

Postwar American Avant-Garde (AE 117)

<http://eclass.uoa.gr/courses/ENL325/>

Week 5 : Conceptual art and the critique of the institution of art

FROM Paul Wood, Francis Frascina, Jonathan Harris, Charles Harrison, *Modernism in Dispute: Art since the Forties* (London: The Open University, 1993)

Literalism and Presentness

[Michael] Fried's argument is based on the distinction he makes between two different modes of experience. In one the spectator perceives an object as that which it literally is, something existing in space and time. The experience is then of interest to the extent that the relationship between spectator and object can be invested with drama; that is to say, to the extent that that relationship can be made 'theatrical.' In the other mode of experience the spectator is engaged by a formal configuration which appears as if "instantaneously present", so that the sense of time and place is suspended. In the former case the relations which matter are those governing the *interaction* between spectator and object; in the latter what matters are those *internal relations* which give the work of art its own identity (in the eyes of the suitably alert and sympathetic spectator).

For Fried it is the second mode of experience that is ushered in by authentic Modernist art. [...]

In the 'analytical' Conceptual Art of Art & Language, it was assumed that there were no longer good reason to countenance the typically Modernist division of labour between artist and critic, according to which the artist was supposed to be an inarticulate 'doer' on whose behalf the critic furnished intelligent meanings and explanations. It was further assumed that the maintenance of a critical practice of art must depend upon enquiry into the power of language and the authority of concepts. The understanding that forms of meaning are sustained by forms of power was given considerable substance and detail in the philosophical theory of the 1960s, and particularly in the work of Michel Foucault. If the artistic work of the avant-gardes of the late 1960s was not always informed by this theory, many of those involved were nevertheless impelled by similar forms of understanding in their reaction against the supposed authority of the modernist observer. It was the view of those associated with Art & Language that if significant change was to be effected within the practice of art, then the initiative would have to be recovered on the terrain of language, where cultural power was invested and sustained. What was required, then, was that the practice of art should be explicitly identified with the practices of reading and writing. For the time being the problems of 'surfaces', of 'effects' and of 'appearances' would have to be left to the attention of conservative interests.

Art After Philosophy (1969)

Joseph Kosuth

[...]

Traditional philosophy, almost by definition, has concerned itself with the *unsaid*. The nearly exclusive focus on the *said* by twentieth-century analytical linguistic philosophers is the shared contention that the unsaid is *unsaid* because it is *unsayable*. Hegelian philosophy made sense in the nineteenth century and must have been soothing to a century that was barely getting over Hume, the Enlightenment, and Kant. Hegel's philosophy was also capable of giving cover for a defense of religious beliefs, supplying an alternative to Newtonian mechanics, and fitting in with the growth of history as a discipline, as well as accepting Darwinian biology.² He appeared to give an acceptable resolution to the conflict between theology and science, as well.

The result of Hegel's influence has been that a great majority of contemporary philosophers are really little more than historians of philosophy, Librarians of the Truth, so to speak. One begins to get the impression that there "is nothing more to be said." And certainly if one realizes the implications of Wittgenstein's thinking, and the thinking influenced by him and after him, "Continental" philosophy need not seriously be considered here.

Is there a reason for the "unreality" of philosophy in our time? Perhaps this can be answered by looking into the difference between our time and the centuries preceding us. In the past man's conclusions about the world were based on the information he had about it - if not specifically like the empiricists, then generally like the rationalists. Often in fact, the closeness between science and philosophy was so great that scientists and philosophers were one and the same person. In fact, from the times of Thales, Epicurus, Heraclitus, and Aristotle to Descartes and Leibnitz, "the great names in philosophy were often great names in science as well."

That the world as perceived by twentieth-century science is a vastly different one than the one of its preceding century, need not be proved here. Is it possible, then, that in effect man has learned so much, and his "intelligence" is such, that he cannot believe the reasoning of traditional philosophy? That perhaps he knows too much about the world to make those *kinds* of conclusions? [...]

The twentieth century brought in a time that could be called "the end of philosophy and the beginning of art." I do not mean that, of course, strictly speaking, but rather as the "tendency" of the situation. Certainly linguistic philosophy can be considered the heir to empiricism, but it's a philosophy in one gear. And there is certainly an "art condition" to art preceding Duchamp, but its other functions or reasons-to-be are so pronounced that its ability to function clearly as art limits its art condition so drastically that it's only minimally art. In no mechanistic sense is there a connection between philosophy's "ending" and art's "beginning," but I don't find this occurrence entirely coincidental. Though the same reasons may be responsible for both occurrences, the connection is made by me. I bring this all up to analyze art's function and subsequently its viability. And I do so to enable others to understand the reasoning of my - and, by extension, other artists' - art, as well to provide a clearer understanding of the term "Conceptual art."

THE FUNCTION OF ART

The main qualifications to the lesser position of painting is that advances in art are certainly not always formal ones. – Donald Judd (1963).

Half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture. – Donald Judd (1965).

Everything sculpture has, my work doesn't. – Donald Judd (1967).

The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. – Sol LeWitt (1965)

The one thing to say about art is that it is one thing. Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else. Art as art is nothing but art. Art is not what is not art. – Ad Reinhardt (1963).

The meaning is the use. – Wittgenstein. [...]

In this section I will discuss the separation between aesthetics and art; consider briefly formalist art (because it is a leading proponent of the idea of aesthetics as art), and assert that art is analogous to an analytic proposition, and that it is art's existence as a tautology that enables art to remain "aloof" from philosophical presumptions.

It is necessary to separate aesthetics from art because aesthetics deals with opinions on perception of the world in general. In the past one of the two prongs of art's function was its value as decoration. So any branch of philosophy that dealt with "beauty" and thus, taste, was inevitably duty bound to discuss art as well. Out of this "habit" grew the notion that there was a conceptual connection between art and aesthetics, which is not true. This idea never drastically conflicted with artistic considerations before recent times, not only because the morphological characteristics of art perpetuated the continuity of this error, but as well, because the apparent other "functions" of art (depiction of religious themes, portraiture of aristocrats, detailing of architecture, etc.) used art to cover up art.

When objects are presented within the context of art (and until recently objects always have been used) they are as eligible for aesthetic consideration as are any objects in the world, and an aesthetic consideration of an object existing in the realm of art means that the object's existence or functioning in an art context is irrelevant to the aesthetic judgment.

The relation of aesthetics to art is not unlike that of aesthetics to architecture, in that architecture has a very specific *function* and how "good" its design is is *primarily* related to how well it performs its function. Thus, judgments on what it looks like correspond to taste, and we can see that throughout history different examples of architecture are praised at different times depending on the aesthetics of particular epochs. Aesthetic thinking has even gone so far as to make examples of architecture not related to "art" at all, works of art in themselves (e.g., the pyramids of Egypt).

Aesthetic considerations are indeed *always* extraneous to an object's function or "reason-to-be." Unless of course, that object's reason-to-be is strictly aesthetic. An example of a purely aesthetic object is a decorative object, for decoration's primary function is "to add something to, so as to make more attractive; adorn; ornament,"¹⁰ and this relates directly to taste. And this leads us directly to "formalist" art and criticism.¹¹ Formalist art (painting and sculpture) is the vanguard of decoration, and, strictly speaking, one could reasonably assert that its art condition is so minimal that for all functional purposes it is not art at all, but pure exercises in aesthetics. Above all things Clement Greenberg is the critic of taste. Behind every one of his decisions is an aesthetic judgment, with those judgments reflecting his taste.

And what does his taste reflect? The period he grew up in as a critic, the period "real" for him: the fifties.¹² [...]

It is obvious then that formalist criticism's reliance on morphology leads necessarily with a bias toward the morphology of traditional art. And in this sense their criticism is not related to a "scientific method" or any sort of empiricism (as Michael Fried, with his detailed descriptions of paintings and other "scholarly" paraphernalia would want us to believe). Formalist criticism is no more than an analysis of the physical attributes of particular objects that happen to exist in a morphological context. But this doesn't add any knowledge (or facts) to our understanding of the nature or function of art. And neither does it comment on whether or not the objects analyzed are even works of art, in that formalist critics always bypass the conceptual element in works of art. Exactly why they don't comment on the conceptual element in works of art is precisely because formalist art is only art by virtue of its resemblance to earlier works of art. It's a mindless art. Or, as Lucy Lippard so succinctly described Jules Olitski's paintings: "they're visual *Muzak*."¹⁴

Formalist critics and artists alike do not question the nature of art, but as I have said elsewhere:

Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. If an artist accepts painting (or sculpture) he is accepting the tradition that goes with it. That's because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a *kind* of art. If you make paintings you are already accepting (not questioning) the nature of art. One is then accepting the nature of art to be the European tradition of a painting-sculpture dichotomy.¹⁵

The strongest objection one can raise against a morphological justification for traditional art is that morphological notions of art embody an implied a priori concept of art's possibilities. And such an a priori concept of the nature of art (as separate from analytically framed art propositions or "work," which I will discuss later) makes it, indeed, a priori: impossible to question the nature of art. And this questioning of the nature of art is a very important concept in understanding the function of art.

The function of art, as a question, was first raised by Marcel Duchamp. In fact it is Marcel Duchamp whom we can credit with giving art its own identity. (One can certainly see a tendency toward this self-identification of art beginning with Manet and Cézanne through to Cubism,¹⁶ but their works are timid and ambiguous by comparison with Duchamp's.)

"Modern" art and the work before seemed connected by virtue of their morphology. Another way of putting it would be that art's "language" remained the same, but it was saying new things. The event that made conceivable the realization that it was possible to "speak another language" and still make sense in art was Marcel Duchamp's first unassisted Ready-made. With the unassisted Ready-made, art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said. Which means that it changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function. This change – one from "appearance" to "conception" – was the beginning of "modern" art and the beginning of conceptual art. All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.

The "value" of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art; which is another way of saying "what they added to the conception of art" or what wasn't there before they started. Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions as to art's nature. And to do this one cannot concern oneself

with the handed-down “language” of traditional art, as this activity is based on the assumption that there is only one way of framing art propositions. But the very stuff of art is indeed greatly related to “creating” new propositions.

The case is often made – particularly in reference to Duchamp – that objects of art (such as the Ready-mades, of course, but all art is implied in this) are judged as *objets d’art* in later years and the artists’ intentions become irrelevant. Such an argument is the case of a preconceived notion ordering together not necessarily related facts. The point is this: aesthetics, as we have pointed out, are conceptually irrelevant to art. Thus, any physical thing can become *objet d’art*, that is to say, can be considered tasteful, aesthetically pleasing, etc. But this has no bearing on the object’s application to an art context; that is, its functioning in an art context. (E.g., if a collector takes a painting, attaches legs, and uses it as a dining table it’s an act unrelated to art or the artist because, as art, that wasn’t the artist’s *intention*.)

And what holds true for Duchamp’s work applies as well to most of the art after him. In other words, the value of Cubism – for instance – is its idea in the realm of art, not the physical or visual qualities seen in a specific painting, or the particularization of certain colors or shapes. For these colors and shapes are the art’s “language,” not its meaning conceptually as art. To look upon a Cubist “masterwork” now as art is nonsensical, conceptually speaking, as far as art is concerned. (That visual information that was unique in Cubism’s language has now been generally absorbed and has a lot to do with the way in which one deals with painting “linguistically.” [E.g., what a Cubist painting meant experimentally and conceptually to, say, Gertrude Stein, is beyond our speculation because the same painting then “meant” something different than it does now.]) The “value” now of an original Cubist painting is not unlike, in most respects, an original manuscript by Lord Byron, or *The Spirit of St. Louis* as it is seen in the Smithsonian Institution. (Indeed, museums fill the very same function as the Smithsonian Institution – why else would the *Jeu de Paume* wing of the Louvre exhibit Cézanne’s and Van Gogh’s palettes as proudly as they do their paintings?) Actual works of art are little more than historical curiosities. As far as art is concerned Van Gogh’s paintings aren’t worth any more than his palette is. They are both “collector’s items.”¹⁷

Art “lives” through influencing other art, not by existing as the physical residue of an artist’s ideas. The reason that different artists from the past are “brought alive” again is because some aspect of their work becomes “usable” by living artists. That there is no “truth” as to what art is seems quite unrealized.

What is the function of art, or the nature of art? If we continue our analogy of the forms art takes as being art’s language one can realize then that a work of art is a kind of proposition presented within the context of art as a comment on art. We can then go further and analyze the types of “propositions.” [...]

Works of art are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context – as art – they provide no information whatsoever about any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist’s intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art is art, which means, is a *definition* of art. Thus, that it is art is true a priori (which is what Judd means when he states that “if someone calls it art, it’s art”).

Indeed, it is nearly impossible to discuss art in general terms without talking in tautologies – for to attempt to “grasp” art by any other “handle” is merely to focus on another aspect or quality of the proposition, which is usually irrelevant to the artwork’s “art condition.” One begins to realize that art’s “art condition” is a conceptual state. That the language forms that the artist frames his propositions in are often “private” codes or languages is an inevitable outcome of art’s freedom from morphological constrictions; and it follows from this that one has to be familiar with contemporary art to appreciate it and understand it. Likewise one understands why the “man in the street” is intolerant to artistic art and always demands art in a traditional “language.” (And one understands why formalist art sells “like hot cakes.”) Only in painting and sculpture did the artists all speak the same language. What is called “Novelty Art” by the formalists is often the attempt to find new languages, although a new language doesn’t necessarily mean the framing of new propositions: e.g., most kinetic and electronic art.

Another way of stating, in relation to art, what Ayer asserted about the analytic method in the context of language would be the following: The validity of artistic propositions is not dependent on any empirical, much less any aesthetic, presupposition about the nature of things. For the artist, as an analyst, is not directly concerned with the physical properties of things. He is concerned only with the way (1) in which art is capable of conceptual growth and (2) how his propositions are capable of logically following that growth.¹⁹ In other words, the propositions of art are not factual, but linguistic in *character* – that is, they do not describe the behavior of physical, or even mental objects; they express definitions of art, or the formal consequences of definitions of art. Accordingly, we can say that art operates on a logic. For we shall see that the characteristic mark of a purely logical inquiry is that it is concerned with the formal consequences of our definitions (of art) and not with questions of empirical fact.²⁰

To repeat, what art has in common with logic and mathematics is that it is a tautology; i.e., the “art idea” (or “work”) and art are the same and can be appreciated as art without going outside the context of art for verification.

[...] it is easy to realize that art’s viability is not connected to the presentation of visual (or other) kinds of experience. That that may have been one of art’s extraneous functions in the preceding centuries is not unlikely. After all, man in even the nineteenth century lived in a fairly standardized visual environment. That is, it was ordinarily predictable as to what he would be coming into contact with day after day. His visual environment in the part of the world in which he lived was fairly consistent. In our time we have an experientially drastically richer environment. One can fly all over the earth in a matter of hours and days, not months. We have the cinema, and color television, as well as the man-made spectacle of the lights of Las Vegas or the skyscrapers of New York City. The whole world is there to be seen, and the whole world can watch man walk on the moon from their living rooms. Certainly art or objects of painting and sculpture cannot be expected to compete experientially with this?

The notion of “use” is relevant to art and its “language.” Recently the box or cube form has been used a great deal within the context of art. (Take for instance its use by Judd, Morris, LeWitt, Bladen, Smith, Bell, and McCracken – not even mentioning the quantity of boxes and cubes that came after.) The difference between all the various uses of the box or cube form is directly related to the differences in the intentions of the artists. Further, as is particularly seen in Judd’s work, the use of the box or cube form illustrates very well our earlier claim that an object is only art when placed in the context of art.

A few examples will point this out. One could say that if one of Judd's box forms was seen filled with debris, seen placed in an industrial setting, or even merely seen sitting on a street corner, it would not be identified with art. It follows then that understanding and consideration of it as an artwork is necessary a priori to viewing it in order to "see" it as a work of art. Advance information about the concept of art and about an artist's concepts is necessary to the appreciation and understanding of contemporary art. Any and all of the physical attributes (qualities) of contemporary works, if considered separately and/or specifically, are irrelevant to the art concept. The art concept (as Judd said, though he didn't mean it this way) must be considered in its whole. To consider a concept's parts is invariably to consider aspects that are irrelevant to its art condition – or like reading parts of a definition.

It comes as no surprise that the art with the least fixed morphology is the example from which we decipher the nature of the general term "art." For where there is a context existing separately of its morphology and consisting of its function one is more likely to find results less conforming and predictable. It is in modern art's possession of a "language" with the shortest history that the plausibility of the abandonment of that "language" becomes most possible. It is understandable then that the art that came out of Western painting and sculpture is the most energetic, questioning (of its nature), and the least assuming of all the general "art" concerns. In the final analysis, however, all of the arts have but (in Wittgenstein's terms) a "family" resemblance.

Yet the various qualities relatable to an "art condition" possessed by poetry, the novel, the cinema, the theatre, and various forms of music, etc., is that aspect of them most reliable to the function of art as asserted here.

Is not the decline of poetry relatable to the implied metaphysics from poetry's use of "common" language as an art language?²⁴ In New York the last decadent stages of poetry can be seen in the move by "Concrete" poets recently toward the use of actual objects and theatre.²⁵ Can it be that they feel the unreality of their art form?

We see now that the axioms of a geometry are simply definitions, and that the theorems of a geometry are simply the logical consequences of these definitions. A geometry is not in itself about physical space; in itself it cannot be said to be "about" anything. But we can use a geometry to reason about physical space. That is to say, once we have given the axioms a physical interpretation, we can proceed to apply the theorems to the objects which satisfy the axioms. Whether a geometry can be applied to the actual physical world or not, is an empirical question which falls outside the scope of geometry itself. There is no sense, therefore, in asking which of the various geometries known to us are false and which are true. Insofar as they are all free from contradiction, they are all true. The proposition which states that a certain application of a geometry is possible is not itself a proposition of that geometry. All that the geometry itself tells us is that if anything can be brought under the definitions, it will also satisfy the theorems. It is therefore a purely logical system, and its propositions are purely analytic propositions. –A. J. Ayer²⁶

Here then I propose rests the viability of art. In an age when traditional philosophy is unreal because of its assumptions, art's ability to exist will depend not only on its not performing a service – as entertainment, visual (or other) experience, or decoration – which is something easily replaced by kitsch culture, and technology, but, rather, it will remain viable by *not* assuming a philosophical stance; for in art's unique character is the capacity to remain aloof from philosophical judgments. It is in this context that art shares similarities with logic, mathematics, and, as well, science. But whereas the other endeavors are useful, art is not. Art indeed exists for its own sake.

In this period of man, after philosophy and religion, art may possibly be one endeavor that fulfills what another age might have called "man's spiritual needs." Or, another way of putting it might be that art deals analogously with the state of things "beyond physics" where philosophy had to make assertions. And art's strength is that even the preceding sentence is an assertion, and cannot be verified by art. Art's only claim is for art. Art is the definition of art.

Sol LeWitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', *Artforum*, 5:10 (Summer 1967), pp.79-84.

In conceptual art the idea of the concept is the most important aspect of the work: *in other forms of art the concept may be changes in the process of execution*

[. . .] All of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.

[. . .] This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless.

[. . .] It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman. It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator.

[. . .] Logic may be used to camouflage the real intent of the artist [. . .] or to infer a paradoxical situation: *some ideas are logical in conception and illogical perceptually*

[. . .] Ideas are discovered by intuition.

[

[. . .] What the work of art looks like isn't too important.

[. . .] The plan will design the work.

[. . .] There are other forms of art around [. . .] No artist I know will own up to any of

these either. Therefore I conclude that it is part of a secret language that art critics use when communicating with each other through the medium of art magazines

POEM, MARCH 1966 / DAN GRAHAM

Schema for a set of poems whose component pages are specifically published as individual poems in various magazines. Each poem-page is to be set in its final form by the editor of the publication where it is to appear, the exact data in each particular instance to correspond to the fact(s) of its published appearance.

1 Using any arbitrary schematic (such as the example published here) produces a large, finite permutation of specific, discrete poems.

2 If a given variant-poem is attempted to be set up by the editor following the logic step-by-step (linearly), it would be found impossible to compose a completed version of the poem as each of the component lines of exact data requiring completion (in terms of specific numbers and percentages) would be contingently determined by every other number and percentage which itself in turn would be determined by the other numbers or percentages, ad infinitum.

3 It would be possible to 'compose' the entire set of permutationally possible poems and to select the applicable variant(s) with the aid of a computer which could 'see' the ensemble instantly.

<http://www.ubu.com/aspn/aspn5and6/poem.html>

SCHEMA

(number of)	adjectives
(number of)	adverbs
(percentage of)	area not occupied by type
(percentage of)	area occupied by type
(number of)	columns
(number of)	conjunctions
(number of)	depression of type into surface of page
(number of)	gerunds
(number of)	infinitives
(number of)	letters of alphabet
(number of)	lines
(number of)	mathematical symbols
(number of)	nouns
(number of)	numbers
(number of)	participles
(perimeter of)	page
(weight of)	paper sheet
(type)	paper stock
(thinness of of)	paper stock
(number of)	prepositions
(number of)	pronouns
(number of point)	size type
(name of)	typeface
(number of)	words
(number of)	words capitalized
(number of)	words italicized
(number of)	words not capitalized
(number of)	words not italicized

In "Other Observations" (1969), Dan Graham wrote: "*Schema* takes its own measure of itself as place, being both art and art criticism"