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THEORIES AND ACTIVITIES OF CONCEPTUAL ARTISTS: AN AESTHETIC INQUIRY

Luise Morton

Of the various art movements which emerged in the late 60s and early 70s, Conceptualism is among the most radical in its attack on traditional theories of art. As a movement, Conceptualism has been syncretic, comprising many groups and individuals with different, often conflicting, theories and practices. The movement has been international in scope, and artists in Europe and America have contributed various interpretations of and emphases to the postulates of Conceptualism. In general, however, Conceptual artists have centered on two questions: "What is the nature of art?" and "What is the function or usefulness of art?" The purpose of my research is an aesthetic inquiry into the theories and art work of Conceptual artists.

Conceptualist theories can be roughly divided into two main categories: those relating to the nature of art and those which center on the purposes of art. In respect to the first question, Conceptualists claim that art lies not in the object itself but in the artist's idea of how to form it. Art products are therefore considered superfluous and among the commonly accepted essentials of art--content, form, and aesthetic quality--only the first has been retained by the Conceptualists as a significant factor in artistic creation. Focusing on the artist's intention, combining social, political, and economic issues as content, Conceptual artists have attacked the prevailing aesthetics of modern art. Their asserted goal has been to eliminate the need for form in art.

In response to the second question, viz., the purpose of art, Conceptual artists have rejected sensory pleasure and focused instead on the perceptual education of the public. They have taken art out of the context of museum and gallery. Assuming the role of critic as well as artist, Conceptualists merge theory with art and themselves explain their work. A considerable part of their creative effort is directed first towards coaxing potential spectators into taking note of art and second, towards expanding the public's visual awareness. As a consequence, Conceptual art takes on the character of an activity rather than a product.

Questions as to the nature and purpose of art are central to most, if not all, recent avant-garde art movements. Moreover, there is considerable overlap in the solutions presented by various art groups to these issues. What makes the Conceptualists' response the most extreme among these solutions is their rejection of aesthetic form as a necessary component of visual art and of sensory pleasure as a necessary purpose.

In rejecting the traditional art object, Conceptual artists are left with two alternatives for conveying meaning, viz., language and action. They have explored both of these possibilities in their "art."

The logical consequences of the Conceptualists' use of language and action as the materials of visual art would seem to be the elimination of distinctions between art and information and between art and life. We are left with artist and audience, with no special entity that can be labeled "art". In order to examine specific examples of Conceptual art works, therefore, we must resort to documentary evidence--verbal and/or visual--that has recorded the actions or ideas of the Conceptual artist.

Although the artistic activities of the Conceptualists are both radical and diverse--and therefore difficult to classify, two modes of expression take precedence; documentation of an act or event; and declaration of intention or idea. These two modes provide a key for the analysis of Conceptual art.

Literature relevant to an analysis of the Conceptual art movement comes from a number of sources, including published statements and other forms of documentation by the artists themselves, catalogues of exhibitions, articles in journals by contemporary art critics, and outlines or summaries by historians of art. Also pertinent to such a task are modern studies on aesthetics by philosophers and sociologists. Because art and theory for the Conceptualist are one and not two, the primary sources, viz., statements by the artists themselves, serve both as examples and as interpretations of Conceptual art.

Modern Theories Of Art

Basic to all traditional theories of art is the assumption that the domain of the aesthetic includes both attitude and object. Present-day theories emphasize various aspects of the relationship between the two terms--some focus on attitude, others on object. One view commonly held is that any object towards which a person takes an aesthetic attitude can become an aesthetic object (Dickie, 1971). Together, attitude and object comprise the aesthetic experience. The fact of aesthetic experience, as Hospers (1946) points out, is the starting point of all theories of art, traditional or modern. What characterizes this experience and distinguishes it from other modes of experiencing is the suspension of our practical responses towards objects in our environment.

Despite major differences, what most modern and traditional views hold in common is a concern with problems of appearance--viz., perception, representation, image, form, surface--and with problems of meaning or expression. Problems of meaning in traditional theories of art have customarily been of two kinds. They include (1) what the artist intended to express and (2) whatever effects the work of art evokes in the observer. Artistic meaning is therefore ambiguous, for in respect to any particular work of art these two kinds of meaning are not necessarily the same. Of the two kinds of meaning, however, the latter traditionally has been viewed as the more significant.

Conceptualist Theories

Conceptualists have approached the problem of meaning from the single perspective of the artist's intention. The work of art from this viewpoint is seen as the principle cause of ambiguity in artistic meaning, for the Conceptualists assert that there should only be one kind of meaning--that which the artist intended. They challenge the traditional assumption that making art objects is a necessary condition for making (visual) art. Instead, they argue that the idea of the artist is information to be conveyed by artist to observer with the most direct means available, whatever they may be.

One of the chief apologists of Conceptual art theory is Joseph Kosuth, who represented his arguments in an article entitled "Art After Philosophy" (printed in Meyer, 1972). Roughly the main tenets of his viewpoint are as follows:

- 1) Being an artist today means to question the nature of art.
- 2) The nature of art is no longer a question of morphology (or gross descriptive features) but of function.
- 3) It is necessary to separate aesthetics from art because aesthetic considerations are "always extraneous to an object's function" (p. 159).
- 4) The value of a painting (or any original work of art) is equivalent to the value of an original manuscript of an author, i.e., they are both "historical curiosities" (p. 163).
- 5) A work of art is an analytic proposition--it operates on logical and linguistic principles and provides no information about matters-of-fact. The truth or falsity of art assertions is not empirically verifiable.
- 6) Synthetic art propositions--i.e., those verifiable by the world--are unnecessary. Experience has its own intrinsic worth, and art cannot compete with real-life experiences.
- 7) An object is art only when placed in the context of art.

The conclusion that Kosuth derives from these basic premises is a simple identity statement: art is art. While tautologies are always true, they are trivial and convey nothing new. Moreover, some of the premises Kosuth asserts are unsupported by common sense, logical argument, or empirical evidence.

Conceptualist Activities

Among Kosuth's artistic presentations of his theoretical investigations, the Information Room (which was on exhibit in 1970 at the "Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects" show in the New York Cultural Center) serves as an example of his endeavor to exemplify, by means of art, art's linguistic basis. The Information Room contained two large tables randomly covered with books, primarily on linguistic philosophy.

Also randomly placed were chairs for the spectators to sit down and read the artist's selections. According to Kosuth, the art of Information Room consisted not in the arrangements of objects but "in the artist's conception of art to which the objects are subordinated" (Meyer, p. X1).

An obvious question presents itself: How are we, the audience, to know from reading articles by philosophers selected by any artist what that artist's conception of art is? However, what can be gained from such an "art condition," to use Kosuth's ambiguous phrase, is 1) that we find something of interest in the articles themselves and 2) that we ask some questions as to what is the meaning of all this.

Theory As Art

Foremost among the British artists using language as art is Terry Atkinson, one of the founders and editors of Art Language, a journal devoted entirely to Conceptual art and theory. In an editorial to the first issue, Atkinson raised two questions: 1) Can a treatise on the principles of Conceptualism stand as a work of art? and 2) Can Conceptual art count as art theory? His answer to both questions was that the intention of the artist determined its classification as art and/or theory.

Atkinson further suggested that for the Conceptual artist the crucial problem is one of recognition. For an object to be recognized as art, an artist may use one of four techniques: (1) constructing an object with all the physical attributes established as necessary to count as artwork; (2) adding new characteristics to older established ones; (3) placing an object in a context where the observer expects a recognized art object; and (4) declaring an object to be a work of art. According to Atkinson, these last two are the techniques of Conceptual artists, although the object for them is often no more than a piece of writing.

Conclusion

Art traditionally has been viewed in terms of expression: as self-expression; as the reflection or expression of a social environment; and as communication--a form of expression wherein action of artist, the work of art itself, and reaction of audience are necessary components (Pelles, 1963). Those who view art as expression, however, are faced with a dilemma: how do we ascertain that what is expressed in a work of art is the same for artist and public?

This problem the Conceptualists have taken as their chief concern. They have focused on the artist's idea (intention) as the key element in the creation of works of art, and they have questioned the traditional assumption that, in visual art, art objects are necessary to convey artistic meaning (Kosuth, 1969). In short, Conceptualists seek to reduce the essential components of artistic expression to artist and audience.

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With the disappearance of the art object from the creative process, formal concerns in the traditional sense no longer apply. Instead, theoretical questions concerning the nature and purpose of art provide Conceptual artists with a framework for their creative efforts. In attempting to establish art theory as art, however, a new dilemma arises, namely, how an artist's idea or theory is to be recognized by the public as art (Atkinson, 1969). Two solutions are provided by the Conceptualists: (1) documenting an idea and placing the documentation in a context where visual art is expected; and (2) declaring an idea, action, situation, etc. to be art.

Are these solutions successful? Can Conceptualists in fact eliminate formal elements from the creative process and still retain an entity that is art? What happens to the notion of style when formal concerns no longer obtain? These are questions yet to be explored in the analysis of Conceptual art.

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