophobic spaces of the gallery system by closing the gallery for one of his shows. Buren sealed off the entrance to a gallery space in Milan with his trademark white-and-one-color striped fabric, "opening" and "closing" the show in one move. In Argentina, Graciela Carnevale welcomed opening visitors to a totally empty room; the door was hermetically sealed without their knowing it: "The piece involved closing access and exits, and the unknown reactions of the visitors. After more than an hour, the 'prisoners' broke the glass window and 'escaped.'"

Such escape attempts were in fact being made by the artists rather than by the audiences. In this case the audience was forced to act out the artists' desires—to break out of the system. Much of this discussion had to do with boundaries—those imposed by conventional art definitions and contexts, and those chosen by the artists to make points about the new, autonomous lines they were drawing. "All legitimate art deals with limits," said Smithson. "Fraudulent art feels that it has no limits." Some, like Huebler and Oppenheim, focused on the redistribution of site or place, al-



though the more abstract notions of space and context usually prevailed over local specificity.

The more successful work from the minimal syndrome rejected itself, allowing the viewer a one-to-one confrontation with pure limit or bounds. This displacement or sensory pressures from object to place will prove to be the major contribution of minimalist art. —Dennis Oppenheim, 1969

Huebler “dematerialized” place (or space) in his many map pieces, which in a quint-essentially “Conceptual” manner disregarded time and space limitations, and in works like one from 1970, which consisted of a vertical line drawn on a sheet of paper with the line below it reading: “the line above is rotating on its axis at a speed of one revolution each day.” Bochner, who made a series of works delineating interior architectural measurements, wrote the same year: “A fundamental assumption in much recent past art was that things have stable properties, i.e. boundaries. . . . Boundaries, however, are only the fabrication of our desire to detect them.” Applying the idea to a social context, Baldessari executed a “ghetto boundary” piece with George Nicolaidis for “557,087” in Seattle in 1969 which, although intended as a consciousness-raising device, would probably be perceived as racist today: they affixed small silver and black labels to telephone poles or street signs along the boundary of an African-American neighborhood.

I'm beginning to believe that one of the last frontiers left for radical gestures is the imagination. —David Wojnarowicz, 1989³

Even in 1969, as we were imagining our heads off and, to some extent, out into the world, I suspected that “the art world is probably going to be able to absorb conceptual art as another ‘movement’ and not pay too much attention to it. The art establishment depends so greatly on objects which can be bought and sold that I don’t expect it to do much about an art that is opposed to the prevailing systems.” (This remains true today—art that is too specific, that names names, about politics, or place, or anything else, is not marketable until it is abstracted, generalized, defused.) By 1973, I was writing with some disillusion in the “Postface” of *Six Years*: “Hopes that ‘conceptual art’ would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively “progressive” approach of modernism were for the most part unfounded. It seemed in 1969 . . . that no one, not even a public greedy for novelty, would actually pay money, or much of it, for a xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting an ephemeral situation or condition, a project for work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded; it seemed that these artists would therefore be forcibly freed from the tyranny of a commodity status and market-orientation. Three years later, the major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by (and still more unexpected—showing in) the world’s most prestigious galleries. Clearly, whatever minor revolutions in communication have been achieved by the process of dematerializing the object . . . , art and artists in a capitalist society remain luxuries.”

Yet, with a longer view, it is also clear that the Conceptual artists set up a model that remains flexible enough to be useful today, totally aside from the pompous and flippant manner in which it has sometimes been used in the art context. Out of that

decade from 1966 to 1975 came a flock of cooperative galleries (55 Mercer and A. I. R. being the notable survivors), a tide of artists' books (which led to the formation in 1976 of Printed Matter and the Franklin Furnace Archive), another activist artists' organization led by former Conceptualists (Artists Meeting for Cultural Change) after the AWC faded with the Vietnam war, and an international performance art and video network. Activist and ecological/site-specific work that had its beginnings in the 1960s in Conceptual-related projects has seen a revival in the 1980s and 1990s; the much-maligned Whitney Biennial of 1993 featured more-and-less "political" art that recalled its Conceptual sources; and feminist activists like the Guerrilla Girls and the Women's Action Coalition (WAC) also renewed 1960s and early 1970s concerns with women's representation in the media, daily life, and role playing/gender-bending.

Perhaps most important, Conceptualists indicated that the most exciting "art" might still be buried in social energies not yet recognized as art. The process of extending the boundaries didn't stop with Conceptual art: These energies are still out there, waiting for artists to plug into them, potential fuel for the expansion of what "art" can mean. The escape was temporary. Art was recaptured and sent back to its white cell, but parole is always a possibility.

Notes

1. Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," in Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 75.
2. Jeanne Siegel, "An Interview with Hans Haacke," *Arts Magazine* 45, no. 7 (May 1971): 21.
3. David Wojnarowicz, "Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell," In *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, exh. cat. (New York: Artists Space, 1989), 10.