

Brigita Ozolins

10 x 100 words on conceptual art

1. What does the term *conceptual art* mean today? Does it define a specific way of working within contemporary art practice that is used only by certain artists? Or is it an historic category that relates to art made in the 1960s and 70s that privileged content and process over visual aesthetics and offered a critique of more traditional art making methods? If you say that you are a conceptual artist, how does that set you apart from other artists? Does your work have a particular style, intention or characteristics? Or could conceptual art and contemporary art be the same thing?
2. Joseph Kosuth, considered to be one of the key founders of the historic Conceptual Art movement, said, 'All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.'ⁱ He is referring to Duchamp's first unassisted readymade, *Fountain*, 1917, which he argues creates a demarcation in the history of how we define and think about art. As the readymade does not rely on the skill of the artist's hand, it questions the very nature and function of art. It proposes that art is no longer essentially about appearance, form and technical mastery but the ideas or concepts underpinning it.
3. Every now and then an art work truly excites me, so that I experience a physical and psychological agitation as I approach it. My heart pumps a little faster. My breathing becomes more rapid. I am unable to think clearly, but I am overcome by a feeling that I have understood something new. My thoughts fire in crazy directions. What is it that triggers the excitement? Is it something within the work? Or something within me? Or is it that the work and I are having a conversation – that we are speaking to each other through a shared conceptual understanding?
4. Sol Lewitt, in his sentences on conceptual art, says 'Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.'ⁱⁱ And yet early conceptual art is often stereotyped as rational, clean and minimal - almost scientific in approach - reinforced by its frequent use of text and an aesthetic of administration that shifts the viewers' focus towards meaning rather than form. But there were two streams of early conceptual art: the hardline exclusives such as Kosuth and Art and Language from which the stereotype grew, and the more open, inclusives, such as Adrian Piper and Lewitt.ⁱⁱⁱ
5. Sydney Biennale, 1998, Goat Island, Martin Creed's *Half the air in a given space*. An historic house is filled with inflated white balloons. I make swimming motions as I navigate through the various rooms, my sense of self becoming a literal surface that threateningly rubs against fragile white rubber. As I venture deeper and further, I become anxious, unable to see where I am in relation to anything else, my normal perspective

completely disrupted by the all-encompassing floating white spheres. Once outside, I am almost breathless, as if I really had been starved of half the air in the house.

6. Art & Language Marina Abramović Vito Acconci Michael Asher John Baldessari Lothar Baumgarten Joseph Beuys Mel Bochner Marcel Broodthaers Victor Burgin Chris Burden Daniel Buren Ian Burn Sophie Calle Martin Creed Mark Divo Marcel Duchamp Olafur Eliasson Henry Flynt Andrea Fraser Thierry Geoffroy Gilbert and George Allan Graham Dan Graham Hans Haacke Jenny Holzer Zhang Huan Douglas Huebler Ray Johnson Ilya Kabakov On Kawara Jonathon Keats Mary Kelly Yves Klein Joseph Kosuth John Latham Sol LeWitt Mark Lombardi Piero Manzoni Robert Morris Allan McCollum Bruce Nauman Yoko Ono Dennis Oppenheim Adrian Piper Martha Rosler Hiroshi Sugimoto Lawrence Weiner Gillian Wearing...
7. Conceptual art is historically associated with a long list of strategies that challenged high modernist art, in particular the paintings and sculptures of abstract expressionism that focussed on form and the purity of materials associated with specific disciplines. The challengers conveyed their ideas using performance, instruction, documentation, appropriation, intervention, installation, site-specificity, everyday materials, political statements, institutional critique, philosophy, language, science and archival practices. These strategies not only challenged modernist art but were set against a background that featured the Vietnam war, the emergence of the feminist and hippy movements, and a deep disillusionment with the grand narratives of humanist thinking.
8. Ian Burn gave a forum at the Tasmanian School of Art in 1993, the same year of his tragic and untimely death. I can't remember the details of what he said but I do remember feeling as though someone had turned on a switch inside my head. It was an epiphany - I was instantaneously able to see what I had never seen before and conceptual art, which had, until that moment, remained a tantalizing mystery to me, was now within my grasp. It happened as Burn explained his literal use of numbers for specific colours in his minimal paintings.
9. In direct opposition to conceptualism is Stuckism, an international art movement established in England in 1999 by Billy Childish and Charles Thomson. Stuckism promotes contemporary figurative painting and is 'anti the pretensions of conceptual art'.^{iv} Stuckists demonstrate against the Turner Prize, which they see as the height of conceptualism. Their manifesto claims 'artists who don't paint aren't artists' and that 'art that has to be in a gallery to be art isn't art'. 'If it is the conceptualist's wish to always be clever, then it is the Stuckist's duty to always be wrong'.^v If stuckism is stuck, what is conceptualism?

10. Conceptual practices historically hark back to Dada, Surrealism, Fluxus, the Situationist International, Minimalism and the happenings associated with Pop art. But the roots of conceptualism are present within the consciousness of art well before the 20th century. For example, through the use of allegory and symbolism, the paintings of pre-modernism are underpinned by an extraordinary conceptual richness. Conceptual art once made a powerful critical statement about the very nature of art and how we experience it. Today, that critique has been fully embraced by the art world. All contemporary art is conceptual. Indeed, as Kosuth said, all art is conceptual.

11. (alternative to 10 above)

The history of conceptual art runs parallel to the history of installation – both hark back to Dada, Surrealism, Fluxus, the Situationist International, Minimalism and the happenings associated with Pop art. Both emerged in relation to one another – and both terms are misused and overused. Alongside installation, the conceptual art movement once made a powerful critical statement about the nature of art and how we experience it. Today, that critique has been fully embraced by the art world - there are no rules about privileging content over form, or vice versa. All contemporary art is conceptual. Indeed, all art is conceptual.

Brigita Ozolins, 2010

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ⁱ Kosuth, Joseph, *Art after philosophy and after*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993, p18

ⁱⁱ Lewitt, Sol, 'Sentences on Conceptual Art', in Osborne, Peter (ed), *Conceptual art*. New York: Phaidon, 2002, p 222.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Peter Osborne's essay 'Conceptual art and/as philosophy' in Newman, Michael and Bird, Jon (eds), *Rewriting conceptual art*. London: Reaktion Books, 1999

^{iv} Welcome to Stuckism. Home page. Viewed 20/02/2010. <http://www.stuckism.com/>

^v Stuckist manifesto. Viewed 20/02/2010. <http://www.stuckism.com/http://www.stuckism.com/stuckistmanifesto.html#manifest>