I

Approaching Conceptual Art

As befits an art of the mind, 'Conceptual art' poses problems right from the start. What was it? When was it? (Is it still around or is it 'history'?) Where was it? Who made it? (Are we to consider 'X' a Conceptual artist or not?) And of course, the umbrella-question: why? Why produce a form of visual art premised on undercutting the two principal characteristics of art as it has come down to us in Western culture, namely the production of objects to look at, and the act of contemplative looking itself (fig.1)?

This is not just a rhetorical device with which to open a book on the subject. These are real questions. It is not at all clear where the boundaries of 'Conceptual art' are to be drawn, which artists and which works to include. Looked at in one way, Conceptual art gets to be like Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat, dissolving away until nothing is left but a grin: a handful of works made over a few short years by a small number of artists, the most important of whom soon went on to do other things. Then again, regarded under a different aspect, Conceptual art can seem like nothing less than the hinge around which the past turned into the present: the modernist past of painting as *the* fine art, the canon from Cézanne to Rothko, versus the postmodernist present where contemporary exhibition spaces are full of anything and everything, from sharks to photographs, piles of rubbish to multi-screen videos – full, it seems, of everything except modernist painting.

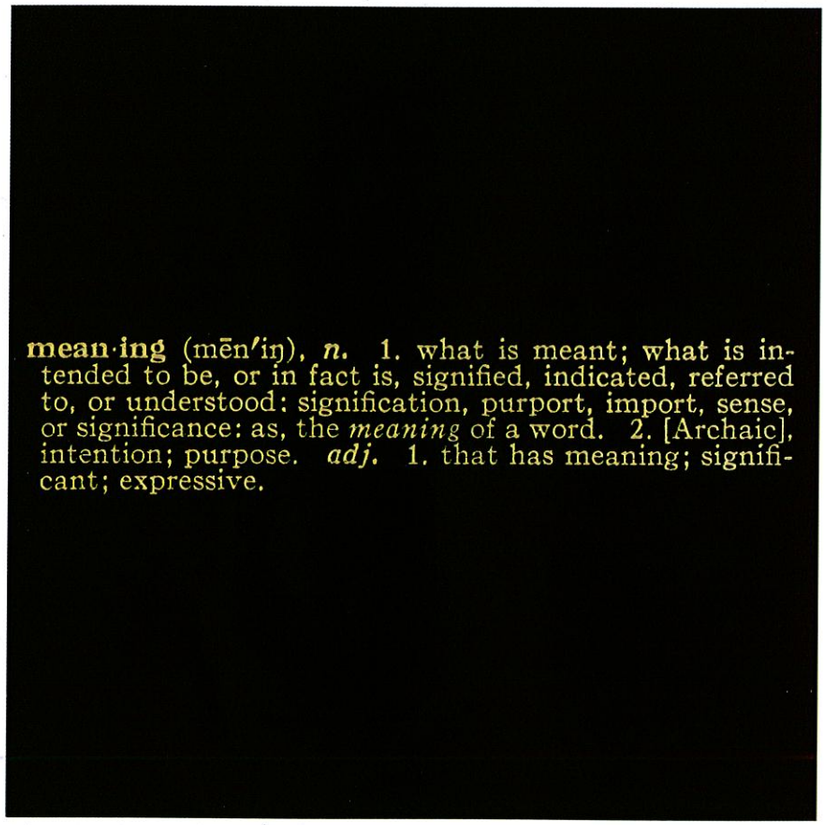
Moreover, Conceptual art's legacy is exceptionally argumentative. Most of the major players are still living, and matters of status and priority are jealously guarded. In the mid-1990s, members and ex-members of the English group Art & Language conducted a war of words in print about the history of their

activities in the mid-1970s. In the 1989 catalogue to *L'art conceptuel* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the first major exhibition to survey Conceptual art as a historical phenomenon, the artist Joseph Kosuth accused the historian Benjamin Buchloh of partisanship and bias after Buchloh had accused *him* of falsifying his role in the movement's origins. And this is not a new phenomenon. As early as 1973, the American artist Mel Bochner greeted the critic Lucy Lippard's attempt to catalogue developments in Conceptual art from 1966 to 1972 in her book *Six Years*, with a root and branch condemnation in the pages of *Artforum*, the leading art magazine of the period. For Bochner, Lippard's account was 'confusing' and 'arbitrary', an 'act of bad faith' that resulted in little more than a 'parody' of what actually happened. Much later, in the 1990s, when 'historical' Conceptual art began to be curated on a major scale, Lippard herself set her sights on those who now queued up to explain its importance, writing that she trusted neither the memories of those who were there, nor the supposedly authoritative overviews of historians who weren't. In addition to such disputes, the historical accounts of Conceptual art that have emerged scarcely offer a consensus. Lippard's retrospect chronicled a set of efforts, not least by women and Latin American artists, to break free of the bureaucratic and confining protocols of modernism, itself held to be largely client to the wider structures of American power. The critic and historian Charles Harrison regards Conceptual art, particularly the work of the Art & Language group, not as a break with modernist principles in the name of a re-engagement with social modernity, but as a necessary re-formulation of the grounds of art's critical independence. For him, an engagement with social modernity and aesthetic independence are anything but antithetical. For his part, Benjamin Buchloh judged the work of at least some of Conceptual art's leading practitioners to be nothing less than 'an aesthetic of administration', that is, as mirroring the structures of Western capitalism in its managerial, post-industrial phase; for Buchloh, the only defensible 'conceptualist' practice was a critique of cultural institutions. In the face of such contrasting views it would be naïve to assume that the present book has located the Archimedean point from which a fully finished account of Conceptual art may be levered into the edifice of art history.

Names

Even the name presents something of a problem. I have already used the phrase 'Conceptual art' to refer to a historical form of avant-garde practice that flourished in the late 1960s and 1970s. The term had historical currency, being used at the time to refer to a variety of language-, photography- and process-based activities: a kind of fall-out from the collision of Minimal art and various 'anti-formal' practices on the one hand with the institution of Modernism on the other, in a climate of increasing cultural and political radicalism. The American artist Sol LeWitt published his 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' in 1967 and subsequently his 'Sentences on Conceptual Art' in 1969. Also in 1969, the first issue of the periodical *Art-Language* featured on its cover the sub-heading, 'The Journal of Conceptual Art'. But the phrase 'Concept art' turns out to have been first employed by the writer and musician

Henry Flynt as early as 1961 in the context of activities associated with the Fluxus group in New York. In an essay subsequently published in the Fluxus *Anthology* (1963), Flynt wrote that '"Concept Art" is first of all an art of which the material is "concepts"', going on to make the point that, 'since "concepts" are closely bound up with language, concept art is a kind of art of which the material is language'. Yet, as central a figure as Lucy Lippard has commented flatly that Flynt's Fluxus-inspired sense of 'Concept Art' had little to do with what she understood as the key activities of the Conceptual art vanguard in New York in the mid- to late-1960s: 'few of the artists with whom I was



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Joseph Kosuth
Titled (Art as Idea as Idea) [Meaning] 1967
Photostat on paper mounted on wood
119.4 x 119.4
(47 x 47)
The Menil Collection, Houston

involved knew about it, and in any case it was a different kind of "concept"'. The point here is *not* that a discussion of antecedents should be excluded from a study of Conceptual art, but that, in writing histories of art, we have to be wary of making plausible-sounding art historical connections that may have had less impact on the actual making of art at the time than retrospective genealogists would like.

It is with such issues in mind that we have to be aware of a third term that has come into increasing currency. The term is 'conceptualism', and it has more than one inflection. On the one hand, there is a use of this word favoured by

journalism. To take an example more or less at random, in the run-up to the 2000 Turner Prize competition at Tate Britain in London, one of the English broadsheet (not tabloid) newspapers casually aimed a jibe at 'the dead animal/unmade bed conceptualism' of contemporary art. 'Conceptualism', that is, has come to stand in some quarters for the array of contemporary practices that do not conform to conventional expectations of art exhibitions showing hand-crafted objects for aesthetic contemplation. In this sense, 'Conceptualism' becomes a negative catch-all for what conservatives of various stripes do not like about contemporary art.

There also exists however, a diametrically opposed sense of the term. It has become a commonplace of the politically correct that modernism was the art of the West, in particular of North America and Western Europe, and an art of men from those places, to boot. Insofar as Conceptual art appears to stand at a transitional point between high modernism and what followed, there have been attempts to broaden the range of 'Conceptual art' out beyond the Anglo-American centre-ground where it was mainly established during the approximate decade 1965–75. A recent collection of essays, titled *Rewriting Conceptual Art* has it that such art constitutes the ground 'on which nearly all contemporary art exists', and that in its recent efflorescence, 'Conceptualism has become all-pervasive if not dominant in the art world'. From that perspective, 'conceptualism' takes on a double identity. 'Analytical' Conceptual art gets downgraded as the art of white male rationalists, mired in the very modernism they sought to critique. The expanded history, on the other hand, begins to excavate a huge array of artists, men and women alike, deemed to have been working in a 'conceptualist' manner from the 1950s onwards, on a range of emancipatory themes ranging from imperialism to personal identity in far-flung places from Latin America to Japan, from Aboriginal Australia to Russia. The result is a claim for 'Global conceptualism', the title of a major exhibition in New York in 1999.

One of the tasks of the present introduction to Conceptual art, then, is to hold apart these rival senses of the central term: neither embracing as unproblematic the full-scale 'conceptualist' hypothesis, nor restricting attention to an Anglo-American (and now historical) Conceptual 'canon'; neither regarding Conceptual art as engaged postmodernism *avant la lettre*, nor as a fading, bureaucratic echo of modernism. We will pay most attention to various tendencies that were significant in the crucial decade from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. But before that we need to look at where Conceptual art came from, its 'pre-history', so to speak. And finally we need briefly to consider the question of its legacy for contemporary art: the question of whether Conceptual art did indeed pave the way for an internationally successful 'conceptualism'.

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The Legacy

Various techniques and strategies associated with Conceptual art have become pervasive in contemporary art. Jenny Holzer's employment of language is one. Sherrie Levine's photographic critique of originality is another. Cindy Sherman's play with identity is yet another. The use of text and photograph made by Barbara Kruger is inconceivable without Conceptual art. And so on. The work of many artists is underwritten by a politics of difference. That of many others is focused on the social and institutional production of meaning. These two strands have jointly rendered historical both the essentialism and the autonomy-claims of modernist theory, no less comprehensively than modernism itself once consigned the ethos of the academy to history (although just as the ghost of classicism continued to haunt the modern movement, the spectre of aesthetic value is present at the feast of postmodernism). It would, however, be unfortunate to close a book on Conceptual art with the implication that its principal legacy was one of an ethically over-secure and humourless political correctness. On the other hand it would be equally inappropriate to celebrate at face value the kind of claim we have already encountered that 'Conceptualism has become all-pervasive if not dominant in the art world'. In one sense perhaps it has. In response to uncomprehending press criticism of his work, Damien Hirst remarked in 2000 that, 'I don't think the hand of the artist is important on any level because you are trying to communicate an idea'. The 'idea' rather than the hand-crafted object has become the common currency of international contemporary art. But that art's relationship to its institutional context is far more secure than was

Conceptual art's at the moment of its emergence. Giant institutions such as Tate Modern, Guggenheim Bilbao, Temporary Contemporary, and others like them are monuments to the place contemporary art has come to occupy in the culture at large. The critic and broadcaster Matthew Collings locates the limit of this modishness when he recognises that 'the ideas are never important or even really ideas, more notions, like the notions in advertising'. Collings likes and admires contemporary art, because as he says 'it's just how life is today', a life that is preoccupied with questions such as: 'Will it make it? Will it fail? Will it get high prices? Will it be on TV?' Collings's love of the trivialities of contemporaneity, of art as the visual equivalent of pop music, is the other side of the coin from po-faced political correctness (and a lot easier to live with). But the point is that neither of them have much to do with the spirit that generated Conceptual art. As Bruce Nauman recognised, it wasn't at all clear what to do; and as Art & Language have said, it wasn't at all clear what the status of the result was.

At the beginning of this book, I argued that it was important to differentiate variant senses of our key term, 'conceptual'. There was an avant-gardist/Fluxus sense of the word suggesting a non-medium-specific range of activities, which, loosely speaking, went to ideas of a universal human creativity and of the world at large as the proper locale of art activity, rather than a specialised aesthetic practice. Then there was a self-conscious and more rigorously theorised 'Conceptual art', which emerged in the late 1960s. This was dedicated initially to a critical examination of the premises of both modernist and avant-gardist art, and evolved in the 1970s into a critical-political practice addressing a broad field of representation. This Conceptual art itself incorporated different strands, some more analytical and language-based, others closer to Fluxus activity in their incorporation of performance elements. These two aspects represented an interest in, respectively, mind and body. For many reasons, not least the rise of feminism, the last quarter of the twentieth century saw a decisive shift of interest on the part of artists to the body. Simultaneously, it became possible to sideline analysis and rational critique as hostage to a deeply unfashionable masculinism. The analytical strand of Conceptual art, linked as it was to a left-wing class politics, was eclipsed by a burgeoning of performance-related activities (often accompanied by video technologies or installations) and frequently underwritten by a politics of identity. This shift lies behind the emergence of the notion of 'conceptualism' that has come into currency to describe the range of object-, video-, performance- and installation-based activities that currently hold sway across the international art scene. 'Conceptualism' in this sense is effectively a synonym for 'postmodernism'. The edges between these different forms of activity are blurred, and it would be mistaken to enforce hard and fast distinctions or definitions. One can all too easily end up in the farcical situation of trying to apply a litmus test to discover whether Artist X, or indeed Artwork X, does or does not meet the residence qualification for its 'Conceptual' passport. That said, some distinctions, albeit provisional, are in order, lest everything sink into a morass where it is impossible to distinguish or evaluate interesting, critical and, dare one say it, progressive practices, from empty, mystificatory or self-publicising nonsense.

At any given time, most of the art that gets produced is not very interesting. This was as true of Conceptual art as it is of contemporary postmodernism, or as it was of academic art. In the past, natural wastage has taken care of that. But as the institution of art has become inflated in modern Western society, and as investment in it – both cultural and directly financial – has multiplied, it becomes less and less easy to tell when the Emperor is wearing his new clothes. Conceptual art's greatest strength is that it was, perhaps briefly, an episode against the grain of all this. Certain artists, *as artists*, took on the responsibility of checking over the kind of thing art was, the kind of institution it was, and the kind of role it fulfilled in modern society. It is, I feel, quite mistaken to conflate this kind of critical practice with the eclecticism that is the most noticeable feature of art at the turn of the twenty-first century. In some respects, Conceptual art may be responsible for this, for having broken down the barriers of the media out of which art is thought capable of being made. But in other senses it is not. I have mentioned the impact that T.S. Kuhn's theory of paradigm revolutions made on the development of Conceptual art. Kuhn argued that most of the time science progressed cumulatively, until anomalies built up and the whole structure was shaken up and a new period of normality commenced. The salient feature of most of the art to which the term 'conceptualism' is applied, whether positively or negatively, is that it is, so to speak, 'normal science'. It is the way things are now, just as academic art was in the middle of the nineteenth century and just as modernism was in the middle of the twentieth.

Hyperbole and utopianism aside, there is a sense in which Conceptual art *was* a form of guerrilla action against the powers that be, in the shape of institutionalised modernism in both the marketplace and the colleges where art was taught and reproduced. Mel Ramsden once remarked that Conceptual art was less about putting writing on the wall than it was about a spirit of scepticism and irony. If 'conceptualism' has indeed become the status quo of a bloated contemporary art world, then arguably it shares less with the spirit of historical Conceptual art than it does with the modern academy from which those artists took their distance. Nowadays, in a period of pervasive 'globalisation' we seem always to be hearing that 'we are all capitalists now' – *liberal* capitalists, of course. By the same token, culturally we are all supposed to be postmodernists. At the close of George Orwell's parable of frustrated revolution, *Animal Farm* (1945), the animals look through the windows of the house where their leaders, the pigs, are dining at the same table as the human farmers:

> As the animals outside gazed at the scene, it seemed to them that something strange was happening. What was it that had altered in the faces, what was it that seemed to be melting and changing? No question now, what had happened. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but it was already impossible to say which was which.

No doubt, critical art continues to be made. But only in an Orwellian sense can it be maintained that 'we are all conceptualists now'.

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