THE DIALOGICAL IMAGINATION: THE CONVERSATIONAL AESTHETIC OF CONCEPTUAL ART

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Within the history of avant-garde art there is a recurrent interest in process-based practices. A substantial claim made by proponents of this position argues that process-based practices offer far more scope for the revision of the conventional culture of art than any other type of practice. In the first place, process-based practices dispense with the idea of the production of a material object as the principle aim of art. While there is often a material 'residue' associated with process-based art, its status as an autonomous object of art is always questionable. Such objects are more properly understood as props or by-products, and are valued accordingly by the artist (but not, alas, by the critic, curator or collector). Process-based practices themselves raise difficult questions for connoisseurs; there is often no clear notion where to locate the boundary dividing process works from the environment at large. The process-based work of art may not result in an object at all; rather, it could be a performance (scripted or not), an environment or installation, an intervention in a public space, or some sort of social encounter, such as a conversation or an on-going project with a community. The point of all these practices is to radically alter the subject-position of both artist and beholder. By so doing, the very idea of the autonomy of art is placed in question. Once attention and purpose are shifted from the making of what amounts to medium-sized dry goods, so the argument goes, both artist and spectator are liberated. What does this freedom consist in? Principally, to be able to cast off a cluster of tradition-bound rules and regulations, institutions and habits that prescribe the nature of art and set out the protocols under which art is to be encountered, enjoyed and appreciated. All avant-garde art aims to complicate and transform the social roles of artist and spectator alike. When the maker of art is no longer solely the initiator of the process or performance, or author of the script the

notions of 'artist' and 'beholder' are rendered meaningless and presumably stripped of their cultural authority. Of course, such social effects are generally demonstrated rhetorically, although there are instances where the 'artist' actually sets out to destroy the institutions of art altogether. Otherwise, artists are content to work between or across better-defined disciplines or fields of practice, without worrying overly about what to call their activity. Indeed, the wide accessibility of some important means of distribution of contemporary cultural activities – namely, the internet – has made this possible, by shifting the strategic thrust elsewhere and, so it is believed, entirely circumventing the institutional superstructure of art as a portable commodity.

In this essay, I would like to make some historical reflections on certain kinds of process-based practices in art that emerged during the mid-1960s and their legacy. I am interested to consider how these practices actually functioned within the so-called world of art. The story I will tell involves the history of some Conceptual Art practices since 1972, although the pre-history of what I call the dialogical imagination in art occurs earlier, at the least during the decade of the sixties. Now, anyone who has studied Conceptual Art and the critical discourse that accompanies its reception will immediately recognise the commonplace assumption that Conceptual art practices are intended to undermine the interpretive competencies of the beholder by presenting in the place of art what usually amounts to a body of text. (Or, in Robert Smithson's less sympathetic but vivid rendering, a 'heap of language'.) Conceptual art was not necessarily meant to be about language as such, but to function as a significant metaphorical shift that took the structure of art to be language-like. At the same time, two further positions around the relationship between language and art emerged. Some Conceptual artists wished to go beyond the (weakly) metaphorical position that posited an analogy between grammar and syntax and the varieties of visual experience in art. They argued that language deserved to be a central concern for the visual artists because it frames our entire experience of visual art. We not only report what we see through the means of language; we see through language. (This is a strong version of Russell Hanson's notion of the theory laden-ness of observational language; a conceptual approach that originally emerged during the late-1950s, early-1960s in the context of the philosophy of science.) Others saw the displacement of the aesthetic approach to art as a positive development that served to eliminate obstacles to the critical reflection on the conditions of

art's consumption and production. That is, the hermetic or poetic in art was suppressed in the name of a potentially more vital demotic form. By substituting reading for looking, the expectations of the beholder were certainly challenged and ultimately frustrated. Yet, the expectation was that out of this frustration or irritation with the minimal amount of visual incident, the viewer comes to a realisation about the conventions of art.

Conceptual artists generally assume that late modernist art – typically, painting and sculpture – presents the beholder with few options to engage with the work of art as other than a highly refined entertainment or spectacle that effectively confirms the subject-position of the beholder and the authority of the artist, whose work is a demonstration of the superiority of the enterprise of modernist art to provide the pre-eminent aesthetic experience. The most radical Conceptual artists tried to frustrate this experience, in order to render redundant the competencies of the beholder. They did this, as I say, by quite literally removing the art object from view. This was accomplished in a number of ways; these methods or strategies constitute the variety of forms and media approaches that one finds within the field of Conceptual Art. In place of an art object whose media identity was secure and of sufficient external complexity and detail, Conceptual Art substitutes text, ephemeral performances, banal photography and installations virtually indistinguishable from the environment in which they are sited.

I would like to bear down on those practices of Conceptual Art that seek to reconstruct entirely the beholder through artistic strategies that foreground the act of conversation, employ a mechanism that enables interactivity, and pursue a radical application of intellectual resources associated with the task of indexing and information retrieval. What can we say plausibly about such an encounter where the performance of the beholder's knowledge, memory and cultural values become the constitutive elements of the artwork? Under such conditions of engagement, can one sensibly speak at all of a work of art? If so, what might the 'work' be that a work of art of this sort aims to do? What, indeed, is the work that is actually accomplished? These questions – by no means an original inquiry – have been, and continue to be, raised in various forms and in diverse contexts by those seeking to understand the social dimension of the practices of Conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s. I wish to consider them anew with regard to some practices of Art & Language. At the outset, I should say that I

approach some of the objects of this inquiry as a partisan maker and some merely as an interested, yet informed, bystander.

Sites of meaning

'Outside a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside a dog, it's too dark to read.'
– Groucho Marx

The iconic image of late-modernist absorption in the act of making a painting is found in a photograph of around 1966 of Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967) labouring over the completion of one of his so-called 'black' paintings. The image contrasts markedly with earlier photographs by Hans Namuth of the artist Jackson Pollock in motion in the midst of one of his drip paintings. The contrast is intentional, I think. Reinhardt was well aware of the popular image of the Abstract Expressionist painter as an athletic, entranced flinger of paint, as "Jack the Dripper". Reinhardt's goal here is to present another kind of studio culture; considered, meticulous, possibly more cerebral and meditative. While Pollock and Reinhardt shared the idea of the studio as the principal site of art's meaning, it is Reinhardt who is most energetic in proselytising his particular vision of art through voluminous published writings (the artist's 'art-as-art' dogma), cartoon strips that appeared in evening newspapers (his famous series titled "How to Look . . ." which were published in PM from 1946-47), numerous public lectures and, of course, through his role as professor of art and art history. Reinhardt's writings caught the eye of many a young Conceptual artist – notably, Joseph Kosuth – and planted the seed that it might be possible to shift the production of meaning from studio to study and beyond. In other words, the significance of a work of art was as much a function of its marketing and distribution as its production. Eventually, the machinery of promotion and distribution took precedence over the making.

For an artist like Mel Ramsden, it was important during the late-1960s to find a means to produce a painting that is as self-reflexive and as abstract as Reinhardt's 'black' paintings, but demands far less of the beholder's attention and carries its meaning on its surface. Ramsden calls these works "100% abstract", and writes that they are "virtual paintings":

> They began as paintings which merely listed the chemical composition of the paint used to produce them: a kind of reflexive materialism, or a tautology of the real. (Baldwin, Harrison and Ramsden 1998: 145)

Somewhat earlier, during 1967, Ramsden initiated a series of works produced "under the spell of Ad Reinhardt". They consist of two panels: the first appears to be a perfectly blank black monochrome; the second is a framed statement reading: "The content of this painting is invisible; the character and dimensions of the content are to be kept permanently secret, known only to the artist". Describing these "Secret Paintings", Ramsden argues that "such paintings can't be made public without an explanation or some kind of account of their production" (Baldwin, Harrison and Ramsden 1998: 217).

What is interesting is how they relate to Reinhardt's 'black' paintings: both are produced in the studio, both are imagined to be blank at first glance, and both require some kind of support in order to fully function in public. I am oversimplifying both Ramsden's and Reinhardt's work here in order to make a point about the consequences of moving the locus of meaning-formation out of the studio. Of producing and distributing, if you will, a partial product, an incomplete product. For me, what is of interest are the paradoxes that ensue when one enters this path; particularly the way in which the notion of 'public' meaning starts to take shape and the way in which one's relationship to the work of art is disturbed, both physically and conceptually. The position of the beholder is threatened from all sides. Kosuth, in some of his projects of the early-1970s, reduces this to the act of reading; hence, the "reading rooms" that consist of tables piled high with the artist's working library. The spectator is forced to become a reader if they wish to engage with the work in a significant way. They are sucked in to a vortex of information. Once the ambiguous object of art (painting) is dispensed with, a kind of positivity takes hold. The material categories of a thesaurus, for example, become a kind of public art when placed, unadorned, on a billboard or inserted in a daily newspaper. All this anti-pictorialism leads the beholder into new territory. All of a sudden, everyone who is a competent reader can become a lover of art. For some Conceptual artists, the corollary was even more potent: any competent writer could be an artist. That, at least, was how it seemed to some avant-garde artists by the end of the 1960s.

Language has a hold on us

This optimism proved to be short-lived. Granted, scepticism towards the art object got the artist out of the studio. But language, it turns out, is not as reliable as it seems. Language, being context-dependent, has an indexical side. An unruly, ambiguous, discursive side. Various indexes were produced by Art & Language from 1972-1974. The first of these was constructed in 1972 for Documenta V. According to Art & Language,

> the principal motif of the series was the nature of the identities of artist and onlooker. In participating, that is to say in working with the Index, the 'spectator' produces a conceptual possibility whereby the work is realised. This realisation is not in the metaphorical sense in which any work of art may be said to be realised and apprehended by a viewer. The Index is a mechanism for generating detail as a pragmatically discursive possibility – a conversation-equivalent perhaps. (Baldwin, Harrison and Ramsden 1999: 58-59)

Index 001 (1972) consists of four card file cabinets containing excerpts from texts, readings and transcripts, all of which had figured in the group's discourse. The spectator was encouraged, in the initial installation at least, to browse through these cards. The fragments of discourse, assorted intellectual landmarks, trivia and all, did or did not map onto the life-world of the spectator. From this encounter, an 'alternate' index is formed. This is the 'work' of the spectator, which is generated dialectically through the 'work' of Art & Language. The early indexing projects presented the beholder with a conundrum not unlike that posed by Reinhardt's "black" paintings: to refuse to engage with them is to render them invisible; return them to the realm of objecthood. However, to accept their invitation to participate risks the possibility of a one-way ticket out of art. Art & Language speaks eloquently of these works now as having extended a scepticism toward the art object "into a scepticism toward the authorship of art" (Baldwin, Harrison and Ramsden 1998: 59). I enjoy this emphatic endorsement of discursiveness in art, but wonder how it will fare in the context of museums and galleries.

Culture as learning and sharing

For Art & Language in New York during the 1970s – and in the UK, as well, I imagine – the sociality of the small group remained the surest means to keep the pernicious influence of the so-called art world at bay. The public, it turns out, is a fickle collaborator. The only solution was to recruit willing co-workers. 'Culture as learning and sharing' – admittedly an uncontroversial anthropological observation – had some purchase for us only because it was so patently obvious that the usual public contexts of art discourse had nothing to do whatever with either learning or sharing. We characterised virtually all art criticism as vagrant opinion-mongering and set about to explore the mystery of how it is that we can even speak to one another, let alone understand, share and learn from conversation.

The "annotations" project, initiated in 1973, took place in a discursive context. A group of us circulated brief texts on what we took to be the key issues that defined or threatened our commonality. The commentary that was generated, week after week, was collected, indexed and reconstituted into a kind of handbook for the public. One of the key concerns of the project was to constitute a model for 'going-on' as an artist in an art world utterly hostile to anyone but a maker of art objects. Of course, we mounted numerous exhibitions during this period. Yet, they aspired to function more as informational displays or remote sites for conversation. In the event, they were quite easily consumed as expensive graphic design. Installation views pose spectators uncomfortably reading while standing up and close to the photostat affixed to the wall. The image resembles that of spectators in the presence of, say, one of Barnet Newman's enormous paintings of the late-1950s, like "Vir Heroicus Sublimus". Still, the analogy between 'looking' and 'reading' and the instability inherent in these two terms held some potential for mischief which Art & Language would realise in practice only later on, during the 1980s and 1990s. Meanwhile, it was clear to us that the 'work' of the beholder, now co-worker, needed to be pinned down. Much Conceptual art was 'completed' in the mind of the beholder; our game was not about 'dematerialisation', but conversation and disruption and, possibly, community-building. From the handbook sprang the "workbook", which yielded a variety of form-filling opportunities, all of which, it must be said, parodied gleefully the administrative culture of late-capitalism. This 1974 "workbook" and allied indexes of 1973 were interactive in the sense that the 'user' was forced to actively make

choices in order to go on. There was little point in simply 'admiring' the workbook formally; one had to engage with it. In 2002, Thomas Dreher and staff at ZKM developed a fully-interactive web-based version of "Blurting in Art & Language New York" (1973), thereby realising its potential as hypertext 'software' avant la lettre.

Communities of discourse

Taking the notion of a community of discourse literally involved us in all sorts of political intrigues. In an effort to escape the small group, we became engaged with larger groups, sometimes groups of artists, at other times, groups of political activists.[1] We experimented using telegrams as a means to initiate conversation at a distance. We also travelled to universities and art centres to hold a series of conversations. The conversations were transcribed and excerpts were displayed in a graphic format, headlined with provocative questions directed at an imagined reader. We experimented with cartoon strips, using our daily experience as subject matter, reflecting on the contradictions that constituted our world. We even initiated a magazine designed to 'address' a wider community of artists; to function as a forum in which all aspects of artistic practice, from the 1960s to the mid-1970s, could be examined critically. At this point, one could say that we were using a variety of non-art media to advance a critical practice. At this point, perhaps, we were furthest from an artistic practice based on the development of a material culture.

During the 1970s, Art & Language self-consciously flirted with its equivocal position as a kind of avant-garde virus within late modernist art practice. This dubious kinship was acknowledged through a number of projects involving explicit quotation or appropriation of historical avant-garde projects, most notably those arising in the former Soviet Union during the 1920s and early-1930s. This phase of production – characterised by some as "vulgar propaganda" or "black propaganda" – ended by the late-1970s (Baldwin, Harrison and Ramsden 1998: 99, 249).

It signifies the height of Art & Language's tortured engagement with the public sphere and the final critical commentary on the morally suspect, managerial aspirations of some of their colleagues. Contemporary art has already embraced such strategies as commonplace. Public intervention is virtually an academic category of

artistic practice; certainly every art student is aware of its protocols. It is worth recalling that such stirrings were beginning to be felt during the late-1970s; I have in mind Jenny Holzer's reaction to the textual, gallery-bound bias of most 'historical' Conceptual art.

The amateur

What remains of conversation in Conceptual art? One may speak of a conversational aesthetic, but that seems to take us back to the original condition that Conceptual art wished to address and change. To displace the object of aesthetic attention is to seek to revise the work of the artist. But what is the proper work of the artist today? More precisely, what is the proper work of the artist who seeks to irritate the mainstream without turning his or her back on it? The sheer complexity of Art & Language's practice fascinates and repels; even more so, nearly forty years on. As Paul Wood has remarked, the practice of Art & Language

> has always been an art practice. Much of the enduring interest of Art & Language work can be traced to the fact that, even now, such a claim is open to interpretation as a truism or a provocation, as evidence of an achievement or a betrayal. (Wood 1993: 11)

Wood talks of a tension in Art & Language's work between "outward address" and "inward address". Many contemporary artists recognise this double bind and find it possible to construct a career within its borders. Wood goes on to argue that the "stability" evidenced in Art & Language's production since the early-1980s was hard won and somehow determined by the upheavals of the 1970s. All this brings into focus the fate of any self-described avant-garde practice, of which Conceptual art is certainly one. Wood recognises the contingent nature of Art & Language's practice; its provisional nature as art. Perhaps this is the best one can do as an avant-garde artist: to keep the resolution of the game in suspension, to resist the temptation to take the notion of revolution in art literally. In the face of the irrepressible professionalisation of art, perhaps the most radical approach available is to adopt the passion and the mocking estrangement of the amateur.

Notes

[1] For an account of this period, see Michael Corris, 'Inside a New York Art Gang', in Alberro and Stimson (1999).

Works Cited

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