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### During the exhibition the gallery will be closed: contemporary art and the paradoxes of conceptualism

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## 2. The Obsession with a Pure Idea

For a variety of reasons I don't like the term "conceptual art". Connotations of an easy dichotomy with perception are obvious and inappropriate. The unfortunate implication is of a somewhat magical/mystical leap from one mode of existence to another. The problem is the confusion of idealism and intention. By creating an original fiction "conceptualism" posits its special non-empirical existence as a positive (transcendent) value. But no amount of qualification (or documentation) can change the situation. Outside the spoken word, no thought can exist without a sustaining support.

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A spectre haunts the chronicles of modern art: the unrealisable yet ever-recurring fantasy of a work of art that consists of nothing but an idea. In 1961, Henry Flynt talked about "an art of which the material is 'concepts,' as the material of e.g. music is sound".<sup>194</sup> The movement that is termed "conceptual art" is simply the result of the premature historicisation of this fantasy.

The impossibility of conceptual art is already implicit in Flynt's formulation. The analogy between sound as the raw material of music and concepts as the raw material of "conceptual art" comes unstuck because sounds are perceptible whereas concepts are not. Without a material medium, nobody can be aware of any concept. "Conceptual artists" – I will abandon the inverted commas in the rest of my text – have tackled this impasse in an impossible way: they have treated it as conceptual material to make art with. Owing to a combination of circumstances, the second half of the 1960s witnessed a whole series of these paradoxical attempts. Obvious examples are Mel Ramsden's *Secret Painting* from 1967-1968 ("The content of this painting is invisible; the character and dimension of the content are to be kept permanently secret, known only to the artist") and Robert Barry's

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<sup>193</sup> Mel Bochner, "Excerpts from Speculation (1967-1970)", in: Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 1999), 192.

<sup>194</sup> Henry Flynt, "Concept Art" [1961], in: Jackson MacLow and La Monte Young, eds., *An Anthology of Chance Operations* (Bronx, N.Y.: L. Young & J. MacLow, 1963), unpaginated.

*Telepathic Piece* from 1969 (“During the exhibition I will try to communicate telepathically a work of art, the nature of which is a series of thoughts that are not applicable to language or image”). These examples are already strong enough to suggest that artists who want to purify the content of their work by eliminating everything that is not content are in danger of ending up with straightforward formalism. If Barry and Ramsden were wanting to make an ironic comment on the work of painters such as Frank Stella, they seem in retrospect to have become the butt of their own joke. Barry’s recourse to paranormal methods only corroborates the esotericism of Ramsden’s secret painting. That also seems to be the only “content” that these works still manage to convey.

Because it is hardly possible to re-stage such extreme positions, the conceptual art fantasy has often adopted the guise of a rigorous detachment of mental from physical effort, a separation between conception and execution. This strategy was not limited to the illustrious period from 1966 to 1972. No history of conceptual art would be complete without László Moholy-Nagy’s telephone paintings of 1922 or Jeff Koons’s polychrome sculptures of 1988, even though both these cases are somewhat contentious.

In 1922 I ordered by telephone from a sign factory five paintings in porcelain enamel. I had the factory’s color chart before me and I sketched my paintings on graph paper. At the other end of the telephone the factory supervisor had the same kind of paper, divided into squares. He took down the dictated shapes in the correct position. <sup>195</sup>

Witnesses later alleged that Moholy-Nagy did not give his instructions over the telephone but delivered them in person; it seems more important, however, that by then it was already technically and artistically conceivable for an artist to leave the realisation of his or her work to some third party, and to translate the “concept” of the work into “information” that could be communicated using a modern technological medium such as the

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<sup>195</sup> “Abstract of an Artist”, in: László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision and Abstract of an Artist* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1947), 79.

telephone. The *Dada Almanach* of 1920 similarly extols the virtues of telephone instructions for the manufacture of paintings.<sup>196</sup>

At the other end of the twentieth century, we find the life-size wooden and porcelain sculptures of Jeff Koons, executed to the artist's specifications by German and Italian craftsmen. The vulgar and backward connotations of the mass-production workplaces contracted by Koons are at odds with Moholy-Nagy's forward-looking vision. Some of the contradictory impulses to which the conceptual art fantasy was subject during the 66 intervening years can be found in Koons's ambiguous position regarding the authorship of these works. He had the wood carver or ceramist responsible for the work sign the plinth, but he placed his own signature on the work as well – invisibly, on the underside of the object.

I have them sign it because I want them to give me 100%, to exploit themselves. I also like not being physically involved because I feel that, if I am, I become lost in my own physicality. I get misdirected toward my true initiative so that it becomes masturbative.<sup>197</sup>

Although Koons did not trust himself with the manual work and wanted to get the very best from the artisans, he also felt that he could not leave anything up to them:

... I could not give these people that freedom. I mean, how can I let them do it; these people aren't artists. So, I had to do the creating. I did everything. I directed every color; I made color charts. This has to be pink, this has to be blue. Everything! Every leaf, every flower, every stripe, every aspect.<sup>198</sup>

To think of these works as conceptual pieces has proved not to be self-evident – at least not for all of Koons's commentators. The reasons for this are clear: the works in question are overly visual and extravagant and contain too many Pop and kitsch elements. By the 1980s “conceptual art” had already changed from a procedural category into a stylistic qualification. It had come to stand for a difficult, austere, frugal and

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<sup>196</sup> Richard Huelsenbeck, ed., *DADA Almanach* [1920] (Hamburg: Edition Nautilus, 1987), 89.

<sup>197</sup> Jeff Koons, in: Burke & Hare, “From Full Fathom Five”, *Parkett* 19 (March 1989), 47.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

disciplined kind of art, for an either sloppy and careless or stiff and academic form of visual poverty. Moreover, as a cynical populist, Koons is far removed from the ideology and lifestyle that we now tend to associate with conceptual artists. Conceptual art is supposed to be historically connected with the spirit of '68, with the protest against the war in Vietnam and with rebellion against paternalistic authorities.

### **Chinese Walls**

The interpretation of conceptual art as an historical phenomenon has to a large extent been guided by a single book: Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, published in 1973. The success of this publication resulted in the obsession with dematerialisation – the reduction of the artwork to nothing more than an idea – being spread far and wide. As a consequence, little consideration has ever been given to indications that the strictest conceptual artists arrived at the very opposite: instead of dematerialising the object, they seemed to hypostasise the concept – to represent it as a concrete thing. Christine Kozlov painted the text A MOSTLY RED PAINTING with white paint on a red canvas. Joseph Kosuth had the words FIVE WORDS IN BLUE NEON realised in blue neon lights. “Frozen” concepts like these constitute the most straightforward interpretation of conceptual art.

The dematerialisation of the art object is an *idée fixe* in the reception of conceptual art. The examples by Kozlov and Kosuth demonstrate that the separation of conception and execution did not make the latter into something less important – on the contrary, it became the chief issue. Looking back, many of the artists concerned seem to have been obsessed by the manual processing of physical material. When asked what his work was about, Lawrence Weiner once replied “materials”.<sup>199</sup> Although he qualified this by saying that he was more interested “in the idea of the material than in the material itself”,<sup>200</sup> this too points to a heightened rather

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<sup>199</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* [1973] (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1997), 73.

<sup>200</sup> Lawrence Weiner, “October 12, 1969”, in: Ursula Meyer, ed., *Conceptual art* (New York: Dutton, 1972), 218.

than reduced consideration for the material. It seems appropriate here to refer to the *idealisation* of the art object rather than its *dematerialisation*.

The works that Lawrence Weiner is still making to this day essentially stem from the inversion of the relationship between his early sculptures and their titles. This reversal initially occurred in 1968, during an exhibition in the grounds of Windham College in Putney, Vermont. Weiner's "sculptural" contribution to the exhibition was exhaustively described in its title: *A SERIES OF STAKES SET IN THE GROUND AT REGULAR INTERVALS TO FORM A RECTANGLE – TWINE STRUNG FROM STAKE TO STAKE TO DEMARK A GRID – A RECTANGLE REMOVED FROM THIS RECTANGLE*. After the work had been damaged by students who needed space for sports, Weiner realised that repair was unnecessary, because the title held all the essential information for the work to be able to survive.<sup>201</sup> Ever since this turning-point in his career, Weiner's works have been "linguistic constructions" that do not need a material interpretation – for example, *A TWO INCH WIDE ONE INCH DEEP TRENCH CUT ACROSS A STANDARD ONE-CAR DRIVEWAY*, or *ONE QUART EXTERIOR GREEN INDUSTRIAL ENAMEL THROWN ON A BRICK WALL*. For him, anyone is free to materialise the concept at any given moment. In some cases, when requested to do so by curators, Weiner has produced a material version himself, but usually his sculptures only exist as text. In an interview dating from 1969, he emphasises the fundamental importance of the possibility of executing the concept: "If [the works] were not possible to be built, they would negate the choice of the receiver as to whether they were built or not." But the work remains the same: "Whether [people] build it or not in no way affects the work."<sup>202</sup>

Weiner's linguistic constructions are always intrinsically complete; they describe the material result of an action rather than the action itself. He refuses to give instructions and avoids the use of the imperative. "My own art never gives directions, only states the work as an accomplished fact."<sup>203</sup> And further, "To use the imperative would be for me fascistic... The

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<sup>201</sup> Cat. *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 222.

<sup>202</sup> Lippard, ed., *Six Years*, 115.

<sup>203</sup> Weiner, "October 12, 1969", 218.

tone of command is the tone of tyranny.”<sup>204</sup> Without their corresponding state of completion, the text version and the material version of a particular work could never be equally valid or function in a parallel way.

Although the political context of conceptual art was permeated by anti-authoritarian notions, Weiner stood relatively alone in his rejection of the instructional form. At various levels, that form was often employed in 1960s conceptual art. At the time, the instruction must have seemed the ideal means to separate physical “labour” from mental effort. Although this was already the case when Moholy-Nagy telephoned a sign factory in 1922, the conceptual artists of the 1960s emancipated the instruction and took it to the extreme. In certain cases, the instruction took the place of the realised work of art. This made the division of labour between inventor and implementor the most important thing.

Between 1966 and 1968 John Baldessari hired a sign painter to make a series of paintings consisting of a text or a text with a photograph. The sign painter was given precise instructions; Baldessari dictated what was to be done.

Important was that I was the strategist. Someone else built and primed the canvases and took them to the sign painter, the texts are quotations from art books, and the sign painter was instructed not to attempt to make attractive artful lettering but to letter the information in the most simple way.<sup>205</sup>

In many cases, the text fragments used in these paintings themselves take the form of instructions — instructions which, once transferred to the canvas, seem to be directed to the person viewing the work. For example, *Composing on a Canvas* instructs the viewer to study paintings in a systematic fashion:

Study the composition of paintings. Ask yourself questions when standing in front of a well-composed picture. What format is used? What is the proportion of width to height?

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<sup>204</sup> Weiner (1972), cited in Alexander Alberro, “Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977”, in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, xxii.

<sup>205</sup> Cat. *John Baldessari* (Eindhoven/Essen: Van Abbemuseum and Museum Folkwang, 1981), 6.

and so on. In other works, Baldessari presents a textual analogy of a “compelling” painting – “The spectator is compelled to look directly down the road and into the middle of the picture” – or of a minimal, reductionist painting: “A work with only one property.” The last example suggests that Baldessari’s objective was highly paradoxical: a painting executed as the material evidence of a concept that amounts to the negation of the painting.

John Baldessari instructed his public in a disturbing, ironic manner. Lawrence Weiner probably overlooked that possibility when he dismissed the instructional form. Nonetheless, Baldessari’s paintings are no less serious as art proposals than the linguistic constructions by Weiner. What the two artists have in common is that their obsession with *making* – the manual processing of physical material – is still framed by a given medium: either painting or sculpture. There was evidently a tendency in 1960s conceptual art to develop a radical method by which a credible result could still be achieved within traditional art media, instead of rejecting those media altogether. This method often involved a proposal in the form of a descriptive text referring to the handling of materials or objects. Whereas Weiner used this form to renounce his authority as an artist, while still being able to make art, Baldessari used it to reformulate his artistic authority, namely as a strategist who organised others to do the work for him. (He similarly engaged a number of amateur painters for his 1969 *Commissioned Paintings*.)

Some artists working in this period gave instructions to *themselves*, but essentially with the same goal: to salvage the idea of meaningful artistic work. Some of them phrased instructions explicitly, while others kept them implicit; some formulated a specific instruction for every new work, others made do with a single instruction for several years. When Carl Andre was asked to contribute to the *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* exhibition (1971), he instructed himself in the following manner: “no materials or fabrication cost” and “no harm to any living thing”.<sup>206</sup> In his *Today Paintings* (1966- ), On Kawara’s self-imposed rule was that they had to be completed within a day; if he did not succeed, he would destroy the unfinished painting immediately. The basis for Vito Acconci’s *Following Piece* (1969) was the

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<sup>206</sup> Cat. *Sonsbeek 71* (Arnhem: Stichting Sonsbeek, 1971), vol. 2, 5.

assignment that the artist set himself to follow a random person on the street until he or she entered a private space. Douglas Huebler's *Variable Piece #111* (1974) was based on the artist's rule of making a close-up shot of a mannequin while standing in front of a shop window and then photographing the passer-by who most resembled that mannequin within the next ten seconds. In these examples, there is still a division of labour between inventor and implementer, even if the same person plays both roles. The artist splits himself in two, to the extent that the instructions cannot be changed once the execution of the work has begun. The interim evaluation of the result will not lead to an adaptation of the concept. In fact, the artist refrains from evaluating the process altogether: every result or outcome is a good result. The instruction must be performed to the best of the artist's abilities, and the results presented as clinically as possible. In 1967, Sol LeWitt described this "Chinese Wall" as follows:

In conceptual art the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art ... is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman.<sup>207</sup>

### **A straight line**

Sol LeWitt wrote his manifesto on conceptual art in 1967. Thirty-five years have passed since then, but there are still young artists appearing on the scene whose work is presented as "conceptual". What makes this label so attractive nowadays? What is the success of conceptual art based upon?

As early as 1973, Seth Siegelaub and Lucy Lippard, two important agents of the first generation, expressed their disappointment and frustration with what conceptual art had managed to achieve. At that point they felt it was obvious that the intended transformation of the art system had failed. The desire to eliminate the commodification of art had proved to be unrealistic: dealers were still dealing, even in "dematerialised" art and

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<sup>207</sup> Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", *Artforum* 5:10 (Summer 1967), 79-84; repr. in: Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 12-16 (quote on 12).

often with the endorsement of the artists themselves. Radical ideas developed by conceptual artists concerning the relationship between the work of art and its audience had gone largely unnoticed beyond a small, well-informed elite, and thus failed to find general acceptance; the breakthrough to a wider audience had never happened.<sup>208</sup> This also applies to the reception of conceptual art in the Netherlands. *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* was seen as a failure by organisers and sympathisers alike; the work of conceptual artists was received with ridicule and incomprehension. When it was over, a sorely disappointed Wim Beeren withdrew from the museum world for a number of years.<sup>209</sup>

The “success” of conceptual art should thus be regarded as primarily an internal success. As a set of ideas and an artistic mentality, it spread itself efficiently through academies and art schools in Europe and North America. From the 1960s on, Michael Asher, Stanley Brouwn, Daniel Buren, Jan Dibbets, Bernd Becher, John Baldessari and other pioneers of conceptual art trained many art students in an institutional context. It is perhaps no coincidence that conceptual artists often turned out to be good teachers: they were in a sense already specialised in the detached analysis of the fundamental issues of art production and artistic expertise. If the separation of mental and physical labour and the use of the instruction as an artistic form were to have an impact anywhere, it would be in the training of young artists.

It is partly due to this prolonged survival of conceptual art within the academic curriculum that, apart from a vague sense of intellectual merit, the label identifying a contemporary work of art as “conceptual” no longer has any real meaning. Nowadays, artists learn during their training to present their work in a “correct” fashion – i.e. in terms of self-reflection and contextual analysis. The following passage is taken from a subsidy

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<sup>208</sup> Blake Stimson, “The Promise of Conceptual Art”, in: *ibid.*, xlii-xliii.

<sup>209</sup> Cf. Camiel van Winkel, “Dertig jaar buiten de perken. Gesprek over Sonsbeek 71 met Cor Blok, Judith Cahen and Lambert Tegenbosch”, *De Witte Raaf* 91 (May-June 2001), 19-21; and *ibid.*, “Informatie ervaren – ervaring vergaren”, in: Jeroen Boomgaard et al., eds., *Als de kunst er om vraagt. De Sonsbeektentoonstellingen 1971, 1986, 1993* (Amsterdam: Stichting Tentoonstellingsinitiatieven, 2001), 89-106.

application by Maziar Afrassabi, born in 1973 in Tehran and educated at the Utrecht School of the Arts (HKU) from 1993 to 1997:

My work process is characterised by the quest for expressive styles in order to problematise the “creative” activity and the relevance of “meaning”, and thus to develop images that are a solution for the problematised object/subject relationship in visual art and, in general, in the recognition of the “Identity”. The a-chronological broaching of (art) history in order to temporarily mark my position within or outside it. In this way I can move freely from context to content and vice versa. ... For me it is very important that my work should be a result of encounters between different levels of experience and thought within the representation. <sup>210</sup>

A statement like this suggests that today any well-educated artist can pass for conceptual. The separation of conception and execution seems to have turned into a general precondition for artists to successfully articulate their position in the art world. The representation and promotion of art make it crucial for artists to reflect on the context of their practice. In the meantime, to contract out the execution of a work has become a standard option for artists and in many cases it makes little or no difference to the content of the work whether they do or not.

The impossibility of attributing a specific meaning to the label “conceptual” with regard to contemporary art production has a retroactive effect on the interpretation of conceptual art of the past. If there ever was a strong foundation for the delineation of this movement, it now seems to have disappeared for good. On reflection, Sol LeWitt’s stipulation that all the decisions should be made before realisation can begin could also be applied to the work of minimalists such as Donald Judd and Tony Smith. (Smith had his 1962 work *Die*, a six-foot steel cube, executed on the basis of telephone instructions: “I didn’t make a drawing; I just picked up the phone and ordered it.” <sup>211</sup>) The elusive position of Carl Andre and Robert Morris also suggests that the categorical distinction – and even antagonism – between minimal and conceptual art must have been established after the fact. Early works by Morris, such as his 1962 *Cardfile*, anticipate typically

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<sup>210</sup> Application for Development and Stimulation Subsidy, CBK Rotterdam 2001. Quoted with the permission of the artist.

<sup>211</sup> Cat. *Tony Smith. Two Exhibitions of Sculpture* (Hartford/Philadelphia: Wadsworth Atheneum and Institute for Contemporary Art, 1966), unpaginated.

conceptual procedures.<sup>212</sup> The rigid distinction between art for the eye and art for the brain starts to collapse in the light of the knowledge that mental and physical work were separated even in op art: Bridget Riley has had assistants paint for her since 1961.<sup>213</sup> The same holds for the systematic distinction between conceptual art and the *instruction pieces* of the Fluxus movement. Around 1960, La Monte Young wrote “compositions” that consisted of a short, one-line instruction, such as “Draw a straight line and follow it” (*Composition 1960 #10*) or “Turn a butterfly (or any number of butterflies) loose in the performance area” (*Composition 1960 #5*). George Brecht took this idea one step further with his “word pieces” and “event scores”. The kinship between conceptual art and Fluxus evolved partly out of post-serial music practices, in which the fixed division of labour between inventor and implementer — composer and performer — was challenged by experiments with chance and aleatoric structures. The interaction and collaboration between composers, choreographers, performers and artists such as Young, Brecht, Yoko Ono, Yvonne Rainer and Robert Morris in the early 1960s generated important procedural models for the conceptual art movement that was to follow. The substitution of a completed work by an open instruction, to be executed by a random person at a random time and place, is the most important of these models. John Cage, whose composition lessons were followed by Brecht and various other Fluxus artists in the late 1950s, gave a crucial impetus to this development. His 1952 composition *4'33*” might be regarded as the Ur-model of the maxim “any result is a good result”.<sup>214</sup>

### **Non-events**

Meanwhile, the obsessive fantasy of a work of art that consists of nothing but an idea has not been suppressed by historical or theoretical considerations. There is a constant flow of artists who want to share this

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<sup>212</sup> Cf. “Round Table: Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp”, *October* 70 (Fall 1994), 127-146.

<sup>213</sup> Frances Spalding, “Bridget Riley and the Poetics of Instability”, in: cat. *Bridget Riley: Paintings from the 1960s and 70s* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1999), 15.

<sup>214</sup> Liz Kotz, “Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the ‘Event’ Score”, *October* 95 (Winter 2001), 55-89.

fantasy with their audience, and for whom the designation “conceptual artist” is like a cool marketing tool. Sometimes they are good for a little fracas and some publicity, as witness the recent uproar caused by *The Lights Going On and Off*, the work that got Martin Creed the Turner Prize in December 2001. The work consisted of an empty room in which the lights went on and off. Other artists protested against the decision of the jury to award the prestigious prize to Creed and his “gimmick” at the expense of “painters and sculptors with real creative talent”.<sup>215</sup> The winning artist had given his opponents ammunition with the memorable statement: “It’s true, anyone can do it... It’s just I’m better than anyone else at it.”<sup>216</sup>

One of George Brecht’s 1961 “event scores” bears the title *Three Lamp Events*. The complete text reads:

THREE LAMP EVENTS.

\* on. off.

\* lamp.

\* off. on.

Martin Creed’s prize-winning work could in theory be understood as a realisation or interpretation of Brecht’s “score” of 40 years earlier. However, what makes this connection less credible – apart from the fact that Brecht’s name was never mentioned – is most notably the aura of “new, hip and unique” that emanated from Creed’s presentation. Press photos of *The Lights Going On and Off* showed the artist standing in an empty museum space, dressed in a dandyish outfit, his eyes fixed on the ceiling lights.

Ever since the historical failure of conceptual art, acknowledged by Siegelau and Lippard in 1973, the spectre of a completely dematerialised work of art has tended to appear against a backdrop of deception and fraud. Martin Creed’s stunt is just the umpteenth version of it. Scandals large and small relating to rip-offs and plagiarism often involve artists with a conceptual status, such as Damien Hirst and Rob Scholte. In these cases, the irritation among colleagues and the public is intensified by the fact that

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<sup>215</sup> BBC, 12 December 2001.

<sup>216</sup> Fiachra Gibbons, “Judges switched on as Turner Prize goes to the Creed of nothingness”, *The Guardian*, 10 December 2001.

apparently unskilled artists are managing to make a lot of money *by doing almost nothing*.

Affairs like these point to a great unease in dealing with the conceptual heritage. The historical effect of conceptual art manifests itself in two separate and contradictory tendencies. Its characteristic formats – such as text panels, photographic documentation, temporary “situations”, performances, etc. – are now part of the toolbox available to any contemporary artist. However, the criteria used to judge works of art have never been adjusted in the spirit of conceptual art. This explains why art since the mid-1970s has become increasingly vulnerable to accusations of plagiarism.

The efforts of artists like Lawrence Weiner were still explicitly aimed at making art transcend value judgements in terms of creativity, originality and innovation. He and his colleagues wanted to dismantle the normalising effect of such criteria. Instead, the reception of works of art was to be determined to a much greater extent by the personal input and initiative of those on the receiving end.

People, buying my stuff, can take it wherever they go and can rebuild it if they choose. If they keep it in their heads, that's fine too. They don't have to buy it to have it – they can have it just by knowing it. Anyone making a reproduction of my art is making art just as valid as art as if I had made it. ... If art has a general aspect to it and if someone receives a work in 1968 and chooses to have it built, then either tires of looking at it or needs the space for a new television set, he can erase it. If – in 1975 – he chooses to have it built again – he has a piece of 1975 art. As materials change, the person who may think about the art, as well as the person who has it built, approach the material itself in a contemporary sense and help to negate the preciousness of 1968 materials....<sup>217</sup>

When considering the uproar surrounding Martin Creed and the Turner Prize, one must acknowledge that the supposed fiasco of conceptual art entails more than a failure to blow up the art market. In essence, *all* institutions involved in professional quality judgments – not just the market, but also art criticism, the museum, and the discipline of art history – have successfully shielded themselves from the implications of conceptual

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<sup>217</sup> Weiner, “October 12, 1969”, 217-218.

art. The intended separation of conception and execution – the replacement of a realised work by an open description or instruction – threatened to destroy the very foundation of quality judgement. If every execution is a good execution and any result a good result, what else is there to say about it? The disregard of conceptual artists for the accepted modernist quality criteria undermined and ridiculed the position of everyone involved in judging works of art.

However, this threat was short-lived; by the mid-1970s the status quo had been restored. Only within the academy – the protected sphere of institutionalised art instruction – have conceptual artists successfully propagated their ideas. There, they have had a direct and unconditional influence.

The periodic recurrence of the fantasy of a completely dematerialised work of art cannot change the fact that conceptual art is a historical phenomenon. Conceptual art has entered the annals of twentieth-century art as one movement among many, without its implications for quality judgement having had any lasting impact on the way the history of that twentieth-century art is written. This two-pronged effect has created an impasse for the critical formation of judgements about contemporary works of art. In the 1990s, well-educated young artists like Douglas Gordon and Gillian Wearing came up with variations on historical examples of conceptual art (including work by Douglas Huebler). In most cases, these new works were too innocent to be considered plagiarism and too shallow to be read as commentary. At the same time, the heroes of yesterday have also continued to produce work themselves – some of them endlessly embroidering on a basic 35-year-old pattern, others stitching on an equally infinite chain of retro-innovations, the consistency of which will only be obvious to themselves. What these young and old artists have in common is that they can easily shrug off any criticism of their work as a symptom of nostalgia for the 1960s. It is all the more pressing, therefore, that critics, theoreticians and historians set themselves the task of developing “post-conceptual” criteria for judging contemporary works of art in a convincing way.