

IN THE SERVICE OF THE HYPOTHETICAL-CONCEPTUAL REALISM

Defining Thoroughbred Conceptualism

In the 1960s conceptual art moved onto the international art stage like a bright beacon of joyous intellectual discovery. Finally, with this development, all that could be surveyed could now be declared art. The shackles of formalism were thrown off. This democratic epiphany came with a forty year-old provenance, Dadaism. Specifically, Marcel Duchamp's "ready-mades." The artist had been quoted to have said, "One day artists can merely point to an object and declare it art." It took four decades for this prophecy to be realized. To many of us, conceptualism first came in the form of pop art. It seemed still to be another facet of avant-gardism at the time, much like abstract expressionism, which had come before it.

By the 1970s and 1980s conceptual art, with its little sister, minimal art, had become philosophical institutions that dominated the art playing field and, in many respects, became absolute. Ironically, the term "absolute" is antithetical to conceptualism in that the conceptualist credo prides itself on the nature of being totally theoretical.

To begin with, conceptualism relies on the premise that the actual existence of a piece of art is a bygone formality. Art, and the desires of the artist, are brought together into a verbal, or literary, presentation (incidentally, a presentation that has come to be called "art speak"). The poetry of this descriptive of the artist's intentions eclipses all other traditional points of artistic responsibility.

However, dispensing entirely with the physical art is not required to be irrevocable. Some props are a great aid in demonstrating the thrust of the cerebral testimony. These aids can take the form of installations, assemblages, and sometimes performances, but all are accompanied by written explanation. A number of noted artists such as Lawrence Weiner, Bruce Nauman, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Edward Kienholz, and John Baldessari have given a face to this honorable mode of late twentieth-century art.

The Subjective Departure

Within the realm of mental concept, how protracted and transverse can the imagination wander? The practical limits of the imagination are measured in just how many onlookers and observers the artist can bring along with him/her on their sojourn of exploration. The more esoteric and abstract, the more people lose interest. This begs the question: Is art for everybody?

The world functions objectively, the artist egresses subjectively— the rational and irrational. The subjective departure for Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland is through the child's immature imagination. The use of children as the medium to bring forth adult fantasy justifies notions of monsters, trolls, unicorns, fairies, witches, Easter bunnies, and Santa Claus. Knowledge of paleontology gives rise to dragons, lake monsters, hairy man-shaped forest dwellers, and sea serpents. More complex science and awareness about the cosmos has spawned alien visitations and space monsters, while ghosts and spirits creak through our imaginations, leaving us with a hopeful search for an afterlife. And, of course, dreams and insanity are the oldest excuse for the unbelievable. All of these notions are an escape from the rational realm, a departure from the object mind— a subjective departure.

But, for the artists to become truly conceptual they must develop other paths of fantastic exploration. The surrealists claimed they followed their automatic impulses on a road into the deep subconscious. The psychedelic artists put their stock in drug-induced, modified delirium.

However, little or no attention has been given to the idea of forming a thought-based mental medium to play off of that which is not deficiency-inspired. A rather crude example of concocting a fantasy device was put into use by spiritualists during the late nineteenth century. A doctor of metaphysics claimed to have witnessed a strange luminous matter flowing out of a trance-induced believer's mouth, and he christened it "ectoplasm." From that point on, ghosts and spectres were believed to be formed of ectoplasm. The superstitious flock now has a miracle material that could, in fact, do anything.

What to make of a similar hypothesis, not created by charlatans, but by honest artists searching for a hypothetical avenue to make imaginatory inroads? Let's suppose, just for the sake of this discussion, that time comes in forty-pound blocks like terra-cotta clay, and this time-clay has a personality. If you cut off a small plug of this proto-time it will have its own smaller, individual personality. If it is pointed away from its larger parent block of time it turns into a cartoon character or some impish extension of its personality.

If it goes back toward its original mass of clay, it withers. And to further this hypothetical foray, if the proto-time is placed in the presence of "ecto-time" (a modifier) the proto-time goes sideways making the personalities change into multiple characters, each with an alternating disposition. So, the very proximity to time in this case is the subjective departure.

Personalizing time movement seems to be a farfetched artistic supposition, but it is honesty without any hype for a belief system or superstitious chicanery. Coming up with a unique premise or medium for the impossible is certainly conceptualism.

Applying Realistic Art To Conceptualism— A Statement Of Intent

For many years modern artists have intended to create paintings that fit into the understood explanation of conceptual art, and not all of it has simply been pop art. However, the majority of modern paintings have tried to slip under the safe recognized title of "pop." Although pop art has been the most obvious refuge, there are some real problems with this idiom. Pop art needs, and totally depends on appropriation— copying something popular. The need to reference itself back to the population's common favoritisms encumbers art's ability to experience the entire spectrum of the hypothetical. In other words, it's very limited. Copying, or just recreating an object in a larger size suggests an atrophied imagination.

With the exception of pop art, there is a problem with the acceptance of realistic fine art painting into the formal art world of conceptualism. Basically it's the contemporary art world's hatred of craftsmanship. Facile dexterity has been frowned on and discouraged for almost sixty years. At best, it has been classified as the quaint expression of a hobbyist, more suited in the quest for a blue ribbon at a county fair. Unfortunately, because of many artists who have timidly restrained their imaginations this dim view has proven justified.

Acceptable or not, craftsmanship and the ability to draw and paint without the aid of computer or photography is a positive human compulsion, and is just as valid a virtuosity as singing with a beautiful voice, or a piano concerto played with nimble fingers. All representational painting should not be categorized with sentimental and innocuous works that placate the requirements of modest morality, something on the order of eyewash.

A well executed oil painting with intelligent purpose should not find itself the exclusive trappings of the interior decorator or the sanctimonious moralist espousing public and family values. The key word is supposition. It must be suggested that art inspired by over-imagination, rendered in precise clarity, and compelled to masquerade as conceptual art can only flourish if it represents itself honestly in the service of the purely hypothetical. Robt. Williams '07