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Introduction:
During the Exhibition the Gallery Will Be Closed

• **1. RESEARCH PARAMETERS**

This thesis aims to be an original contribution to the critical evaluation of conceptual art (1965-75). It addresses the following questions: What is conceptual art, what were its aims and procedures and what has it achieved? Is there a privileged relationship between contemporary art and conceptual art? Has the notion of “concept” fundamentally changed the theoretical position of artists and their interaction with audiences, critics, curators and historians? What are the implications of conceptual art for the practices of art historical and critical writing today? Have art historians, especially those who write about post-1960s art, taken these implications into account? And if not, why not? What dilemmas characterise the critical legacy of conceptual art?

The specificity of my approach lies, firstly, in using a combination of historical, critical and theoretical tools and, secondly, in adopting a starting point in the artistic practice of today. I will suggest that, in order to understand the nature of conceptual art, one has to analyse its continued effect, its outgrowths and aftermath. This seems to be the only way to reach a deeper understanding of the issues that are seminal for contemporary artistic and art historical discourses. Therefore my reading of conceptual art is grounded in a critical and theoretical analysis of contemporary art. I look at contemporary art as a combined system of production and reception, in which discursive and artistic practices are intimately entwined. My aim is firstly to identify the structural changes that have occurred in this system since the 1960s and then to trace them back to the artistic movement commonly known as conceptual art.

Shifts in the cultural position of the visual artist over the last fifteen to twenty years, such as the tendency towards a design-based model of

production (see chapters 3 and 4 below), call for a renewed interpretation of the artistic movement that, I hope to show, prefigured these shifts. This explains why this thesis could only be written now and not, say, in 1975 or 1990. More than forty years after its inception, I look at conceptual art from a deliberately anachronistic point of view, taking into account after-effects that may never have been planned or foreseen by the artists in question or their advocates. I evaluate the original ideas and intentions in close connection to their offshoots and derivatives, whilst trying to avoid the danger of teleological reduction.¹

A common notion in the art historical literature on conceptual art is that its basic thrust is anti-visual (see section 5 of this introduction). My own understanding of conceptual art, as developed in this thesis, is that it is not based on a refusal of visibility, but on something that makes the distinction between visual and non-visual parameters virtually irrelevant: the primacy of information.

I intend to show that the appearance of conceptual art was the result of artists starting to take account, in various radical ways, of two conditions, one social, the other institutional: first, the rise of post-industrial or “informational” society, as it was theorised at the time by critics such as Jack Burnham and sociologists such as Daniel Bell;² second, the central position of institutions and mediators, which had become indispensable for the experience of artworks by an audience. The simultaneous impact of these new conditions is no coincidence: they can be seen as two distinct but related forms of the primacy of information. Artists such as Carl Andre, Lawrence Weiner, John Baldessari, Douglas Huebler, Michael Asher, and Joseph Kosuth not only acknowledged and accepted

¹ This idea of an anachronistic art history is indebted to Hal Foster’s notion of a “traumatic” avant-garde that “is never historically effective or fully significant in its initial moments”. Foster, “Who’s Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?”, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 1996), 29.

² Jack Burnham, “System Esthetics”, *Artforum* 7:1 (September 1968), 30-35; and “Real Time Systems”, *Artforum* 8:1 (September 1969), 49-55. Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society. A Venture in Social Forecasting* [1973], repr. (New York: Basic Books, 1999). Bell’s first publications on the post-industrial society date from the early 1960s.

these conditions, but deliberately allowed them to determine the fundamental parameters of their artistic output.

Closely connected to the rise of post-industrial society is the mathematical theory of information. This information theory was a branch of science developed in a military context during and shortly after World War II. Its aim was to produce theoretical models for improving the efficiency of information transfer and communication channels. The theory found a broad range of technological and social applications in the post-war decades and also left considerable traces in the sphere of cultural production, especially around 1970. The transfer of information became a self-imposed task for a wide range of cultural producers.³

Thus, conceptual artists adopted a position literally as brokers of information.⁴ In their practice as artists they would subject the manual work to a protocol (a set of explicit prescriptions and rules) and in many cases completely separate the conception of a work from its execution, denying responsibility for the latter. By reducing a work to the “information value” of a concept, protocol or script, these artists seemed to accept the premises of information theorists about the possibility – or need – to reduce the act of communication to an efficient exchange of “bits”.⁵

Taking 1970 as the historical starting point of “contemporary art” (see section 4 below), I define and analyse contemporary art as “post-

³ Relevant sources on information theory are Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* [1949] (Urbana/Chicago/London: University of Illinois Press, 1972); and Jeremy Campbell, *Grammatical Man. Information, Entropy, Language, and Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982). For a critical and historical perspective, see Kathleen Woodward, ed., *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture* (London/Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); and Omar Aftab et al., “Information Theory and the Digital Age”, <http://web.mit.edu> (2001).

⁴ Cf. Robert Hobbs, “Affluence, Taste, and the Brokering of Knowledge. Notes on the Social Context of Early Conceptual Art”, in: Michael Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art. Theory, Myth, and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 200-222. An interesting case of “reframing”, Hobbs’ use of the word “knowledge” may be understood as an attempt to take away some of the embarrassment concerning the information paradigm of the late 1960s and to make conceptual art seem compatible with the current focus in the contemporary art world on artistic research and knowledge transfer.

⁵ Michael Corris has suggested that the use of information theory by conceptual artists was done “in the spirit of a productive misreading”. “Recoding Information, Knowledge, and Technology”, in: Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art. Theory, Myth, and Practice*, 197.

conceptual” in the double sense of *coming after* and *permeated by* conceptual art.⁶ This definition allows me to disregard the redundant notion of “neo-conceptual art,” a term coined in the art world for certain work produced in the 1990s. All art produced since 1970 has had to come to terms with the legacy of conceptual art. The social and institutional conditions taken into account by conceptual artists (and relating to the primacy of information) still exist and have profound consequences for the position of artists today.

Contemporary art is increasingly subsumed within the realm of communication, in both academic and institutional contexts.⁷ Since conceptual artists were the first to consider their practice in terms of information transfer,⁸ a critical reconstruction of the conceptual roots of contemporary art may help to shed light on the conditions that determine artistic production today. In order to achieve this, I will go beyond the classical art historical framework and, following a suggestion by Benjamin Buchloh,⁹ look at the broader social and cultural changes that took place in Europe and North America in the 1960s and '70s – most importantly, the transition from an industrial to a service-oriented economy.

A critical evaluation of the legacy of conceptual art is complicated by the following paradox. On the one hand, the fact that conceptual formats such as photo-documentation and text works are now a widespread phenomenon

⁶ As suggested in Peter Osborne, “Art beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Criticism, Art History and Contemporary Art”, *Art History* 27:4 (September 2004), 666.

⁷ Charles Forceville and Grant Kester are among the academic writers who propose that art be viewed as a form of communication. See Forceville, “Relevanz und Prägnanz: Kunst als Kommunikation”, *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* 31:1-2 (2009), 31-63; and Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Conversation in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). For a thorough and valuable critique of the notion of art as communication, see Frank Vande Veire, “Een gift aan levende doden. Over het kunstwerk als publiek geheim”, *De Witte Raaf* 101 (January-February 2003), 19-23.

⁸ See Edward A. Shanken, “Art in the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art”, in: Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art. Theory, Myth, and Practice*, 235-250, and in the same volume: Johanna Drucker, “The Crux of Conceptualism: Conceptual Art, the Idea of Idea, and the Information Paradigm”, 251-268.

⁹ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions”, *October* 55 (Winter 1990), 105-143. Originally published in a different version in: cat. *l'Art conceptuel, une perspective* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989), 41-53.

in the globalised contemporary art scene suggests a fair measure of success. On the other, conceptual art entailed a revolutionary promise (suggesting a radical demystification of artisthood) that has never materialised – something that many critics and historians working on conceptual art see as an unmistakable failure. Conceptual art never delivered what it seemed to promise. How should we relate the material success of conceptual art (as a range of established and recognisable work formats) to this failure? And given this paradoxical after-life of conceptual art, what does it mean to say that contemporary art as a whole has absorbed the conditions that originally gave rise to the conceptual art movement?¹⁰

Thus, the additional aim of this thesis is to identify the implications of conceptual art for the practice of art historical and critical writing today. I hope to show that conceptual art has had crucial consequences for the professional quality judgment of works of art and, by extension, for all discursive “traffic” triggered by those works. Notions of authorship, oeuvre, criticality, and artistic autonomy were challenged by developments in artistic practice. This means not only that a critical reappraisal of the conceptual movement has to take account of institutional aspects, such as the museum and gallery system and the position of mediators and specialists, but also that art historians need to extend the reappraisal to their own discipline and to the role it has played in conceptualising conceptualism.

In this respect, it is important to note that most recent literature on conceptual art has been aimed at modifying or expanding the canon by

¹⁰ See Jeff Wall, *Depiction, Object, Event. Hermes Lecture 2006* ('s-Hertogenbosch: Stichting Hermeslezing, 2006). Wall gives the following suggestive analysis: “From the early 70s on, it seems that most artists either ignored the [conceptual] reduction altogether, or acquiesced to it intellectually, but put it aside and continued making works. But the works they made are not the same works as before. Since there are now no binding technical or formal criteria or even physical characteristics that could exclude this or that object or process from consideration as art, the necessity for art to exist by means of works of art is reasserted, not *against* the linguistic conceptual reduction, but in its wake and through making use of the new openness it has provided, the new ‘expanded field’. The new kinds of works come into their own mode of historical self-consciousness through the acceptance of the claim that there is a form of art which is not a work of art and which legislates the way a work of art is now to be made. This is what the term ‘post-conceptual’ means” (19-20).

including previously marginalised or undervalued artists.¹¹ It has not challenged fundamental underlying assumptions, such as the opposition between the visual and the cerebral, the discontinuity between high art and mass culture, or the anti-institutional character of conceptual art. Attempts by conceptual artists in the 1960s to undermine the status of the artist as author have never been followed through, either in theory or in artistic practice. Even if those attempts were noted in the initial reception of the work, by the 1980s and '90s the aura of authentic artisthood had been largely restored. Part of my research concerns the way conceptual practices have changed (or perhaps have *failed* to change) the art historical and critical reception of works of art. If the implications of conceptual art were unacceptable from an institutional point of view, does that mean they have been effectively “repressed” by the stakeholders in the system? Or else can we identify the conditions that made it impossible, in a visual art context, to discard notions such as authorship and oeuvre?

This introduction begins with an explanation of the structure of the thesis and its genesis (section 2), followed by a discussion of methodological aspects (section 3). It goes on to propose a demarcation of conceptual art and examine some issues of chronology and periodisation (section 4). Finally, it analyses the historiography of conceptual art (section 5) and synthesises my own argument with regard to the legacy of conceptualism (section 6).

• 2. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

This thesis consists of a collection of essays written and published for various occasions and in various formats between 2001 and 2010. They differ considerably in terms of length, substance, and style. Some are thematic; others are more historical; only one of the essays is a monographic text dealing with a single artist. Four of the texts (chapters 2, 5, 6, and 7) were originally commissioned as catalogue essays; two others (chapters 3 and 4) were included in my book *The Regime of Visibility*; the

¹¹ See the publications listed in note 30 below.

remaining text (chapter 1) was part of a critical anthology on the history of Sonsbeek exhibitions.¹²

I have grouped the seven chapters into three parts. Part I is entitled “Unfortunate Implications”, part II “Conceptual Art in a Visual World”, and part III “Conceptual Art and Photography”. The second part clearly comprises the bulk of the thesis. The texts in that section (chapters 3 and 4) were originally part of a theoretical model for the dialectical relationship between art and mass culture (in *The Regime of Visibility*). They propose a critical reading of conceptual art from the 1960s and ’70s in a comparative conjunction with graphic design practices of the same period. I evaluate conceptual procedures by looking at their offshoots in the art of the 1980s and ’90s. The outcome of this interpretative operation is a description of contemporary art as a combined system of production and reception featuring the paradoxical notion of “applied concept art”. Chapter 5 can be read as an afterthought to this. It offers reflections on the tension between the conceptual ambitions of contemporary art and its decorative “use” in the homes of private collectors. The discursive background is formed by certain political ideals cherished by the historical avant-garde regarding an artistic breakthrough into the domain of everyday life.

The first part of the thesis (“Unfortunate Implications”) represents an early phase in my research, with texts dating from 2001 and 2002. Chapter 1 looks into the reception of the neo-avant-garde in the Netherlands around 1970. It takes the form of a case study of the milestone exhibition *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* (1971) and two subsequent exhibitions in Park Sonsbeek (1986 and 1993). I focus on the critical reception and institutional ramifications of the 1971 event, which was meant to introduce conceptual art and land art to a wider public in the Netherlands but was in the end, due to numerous factors and circumstances, perceived by many as a downright failure. “Conceptual art” is not a prominent label or term in this chapter but the interpretative model that is developed in later essays already plays a significant part in it. I have chosen to include this text in the thesis because it has a substantial thematic connection both with chapters 3 and 4 (regarding the primacy of

¹² For publication details see the acknowledgments elsewhere in this volume.

information) and with chapter 5 (the notion of site-specificity). The original research it necessitated, especially concerning the critical reception of *Sonsbeek buiten de perken*, gives evidential strength to my arguments about the primacy of information and the crucial position of experts and mediators in the public's experience of contemporary art. A final reason to include it is that it already hints at the specific attitude of conceptual artists (both critical and non-critical).

Chapter 2 takes as its central point the impossible fantasy of a work of art that consists of nothing but an idea – a fantasy that seems to haunt the chronicles of twentieth-century art. Although this chapter problematises the notion of conceptual art as a movement, it also contains arguments for my proposition that the conceptual is a generic condition for the production and reception of contemporary art – a condition that even students in art school have to learn to negotiate. Although the text of this essay overlaps to some extent with sections of chapter 3, I decided to include it in the thesis both because it represents an important phase in my research on conceptual art and because it fills certain gaps. Chapter 2 places a strong emphasis on the idea that conceptual art was an impossible project; this idea is subsequently developed and reworked in the “paradoxes” thematised in chapter 3. So, if the later text builds on notions and ideas introduced in the earlier one, the earlier one nevertheless contains interesting elements that I felt needed to be presented in the thesis. These chapters represent different stages in the development of my research.

If the conventional dichotomy between the visual and the conceptual is already relativised in the second part of the thesis, I elaborate and apply the results of this in the third part. Here, in chapters 6 and 7, I analyse the exceptional position of photography as a medium used by visual artists, against the background of the “post-medium condition” of contemporary art.¹³ Chapter 6 sketches a genealogy of “conceptual photography”, focusing on the impasse in which the medium found itself circa 1975 and the role played by the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher in overcoming that impasse. It is partly due to the Bechers that the

¹³ Cf. Rosalind Krauss, “A Voyage on the North Sea”. *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London/New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999).

photographic metier acquired the conceptual aura that has made it such a successful and widely used contemporary art form. Chapter 7 is a monographic text on the work of Canadian artist Jeff Wall. Although written in 2002, almost eight years before chapter 6, it can be read as an extension to it. It takes as its lead the critical remarks on the position of photography in contemporary art with which the previous chapter ends. Wall's way of working provides an intelligent alternative to the widespread idea that artists observe the world and allow us to see it through their eyes.

The essays compiled in the thesis are the fruit of a critical writing practice established and developed outside the university. This partly explains their hybrid nature, hovering between art history, theory and criticism. At an early stage of the thesis preparation process, the decision was taken not to edit the essays, as this would block one of the aims of the research: to look into the effects that conceptual art has had on critical and art historical writing practices over time. The thesis is therefore to some extent a case study based on material provided by my own essays. In the conclusion, I explicitly reflect on my writing.

The essays have been compiled with an eye to the overall art historical argument that, although fragmented and sometimes implicit, is unmistakably there. Inconsistencies between them may nevertheless be attributed not only to differences in their original publication context, but also to the development of my thinking. To some extent, the contrast between chapter 2 on the one hand and chapters 3 and 4 on the other represents a wider change in my approach to conceptual art over the years – a change that may have been gradual, but is nevertheless significant. The earlier text was written in the spirit of a mostly intuitive reaction against the sanctified canon of 1960s art and against the legitimating role of art historians in writing on recent art. The later texts document a shift towards a more considered and balanced view of the historical relationship between conceptual and contemporary art. The dialectics of this history reach a more mature form here. I return to these dialectics in the conclusion of the thesis, where I discuss the use of irony in historiography.

This introduction is a new text that was written specifically for the thesis. Its main purpose is to synthesise the overall argument of the essays and to present it in a consistent, explicit and unbroken form. The introduction also gives theoretical and art historical support to the essays by providing additional sources and references. As a result, it is a rather dense and compact text offering few examples of particular works or oeuvres to illustrate the points being made. The reader will find such examples in the corresponding chapters.

• 3. METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

In this section I consider some methodological issues concerning the art historical treatment of conceptual art. I position myself in a tradition of critical writing before identifying the major strands in the method used in this thesis.

The dominant art historical approach to conceptualism seems rather narrow and limited. It clings, for example, to a high-art perspective and a strict opposition between the visual and the cerebral. It tends to look mainly at the art object and its transformations, rather than at the changing procedures of art-making or at the repositioning of the artist in the social and cultural field. No matter how one feels about these limitations (some may like to believe that they testify to the classical strength of the discipline), it is clearly possible to enrich the art historical landscape by adopting a different approach. I propose to link the art in question to more general transformations that occurred in the social and cultural sphere in the second half of the twentieth century; to look at the position of the visual artist as a cultural producer among other kinds of cultural producers; and to conduct a comparative study of conceptual art and other, applied forms of visual production. I intend to show that arguments for such a methodological shift towards the field of cultural studies can be derived from conceptual art itself.

With regard to the visual/cerebral dichotomy, conceptual art poses a challenge to art historians. In response to a questionnaire on visual

culture published in a 1996 issue of *October*, art historian Thomas Crow suggested that the academic study of visual culture (as a generalised “history of images”) risks establishing an uncritical continuation of the modernist ideology of visibility. Crow reads the work of conceptual artists as a warning against such a turn towards the visual. It is worth quoting this passage:

Preoccupation with the optical entails a failure to recognize that painting in particular achieved its high degree of self-consciousness in Western culture by virtue of antagonism toward its own visibility. On this point Conceptual artists have been more acute diagnosticians than were the modernist critics – and a visual-culture approach will in turn yield little or no understanding of Conceptualism. To surrender a history of art to a history of images will indeed mean a deskilling of interpretation, an inevitable misrecognition and misrepresentation of one realm of profound human endeavor.¹⁴

My response to Crow would be that the visual and the conceptual are relative values. Arguments for an absolute opposition between the two can certainly not be derived from conceptual art. As Thomas McEvelley has shown, it is impossible to experience the visual and conceptual dimensions of art in isolation from each other.¹⁵ It is precisely conceptual art that demonstrates as much, as I point out in chapters 3 and 4 below.

The third chapter of my thesis is constructed around an analysis of the combined production of conceptual artists and graphic designers in the 1960s and ’70s. To some degree it would seem that I do in that chapter what Crow warns his readers not to do: to pursue a “visual-culture approach” to conceptual art. However, there is little reason to assume, as Crow does, that such an approach necessarily amounts to a “preoccupation with the optical”. The comparative study of autonomous and applied modes of visual production at least allows us to analyse some of the interventive strategies

¹⁴ Thomas Crow, “Visual Culture Questionnaire”, *October* 77 (Summer 1996), 36. Crow offered an extended version of this argument in his essay “Unwritten Histories of Conceptual Art: Against Visual Culture”, in: Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1996), 212-242. See also chapter 4 below.

¹⁵ Thomas McEvelley, *Art & Discontent. Theory at the Millennium* (New York: Documentext/McPherson, 1991), 43-45.

that artists have developed in the recent past in response to changes in the surrounding culture, a culture that is perhaps *itself* preoccupied with the visual or “optical”. Moreover, one could argue that the interpretive skills of the art historian – which Crow claims are under threat – have been problematic and at risk ever since the 1960s. My “cultural” approach to conceptual art has the additional advantage that it creates conditions for testing and developing interpretive methods and analytical concepts. Instead of “surrender[ing] a history of art to a history of images”, an approach like this can help recuperate the critical potential of the art historical discipline.¹⁶

At this point I have to warn the reader that this is not a conventional doctoral thesis. It is a compilation of rather divergent critical essays that were not written with such a joint purpose in mind and that are not confined to a strict methodological procedure. This unorthodox conception of an academic dissertation reflects important changes that have occurred in the art historical discipline since the 1960s. Art historians like Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster can be credited with creating, in and around journals such as *Artforum* and *October*, the exemplary model of a writing practice that integrates non-academic, theoretical and critical text formats. Having been a student in the 1980s, I have absorbed this critical-essayistic mode and, moreover, witnessed how it has developed into a tradition in its own right with near-canonical status.¹⁷ This is one reason why I feel I can defend a doctoral dissertation written in this mode.

¹⁶ In a similar spirit, W.J.T. Mitchell has argued that the “pictorial turn”, understood as “a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality”, answers the “need for a global critique of visual culture”, a need that is all the more urgent as “traditional strategies of containment no longer seem adequate”. Thomas Crow would be relieved to find that, for Mitchell, this pictorial turn does not imply “a renewed metaphysics of pictorial presence”. “The Pictorial Turn”, in: Mitchell, *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16.

¹⁷ This status was established or confirmed by a major publication written by seminal members of the *October* editorial team: Hal Foster et al., eds., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004). This book is on its way to becoming the new bible of the historiography of modern art.

Another reason has to do with the subject of my research. Any critical study of the legacy of conceptual art would be incomplete without some reflection on the practice of writing about art. Changes in the relationship between the production of art and the production of discourse which happened in the context of conceptual art – and of which conceptual artists were fully aware – continue to determine the practice of critics, historians and theorists writing on art today, regardless of whether or not they have any conceptual propensity. Texts on contemporary art may have an explanatory, analytical, critical, legitimating or historicising function; in all cases, artists and writers – or, more broadly, artists and mediators – will find that their professional trajectories have become inextricably entwined.¹⁸ The critical discourse on contemporary art triggers artistic developments; conversely, artistic practices contribute to and stimulate the production of new discourse. Writing on contemporary art, one needs to be constantly aware of this interaction and to reflect on it.

Any contemporary writing practice informed by conceptualism, like the one documented in the present thesis, necessarily moves between the separate disciplines of art history, art theory and art criticism. In isolation, the tools of these disciplines risk falling into obsolescence. Like sculptures by Claes Oldenburg, history, theory and criticism have all become “soft” versions of their glorious modernist selves. *Theory* is no longer purely theoretical, due to its entanglement with artistic practice. *Criticism* has lost the ability to identify artistic quality by applying firm and uncontested criteria (or has realised that it never possessed that ability). And *art history* faces the problem that it was never conceived to speak about contemporary art.¹⁹ These weaknesses can be overcome, I suggest, by means of cross-compensation. In order to engage with recently produced art, art history needs to be braced by theoretical and critical elements, just as art theory and criticism need to be backed up by history. Criticism and history should be theorised, history and theory criticised, theory and criticism historicised

¹⁸ The resulting confusion is effectively registered in: “Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism”, *October* 100 (Spring 2002), 200-228.

¹⁹ For a recent philosophical attempt to differentiate between the disciplines of art history, theory and criticism, see Noël Carroll, *On Criticism* (London/New York: Routledge, 2009).

– and all this in one hybrid discursive operation. The absence of stable notions of artistic quality, historical importance and theoretical validity creates a multi-dimensional space in which the work of art must be moved around until all possible critical configurations have been exhausted.

It follows that the art historical treatment of conceptual and contemporary art in this thesis is methodically fluid. No fixed rules or recipes can be provided to support it.²⁰ This art historical method is pragmatic and sometimes eclectic. It is an anti-method, in the sense that it can convince the reader only through its results. Its sources of inspiration are deeply buried in certain critical, art historical and theoretical essays that deal primarily with content rather than method. Several strands can be identified in this fabric: a dialectical strand, as exemplified by the work of Fredric Jameson and Hugues Boekraad; a sociological strand, as exemplified by that of T.J. Clark; a revisionist strand, as exemplified by the writings of Jeff Wall and Thierry de Duve; and a philosophical strand, as exemplified by the work of Peter Osborne.²¹ Thus, the research presented in this thesis can be described as a cross between a dialectical form of cultural criticism, a social history of art, and a conceptually inspired art theory.

Of course this hybrid research method is open to criticism. There are tensions between the various methodological strands that need to be acknowledged, as they threaten to undermine the consistency of the research. In sociology, for instance, the self-perception of a given professional field – such as the contemporary art world²² – is by definition

²⁰ I am tempted to refer to Roland Barthes' sceptical position regarding method in the humanities: "[when] everything has been put into the method, nothing is left for writing; the researcher repeatedly asserts that his text will be methodological but the text never comes." "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers" [orig. 1971], in: Barthes, *Image, Music, Text: Essays* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 201.

²¹ References to specific works by these and other authors will appear at appropriate places in the text.

²² To understand the nature of the art world, several theoretical models have been developed over the years by sociologists such as Howard Becker and Pierre Bourdieu and by philosophers like Arthur Danto. Becker's notion of the art world stresses the collaborative aspect of artistic production. "Art worlds consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art. Members of art worlds coordinate the activities by which work is produced by referring to a body of conventional understandings embodied in common practice and in frequently used artifacts." Howard S. Becker. *Art Worlds. 25th Anniversary Edition. Updated and Expanded* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 34. Whereas Becker sees

relevant, whereas in critical theory such perceptions may be “unmasked” as one-sided or ideological mystifications.

I will deal with these pitfalls in the writing process itself. For now, it is important to underscore the benefit of my hybrid methodology: it “unblocks” the art historical discipline by transcending some of the dichotomies that haunt it.

• 4. PERIODISATION AND DEMARCATIONS

To delimit conceptual art – or conceptualism²³ – as an object of scholarly research is known to be problematic. In its heyday the art was often shown in a shared context with minimal and post-minimal art, arte povera and land art; only later, in retrospect, have these movements been branded as

the art world as a collective facility or resource for producing works of art, Danto emphasises the role of language and discourse in the constitution of (modern) art; this made him describe the art world as “an atmosphere of interpretation”. For their existence, works of art depend on a theory of art, framed in a language that is by definition spoken by insiders. “There is no art without those who speak the language of the artworld.” Arthur C. Danto, “Artworks and Real Things”, *Theoria* 39:1 (1973), 15. See also Danto, “The Artworld”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 61:19 (1964), 571-584. In contrast to the voluntaristic models proposed by Becker and Danto, Bourdieu’s theory of artistic “fields” is driven more by mechanisms of power, social distinction and exclusion. Participants are subject to invisible forces, like elementary particles crossing a magnetic field; their behaviour is the net result of these forces and their own “inertia”. The artistic field is described as an arena in which two principles of hierarchisation clash: the autonomous principle of authenticity and aesthetic merit, and the heteronomous principle of commercial success and political or class affiliation. This space and the resources it contains, such as recognition, prestige, and financial reward, are by definition limited; artists compete with each other for the largest share. Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l’art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* [1992], rev. ed. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998), 30-31, 355-357. See also Howard S. Becker and Alain Pessin, “Epilogue to the 25th Anniversary Edition: A Dialogue on the Ideas of ‘World’ and ‘Field’”, in: Becker, *Art Worlds*, 372 ff. A more recent sociological theory interprets the art world as a network, the structure of which grows and develops on the principle of connectivity. Pascal Gielen, *Kunst in netwerken. Artistieke selecties in de hedendaagse dans en beeldende kunst* (Tielt: LannooCampus, 2003).

²³ In my thesis I use these terms as synonyms. Cf. Michael Newman and Jon Bird, “Introduction”, in: Newman and Bird, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 5-6: “The distinction between Conceptual art – the movement – and ‘Conceptualism’ – a tendency or critical attitude towards the object as materially constituted and visually privileged – is far from precise and frequently breaks down in the work of artists who deliberately crossed genres and media forms.”

different or even antithetical.²⁴ For my deliberately anachronistic approach, however, disputes about historical correctness and artistic lineage are of minor importance. The same goes for critical attempts at revising or expanding the canon of conceptualism. Since my research focuses on the legacy of conceptual art in terms of systemic changes, I feel entitled to take the canon for granted. The legacy of any artistic movement is always to a certain extent a canonical affair: a matter of ripples spreading from centre to periphery, rather than the other way around. To put it rather more bluntly: the canon is likely to dominate the legacy. Quibbles over antecedence, affiliation and initiation – abundantly present in the literature on conceptual art²⁵ – only distract attention from the long-term effect.

Which artists are part of the canon of conceptual art? Given the “fuzziness of the notion [that was] constitutive for Conceptual art”,²⁶ the best way to answer this question is by being pragmatic and looking at the artists included in the major survey exhibitions devoted to conceptualism. Taking this type of museum exhibition, rather than more dispersed and academic art historical sources, as the central site of canon formation has the advantage that the outcome will be relatively unequivocal: a particular artist is either included or not.²⁷

²⁴ Alison M. Green, “When Attitudes Become Form and the Contest over Conceptual Art’s History”, in: Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art. Theory, Myth, and Practice*, 127. For arguments against the notion of conceptual art as a “style” or “movement”, see Stephen Melville, “Aspects”, in: cat. *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 229-245.

²⁵ E.g., Joseph Kosuth, “Joseph Kosuth responds to Benjamin Buchloh”, in: cat. *l’Art conceptuel, une perspective*, 60. For an overview of the polemics and arguments surrounding the Art & Language collective, see Michael Corris, “Inside a New York Art Gang: Selected Documents of Art & Language”, in: Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 470-485.

²⁶ Isabelle Graw, “Conceptual Expression: On Conceptual Gestures in Allegedly Expressive Painting, Traces of Expression in Proto-Conceptual Works, and the Significance of Artistic Procedures”, in: Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann, eds., *Art after Conceptual Art*, Generali Foundation collection series (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 119.

²⁷ Bruce Robertson has argued that “canonization ... occurs when an art object enters a public museum collection – or soon after”. Robertson, “The Tipping Point. Museum Collecting and the Canon”, *American Art* 17:3 (Fall 2003), 2. In the post-war context, this argument could be extended to include not only museum collections but also major museum exhibitions. On the role of the museum in the process of art historical canon formation, see Elizabeth Mansfield, ed., *Art History*

General survey exhibitions on conceptual art took place in 1969 (Leverkusen), 1989 (Paris) and 1995 (Los Angeles).²⁸ There are differences between these exhibitions, arising partly from variations in scale (Leverkusen showed 44 artists, Paris 38, Los Angeles 55) and geography (American versus European perspectives). But exactly these differences make it possible to say that the artists included *in all three exhibitions* must comprise the canon of conceptual art: John Baldessari, Robert Barry, Mel Bochner, Marcel Broodthaers, Stanley Brouwn, Daniel Buren, Victor Burgin, Hanne Darboven, Jan Dibbets, Dan Graham, Douglas Huebler, On Kawara, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman, Adrian Piper, Edward Ruscha, Robert Smithson and Lawrence Weiner. If the criterion is inclusion in *at least two* out of the three exhibitions, the canon also includes Giovanni Anselmo, Art & Language, Michael Asher, Bernd/Hilla Becher, Alighiero Boetti, André Cadere, Hans Haacke, Stephen J. Kaltenbach, David Lamelas, Emilio Prini, Bernar Venet and Ian Wilson (see fig. A, page 68–69 below). Almost all the artists discussed in my thesis, or at least those active in the 1960s, are part of this canon.

L'Art conceptuel, une perspective (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989) was the first comprehensive retrospective exhibition of conceptual art.²⁹ It marked the onset of a wave of curatorial interest in the movement, in conjunction with an even larger stream of critical and academic publications that has continued to the present day. Separated from the original moment of conceptualism by several decades, a substantial number of exhibition catalogues, monographs, anthologies and art historical studies have been produced, adding up to a more or less detached evaluation of conceptual aims, works and procedures. This is what I would call the “second reception” of conceptual art, starting in 1989.

Since the late 1990s, there has been an emerging tendency in the literature on conceptual art to put the canon into perspective by the

and Its Institutions. Foundations of a Discipline (London/New York: Routledge, 2002).

²⁸ *Konzeption – Conception*, Städtisches Museum Leverkusen, 1969. *L'Art conceptuel, une perspective*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989–1990. *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1995–1996.

²⁹ The earlier exhibition in Leverkusen was constitutive rather than retrospective, given its historical moment.

inclusion of lesser known, marginalised or undervalued artists (women artists, artists from Latin America, etcetera).³⁰ This tendency concurs with an increased emphasis on the pluriformity of conceptual practices and consequently with a reduced interest in identifying overall characteristics of conceptual art or in theorising its general foundations. The inclusive approach was demonstrated most emphatically by the exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s* (Queens Museum, New York, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and Miami Art Museum, 1999-2000), an event that featured more than 135 artists from 30 different countries. The exhibition catalogue contains eleven essays devoted to conceptual art and conceptualist tendencies in regions and continents such as Japan, Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, China, Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Whatever the merits of such a curatorial undertaking, one thing seems clear: if contemporary art is fundamentally determined by conceptual art, and if in the last twenty years contemporary art has become a truly global phenomenon, it makes sense that sooner or later this sort of global equivalent of conceptual art would be constructed. Seen from this perspective, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s* was a relatively predictable project.

To conclude this section, I will look briefly at the issue of chronology and periodisation. The literature on conceptual art cites a range of different time frames to demarcate the movement. Some are clearly more inclusive than others. To give a few examples: Benjamin Buchloh is early with 1962-69, starting his account with several “proto-Conceptual” works by Sol Lewitt, Robert Morris and Edward Ruscha dating from 1962;³¹ retrospective exhibition catalogues mostly opt for the convenient time frame 1965-75, with the occasional generous exception;³² and the editor of a critical

³⁰ See for instance Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999); Michael Newman and Jon Bird, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion, 1999); Alberro & Buchmann, eds., *Art after Conceptual Art*, Generali Foundation collection series (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

³¹ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions”, *October* 55 (Winter 1990), 111-122.

³² *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996); and *Conceptual Art in*

anthology shifts the focus to the years 1966-77.³³ Many writers seem to agree, however, that the historical climax of the conceptual movement was reached in the 1968-70 period.³⁴ If some, like Buchloh, take the climax to coincide with the finale of the movement, they choose to ignore its artistic and institutional “tail” in the first half of the 1970s, a period in which conceptual art obtained major public visibility via important exhibitions such as *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* (1971) and *Documenta 5* (1972). For this reason I have chosen to confine myself in this thesis to the conventional time frame of 1965-75, in the awareness of the relativity of any art historical periodisation.

Another issue of chronology concerns the historical starting point of contemporary art. In his recent study *What Is Contemporary Art?* Terry Smith has shown that definitions of contemporary art (as proposed by art historians, critics, and curators) have constantly changed over time, ranging from a stress on its position outside time or “beyond history” in the 1980s and '90s to a more globalised, socially embedded and documentary concept of art ushered in by *Documenta 11* (2002).³⁵ In this thesis, I look at contemporary art as a “post-conceptual” phenomenon – a system that has absorbed production values developed in the name of conceptual art. As I have argued, this implies that the starting point of contemporary art lies around 1970, at the culminating moment of conceptualism. Is this chronology supported by evidence? Some indication is provided by the collection displays of major institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which reserves its “Contemporary Galleries” for works of art

the Netherlands and Belgium 1965-1975, ed. Suzanna Héman et al. (Amsterdam/Rotterdam: Stedelijk Museum and NAI Publishers, 2002). The exception is *In & Out of Amsterdam. Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960-1976*, ed. Christophe Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009).

³³ Alexander Alberro, “Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977”, in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, xvi-xxxvii.

³⁴ “... the historical nucleus comprised of Art & Language, Barry, Huebler, On Kawara, Kosuth, Weiner, and others, whose works have left their imprint dating from the mid-sixties to the early seventies, reaching a peak around 1968.” Suzanne Pagé, “Preface”, in: cat. *l'Art conceptuel, une perspective*, 11.

³⁵ Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 244-249. Smith’s own definitions are remarkably tautological: contemporary art is “art in the conditions of contemporaneity”; it is “the institutionalized network through which the art of today presents itself to itself and to its interested audiences all over the world” (*ibid.*, 5, 241).

produced after 1970.³⁶ This suggests that, in the museum context, 1970 is identified as the year marking the watershed between the era of the great movements of modern art – which can be presented to a museum audience as single, relatively coherent episodes – and the pluriform artistic production of today.³⁷

However, this approach is only one of several possibilities.³⁸ Outside the museum context, other definitions and periodisations might apply. As the institutional context changes, the watershed between modern and contemporary shifts back and forth in time. The responses to a recent questionnaire on “The Contemporary”, published in the journal *October*, provide an interesting range of ideas about the birthdate of contemporary art.³⁹ Several respondents suggest that, in the organisational matrix of university art history departments, the most recent period – identified as “contemporary art history” – starts in 1945 or 1960.⁴⁰ Others, mostly employed as museum curators, refer to 1970 as the starting point, thus confirming the model of the MoMA collection display.⁴¹ Then again, some politically aware art historians mention the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, symbolising the end of the Cold War era, as a fundamental turning point in post-war history and as the beginning of the contemporary period.⁴² This view, apparently supported by many art world professionals, is reflected in the typical curatorial strategies and themes of the Biennials and other large-

³⁶ Terry Smith’s book contains a critical analysis of MoMA’s display of contemporary art since its reopening in 2004 (ibid., 13-37).

³⁷ Smith quotes a wall text from the 2007 MoMA collection display entitled “Multiplex: directions in art 1970 to now”, which reads: “An earlier view of modern art, with a mainstream flowing from one ‘ism’ to another, had given way [around 1970] to a broader consideration of disparate practices. This framework for understanding is still in place today.” (Ibid., 34.)

³⁸ Another canonical museum, the Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris, employs a similar distinction between its collections of modern art (level 5) and contemporary art (level 4); here, however, 1960 is the turning point.

³⁹ “A Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’: 32 Responses”, *October* 130 (Fall 2009), 3-124.

⁴⁰ Responses to *October* questionnaire by Miwon Kwon and Richard Meyer (ibid., 13, 18).

⁴¹ Responses by Tony Godfrey, T.J. Demos, and Helen Molesworth (ibid., 30, 79, 113).

⁴² Response by Alexander Alberro (ibid., 55). The year 1989 is also taken as the starting point by Julian Stallabrass in his *Art Incorporated. The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

scale international exhibitions that have increasingly dominated the stage of contemporary art in both the Western and non-Western world since 1989.⁴³

Outside of this mosaic of academic notions and professional views, a more common and everyday conception of contemporary art is cherished, in which the term means simply “the art of today”. This a-historical and uncritical use of the term materialises in glossy commercial publications with titles such as *Art Now*.

Two preliminary conclusions may be drawn. 1. Any serious proposal for a periodisation of contemporary art needs to be worked out in tandem with a critical definition. Without such a definition of contemporary art, the choice of any particular birthdate remains arbitrary. In this thesis, I propose “post-conceptuality” as a fundamental notion. 2. In developing a combined historical, critical and theoretical framework for contemporary art, institutional and contextual aspects are as important as artistic and aesthetic notions. In my thesis, I specifically connect the practice of contemporary art with aspects of curating (chapter 1), art education (chapter 2), information theory (chapter 3), criticism (chapter 4) and collecting (chapter 5). Although these institutional and contextual aspects can be clearly differentiated from each other, they come together in what is often described as “the art world”. In my conclusion I reflect in more general terms on my own position vis-à-vis this “world”.

• 5. HISTORIOGRAPHIES

In this section I discuss some relevant tendencies in the historiography of conceptual art since 1989 – the year I have proposed as the starting date of its “second reception”. I focus on three important notions that have found ample support in the art historical literature: first, the non- or anti-visual nature of conceptual art; second, the idea of conceptual art as a (failed) revolutionary movement; and third, the “bureaucratic” aspect of conceptual art. Building further on this, the second half of the section aims to identify

⁴³ Cf. Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic, eds., *The Manifesta Decade: Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

the main paradoxes of conceptual art via an analysis of texts written by three prominent art historians.

The first tendency in the literature to be mentioned here is a strong agreement about the non- or anti-visual nature⁴⁴ of conceptualism. Conceptual artists are said to have overturned or “suppressed” the priority of the visual dimension in art. Thomas Crow, writing in 1996, summarises the argument as follows:

The “withdrawal of visibility” or “suppression of the beholder”, which were the operative strategies of Conceptualism, decisively set aside the assumed primacy of visual illusion as central to the making and understanding of works of art.⁴⁵

Conceptual artists, Crow contends, shared “a mistrust of optical experience as providing an adequate basis for art” and believed that the reliance of a work of art on “purely visual sensation” was inversely proportional to its “cognitive value”.⁴⁶ This has become a major theme in the second reception of conceptual art; many authors put forward their own specific variation. I will name only a few. For Liz Kotz, author of a study on the use of language in the art of the 1960s, the move away from the visual was part of a general “linguistic turn” discernible in the art of that decade.⁴⁷ Michael Newman, in an essay published in 1996, stated that conceptual art “involved a break with the aesthetic primacy of visibility”, which had already been “brought to a crisis by alienated, mechanical forms purged of meaning employed by Minimalism”.⁴⁸ According to Benjamin Buchloh, writing in his previously mentioned essay of 1989/1990, conceptual art did not merely renounce visual qualities, it actually “instated the prohibition of any and all visibility

⁴⁴ Does a *non-visual* tendency in art always denote an *anti-visual* artistic attitude? Not necessarily, but the authors referred to below do not care to make this distinction. It is lost in their representation of conceptual art as a critical movement.

⁴⁵ Crow, “Unwritten Histories of Conceptual Art”, 213. The terms “withdrawal of visibility” and “suppression of the beholder”, used by Crow in this passage, were coined by Benjamin Buchloh and Charles Harrison respectively (see below).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 214-215.

⁴⁷ Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At. Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

⁴⁸ Michael Newman, “Conceptual Art from the 1960s to the 1990s: An Unfinished Project?”, in: *Kunst & Museumjournaal* 7:1/2/3 (1996), 97.

as the inescapable aesthetic rule for the end of the twentieth century.”⁴⁹ For Buchloh this “withdrawal of visibility” represented nothing less than a determined step towards a fully-fledged institutional critique.

What begins to be put in play here, then, is a critique that operates at the level of the aesthetic “institution”. It is a recognition that materials and procedures, surfaces and textures, locations and placement ... are always already inscribed within the conventions of language and thereby within institutional power and ideological and economic investment.⁵⁰

In several essays on conceptual art published between 1989 and 1991, Charles Harrison traced the lack of visibility in conceptual art to what he called “the suppression of the beholder”. In the catalogue for *l'Art conceptuel, une perspective*, he stated that “the intended suppression of the disinterested spectator” was a political move against the authoritative culture of modernism and its class-based idealised construction of an audience for art – “the ideally competent spectator/gentleman”.⁵¹ In another essay, published a year later, Harrison developed this argument further, suggesting a political activation of the artist’s “constituency” (that no longer consisted of “viewers” or “beholders”):

The suppression of the beholder was not simply a matter of making things that were radically unartistic or radically political – and in that sense unamenable to being beheld. Nor did it *simply* mean envisaging a different constituency. It meant establishing the grounds for a different kind of transaction.⁵²

According to Harrison, conceptual art confronted its (real or imagined) audience with a radical image of itself-as-audience: “the image of people of

⁴⁹ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969”, 119.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁵¹ Charles Harrison, “Art Object and Artwork”, in: cat. *l'Art conceptuel, une perspective*, 63-64.

⁵² Harrison, “Conceptual Art and Critical Judgment”, in: cat. *Art conceptuel formes conceptuelles* (Paris: Galerie 1900-2000 and Galerie de Poche, 1990); repr. in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 538-545. A revised and extended version appeared as “Conceptual Art and Its Criticism” in: Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting. Further Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 35-48, from which the present quote is taken (48).

whom something is demanded by the material presented to view: people challenged to act on that material and its place in a history that might or might not be their own, to take thought on the conditions of thought – or to keep quiet.”⁵³ The further implications of this activation of the audience remain unclear, as Harrison ends his essay here.⁵⁴

The second important tendency in the literature is closely related to the first: the representation of conceptual art as a revolutionary movement – a revolution that failed. Conceptual art is often seen as a radical attempt to overthrow the “establishment” of the art world and to fundamentally change its institutional structure: the system of galleries, museums, auction houses, private collectors, and critics, and the mundane economic power relations embedded in that system. The “dematerialised” practices of conceptual art are regarded as part of a strategy to prevent artistic work from being bought and sold and artists from falling into the traps of commodification and speculation. This anti-institutional objective is said to extend beyond the limits of the art world and to connect to the wider social and political movements of the late 1960s. As Lucy Lippard pointed out in 1973: “The era of Conceptual art ... was also the era of the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, the Women’s Liberation Movement, and the counter-culture”.⁵⁵ This political context was confirmed by artist Joseph Kosuth, who identified conceptual art in 1975 as “the art of the Vietnam war era.”⁵⁶ Artists linked to the conceptual movement challenged the authority and power of

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See also his essay “Conceptual Art and the Suppression of the Beholder”, in: Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language* [1991], new. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 29-62, in which he reads the radical art movements of the 1960s as an implicit critique of the assumption that “works of art are things made primarily to be looked at” (33).

⁵⁵ Lucy Lippard, “Escape Attempts”, in: Lippard, ed., *Six Years. The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* [1973], (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1997), vii. And from the same text: “Anti-establishment fervor in the 1960s focused on the de-mythologization and de-commodification of art, on the need for an independent (or ‘alternative’) art that could not be bought and sold by the greedy sector that owned everything that was exploiting the world and promoting the Vietnam war” (xiv).

⁵⁶ Kosuth, “1975”, *The Fox* 1:2 (1975); repr. in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 345.

conventional forms, roles and patterns that were deemed patriarchal, imperialist and undemocratic.⁵⁷

This radical agenda implied, among other things, that conceptual artists would attempt to reach their audience (or “receivers”, in Lawrence Weiner’s term⁵⁸) directly, without the interference of mediators and critics. Criticism – one of the powerful institutions in the art world – would become redundant. It appears that this tendency was taken very seriously in the years around 1970, by artists and critics alike. Barbara Rose wrote in *Artforum* in 1969:

By making immaterial, ephemeral or extra-objective work, the artist eliminates intrinsic quality. This challenges not only the market mechanism, but also the authority of the critic by rendering superfluous or irrelevant his role of connoisseur of value or gourmet of quality.⁵⁹

Lucy Lippard, John Chandler and Joseph Kosuth predicted the same “revolution” in 1968 and 1970.⁶⁰ As conceptual art, according to Blake Stimson, represents the historical moment where art aspires to a fully “intellectual” status, it is a significant given that artists not only took over the role of the critic in interpreting, criticising and defending their own and each other’s work, but also claimed an active part in the project of writing both the theory and history of conceptual art, as it was taking shape.⁶¹ Part of the revolutionary aspiration of the movement was thus an attempt to “demolish the distinctions between art practice, theory and criticism”.⁶²

As Stimson has shown, however, only a few years after the notion of conceptual art as a revolutionary movement surfaced in the discourse, the

⁵⁷ Stimson, “The Promise of Conceptual art”, *ibid.*, xxxviii-xlii.

⁵⁸ Weiner, “October 12, 1969”, in: Ursula Meyer, ed., *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972), 218.

⁵⁹ Rose, “The Politics of Art, Part III”, *Artforum* 7:9 (May 1969), 46. Quoted in Stimson, “The Promise of Conceptual art”, note 11.

⁶⁰ Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art”, *Art International* 12:2 (February 1968); repr. in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 49. Joseph Kosuth, “Introductory Note to *Art-Language* by the American Editor”, *Art-Language* 1:2 (February 1970); repr. in Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 39.

⁶¹ Stimson, *op. cit.*, xli.

⁶² Newman and Bird, “Introduction”, *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, 2.

idea of its failure also manifested itself.⁶³ By the early 1970s disappointment was already being voiced – interestingly enough, not by sceptical opponents, but by supporters such as Seth Siegelaub and Lucy Lippard – regarding the material effect conceptual practices had had in transforming the institutional structure of the art world. A breakthrough from the confines of the specialised art world to a wider audience had never taken place, lamented Lippard in her “Postface” of the anthology *Six Years*. She deplored the commercial breakthrough that had happened instead: conceptual artists were exhibiting in prestigious galleries and museums. Their work, no matter how ephemeral, was being sold and traded just like any specimen of object-based art from the past. The hoped-for democratic reform of the art world had not happened.

Clearly, whatever minor revolutions in communication have been achieved by the process of dematerializing the object (easily mailed work, catalogues and magazine pieces, primarily art that can be shown inexpensively and unobtrusively in infinite locations at one time), art and artist in a capitalist society remain luxuries.⁶⁴

In order to reach their audience, Lippard wrote, artists still depended on the same corrupted circle of mediators as before: “... a very small group of dealers, curators, critics, editors, and collectors who are all too frequently and often unknowingly bound by invisible apron strings to the ‘real world’s’ power structure ...”.⁶⁵ In the same year (1973), Seth Siegelaub, an art dealer who had contributed a great deal to the development of alternative distribution strategies for conceptual artistic practices, expressed his disappointment that the artists involved had in the end surrendered to – and agreed to profit from – the conventional economic mechanisms.⁶⁶

An interesting parallel can be drawn between the critical reception of conceptual art (in the late 1960s and early 1970s) and its subsequent art historical reception. In both contexts, writers sympathetic to the cause of

⁶³ Stimson, *op. cit.*, xlii.

⁶⁴ Lippard, “Postface”, *Six Years*, 263.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁶⁶ Michel Claura and Seth Siegelaub, “l’Art conceptuel”, *XXe siècle* 41 (December 1973), 156-159. English translation in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 286-290.

the movement were responsible for the most critical assessments of its legacy. (The explanation of this phenomenon is probably that they had taken its ambitions more seriously than anybody else.) They tend to describe the attempted institutional revolution as a downright failure – a short-lived liberation from the shackles of Spectacle, followed by an inevitable restoration. This is, for instance, the disillusioned conclusion of Benjamin Buchloh’s influential essay “Conceptual Art 1962-1969” (which I discuss in detail below):

[Conceptual art] fail[ed] to recognize that ... its transformation of audiences and distribution, its abolition of object status and commodity form – would most of all only be shortlived, almost immediately giving way to the return of the ghostlike reappearitions of (prematurely?) displaced painterly and sculptural paradigms of the past. So that the specular regime, which Conceptual Art claimed to have upset, would soon be reinstated with renewed vigor. Which is of course what happened.⁶⁷

A similar argument can be found in the writings of Charles Harrison, the British art historian who, as a member of artists’ collective Art & Language, could be seen to embody the successful collapse of the distinctions between art practice, theory and criticism, but who nevertheless looked back on conceptual art as “a failed cultural revolution” overshadowed by “the counter-revolutionary culture which was the culture of the 1980s.”⁶⁸ Hal Foster uttered equally bitter remarks concerning the radical promise of conceptual art during a round-table discussion in 2002. Foster, one of the editors of *October*, usually objects to the disillusionment of his colleague Buchloh, but on this occasion failed to do so.

In Conceptual art, the move to make art as transparent as possible had this pathos: art became ever more opaque, at least to viewers beyond an immediate milieu, beyond a coterie. ... The celebrated birth of the reader or of the viewer never really happened.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969”, 143.

⁶⁸ Harrison, “Conceptual Art and the Suppression of the Beholder”, 62.

⁶⁹ “Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism”, *October* 100 (Spring 2002), 215.

His remarks echo Lucy Lippard's lament in the concluding pages of *Six Years*, published almost thirty years before, about the "ghetto mentality predominant in the narrow and incestuous art world itself".⁷⁰

The problem with the idea of conceptual art as a revolutionary and anti-institutional movement is that it leaves little room for understanding the bureaucratic aspect of many of the works in question. This is the third notion to be discussed here.

The main activities of conceptual artists seemed to be the registering, documenting, filing, listing, archiving, and indexing of information. As early as 1966, Sol LeWitt made it clear that this bureaucratic aspect was not an accidental side effect, but something intended and even programmatic. He compared the artist to a clerk:

The aim of the artist would be to give viewers information. ... He would follow his predetermined premise to its conclusion avoiding subjectivity. Chance, taste or unconsciously remembered forms would play no part in the outcome. The serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloguing the results of his premise.⁷¹

This bureaucratic aspect has been more or less acknowledged in the art historical reception of conceptualism, but it is one that appears to be incompatible with the anti-institutional reading of the art. Authors promoting that radical view – including Benjamin Buchloh (see below) – clearly have trouble coming to terms with the bureaucratic aspect. It is not difficult to see why. It represents the extent to which conceptual art was *not* critical, but affirmative and perhaps even conformist. It is the mimetic side of the work – the side based on an imitation of the processes and instruments of management, administration and control.

When considered aesthetically – as a repetitive, non-expressive compilation or treatment of mostly worthless materials – the mimesis of management and administration could still be seen as mildly subversive or unorthodox and thus, in a limited sense, as critical, but in the wider social

⁷⁰ Lippard, "Postface", *Six Years*, 264.

⁷¹ LeWitt, "Serial Project #1, 1966", *Aspen Magazine* 5-6 (1967), n.p. Quoted in: Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969", 140.

and institutional context this critical implication quickly vanishes. The imitation of the omnipresent bureaucratic regime, known from its many corporate, governmental and institutional manifestations, threatens to establish a connection between conceptual artists and the innermost circles of managerial power and control.⁷²

In retrospect, some of the artists involved have drawn remarkably radical conclusions that most art historians would shy away from. Art & Language members Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, for example, stated in 1988 that the administrative or bureaucratic aesthetic of conceptual art had paved the way for the entrepreneurial, managerial profile of the contemporary artist. Baldwin wrote: "... what we were creating was an iconography of *administration*. The artist turned businessman and worse is one of the legacies of Conceptual art."⁷³ Ramsden concurred with this: "Conceptual art was the first upwardly mobile art. It moved artists into the same role, into the same space, as that of managers and curators."⁷⁴ In 1981 Ian Burn, a self-proclaimed "ex-Conceptual artist" and as such even more critical than Baldwin and Ramsden, pointed out that the procedures of conceptual art were actually based on a capitalist division of labour.

What was witnessed with Conceptual Art was an absolute separation of mental or intellectual from manual work, with a revaluating of the intellectual and a devaluating of the manual. It is hard to avoid the analogy with the role of management in industry, but would we say that the mental work of management was a "dematerialization" of the manual work? Of course not: the mental work represents the withdrawal of mental decision-making out of

⁷² In 1972 *Artforum* published a harsh essay by critic Max Kozloff, who condemned conceptual artists, among other things, for their lack of political responsibility: "... the eliminating of objects is suspect in a crew of artists who have a fear of being explicit and a horror of being held accountable. A credibility gap exists in our art life just as it does in our political world, for the reason that, in both, people are systematically abstracted from their humanity and considered as receivers of stimuli – a mass that exists only to be conditioned. Conceivably the art scene here is a frivolous microcosm of big power rhetoric and manipulations. I am impressed, in any case, by the bureaucratic tendencies of art-as-idea – the fact that ever more extraneous, repetitious, and purposeless work fills the air with crypto-efficiency." Kozloff, "The Trouble with Art-as-Idea", *Artforum* 11:1 (September 1972), 261-265; repr. in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 268-277 (quote on 276).

⁷³ Michael Baldwin, "Conceptual Questionnaire", *Flash Art* 143 (November-December 1988), 106.

⁷⁴ Mary Anne Staniszewski, "Mel Ramsden Interview", *ibid.*, 107.

manual production, in order that management might more readily control production and workers. If the analogy is applied back to Conceptual Art, one is left with endless questions about why art should mimic that structure, why at this particular time, and so on.⁷⁵

In chapters 3 and 4 below I develop a “post-conceptual” reading of contemporary art which integrates reflections such as those by Baldwin, Ramsden and Burn about the artist-as-manager. The background for this reading is the entrepreneurial status contemporary artists have acquired since the 1990s, which calls for a renewed look at the legacy of conceptual art.

In the remainder of this section I attempt a closer identification of the major paradoxes in the art historical reception of conceptual art by focusing on the work of three authors: Benjamin Buchloh, Alexander Alberro and Charles Harrison. In the case of Buchloh and Alberro, the paradox lies in the aesthetic of bureaucracy and administration. In that of Harrison, attention shifts to the joint paradoxes of artistic quality, aesthetic value and critical judgment. The point of my critical reading is not to underline the flaws in these texts or to prove their futility, but rather to identify the fundamental problems that any serious art historical treatment of conceptual art sooner or later has to deal with. It is only by recognising the relation between the ambiguous nature of the conceptual project and their own disciplinary practice that art historians may be able to resolve those ambiguities rather than reproduce them.

No account of the bureaucratic dimension of conceptual art can be considered complete without a reference to Benjamin Buchloh’s essay “Conceptual Art 1962-1969” (published in its final version in *October* in 1990). In this influential text,⁷⁶ Buchloh sketches the post-war rise of a new

⁷⁵ Ian Burn, “The Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath (or the Memoirs of an Ex-Conceptual Artist)”, in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 403. Originally published in *Art & Text* 1:1 (Fall 1981), 49-65.

⁷⁶ Recent anthologies on conceptual art abound with references to Buchloh’s essay. See, for example, Michael Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art. Theory, Myth, and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Alexander Alberro

middle class of managers and office workers, whose social identity is “one of merely administering labor and production (rather than producing) and of the distribution of commodities.”⁷⁷ By the 1960s, developments in the late capitalist economy had transformed the managerial elite into a central and powerful social class.⁷⁸ Buchloh points out a structural analogy between the “aesthetic of administration” as featured in conceptual art and the social identity of the new middle class that formed the audience for the post-war culture industry. Like corporate managers and administrators, conceptual artists tended to do paper work rather than perform physical labour. Thus they took Duchamp’s readymade one step further away from traditional studio practice:

Just as the readymade had negated not only figurative representation, authenticity, and authorship while introducing repetition and the series (i.e., the law of industrial production) to replace the studio aesthetic of the handcrafted original, Conceptual Art came to displace even that image of the mass-produced object and its aestheticized forms in Pop Art, replacing an aesthetic of industrial production and consumption with an aesthetic of administrative and legal organization and institutional validation.⁷⁹

How had this analogy between artists and administrators come about? Was the bureaucratic order of conceptual art part of a lucid critical strategy? Did conceptual artists consciously mimic the logic of administration and bureaucracy, or was their production only a symptom of shared socio-economic conditions? Buchloh repeatedly addresses these important issues.

What still remains open for discussion, of course, is the extent to which Conceptual Art of a certain type shared these conditions, or even enacted and implemented them in the sphere of the aesthetic – accounting, perhaps, for its subsequent proximity and success within a world of advertisement strategists – or, alternatively, the extent to which it merely inscribed itself into the inescapable logic

and Sabeth Buchmann, eds., *Art after Conceptual Art*, Generali Foundation collection series (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

⁷⁷ Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969”, 128.

⁷⁸ For a reflection on the terminology of “late capitalism” in relation to post-industrial society and postmodernism I refer to Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London/New York: Verso, 1991), ix-xxii.

⁷⁹ Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969”, 119.

of a totally administered world, as Adorno's notorious term identified it.⁸⁰

Ten pages on, after quoting Sol LeWitt's description of the artist as an office clerk, Buchloh rephrases the issue in slightly more straightforward terms: "Inevitably the question arises how such restrictive definitions of the artist as a cataloguing clerk can be reconciled with the subversive and radical implications of Conceptual Art."⁸¹ Does he come up with a fully resolved and satisfying answer to this question? Buchloh writes that conceptual works of art "coincide ... in their rigorous redefinition of relationships between audience, object, and author."⁸² Yet he states on the next page that "... from its inception Conceptual Art was distinguished by its acute sense of discursive and institutional limitations, its self-imposed restrictions, its lack of totalising vision, its critical devotion to the factual conditions of artistic production and reception without aspiring to overcome the mere facticity of these conditions."⁸³ How to reconcile these two characteristics of conceptual art – on the one hand, its revolutionary tendency to "redefine relationships", on the other its radical acceptance of "factual conditions"? To squarely identify conceptual art as the starting point of institutional critique is to ignore the quasi-conformist or mimetic side of the work. What kind of explanatory model could integrate these two aspects?

It seems that Buchloh's moral objections to "the society of the spectacle" and the culture industry are such that they prevent him from answering his own questions. In the final analysis he accepts that a fundamental contradiction of conceptual art remains unresolved – the fact "that the critical annihilation of cultural conventions itself immediately acquires the conditions of the spectacle, that the insistence on artistic anonymity and the demolition of authorship produces instant brand names and identifiable products, and that the campaign to critique conventions of visibility with textual interventions, billboard signs, anonymous handouts, and pamphlets inevitably ends by following the preestablished mechanisms

⁸⁰ Ibid., 129.

⁸¹ Ibid., 140.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 141.

of advertising and marketing campaigns.”⁸⁴ A more eloquent phrasing of the major paradox of conceptual art can scarcely be imagined.

Remarkably, a critical operation that Buchloh in principle supports – signalled by “the withdrawal of visuality” – leads to an outcome that he fundamentally despises. The ambiguities of the essay’s conclusion therefore do not come as a surprise. In the final analysis, he writes, conceptual art was a decisive step in the self-inflicted and irreversible demolition of the autonomous artistic domain. It

subject[ed] the last residues of artistic aspiration toward transcendence (by means of traditional studio skills and privileged modes of experience) to the rigorous and relentless order of the vernacular of administration. ... it mimed the operating logic of late capitalism and its positivist instrumentality in an effort to place its auto-critical investigations at the service of liquidating even the last remnants of traditional aesthetic experience.⁸⁵

In their critical revision of the parameters of artistic production, conceptual artists naively assisted the late capitalist regime in bringing the privileged realm of the artist under its rule. Although Buchloh may always have had mixed feelings about those privileges, due to their alleged roots in mystifications, he clearly regards this as a dubious achievement, as it is

inextricably tied to a profound and irreversible loss: a loss not caused by artistic practice, of course, but one to which that practice responded in the full optimism of its aspirations, failing to recognize that the purging of image and skill, of memory and vision, within visual aesthetic representation was not just another heroic step in the inevitable progress of Enlightenment to liberate the world from mythical forms of perception and hierarchical modes of specialized experience, but that it was also yet another, perhaps the last of the erosions (and perhaps the most effective and devastating one) to which the traditionally separate sphere of artistic production had been subjected in its perpetual efforts to emulate the regnant episteme within the paradigmatic frame proper to art itself.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ibid., 140.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 142-143.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 143.

“Or worse yet...”, he adds, and concludes his essay with the passage quoted above about the return of “painterly and sculptural paradigms of the past” and the reinstatement of the “specular regime” in the later 1970s and 1980s.

To summarise: in the course of this essay Buchloh criticises conceptual artists first for being tautological and positivistic; then for conforming to the commercial logic of advertising and marketing; also for altogether erasing the domain of high art; and finally for having had no long-term effect at all. Apart from the moral indignation of the author, it is difficult to see how these reproaches add up to a coherent assessment of the art in question. Nevertheless, Buchloh’s essay remains a remarkable attempt to analyze the paradoxical achievements of conceptual art in the light of the socio-economic conditions of the post-war era. The questions it poses and the dilemmas it lays bare have never lost their urgency.

In *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (2003) Alexander Alberro extends some of Benjamin Buchloh’s ideas, but without the latter’s unproductive moralism. From the first pages of his book, Alberro is clear that the advent of conceptual art is linked to fundamental changes in capitalist society. He relates it to

the new kind of society ... described as postindustrial, information, and consumer society, [and] marked, among other things, by novel modes of communication and distribution of information, new types of consumption, an ever-more-rapid rhythm of fashion and style changes, and the proliferation of advertising and the media to an unprecedented degree. Providing services and manipulating information became the heart of this new economic paradigm⁸⁷

In this post-industrial context, artists whom we now identify as conceptual most radically embraced a businesslike model of artistic practice, strategically centred on notions of publicity, marketing and entrepreneurship. “Indeed, conceptualism’s unusual formal features and mode of circulation in many ways utilise and enact the deeper logic of informatisation.”⁸⁸ By disconnecting concept from execution, or

⁸⁷ Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 2003), 2-3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

information from visualisation, “these artists replicated not only capitalism’s division of mental and physical labor, but also its privileging of the planning and design stage of production over the procedure of construction.”⁸⁹ Thus, he places conceptual art right at the heart of post-industrial society. It should be noted, though, that he does not address the bureaucratic aspect of the art as such.

The main protagonist in Alberro’s book – which focuses exclusively on New York and the American east coast – is Seth Siegelau, the art dealer who played a prominent role in promoting and distributing the work and ideas of artists Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner, Douglas Huebler and Joseph Kosuth. Alberro wants to show that, in the socio-economic conditions of the late 1960s, dealers rather than critics had become the most important mediators for visual artists.⁹⁰ Siegelau replaced the exhibition space of the art gallery with various printed media such as newspapers, magazines, journals, catalogues, and invitation cards, using the virtual space of publicity and advertising as an ephemeral and “dematerialised” exhibition medium. For artists whose work primarily consisted of the proposed, imagined, or realised transfer of information, this was, according to Alberro, a perfect distribution strategy: “... the absolute negation of preciousness that characterized these works, together with their dissemination in mass communication networks, eliminated uniqueness and rendered artworks more readily accessible than ever before.”⁹¹

Alberro tries to erase all possible doubts concerning the critical aims of this artistic enterprise. He identifies two general objectives of conceptual art, the first being the demystification of artistry. Conceptual art, he writes, was a conscious attempt at rectifying the idealised image of the artist “as that person who, on the basis of a craftsmanlike maintenance of traditional skills, emblemized the unity of the psyche, society and culture based on the synthesis of physical, mental, spiritual, and technical work.”⁹² The artist as businessman or information manager was the model offered to replace the modernist type with its romantic, bohemian

⁸⁹ Ibid., 100.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 8-10.

⁹¹ Ibid., 128.

⁹² Ibid., 100.

overtones. Secondly, conceptual artists intended to eliminate the special aura of the work of art:

... the work, like advertising, becomes an object whose use value is located in its publicity and sign value. The work abolishes all claims to aesthetic value and to the auratic glow that formerly gave prestige to art.⁹³

In contrast to the late modernist art practice of the 1940s and '50s, conceptual artists refused "to differentiate art from the information that surrounded it and the exhibition and distribution context in which it appeared ...". As a result, the "critical and evaluative categories" that sanction the differentiation between high art and mass culture, between art and non-art, became defunct.⁹⁴

According to Alberro, the critical impulse of conceptual art was directed against "the institutional containment of art".⁹⁵ He places the movement in the political context of the Art Workers Coalition, stating that there was "a manifest need in the newly politicized art world for a truly democratic, public art that challenged the authority not only of museums but of 'all art institutions and conditions' ".⁹⁶ However, his claim that the artistic production of Huebler, Weiner, Barry and Kosuth was the perfect response to this need is not entirely convincing. Even if their work found its audience by way of the printed media, ignoring "the confines of the pristine gallery or museum",⁹⁷ it would be a misrepresentation to say that it actually escaped from the institutional condition of the art world. The prominence of Siegelau's role as a professionally recognised mediator is a case in point.

In his attempt to accommodate conceptual art to the progressive political agenda of late 1960s counter-culture, Alberro glosses over the bureaucratic dimension of conceptual art. One understands why: the connotations of bureaucracy seem incompatible with the desire for "a truly democratic, public art". After all, the image of the artist as a clerk (LeWitt)

⁹³ Ibid., 131.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 129. Alberro is quoting here from an Art Workers Coalition "Open Hearing" flyer (1969).

⁹⁷ Ibid., 122.

evokes an almost mechanical processing of information, while the related image of the artist as a manager implies authority, hierarchy, and top-down instructions. Neither of these two models – clerk and manager – sits easily with the political zeitgeist of “1968”.

Like Benjamin Buchloh, Alexander Alberro is unable to reconcile the bureaucratic aspect of conceptual art with its supposedly critical aims. He points out certain discrepancies, which he nevertheless fails to explain. As conceptual artists challenged the traditional notion of authorship, the result was “an increased anxiety concerning ownership and authorship” among dealers, collectors and other parties involved.⁹⁸ This anxiety was partly resolved, as Alberro shows, by the introduction of contracts and legal certificates meant to guarantee the authenticity of specific works, to identify the rights of the artists who had produced them, and to specify the terms of their acquisition by institutional or private collectors. (Seth Siegelaub played a major role in conceiving these legal documents and promoting their use.) Even if this legalistic and bureaucratic trend was driven by the progressive ideals of demystification and de-auratisation, the effect it had was the opposite, writes Alberro. In fact it aligned the art with the priorities of the market. The Artist’s Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement (1971) “served to confine even work that existed only as abstract idea or, alternately, only as widely dispersed documentation within its capital relations, and thus inserted conceptual art into the art market as a pure commodity or bill of sale.”⁹⁹ Even more fundamentally, the campaign against the “auratic glow” of the artwork was effectively neutralised by this use of certificates and contracts. “The aura absent from conceptual art was thereby reintroduced in the auratisation of the signature.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, in the final pages of his study, Alberro implicitly works towards the conclusion that the two critical objectives of conceptual art – the demystification of artishood and the eradication of the aura of the work of art – had not been fully realised.

All this leads to the question of whether those objectives were as clear-cut as we may like to think they were. Was the conceptual campaign

⁹⁸ Ibid., 164.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 169.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

against the aura of the work of art and the privileged status of the artist perhaps no more than a temporary whim of a small group of artists? Alberro's account of this history also raises another question: How closely is the "auratic glow" of art connected to the notion of aesthetic value? Forty years after the historical climax of conceptualism, with conceptual works on display among the collection highlights of major art museums worldwide, we may wonder whether it truly represented a move against (rather than a redefinition of) aesthetic value.¹⁰¹

An interesting approach to these questions can be found in several texts on conceptual art written by Charles Harrison and published between 1990 and 2004. They centre on notions of "quality" and "aesthetic value", even though the author admits that "the avant-garde of the late 1960s and early 1970s has rightly been associated with a certain subversiveness as regards the conventions of artistic quality."¹⁰² In his essay "Conceptual Art and Its Criticism" (2001), an earlier version of which appeared in 1990 as "Conceptual Art and Critical Judgment",¹⁰³ the author states that it is impossible for art historians to discuss conceptual art without making critical distinctions.¹⁰⁴ Even the simple task of distinguishing between works of art and mere documents involves the application of certain criteria and hierarchies. Harrison recognises that it would be wrong to reintroduce "the question of qualitative discrimination" in the case of an art for which this question was "otiose or irrelevant". However, he suggests, as neither the art market nor curatorial and museum practice tends to reflect actively on the mechanisms and criteria of selection and valuation, this task falls to

¹⁰¹ For a philosophical treatment of this question I refer to Peter Osborne, "Art beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Criticism, Art History and Contemporary Art", *Art History* 27:4 (September 2004), 651-670. According to Osborne, it was the irony of conceptual art "to have demonstrated the ineliminability of the aesthetic as a *necessary*, though *radically insufficient*, component of the art work through the failure of its attempt at its elimination, the failure of an absolute anti-aesthetic" (664).

¹⁰² "Conceptual Art and Its Criticism", in: Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting. Further Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 2001), 37.

¹⁰³ See note 52 above.

¹⁰⁴ Harrison refers to "the relationship between historical understanding and critical discrimination." ("Conceptual Art and Its Criticism", 37.)

critical art historians.¹⁰⁵ When considering conceptual works of art, the only issue that matters to him is the extent to which they break with the authority of modernism.¹⁰⁶ The work “should be opaque – other – vis-à-vis that account of the history of art that represented the progressive reduction of means as a logic of development.” For Harrison, the tendency towards dematerialisation, often seen as a crucial quality in conceptual art, is nothing but an uncritical continuation of the modernist reduction of means; it presupposes a “theoretical and social continuity” with both the practices and the audiences of the modernist avant-garde. It is the task of art historians to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant forms of conceptualism – to separate “those works that were effective prolongations of the critical system [of modernism] from those that proposed some sort of new beginning insofar as they reduced it to absurdity.”¹⁰⁷ Harrison has no hesitation in taking this task upon himself.

He reserves his positive judgment mainly for early works by Art & Language – the artists’ collective of which he was himself a member. Their work in the late 1960s, he writes, grew out of a desire to undermine the authority of the modernist viewer by obstructing the “mechanisms of validation”.¹⁰⁸ In order to achieve a transformation of the competence of the audience, Art & Language produced works that were disappointing from a modernist perspective, while based on an alternative artistic competence.

Viewed under their phenomenological and morphological aspects they remained – and remain – insignificant, inconstant, or absurd. Into the resulting aesthetic void they instilled the demand for a reading – that is to say, a demand that Modernist beholders could not easily satisfy without abandoning the secure grounds of their own authority.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 37-38.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 42. On this point see also Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, “Modernity and Modernism Reconsidered”, in: Paul Wood et al., eds., *Modernism in Dispute. Art Since the Forties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 170-256.

¹⁰⁷ Harrison, “Conceptual Art and Its Criticism”, 42-43.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 43.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 44. See also Harrison’s essay “Art Object and Artwork”, in: cat. *l’Art conceptuel, une perspective*, in which he identifies the aim of Art & Language “to disqualify the competent spectator presupposed in the aesthetic discourse of Modernist culture, and to unseat him from his position as an ideal arbiter of taste” (63).

However, we are meant to consider Art & Language as an exceptional case. Harrison makes his negative judgment of the work of many other conceptual artists explicitly clear. Neither “stylistic monomania” (as in the case of Hanne Darboven, Daniel Buren, and On Kawara) nor an “overtly sociopolitical program” (Hans Haacke and Martha Rosler), he says, suffices to effectively overthrow the modernist rule of “depth and complexity”.¹¹⁰ These evaluative criteria, Harrison goes on to explain, remain for him – perhaps not surprisingly – the only relevant ones anyway, notwithstanding the modernist context in which they have so often been put to use. His argument is simply that radical art practices of the 1960s and ’70s failed to produce alternative criteria that he finds convincing and viable. Instead, those practices tended to produce works that “are liable either to establish themselves in a thoroughly conventional world of art or to be absorbed without remainder into the larger world they purport to invade.” And he continues his verdict:

In the first case the works thus represented are subject to whatever institutional or fashionable criteria may happen to prevail. In the second case they do indeed put themselves beyond the concerns of evaluative criticism of art, but only by failing to be of interest as intentional objects under some critically significant description. In neither case do they offer any novel address or alternative to the requirement of cognitive depth in art.¹¹¹

Oddly, Harrison implies that conceptual artists have failed to make him revise his quality criteria, only to use that as an argument against the quality of their work. This paradox – the paradox of critical judgment – plays a central role in the legacy of conceptual art, as we shall see later.

In resisting the rule of the spectacular and the superficial – what he calls “noncognitive effectiveness”¹¹² – Harrison draws attention to his own evaluative criteria: “depth and complexity”. These two words, used repeatedly throughout his text, sound almost like a magic incantation; they make their appearance without the support of any discursive framework. How is one to decide whether a given work of art is “deep”? And when is a

¹¹⁰ Harrison, “Conceptual Art and Its Criticism”, 45.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 47.

work “complex”? Are depth and complexity necessarily qualities intended by the artist or can they simply occur? One could object that Harrison’s criteria serve as a shortcut to a reconstructed myth of creativity and personal inspiration – “the fiction of the artist as creator”, as Harrison himself still called it in 1989.¹¹³ One conclusion could be that, despite all his claims to the contrary, Harrison remains heavily indebted to a modernist (Greenbergian) logic; that he uses his radical tools only to prolong the lifespan of an “old” (modernist) notion of quality in art. (Even his intention to judge conceptual works by their subversion of modernist orthodoxy is a negative historical determination that, as such, remains trapped in the linear model of history that he claims to reject.)

In a text published in 2004 – fourteen years after “Conceptual Art and Critical Judgment” – Charles Harrison displays a sharp awareness of the fact that his previous pleas for quality and aesthetic value were always rather problematic. In the following passage he admits that, due to the impact of conceptual art, there is no longer any immanent standard for quality in art and thus no firm basis on which to make qualitative discriminations other than contingent ones. Ever since 1970 – my postulated starting date for the post-conceptual production system of contemporary art – “quality” has been a tainted notion, says Harrison.

The question that hangs over the Conceptual Art movement is this: if it is no longer useful or relevant to distinguish between works of art through analyses of their shapes and colours, if, indeed, there are no intrinsic properties by means of which an object can be recognised as an *art* object, how is criticism – and more importantly *self*-criticism – to proceed, and on what basis? If it is the case that certain works are “talked” into importance by the inhabitants of the artworld, is this all that criticism really amounts to? Are there other grounds on which to distinguish the exceptional from the indifferent – or from the mildly interesting, the passable, the good-in-its-way and so on – or are such distinctions bound in the end to lose all substance once accuracy of resemblance ceases to be a relevant criterion? It is certainly the case that since the early 1970s the concept of “quality” has become virtually unusable in art criticism, and has had to be abandoned to its compromising

¹¹³ Harrison, “Art Object and Artwork”, 64. In this perspective, both the aura of artishood and the authority of connoisseurship seem to have survived what Harrison and Paul Wood elsewhere refer to as “a passage *through* the critique of authorship”. Harrison and Wood, “Modernity and Modernism Reconsidered”, 254.

association with the snobbery of connoisseurship and the auction house, and to its disastrous co-option to the jargon of educational administrators and management consultants. Does this tell us something about the failure of a specific cultural regime – one that can no longer plausibly defend the autonomy of its values – or is it indicative of a significant change in the very meaning of art, which until recently had tended to be virtually synonymous with its perceived aesthetic merit?¹¹⁴

Phrased as a series of (rhetorical) questions, this lucid passage identifies the crucial nexus between the historical moment of conceptualism and the general characteristics of contemporary art. More specifically, Harrison argues here that the changed historical conditions responsible for the rise of conceptual art have structurally transformed the basis of critical evaluation. And it is this historical transformation that indeed marks the onset of contemporary art – the singular system of cultural production in which, to borrow a phrase from Donald Judd, a work “needs only to be interesting”.¹¹⁵

• 6. THE LEGACY OF CONCEPTUAL ART

In this final section of the introduction I present my main argument about the legacy of conceptual art. I should emphasise right at the beginning that I will not be looking into the “influence” of the movement on individual contemporary artists – artists who might be thought to represent, in one way or another, the “neo-conceptual” art of today. Instead, I am interested in describing the structural effect that conceptual art has had on the system of artistic production and reception known as “contemporary art”. This is an overall, global effect that is equally real for contemporary artists of all kinds, as it determines the fundamentals of artistic practice. My approach implies the conviction that a critical evaluation of conceptual art should go hand in

¹¹⁴ Harrison, “Conceptual Art, the Aesthetic and the End(s) of Art”, in: Gillian Perry and Paul Wood, eds., *Themes in Contemporary Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 69-70.

¹¹⁵ “Specific Objects” (1965), in: Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959-1975: Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Reports, Statements, Complaints* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 184.

hand with an analysis of the system of contemporary art as a whole, in general terms. This is what I hope to achieve in the pages that follow.

As I have shown in the previous section, a discussion of the legacy of conceptual art can easily evolve into a discussion of the legacy of the counterculture and the protest movements of the 1960s. Exactly this idea – conceptual art as “the art of the Vietnam war era”¹¹⁶ – has contributed to the rather one-sided assessment of conceptual art as a revolution that failed. At this point, a different, more businesslike view of conceptual art may be more productive, especially since the cool and detached nature of many conceptual works of art hardly matches the overheated anti-authoritarian thrust of “1968”. In addition, I intend to show in this thesis that the counter-cultural reading of conceptual art is unconvincing and barely supported by the evidence. To say that conceptualism was a real, politically motivated attempt to subvert the institutional and commercial infrastructure of the art world is to cherish rather naive expectations, as Robert Smithson suggested in 1972.¹¹⁷

In this respect I agree with Michael Newman, who has explicitly warned against idealising the conceptual art movement. In 1996 he wrote:

To treat Conceptual Art as a purely positive phenomenon or as a definitive overcoming of contradictions would be to deny its own project. ... In retrospect it may be seen that Conceptual Art was a part of what it opposed: that it both involved a defensive mimicry of bureaucratic culture, and remained parasitic on the institutions it subjected to critique.¹¹⁸

Following this train of thought, I want to suggest that works by conceptual artists structurally reflect the institutional framework of the system of artistic production and the artist’s dependence on that framework. (My use of the term “reflect” in this context is not meant to suggest that works of art passively or automatically mirror their social, cultural or institutional

¹¹⁶ Kosuth, “1975”, *The Fox* 1:2 (1975), 87-96; repr. in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 334-348 (quote on 345).

¹¹⁷ “Production for Production’s Sake” (1972), in: Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 378; repr. in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 284-285.

¹¹⁸ Newman, “Conceptual Art from the 1960s to the 1990s: An Unfinished Project?”, 102.

conditions. Rather, it refers to practices in which the artist deliberately makes the work reflect external conditions, as an artistic strategy.) Conceptual artists refused to give their audience what it wanted – a robust affirmation of the sovereign and expressive creativity of man. Instead, what viewers received was an affirmation of the implication of the art in its institutional context.¹¹⁹ Paradoxically, this was the only way for conceptual artists to salvage the idea of artishood.

I agree with Michael Newman that conceptualism is an unresolved project, and that its relevance to the art practice of today lies precisely in that lack of resolution and closure. But does this mean it is also an *unfinished* project that could be picked up and continued today? Here I disagree with Newman's views. The return or continuation of conceptual art that he foresees¹²⁰ is essentially inconceivable, since there are now neither grounds nor instruments for discriminating between neo-conceptual and non-conceptual works of art. This is precisely the legacy of conceptual art. Contemporary art as a whole is "post-conceptual". This does not mean that it has transcended or overcome the paradoxes of conceptualism; on the contrary, the entire field of artistic production is now determined, on a fundamental level, by conditions that conceptual artists recognised and addressed in their work. In my definition, contemporary art is a phenomenon that has evolved out of the paradoxes of the conceptual movement. Or, to phrase it differently: the conceptual art episode marked the systemic transition from modern to contemporary art around 1970. Here I follow Peter Osborne's thesis:

... it is *only* in relation to the category of conceptual art, in its inherent problematicity, that a critical-historical experience of contemporary art is possible. In this respect, "post-conceptual art" is not the name for a particular type of art, so much as the

¹¹⁹ According to Charles Harrison, conceptual art entailed "a militant assertion of art's implication in its own distributive and promotional structures, and of its adjacency to and implication in text". "The Trouble with Writing", in: Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting*, 21.

¹²⁰ "Conceptual Art opened up possibilities for critical artistic intervention the range of which has not yet been exhausted ...". Newman, "Conceptual Art from the 1960s to the 1990s: An Unfinished Project?", 103.

historical-ontological condition for the production of contemporary art in general ...¹²¹

In what follows I will present my analysis of this post-conceptual condition of contemporary art.

Contemporary art is a generic form of artistic production.¹²² Artists can choose from an infinite number of media and techniques, such as drawing, writing, painting, film, video, sculpture, assemblage, montage, installation, performance, photography and sound, or any combination of these, but the choice of a specific medium is subordinate to whatever experience or “content” they intend to offer to an audience. The medium no longer defines either the stakes of the work or the reputation of the artist. This is what has been called the “post-medium condition” of contemporary art.¹²³ Not just the medium, but also the notion of “style” has lost the prominent position it occupied well into the 1960s; it no longer has any critical and discriminative potential. Movements and trends in contemporary art are no longer evaluated on stylistic grounds, but screened for some new artistic “concept”. The visual appearance of a work of art is often seen as secondary to the ideas at the root of it. This is not some kind of decadent mannerism, but a result of the fact that art has internalised its own critical discourse. Contemporary art is discursive through and through. In the words of Philip Fisher: “Any work of art now occurs within a culture of intellectualized criticism.”¹²⁴ The open and generic character of contemporary art implies that with each new work it provides new legitimacy for itself. As Osborne

¹²¹ Osborne, “Art beyond Aesthetics”, 666.

¹²² Cf. Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 1996).

¹²³ Cf. Rosalind Krauss, “A Voyage on the North Sea”. *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London/New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999).

¹²⁴ Philip Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art. Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 90. Symptoms of this condition are “the close connection of the arts with the university, with sophisticated verbal analysis in art journals, with systematic ordering in histories of art, and in the one- or two-semester courses through which most young people first encounter art” (ibid.).

suggests, this can be seen both as proof of the ongoing critical vitality of contemporary art and as a sign of a deep and structural crisis.¹²⁵

Contemporary art as a whole is characterised by a remarkable lack of craftsmanship. Although individual artists may demonstrate particular technical skills and mastery, such qualities are always specific to an oeuvre and unrelated to any collective standard or rule. No general skills are inherent in the practice of contemporary art; instead, skills are always imported from outside into the field of art as part of an individual artistic strategy. It is only through this act of appropriation that particular skills can become momentarily relevant in the art context. There is no general set of competences that anyone needs to master in order to be able rightfully to claim to be an artist, just as there are no *a priori* criteria – either technical or aesthetic – for deciding what counts as a work of art, or even a *successful* work of art, and what doesn't. If the field of contemporary art represents a specific competence, it is certainly not consensual. Each individual work can and must be read as a provisional statement by the artist on the nature of artistic competence.¹²⁶

All this means that a quality judgment in contemporary art is never a matter of applying certain rules or following a checklist. Both professional and non-professional viewers judge works of art without recourse to any set of quality criteria external to themselves or to the object in question. They do so by evaluating or “testing” the artistic proposal that is presented to them (“This is a work of art”). De Duve has shown that, in principle, given the absence of rules and conventions, anyone is equipped to make an aesthetic judgment. No one can claim *a priori* to be in a better or more knowledgeable position than anyone else. Although specialist knowledge and specialised knowledge providers still prevail, the traditional figure of the connoisseur is unthinkable in the context of contemporary art.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Osborne, “Art beyond Aesthetics”, 654.

¹²⁶ Cf. Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 263: “Most works of contemporary art, if they aspire beyond conformity or anachronism, are de facto suggestions as to what a work of contemporary art might be in circumstances such as these”. See also Thierry de Duve’s argument as to why “art as a whole must be judged case by case” (*Kant after Duchamp*, 359).

¹²⁷ De Duve: “The artist chooses an object and calls it art, or, what amounts to the same, places it in such a context that the object itself demands to be called art (which means that, if only privately and solipsistically, the artist has already called it

The social and cultural status of contemporary artists is not fundamentally undermined by the lack of craftsmanship in their trade, even if this does make them vulnerable to populist attacks and media hype (“Is *this* art?”). Given the discursive nature of contemporary art, artists have the freedom to delegate or subcontract the execution of a work, so long as this appears to be in agreement with the artistic concept. Contemporary art may be the art form in which the largest portion of the physical work is *not* done by the “authors” themselves, but by assistants or skilled artisans, in factories or specialised workshops. Yet this is hardly a controversial issue in the art world of today. An artist may choose to have a concept or design executed by others, provided that he or she accepts full responsibility for setting the parameters and monitoring the quality of the execution. This seems to be the one fundamental condition limiting the freedom of the “deskilled author” in contemporary art. As I show in my essays on the artist as designer (chapters 3 and 4 below), the radical disregard of quality control by conceptual artists – their readiness to accept any outcome of the execution of a concept – has long lost its intellectual lustre.

Nevertheless, it should be clear by now that the basic features of contemporary artishood described above have evolved out of conceptual art. The post-medium condition is intimately connected to the notion of “concept”. It became part of the mainstream of artistic practice in the 1960s, the modernist notion of medium-specificity having become obsolete.¹²⁸ The aspect of “deskilling” has a longer history, starting in the second half of the nineteenth century with the work of Manet, the Impressionists, and the Neo-Impressionists; in many ways it was the primary “drive” of modern art, until it climaxed in the 1960s.¹²⁹ Benjamin Buchloh has proposed that the

art). The spectator simply repeats the artist’s judgment. Anyone can do it; the required skill, the know-how, is nil; it is accessible to the layman.” (Ibid., 312.)

¹²⁸ For an original account of this history, see Jeff Wall, *Depiction, Object, Event. Hermes Lecture 2006* (’s-Hertogenbosch: Stichting Hermeslezing, 2006).

¹²⁹ “Throughout modernity, artistic strategies resist and deny the established claims for technical virtuosity, for exceptional skills, and for conformity with the accepted standards of historical models. They deny the aesthetic any privileged status whatsoever and debase it with all the means of deskilling, by taking recourse to an abject or low-cultural iconography, or by the emphatic foregrounding of procedures and materials that reinsert the disavowed dimensions of repressed somatic experience back into the space of artistic experience.” Buchloh, “The Social

deskilling of the artist was mirrored in a similar deconditioning of the viewer, who from that moment on no longer needed any special competence in order fully to appreciate the art:

... a traditional, hierarchical model of privileged experience based on authorial skills and acquired competence of reception [was replaced] by a structural relationship of absolute equivalents that would dismantle both sides of the equation: the hieratic position of the unified artistic object just as much as the privileged position of the author.¹³⁰

It was in this context, under the aegis of conceptualism, that the triangular relationship between artist, artwork and viewer was fundamentally redrawn to take on its contemporary form: artist, artwork and viewer now occupy shifting positions in an open field permanently subject to institutional and discursive forces.

As I have argued, conceptual art was the transitional phase between modernism and contemporary art. This transition, however, should not be seen as an absolute divide or as a total erasure of precedents and tradition. At least two important characteristics of (or tendencies in) modernism had their roots in the nineteenth century yet find an echo in contemporary artistic practice. In order to extend the historical reach of my analysis of conceptual and post-conceptual art, I will briefly sketch this “prehistory”.

The first important characteristic of modernism that needs to be referred to is “anomy” or lawlessness. Instead of conforming to an external standard of aesthetic validity, any modernist work of art suggests its own individual set of rules or criteria that it wants to be measured by. In other words, the work itself will determine the conditions for its failure or success. This notion has been theoretically developed by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann in his study *Art as a Social System*. Luhmann states: “... every artwork is its own program, and ... it demonstrates success and

History of Art: Models and Concepts”, in: Hal Foster et al., eds., *Art since 1900*, 31. See also the entry on deskilling in the same volume (ibid., 531).

¹³⁰ Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969”, 140.

novelty if it manages to show just that”.¹³¹ According to this idea, the only critical evaluation of a work of art that makes sense is one that identifies the immanent rules of the work in question and decides whether the work actually lives up to them.¹³² It should be clear, however, that this identification procedure necessarily entails more than a passive deciphering of some hidden “user’s manual”. It requires an active contribution by the viewer; identifying the rules of the work is an act of interpretation.

This brings us to the second relevant trait of modernism: the paradox of subjectification. From the early nineteenth century, artists increasingly gained control over their artistic production.¹³³ Given their relative detachment from clients and patrons, decisions on what to make and how, when and where to make it became their sole responsibility. At the same time the responsibility for the *interpretation* of the work shifted away from the artist and patron to become a prerogative of the critic, or, more generally, the viewer. The artist gained control in one respect but lost it in another. This is what I call the paradox of subjectification: the artist’s subjective grip on the work of art and its destination became both stronger and weaker.

To elaborate on this proposition: White and White have shown how, in France, the powerful Academic system for the organisation and legitimisation of artistic production declined from the early nineteenth century onwards as it proved incapable of adapting to changed social and economic circumstances.¹³⁴ The competing institutional system that gradually took over, until it was fully in place around 1880, is referred to as the Dealer-Critic System. In the old system of centralised control, constructed around the *École des Beaux-Arts*, the Salon, state acquisitions

¹³¹ Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 202.

¹³² “One might speak of failure when an observer loses control over a work’s play of forms, when he can no longer understand how a particular formal choice relates to others on the basis of what this choice demands of the work as a whole. But this can be demonstrated only with reference to a concrete case, not by applying principles or rules. ... In order to observe a work of art adequately, one must recognize how the rules that govern the work’s own formal decisions are derived from these decisions.” *Ibid.*, 202-204.

¹³³ See, for example, Oskar Bätschmann, *Ausstellungskünstler. Kult und Karriere im modernen Kunstsystem* (Cologne: Dumont, 1997).

¹³⁴ Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (New York: John Wiley, 1965).

and state commissions, dealers and critics had been relatively marginal figures; in the new system their position was crucial.¹³⁵ Dealers took over the role of patrons of the arts; their open, entrepreneurial approach and their willingness to invest in the careers of artists on a speculative basis proved in the long run more effective and also more beneficial to artists, allowing them a middle-class standard of living. At the same time, from around 1830, critics adopted a more professional profile as their ties with the Academy loosened.¹³⁶ According to White and White, their role changed in two important respects. First, in the Academic system it had been up to artists themselves to formulate their theories. Starting with the generation of Manet and the Impressionists, this task fell to the critics. Although artists continued to discuss technical and theoretical issues with each other, it was left to the critics “to present these discussions as organized theories”.¹³⁷ Second, when it came to instructing the public about developments in painting, the emphasis shifted from subject matter (the Academic priority) to issues of style and painting method. Thus, in the new situation, critics tended to instruct the public “how to look at a painting, rather than how to interpret its subject”.¹³⁸ This implied that, from now on, any critical judgment had to overcome an uncertainty or indeterminacy that was of a more fundamental nature than before. The question raised was no longer “What does this painting tell us?”, but “How is this a good painting?” or even “How is this a *painting*?”¹³⁹

In the twentieth century this uncertainty became more or less endemic. Regardless of their authorial position, artists were affected by it just as much as critics and other viewers. Especially since the 1960s, the uncertainty of interpretation has shifted from the domain of painting – a recognisable, technically delineated discipline – to a generic field in which practitioners call themselves neither painters, sculptors nor photographers,

¹³⁵ Ibid., 151.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 96.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 120.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 119.

¹³⁹ These issues came to a climax with the rise of abstract art in the early twentieth century. Cf. De Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, 155 ff.

but simply “artists”.¹⁴⁰ The crucial question is no longer “How is this a painting?” but “How is this a work of art?”

As long as a work is in production, the artist can decide autonomously on any artistic parameter. He can feel that the work is his, and only his. Yet once it is finished and put on display, the work will slip away from his control. The artist will still be seen as the author of the work and therefore be held responsible, but responsible for what? The question of what the work purports, what it means and what it refers to, what its merits and weaknesses are – or even what the work *is* and what it *does* – can only be answered by individual members of the public.¹⁴¹ The viewer is required to take responsibility for the interpretation of the work, as the interpretation can never be taken for granted. Thus artists are unable to control the reception and “afterlife” of their work. They may offer their own interpretation, but that will count as just one possible reading out of many. They are not in a privileged position to decide the meaning of their artistic output. In terms of Luhmann’s theory, the artist is a “second-order observer” on a par with any other viewer of the work.¹⁴²

It is my proposition that conceptual art represents the historical phase in which artists started to acknowledge these conditions and produce work that communicated their awareness and acceptance of them.¹⁴³ This would be the fundamental and perhaps symbolic significance of the

¹⁴⁰ This is what Thierry de Duve has called “art in general”. *Kant after Duchamp*, 154.

¹⁴¹ In a fundamental sense critics, even if better informed than the average viewer, are no more entitled to have the final say about a given work than anybody else. This is a crucial amendment to the Dealer-Critic System as described by White and White. The amendment, however, does not entail a complete loss of authority on the part of the critic, but an obligation to prove or demonstrate this authority each time anew.

¹⁴² Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, 67 ff.

¹⁴³ This is confirmed by Ian Burn: “The corporate-like institutions of the New York art world and its international marketing system were increasingly acting to determine the public ‘meaning’ of works of art. The artist’s prerogative to determine a ‘meaning’ of his or her work had been eroded – indeed, it seemed to have been surrendered almost willingly. Moreover, the body of knowledge of art traditionally acquired in association with its practice was being increasingly taken over by the new growth industries of art history departments, the publication of criticism, the contemporary museums and galleries. The perpetuation of many careers in these areas demanded that the territorial claims be defended by all conceivable means.” Burn, “The Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath (or the Memoirs of an Ex-Conceptual Artist)” [1981], in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 396-397.

rigorous separation between the conception of a work and its realisation that was proposed by Sol LeWitt's *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* (1967)¹⁴⁴ and observed in multiple ways by artists such as Lawrence Weiner, On Kawara, George Brecht, John Baldessari, and Douglas Huebler. By making work consisting of a script or protocol that could – but would not necessarily – be executed by any (known or unknown) “receiver” at any point in time, or by listing a number of rules or ideas and proceeding to make work in accordance with them, regardless of the aesthetic interest of the material result (if any), conceptual artists did more than just frustrate the ordinary mechanisms of distribution and commerce. They detached themselves from the mythical notion of the artist as a sovereign creative being. By renouncing responsibility for the execution of their concepts, they acknowledged that no artist ever has complete control over the outcome of his or her work.¹⁴⁵

Modernist art production around the mid-century had been propelled by a strong ideal of pure visuality and immediate sensation, both in practice – as witness the work of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, among others – and in theory. The dominant formalist art theory, propagated by Clement Greenberg and later by Michael Fried, saw art as the realm of direct emotional responsiveness on the part both of the maker and of the viewer of the work; art transcended the limitations of language, logic and reason. With the benefit of hindsight, I want to suggest that this ideal can be interpreted as an ideological overcompensation for the substantial discursive dimension of modern artistic practice – the fact that language and discourse had become essential factors in the formation and reception of artistic developments. In the context of post-industrial society after World War II, the late modernist ideology of art – epitomised by

¹⁴⁴ “It doesn’t really matter if the viewer understands the concepts of the artist by seeing the art. Once out of his hand the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way.” LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” [1967], in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 14.

¹⁴⁵ Of course these developments did not happen in a vacuum. What has been called, after Roland Barthes, “the death of the author” affects a wider cultural field; it can be linked to the advent of postmodernism in the 1960s and 1970s. It is interesting to note, however, that Barthes originally wrote his essay on the death of the author for *Aspen*, a conceptual art magazine.

Fried's dictum "presentness is grace"¹⁴⁶ – was increasingly felt to be an anomaly or even a perversion. Like any other field of cultural production, the realm of visual art had become subject to the primacy of information; this is what conceptual artists recognised and demonstrated in their work.¹⁴⁷ The differentiation between art and non-art could no longer be made on visual grounds, as Arthur Danto showed in 1964 and again in 1981; it must always be made with a *theory of art* in mind, allowing a specific object to be identified as a work of art.¹⁴⁸ The identification of art happened on discursive grounds, in an institutional context in which a number of specialised mediators – dealers, critics, museum curators, theorists, historians – each played their respective part.¹⁴⁹ Thus the artistic practice of the post-war period increasingly manifested itself in or as a "museum of language", to use a phrase of Robert Smithson's.¹⁵⁰ This museumisation of art, it is important to stress, was not based on the architectural confinement of works to officially designated buildings and sites, but on an institutional containment in clusters of language, reproductions and discourse. No matter how remote or uncultivated the location, as in the case of land art and site-specific installations, works of art always bring their institutional framework along with them (see my analysis of *Sonsbeek 71* in chapter 1). This museum-without-walls (André Malraux's *musée imaginaire*) has been

¹⁴⁶ The closing sentence of Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood", *Artforum* 5:10 (June 1967), 23.

¹⁴⁷ Here I am indebted to Charles Harrison, who wrote: "From the point of view of Art & Language, the more theoretically sophisticated the supporting structure of criticism by which abstract painting and sculpture was upheld in the 1960s, the more the art in question was reduced to the status of mere demonstration, leaving the writing looking more and more like the effective representational medium. ... With hindsight of this order the emergence of Conceptual Art appears highly overdetermined. To paraphrase Mel Ramsden, 'The time had come, finally, to put the writing on the wall.'" "The Trouble with Writing", in: Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting*, 24.

¹⁴⁸ "... there is an internal connection between the status of an artwork and the language with which artworks are identified as such, inasmuch as nothing is an artwork without an interpretation that constitutes it as such." Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 135. See also, by the same author, "The Artworld", *The Journal of Philosophy* 61:19 (1964), 571-584.

¹⁴⁹ A development famously satirised in Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975).

¹⁵⁰ "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" (1968), in: Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 78-94.

the true destination of art in the twentieth century.¹⁵¹ Philip Fisher has shown how modern art was shaped by artists finding ways of “introjecting” the “institutional qualities” of the museum into their work.¹⁵²

As already stated, conceptual art did not attempt to break out of the institutional containment of art; it demonstrated that this containment is an inescapable *but also productive* condition for art in the information age. This brings us back to the issue of the bureaucratic-mimetic aspect of conceptual art. Conceptual artists refused to assist in the mystification of artisthood. Through their work, they exposed a bare institutional structure of production and reception largely stripped of its romantic, modernist clouds and veils. Conceptual artists willingly gave up not only the ideals and pretensions that had been upheld by late modernist artists and their advocates (the image of the artist as a sovereign human being and autonomous creative mind), but also the idealised immediacy of the aesthetic experience – something that would “happen” without any discursive or institutional preparatory groundwork. This context helps us to understand the mimicry of bureaucracy in conceptual art. Conceptual artists were attracted to the dry, repetitive, cerebral procedures of bureaucracy and administration because these procedures represented the exact opposite of the intuitions and attitudes celebrated in late modernist artisthood. To absorb the “aesthetic of administration” was, therefore, an efficient way of disqualifying one model of artisthood and proposing another – one that seemed more in tune with the times.

Does this mean that the bureaucratic-mimetic aspect of conceptual art had a critical purpose after all? Yes and no. It is important to stress that one major aspect of the task of managers and bureaucrats was deliberately *not* appropriated by conceptual artists: the element of quality control, in its many different manifestations – work floor supervision, performance

¹⁵¹ De Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, 416-420. De Duve creates a connection between Malraux’s model of a museum that contains nothing but reproductions and the “enunciative” status of modern art: “The artistic patrimony of the world has nothing in common but the statement, ‘this is a work of art’ ... Once something, no matter what, has been cited by the museum-without-walls, it is art” (419-420).

¹⁵² Philip Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art*, 36.

monitoring, output control, feedback, process evaluation, etcetera.¹⁵³ For conceptual artists, any result – even *no* result – was a good result (see examples of works by Huebler, Weiner, Andre, Baldessari and others in chapters 1, 2 and 3). So their appropriation of bureaucracy can be seen as critical only to the extent that it was, paradoxically, *not* critical. It criticised the myths and conventions of late modernist artishood by embracing a managerial model of professionalism, yet the efficacy of this critique required that the production process be stripped of any aspect of critical evaluation. Only by virtue of this “omission” could the authoritative professional practice of managers and bureaucrats be turned into a defensible model for advanced artistic work.¹⁵⁴

The onset of contemporary art around 1970 is dialectically marked by the brief acceptance of this model *and* its subsequent rejection or repression by artists and mediators alike. By the mid-1970s the dimension of quality control had already been fully reinstated; the attempted demystification of artishood was reversed. Yet, as I aim to show in this thesis, this brief episode has left permanent traces in the production system of contemporary art.

Conceptual art was an impossible project to the extent that it worked towards the suppression of artishood in a dialectical form, the very act of suppression being a work of art as well and thus undoing itself. The ambivalence of this operation is crucial, as is demonstrated by the following example. Robert Barry’s *Closed Gallery Piece* of 1969 consisted simply of

¹⁵³ The notion of “total quality control” as a focus for managers and corporate executives was successfully launched in the 1960s by W. Edwards Deming, with his Deming-Shewhart quality control cycle. See Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin, 2008), 241-242, and Andrea Gabor, *The Man Who Discovered Quality. How W. Edwards Deming Brought the Quality Revolution to America: the Stories of Ford, Xerox, and GM* (New York: Times Books/Random House, 1990).

¹⁵⁴ This is the major point that Isabelle Graw overlooks when she states, somewhat provocatively, that “[Jackson] Pollock’s procedure, the attempt to systematically bring forth ‘immediacy’ through a specific experimental set-up (‘dripping’) is, in fact, not so alien to [Sol] LeWitt’s production-aesthetic systematics.” Her argument that “[s]eries and systems do not preclude emotionality” is irrelevant in this respect. Graw, “Conceptual Expression: On Conceptual Gestures in Allegedly Expressive Painting, Traces of Expression in Proto-Conceptual Works, and the Significance of Artistic Procedures”, in: Alberro and Buchmann, eds., *Art after Conceptual Art*, 129.

the announcement: “During the exhibition the gallery will be closed”.¹⁵⁵ It was realised successively in galleries in Amsterdam, Turin and Los Angeles. The decision taken by this artist to close the exhibition space for the duration of his exhibition amounts to a suspension of the conditions that would normally enable the public to experience the work. According to Lucy Lippard, Barry’s *Closed Gallery Piece* “comments on the use of gallery space and the international gallery system for an art so dematerialized that it has no fundamental need of either one.”¹⁵⁶ We could also say that the work simply communicates or publicises its own conditions of being – conditions related to publicity, communication, and printed media. However, the paradox is that the content of Barry’s communication still refers to the “old” distribution system that his artistic practice claimed to make redundant; the information conveyed is limited to the terms of the transaction between the artist and his audience. This brings to mind Michael Newman’s statement, quoted earlier, that conceptual art “remained parasitic on the institutions it subjected to critique”.¹⁵⁷ Or Thierry de Duve’s assessment of conceptual art, where he points to an “ever-repeated endeavor to remove all visual materiality from the piece, to communicate this very removal to the artworld itself, and to consider the piece self-referentially (a very modernist attitude) as being something that the art institution cannot possess or even show but that nonetheless depends on the institution for its existence.”¹⁵⁸ Is Barry’s *Closed Gallery Piece* a critical comment on the gallery system? Is it a radical intervention in the institutional structure of the art world? Or can it be considered the product of an artistic practice that fully accepts the institutional conditions but refuses to provide the system with expressive “content” that would legitimate its existence? Or is it, going further still, a detached philosophical exercise in thinking about the conditions of artistic production and reception? Most likely it is all these things at once, and that

¹⁵⁵ *Art & Project Bulletin* 17 (1969). See also: cat. *l’Art conceptuel, une perspective*, 120-121.

¹⁵⁶ Lippard, “Robert Barry Presents Three Shows and a Review by Lucy R. Lippard”, in: Lippard, ed., *Six Years*, 232.

¹⁵⁷ Newman, “Conceptual Art from the 1960s to the 1990s: An Unfinished Project?”, 102.

¹⁵⁸ *Kant after Duchamp*, 299.

is exactly what constitutes the ambivalent, unresolved nature of conceptual art.

This unresolved nature has repeated itself in an unresolved art historical reception. As I have shown in section 5 above, straightforward enthusiasm for the achievements of conceptual artists is rare, especially among ambitious art historians – like Buchloh and Harrison – who in principle sympathise with the aims of the conceptual project. One source of ambivalence may be the fact that conceptual art confronts these historians with their own (political) objections to the relatively closed insider world of “high art” – the world that most conceptual artists, with their self-referential manoeuvres, seem to have accepted as their habitat. Moreover, the ambivalence may have been fed by the way in which contemporary art has “corrected” or “improved” the conceptual project by reintroducing the element of qualitative discrimination into the artistic process, thus eliminating what (only) appeared to be an internal contradiction. As a result, the dialectical suppression of artishood was undone and replaced by the unlimited, market-driven production of contemporary works of art that exists today, a development that both Buchloh and Harrison despise and that, as I have shown, strengthened their view of conceptual art as a failed revolution.

The historiography of conceptual art has been dominated by a relatively conventional art historical approach. The literature on the movement is mostly monographic, monothematic, and specialised; it focuses on individual oeuvres, isolated artistic achievements and singular personalities.¹⁵⁹ The rapidly growing number of monographic studies on Robert Smithson is a case in point. In the last two decades, radical 1960s art (of all “flavours”, including conceptual) has been effectively canonised by the collective efforts of art historians, museum curators and critics. The art historical reception of conceptualism continues to cherish a “high art” perspective, while connections with the wider culture – or, more

¹⁵⁹ Recent studies on conceptual art (see note 30 above) are compilations of mostly monographic texts.

specifically, visual culture – are rarely made. The social history of conceptual art still remains to be written.¹⁶⁰

What is more, forty years after the conceptual reformulation of the role of the artist, most art historians remain attached to an autonomous notion of artishood – even in the case of an artistic movement that detached itself from it. Evaluative criteria such as innovation, originality and critical agency – criteria that conceptual artists considered irrelevant and attempted to dismantle – are still being applied to their work, more or less explicitly, as my review of the literature has shown. Art historians have not emulated the suspension of critical judgment found in the working process of conceptual artists – not even those historians who consider conceptualism to be of paramount importance. It would seem that, even for the most radical among them, a premise such as “any result is a good result” is unworkable. After all, it not only conflicts with their belief in their own critical competence, but also collides with the idea of critical agency that prevails in the image of the conceptual artist and that presupposes a subject with a conscious critical intention.¹⁶¹ In treating critical agency as their primary quality criterion, art historians thus automatically ratify the full authorship of the artist in question.

¹⁶⁰ In a panel discussion with Rosalind Krauss and Michael Fried in 1987, Benjamin Buchloh criticised himself and his colleagues for being exclusively focused on the canon of high art, which “inadvertently confirms – despite all claims to the contrary – the construction of individual oeuvres and authors, and it continues to posit and celebrate individual achievement over collective endeavor. We are also united as critics in our almost complete devotion to high culture and our refusal to understand art production, the exclusive object of our studies, as the dialectical counterpart of mass-cultural and ideological formations – formations from which the work of high art continues to promise if not redemption then at least escape.” To explain this “limitation” Buchloh referred to “professional specialization and the general compartmentalization of intellectual labor,” but also to “the historian’s role-casting”. Nevertheless he found it “all the more astonishing since many of the objects of our study – especially pop and minimalism, their predecessors in dadaism and constructivism and their followers in the art of the mid-to-late ’70s ... programmatically foreground the conflict between high and mass culture and insist on the transformation of the historical dialectic.” Buchloh, “Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop”, in: Hal Foster, ed., *Discussions in Contemporary Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), 66-67.

¹⁶¹ In a different context, Claire Bishop has correctly observed that “‘agency’ implies a fully present, autonomous subject of political will and self-determination”. Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, *October* 110 (Fall 2004), 16. See also Rudi Laermans, “Artistic Autonomy as Value and Practice”, in: Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne, eds., *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009), 134.

The problem of critical evaluation cannot be solved by a shift in focus from the realisation of the concept to the concept itself. What kind of criteria would have to be used to reach a critical judgment on the concept? Aesthetic, social, political, philosophical, or even ecological criteria?¹⁶² The example of Barry's *Closed Gallery Piece* shows that none of these is generally applicable. It is difficult to agree even on the simple attributes or qualities of Barry's concept. Is the concept of the closed gallery space subversive? Visionary? Playful? Austere? Engaged? Formalistic? Ironic? Political? Cynical? Humorous? To some extent each of these descriptors can be justified, even though they partly contradict each other.

Instead of looking back on conceptual art as a failed revolution, it would be more productive to work towards an interpretation based both on the parallels that exist between this movement and the visual and information culture of the period, and on the intricate ways in which conceptual art has anticipated – or better: prefigured – major structural characteristics of contemporary art and contemporary artisthood. It is this approach that I propose and test in this thesis. I do so along three different lines.

The first line in my approach is the history of exhibitions. Milestone exhibitions such as *Software* (Jewish Museum, New York 1970) and *Information* (Museum of Modern Art, New York 1970), which were crucial events for the public and institutional breakthrough of conceptual art, were completely permeated by the information discourse. The same goes for *Sonsbeek buiten de perken*, the outdoor exhibition of site-specific sculptures and installations that took place in the Netherlands in 1971. In chapters 1 and 3, I show how these exhibitions attempted to translate the model of information theory to the practice of producing and presenting works of art. In chapter 1 especially, I focus on the ensuing structural problems that faced critics, theorists and curators – the mediators of art – in redefining their communicational position. The serious nature of these dilemmas can be traced, among other things, to the fact that, as I show in chapter 3, conceptual artists accepted the inherent redundancy at the heart

¹⁶² When Sol LeWitt stated that "Conceptual art is only good when the idea is good", he did not provide any such criteria. LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", [1967], in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 16.

of any communication system and refused a strict separation between message and noise.

The second line in my approach traces the changing role of the visual artist as cultural producer, in response to social pressures relating to professionalisation and entrepreneurship. I analyse the historical parallels between conceptual artists and graphic designers – two groups who defined themselves in the late 1960s as “information workers” and who focused on the transfer of information *by graphic means* (publications, printed matter, offset, Xerox, photography, text, etc.).¹⁶³ More importantly, both groups opted – partly on theoretical and partly on intuitive grounds – for a radical division of their work process into two completely separate parts: *information* on the one hand and *visualisation* on the other. While conceptual artists claimed to limit their responsibility to the first part and had others decide whether (and how) to visualise the “information”, graphic designers such as Wim Crouwel, conversely, refused to be held accountable for the nature of the information they had been commissioned to visualise. This reversed limitation of responsibilities should be seen against the backdrop of post-industrial society as it developed after World War II – a society in which the service sector was becoming the major economic focus and in which managers had driven the traditional “capitalists” from the centre of power.¹⁶⁴ In this context, both conceptual artists and graphic designers had reasons – different reasons, as I will show – to distance themselves from a “holistic” approach to the creative process.

In chapters 3 and 4, I describe how the procedural separation between information and visualisation meant that the practice of conceptual artists was effectively haunted by the very “spectre of design” that would pervade the paradoxical reception of an artist like Jeff Koons from the 1980s onwards. I also analyse the historical relationship between contemporary art – defined as “applied concept art” – and the information paradigm from which it has developed. Connected to this is the ambiguous

¹⁶³ John Chandler drew a parallel between conceptual art and graphic design in his article “The Last Word in Graphic Art”, *Art International* 7:9 (November 1968), 25-28.

¹⁶⁴ In *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: les Presses du réel, 1998) Nicolas Bourriaud incorrectly situates this shift from industrial production to services in the 1990s.

status of the decorative aspect of contemporary art, as discussed in chapter 5. In a fundamental sense, the contemporary artist is a cultural producer whose post-conceptual status implies that he cannot just “make” something anymore – that is to say, without conceptual or contextual justification. This can be taken to mean that the division between information and visualisation – between conception and realisation – is still in place. Contemporary artists are, however, expected to conform to a professional regime of cultural entrepreneurship, project management and quality control, and must therefore take responsibility for *both* sides of the artistic process. The professional status of the artist implies that all the facets of artistic practice can and should be planned, controlled and accounted for. If nothing else, the artist is a manager of a self-defined production process that runs from context to concept and from concept to execution.¹⁶⁵ Parts of this cycle can be delegated to others, but in each case the artist, as “author” of the work, remains responsible for the quality of the end result.

The third line in my approach follows a specific medium – photography. As I show in chapters 6 and 7, photography occupied a special place in the historical nexus between conceptualism and contemporary art. It gave artists the tools to distill a positive professional profile out of the principles of deskilling and dilettantism. Photography had this potential precisely because it suggested, in its early use by conceptual artists, a demystification of artishood. It was the conceptual aura of photography that has made the medium not only acceptable, but eventually highly successful in the “post-medium” context of contemporary art.

¹⁶⁵ See my essay “Middle Culture: Designers, Artists, Professionals”, in: *Now Is the Time. Art & Theory in the 21st Century*, eds. Jelle Bouwhuis et al. (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009), 125-134.

FIGURE A: THE CANON OF CONCEPTUAL ART
ARTISTS INCLUDED IN THREE MAJOR SURVEY EXHIBITIONS

	1969 Leverkusen	1989 Paris	1995 Los Angeles
Acconci, Vito			X
Ader, Bas Jan			X
Anselmo, Giovanni		X	X
Antin, Eleanor			X
Arnatt, Keith	X		
Art & Language		X	X
Asher, Michael		X	X
Askevold, David			X
Baldessari, John	X	X	X
Barry, Robert	X	X	X
Baxter, Iain	X		
Baumgarten, Lothar			X
Becher, Bernd & Hilla	X		X
Bochner, Mel	X	X	X
Boetti, Alighiero e	X	X	
Broodthaers, Marcel	X	X	X
Brouwn, Stanley	X	X	X
Buren, Daniel	X	X	X
Burgin, Victor	X	X	X
Burgy, Donald	X		
Butler, Eugenia	X		
Cadere, André		X	X
Calzolari, Pier Paolo	X		
Coleman, James			X
Cotton, Paul	X		
Darboven, Hanne	X	X	X
Dibbets, Jan	X	X	X
Downsborough, Peter			X
Duchamp, Marcel		X	
Elk, Ger van			X
Fischer, Morgan			X
Flavin, Dan		X	
Fulton, Hamish	X		
Gilbert & George	X		X
Graham, Dan	X	X	X
Haacke, Hans		X	X
Hesse, Eva		X	
Huebler, Douglas	X	X	X
Jackson, Richard	X		
Johns, Jasper		X	
Jonas, Joan			X
Kaltenbach, Stephen	X		X
Kawara, On	X	X	X
Kirby, Michael	X		
Klein, Yves		X	
Knight, John			X
Kosuth, Joseph	X	X	X
Kozlov, Christine			X
Lamelas, David	X		X

Leavitt, William			X
LeWitt, Sol	X	X	X
Long, Richard			X
Manzoni, Piero		X	
Marioni, Tom			X
Matta-Clark, Gordon			X
McLean, Bruce	X		
Morris, Robert		X	
Nauman, Bruce	X	X	X
N.E. Thing Co.			X
Nordman, Maria			X
Oldenburg, Claes		X	
Opalka, Roman		X	
Oppenheim, Dennis			X
Palermo, Blinky			X
Paolini, Giulio			X
Penone, Giuseppe	X		
Piper, Adrian	X	X	X
Polke, Sigmar	X		
Prini, Emilio	X	X	
Raetz, Markus	X		
Rainer, Yvonne			X
Rauschenberg, Robert		X	
Ruppersberg, Allen	X		X
Ruscha, Edward	X	X	X
Sandback, Fred	X		
Sladden, Richard	X		
Smithson, Robert	X	X	X
Snow, Michael			X
Toroni, Niele			X
Ulrichs, Timm	X		
Venet, Bernar	X	X	
Wegman, William			X
Weiner, Lawrence	X	X	X
Wilson, Ian		X	X
Zaj	X		