

EMERGENCY CONDITIONALS

FOR 'PHILOSOPHY AND CONCEPTUAL ART'

MB. By way of an opening we need to ask just what the term Conceptual Art is supposed to pick out. It has lately come to mean more or less any kind of art that does not explicitly seek to attach itself to a technical tradition and is not medium specific. Art is no longer conceived on the basic principle of a painting/sculpture axis, but rather as a current and continuing generic product capable of installation and distribution within some institution of an art-world.

MR. As an alternative, we could think of Conceptual Art as a specific critical development in the historical ambience of high Modernism during the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s. In talking of high Modernism we mean not just a selection of transatlantic art made retrospectively in accordance with a purified Greenbergian theory – not just the paintings of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski, and the sculpture of Anthony Caro - but also the work that both overlapped and competed with theirs: Frank Stella's, Don Judd's, Dan Flavin's, Robert Morris's, Sol LeWitt's. A Conceptual Art movement conceived along these lines is associated with a specific historical period – though we can still argue both about how that period is defined and about what work does or does not come up for the count. Thus, by analogy, while Cubism was a movement with fuzzy boundaries, and while the epithet 'Cubist' was used by non-professionals as late as the mid-twentieth century to refer to odd-looking avant-garde art, it could be said that a Cubist painting made in the 1950s would have been unlikely to deserve much serious critical attention.

CH. It might seem that these two different modes of usage of the category of Conceptual Art are easily enough reconciled. We can simply consider a continuing generic Conceptual Art as the long-term outcome of the historically specific Conceptual Art movement – or of what has been called 'Modernism's nervous breakdown'. But we have to be careful. It was not as though practical dissent from hegemonic Modernism had one single possible outcome. It might have seemed for a while that everyone was busy disinterring Marcel Duchamp and playing the same

game of appropriative and nominative gestures. (I think of this as the 'When Attitudes become Form' moment – lasting until around the summer of 1969.) But it very soon became apparent – at least to Art & Language – that this could develop in several quite different ways, from which we pick out a contrasting pair.

MR. It could go towards a kind of institutional theatre: from Joseph Beuys and Daniel Buren, to the more recently celebrated works of Ilya Kabakov, or to more or less anything liable to be installed in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern.

MB. Alternatively it could lead to a kind of essayistic practice that reflected upon its own conditions and considered the language and vocabulary and historicity of the appropriative gesture itself.

CH. But these were not possibilities with equal pragmatic legs. The first may have been the complaisant client of demotic institutional theory, but by the early 1970s informal versions of that theory were spreading apace both through the avant-garde sectors of the art-world and through the graduate departments of American universities. The art of institutional theatre both rode and was ridden by various types of fashionable postmodernist theory, and particularly by those that were vehicles for virtuous anxieties about the consequences and inequities of class, race, gender and expansion of the media. Its various practical modes were unified under the sign of the curator, and were supported from the world of cultural studies and corporate radicalism.

MR. In the climate of taste this alliance has served to encourage, pathetic Modernists like Cy Twombly and anti-Modernists like Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud could be recuperated alongside such exciting newcomers as Damien Hirst and Tracy Emin. 'You've got to choose between Mondrian and Duchamp', Ad Reinhardt said in 1967. Now choice means the right to consume everything indifferently.

MB. Not long ago we participated in a symposium addressed to the question, 'What work does the art work do?' On that occasion we suggested that for the sake of argument a distinction might be made along the following lines: on the one hand there are works of art – and theories about works of art – based on the

proposition that work is what spectators do in variously animating the work of art through interpretation and exegesis. It should be clear enough that the art of institutional theatre tends on the whole to conform to this mode, and that it delivers itself up with some facility to journalism, whether of the popular or of the academic variety.

MR. Media-led critical bullshit sticks easier to the slight and the trivial than it does to the articulate and the complex.

MB. On the other hand there are works of art – or theories about works of art – based on the proposition that whatever work is done is intimately connected to the intentional character of the artwork, and that it is what that artwork does in animating its suitably attuned and attentive spectator.

CH. We should make it clear, perhaps, that we do not here mean to invoke that Wollheimian gentleman who is the artist's boon companion. We simply mean to suggest that there exists the possibility of interpretative failure, and that to a significant degree the work will be the arbiter of that. When we refer to the intentional character of the work, we do not want to suggest that this is the intentionality of a single individual, but that there is some critical dialogue that the work and the viewer enter into regarding what is relevant and resonant in a given interpretation, and that one of the participants in this dialogue will be the work itself conceived as intentional.

MB. The second, essayistic, type of Conceptual Art tended to look to the second of these modes. It separated itself out from the permissive melange of 'When Attitudes become Form' at a point when it no longer seemed defensible to treat Modernism's nervous breakdown as an occasion of opportunity. It developed out of a kind of anxiety regarding the relaxed, ostensive practice of dematerialisation-as-liberation. One couldn't just live in a relaxed world of wilful artistic ostension. How, we asked, might one make work with detail in a circumstance where the possibility of detail is not given among the resources of a specific medium? By detail, what we had in mind was some aspect or set of connected properties that both required

and arbitrated a complex description – one that was not just an account of how the work interacted with the artworld.

MR. The problem wasn't that one objected to art getting away with things under the artistically demotic forms of an institutional theory - 'If someone calls it art, it's art' and so on. For the most part the emptiness of Conceptual Art amenable to such theory just seemed critically harmless.

CH. Nor was the problem how to have something of aesthetic interest in a Wollheimian sense that nevertheless didn't have the physical properties by which that interest was supposed to be provoked. At a certain level the issue of aesthetic interest was simply beside the point. Art is theory-laden and concept-laden whatever anyone claims to be seeing and feeling in front of it – and not just any old concepts or any old theories. Peter Lamarque has made a similar point with respect to the work of Rembrandt. It could be said that essayistic Conceptual Art simply made an issue of this.

MB. The difficulty was that neither of these senses of the problematic took adequate account of the consequences of the collapse of the Greenbergian mainstream; nor did they properly acknowledge the insecurities attendant on the institutional theory - the concern that it might simply be wrong in its accounting for the relations between perceiving and describing, or that, in accepting it, artists might find themselves in an invidious position vis-à-vis actual institutions – or in a dead end so far as art was concerned.

MR. In fact it could be said that one consequence of the institutional theory has actually been to licence an obsession with the idea of art as generic, when much of what is produced in the name of generic art could quite well be accounted for as continuous with the critical concerns of late modernism. After all, there are actually very few Snow-Shovel like things, but many paintings with words and tasteful arrangements of stuff – which do no more real damage to modernist ideas about medium-specificity than did Frank Stella's black paintings.

CH. As we have already suggested, the alternative modes we have labelled institutional theatre and essayistic practice were not actually equivalent and parallel developments. The consequences of the development of generic Conceptual Art were such as to suppress the discourses of autonomy and internality, and to obliterate the sense of a parallel development that retained some investment in their continuity. It grew fat on the very theoretical resources it claimed to have transcended. In the new hegemony, even the supposedly outmoded modernistic discourse on autonomy was somehow incorporated and represented.

MR. But we do clearly identify the practice of Art & Language with the essayistic alternative. We are therefore unwilling to accede to the idea that generic Conceptual Art is the unchallengeable outcome of the original Conceptual Art movement. This does not mean that what we have been and are trying to do is to flog Greenbergian Modernism back into life, or to reinstate its concepts of autonomy and internality. It may be that our form of Conceptual Art had in common with painting the fact that it did not actually *require* a specifically institutional kind of theory to tell it what it is. But given the way things were going, autonomy was always going to be a contested and insecure project. It was not as though the question of what work the art work does was ever really going to be settled one way or the other. Indeed, if it were, art would almost certainly be a thoroughly uninteresting business.

CH. We should try to review some of the conditions of problems. One is that the critical negativity [bankruptcy?] of Modernism was part of the reason that the Conceptual Art movement could emerge.

MR. A second is that institutionality is or has become a sort of enslavement to management.

MB. A third is that only by means of some form of internality combined with some capacity for detail could death by curatorship be effectively resisted.

MR. A fourth is that the denizens of the happy world of wilful ostension failed to grasp the complexities and difficulties of the very language by which that ostension

was being effected. Instead they relied both on the artist being accorded a kind of 'Romantic' authenticity and on a complaisant acceptance of the transparency of his words.

MB. A fifth problem is that this authority and mystification could only be resisted by description, and by a theory that was in some way internal to the work itself. What was required was a social world in which and into which the work could be uttered.

CH. In fact it is not entirely clear which came first: the imperative to beat the curator by creating a descriptive circumstance, or the need for some sort of internal complexity in the work.

MB. The best way to resolve that issue is to say that a sort of context of conversational concentration was 'naturally' established once one recognized that art is vacuous unless it is describing as well as described.

MR. And once you have got a conversational process going it tends quite naturally to take on a project-like character: in being conversational it tends also to take account of the world of which it is with difficulty a part, and in which it is uttered. It is thus availed as a matter of course of the grounds on which to contest claims for the internality of its own outcomes. This is to say that a conversational practice will be disposed to sustain a degree of tension between, on the one hand, its contextual and institutional circumstances, and on the other the kinds of claim it might make to internality (to having an oeuvre, and to there being some degree of formal integrity in its products, and so on).

CH. In fact the conversational practice tends to militate against any purified sense of what the work is, so that its capacity to constitute an oeuvre is severely impeded. There is a popular representation of Art & Language according to which we are held to have made an avant-garde claim to the effect that our conversations and proceedings are art. This vexatiously misses the point. It takes us as it were back to the original point of bifurcation and associates us with the institutional theatre of such figures as Ian Wilson – who did indeed claim around 1970 that his conversations were art.

MB. We can recall having had conversations with Ian Wilson. We can recall nothing of their content. The presupposition was presumably that as artworks they need have none. 'Conversation' was a quasi-Duchampian readymade – in this case an appropriated category, or... what? In fact were one able to remember the content of a conversation with Ian Wilson one would be the less likely to recover conversation itself as a ready-made.

MR. For us, the conversational process was not a Duchampian gesture. Though it may have had heir-lines to it, it also had heir-lines to the 'internal' critique of high modernism and its penumbra. But first and foremost it was a means of exchange and production. The point was that we were in no position confidently to impose a sense of artistic hierarchy on the distinctions between verbal discussions, informal on-paper exchanges, essays, and pieces of paper stuck to the gallery wall. Of course certain hierarchies did get established for purposes of publication and display, but they were matters of practical contingency.

MB. It would be wrong, though, to suggest that there were no normal aesthetic considerations in play. Whether we cared to admit it or not, certain matters of taste were relevant, and these were of a more-or-less Wollheimian kind – to do with the physical properties of things.

MR. That which was produced for distribution and display was not without its vestigial aesthetic aspects. There was no pink Conceptual Art, and absolutely no green. What tended to predominate was the black, white and grey of the office and of the otherwise socially unspectacular. There was a kind of truth to materials in this. In those days there were no colour photocopies. In the case of a great deal of Conceptual Art – some of our own included – there may in the end be little remainder once considerations of graphic taste are accounted for. It is an open question just how far Wittgenstein-on-the-wall escapes significantly from the kind of aesthetic admonitions that were associated with the work of Don Judd without in the process simply being reduced to an inefficient form of Wittgenstein-on-the-page.

MB. We did have some anxieties about this at the time. What followed were texts printed in green and red and so on. The point was to evade the myth that neutral taste was co-extensive with critically significant dematerialisation – and that there was a progressive political aspect to both.

CH. We were well enough aware of the silly hypostatisations. Some of the talk about dematerialisation certainly muddied the waters. In fact it was in muddy water that we saw our work as in constant transition between the conversation, or the theorising that it recorded, and the gallery wall it had syndicalised or taken over. In so far as it achieved some independence from graphic considerations that work put itself in the way of aesthetic virtues that were literary – either theoretical or descriptive.

MR. It did not follow, however, that in so far as it achieved virtue of a kind it must therefore be embedded in the theoretical discourses of literature or philosophy. To say that it was theory was false, since the work it did as art absolved it of the standard assumptions that it was truth-telling, coherent or extensible in ways that theory and philosophy are supposed to be. Nor was it literary in a normal sense. It did not and could not demand of the viewer that she be a literary reader.

MB. This sense of permanent transition and instability brought us to what we called an emergency conditional. The work was theory (or something) just in case it was art, and it was art just in case it was theory. Could we say then, that in its strangeness it resonated with both?

CH. And, further, permanent transition and instability called forth other emergency conditionals. We were artists just in case we were critics and critics, or teachers or art historians, just in case we were artists. This 'homelessness' gave the work a brief independence; paradoxically, a place of production that was not wholly subservient to institutions and disciplines.

MR. But what if someone objects that the work actually *was* 'theory'; that it could be read and (occasionally) used as theory. Is it then displaced or disqualified as art? We are not sure that it is. It may end up, like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, as a kind of

book about nothing. But if it *is* theory, then on the whole it will try to be about something – some object or relation or process; and this will then map it back to the circumstances of the original bifurcation consequent upon Modernism's Nervous Breakdown.

CH. What is perhaps more to the point – if more problematic - is the thought that by around 1968 to '69 the original ontologically iffy artworks – air-conditioned rooms, columns of air and what have you - had been swamped or themselves partly displaced by the theory that was intended to be 'about' them. The 'Air-Conditioning Show' of 1967 furnishes an example. This consisted of a text proposing the air in an air-conditioned room as an art object and expanding on the problems that that proposition entailed. The question raised was, 'Is it necessary actually to install air-conditioning as described in the text, or will the text do just as well?' Was the text to be identified as the art – the meaning – we make, and was any concrete 'realisation' of that which it described merely a conservatively contemplative distraction?

MB. We might think of this question as marking the distinction we have already proposed between Conceptual Art thought of on the one hand as a kind of Duchampian extension of Minimalism occasionally outside the realm of middle-sized dry goods, and on the other as a fundamentally textual cultural practice.

CH. Imagine that someone asserts that 'Everything in the unconscious perceived by the senses but not noted by the conscious mind during trips to Baltimore in the summer of 1969' is his work of art, and someone else say, 'What do you mean?' The 'What do you mean?' is supposed by the artist and his admirers not actually to impinge on the assertion. To treat that assertion as a speech act – or its textual equivalent – is to commit a kind of foul. It seems nevertheless necessary to treat it as the speech act it actually is. But to do this is to impede it. What we had in mind was a kind of text in which the interrogative is included along with the appropriative claim – and one which would therefore be an object of a quite different order. The consequence was considerably to increase the detail of the appropriative gesture – the theoretical content that it wore on its face.

MB. The difference entailed is more than merely quantitative. The viewer is made a reader of sorts – a conversationalist of sorts. This seems a not undesirable outcome. It is one with which we have tried to render our subsequent practice consistent. Conceptual Art may entail a way of making art. If it is one in which painting as traditionally understood can only be sentimentally pursued, it is not necessarily one in which the possibility of internality is ruled out. What may be ruled out is the idea of an oeuvre as unified by some biologically authenticated style. A conversational practice will tend to rule against certain kinds of consistency and purification.

MR. If Conceptual Art as we understood it had a future it was not as Conceptual Art – not, at least, if what that means is simply the Duchampian model emptied of its transgressive potential and rendered congenial to the managers of interdisciplinarity.