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Conclusion:

Conceptual Art and the Ironies of History

It may seem beyond dispute that contemporary art is characterised by an enormous pluriformity and diversity in both its tangible manifestations and its underlying intentions. Consequently, any definition or theoretical description of contemporary art will have to allow for an infinite range of artistic specimens.⁴⁰⁹ This requirement can also be taken to imply that only theoretical descriptions phrased in the most general and abstract terms might rightfully claim to have lasting relevance.⁴¹⁰ Any attempt to define contemporary art by identifying concrete artistic tendencies or currents, such as Terry Smith's recent proposal, will almost inevitably fail to transcend its own limited perspective.⁴¹¹ Such definitions are based on fashionable criteria that will quickly prove ripe for replacement. Art historians researching the field of contemporary art need to develop a critical and theoretical framework to compensate for the evident lack of historical distance from their objects of study.

The contribution that my dissertation aims to make to the corpus of art historical knowledge revolves around a post-conceptual definition of contemporary art. It can be summed up in the following four points: 1. Contemporary art came into existence around 1970, when conceptual art was at its peak. 2. Contemporary art is a globalised system of artistic production and reception, the foundations of which derive from conceptual art. 3. This conceptual "legacy" is not a matter of individual artistic merit and influence, but of general conditions of production anticipated in the 1960s and fully materialised since the 1970s. 4. Contemporary art has managed to be successful and legitimate as post-conceptual art only by

⁴⁰⁹ One writer who has made this perhaps obvious, yet important, point is Arthur C. Danto. See for instance "The Abuse of Beauty", *Daedalus* 131:4 (2002), 35.

⁴¹⁰ In Danto's words: "... the conditions for something to be art will have to be fairly abstract to fit all imaginable cases ..." (ibid., 37).

⁴¹¹ Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6-8.

repairing what seemed to be the major inconsistency of conceptualism: its refusal of quality control.

My analysis of post-conceptuality implies that conceptuality is no longer a distinct quality or trait of individual works of art; instead, it has trickled down and permeated contemporary artistic production as a whole. I have proposed a framework that has the effect of reducing contemporary art – in all its diversity and pluriformity – to a set of fundamental, historically specific conditions of production and reception. These conditions are, first, the cultural dominance of “information”, leading to a complete separation between concept and visual form; second, the full professionalisation of artistic practices, with the artist achieving the status of project manager and cultural entrepreneur; and third, the universal applicability of the criteria of “good design”. By describing contemporary art as “applied concept art” (see chapter 4), I have pointed out that the procedures developed by conceptual artists to separate the concept of a work from its execution allowed the shadow of applied art and design to cross the threshold of the artist’s studio.

It could be objected that my theoretical description of contemporary art is both too restrictive and too universalist to do justice to the manifest pluralism of contemporary artistic production. What about artists whose work displays not the slightest awareness of the existence – let alone the achievements – of conceptual art? Surely my post-conceptual model cannot apply to those cases? My answer would be that in fact it does. My theory is concerned with the most general and abstract conditions of artistic production; these apply in equal measure to all artists active in the field of contemporary art today. Individual artists may differ from each other in the extent to which they consciously reflect on these conditions in their work. However, the fact that a small (or even a large) number of artists are unaware of the conceptual root of the system of contemporary art does not mean that, on an individual level, a straightforward return to a pre-conceptual situation is possible. Even artists who reject the legacy of “concept” base themselves on some concept – for instance, on the concept of “the painting tradition”, “intuition” or “expression”.⁴¹² Their construction

⁴¹² Cf. Isabelle Graw, “Conceptual Expression: On Conceptual Gestures in Allegedly Expressive Painting, Traces of Expression in Proto-Conceptual Works, and

– or simulation – of a pre-conceptual artistic practice only confirms the power of post-conceptual conditions that allow them to conceive of that construction in the first place. They may not be aware of this themselves but, in evaluating their work critically, one has to assume that they are. Fundamentally, the only naïve art practice imaginable today is a *consciously* naïve one.⁴¹³

The post-conceptual interpretation of contemporary art takes place against the backdrop of the paradoxes of conceptualism. To summarise: conceptual art was critical by being uncritical; it made itself dependent on institutions it considered redundant; and it “performed” the suppression of artisthood in the form of a work of art – not once, but again and again. The irony that colours statements like these is related to the post-conceptual consciousness that I have sketched in chapter 4: the awareness of the paradoxical yet inescapable implications of the conceptual legacy for the production and reception of contemporary works of art. It is ironical indeed to find oneself devoid of stable quality criteria when faced with a work of art, and to realise that any critical judgment is potentially reversible – meaning that the strength of the work could also be its weakness, and vice versa – while this situation itself is irreversible (but not necessarily deplorable). This ironical awareness structurally affects the position of all agents professionally involved in contemporary art: artists, critics, curators, scholars, etcetera.

A detached look shows that my own writing is actually immersed in irony. The trope of irony – “[to] say something in such a way that the opposite meaning is implied”⁴¹⁴ – manifests itself in my dissertation in two distinct but obviously related ways: both in the interpretation 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.

⁴¹³ This is confirmed by Thomas Crow in his essay on conceptual art. “Almost every work of serious contemporary art recapitulates, on some explicit or implicit level, the historical sequence of objects to which it belongs. Consciousness of precedent has become very nearly the condition and definition of major artistic ambition.” “Unwritten Histories of Conceptual Art: Against Visual Culture”, in: Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1996), 212.

⁴¹⁴ Alan H. Monroe, *Principles and Types of Speech* [1939], 4th ed. (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1955), 377. See also Allan B. Karstetter, “Toward a Theory of Rhetorical Irony”, *Speech Monographs* 31:2 (1964), 162-178.

evaluation of individual works of art, and in the construction of an overall history. In these final pages, I want to take a closer look at this use of irony and its historiographical implications. In the introduction to this dissertation, I pointed to the unresolved nature of the art historical reception of conceptual art, especially in the work of “disappointed fans” like Benjamin Buchloh and Charles Harrison. To what extent is my ironical approach more resolved?

To begin with the first manifestation of irony: I look at artistic practices through the lens of the art world, as a sceptical participant shifting between an insider’s and an outsider’s position. In a contemporary context, the art world is like a social “milieu” or medium for the generation and transfer of perceptions, opinions, ideas and attitudes concerning the art that is – or should be – produced. This milieu is characterised by its own particular chemistry – a mix of interlocking habits, values, conventions, biases, discourses, tendencies and taboos that are constantly being stirred and shaken by social, cultural, political, and institutional forces and events. In the seven chapters of my dissertation, I either analyse artworks and oeuvres through this discursive milieu or dissect them “as such” – meaning that I either follow their art world reception or go against it. The ironical alternation between these two modes, it has occurred to me in hindsight, is an important critical tool. There are no straightforward ways to apprehend the mediating lens of the art milieu, and the effect it has on the production and reception of works of art, in isolation. As in the case of spectacles that we need in order to see, it is only by continuously alternating between the assisted and the unassisted vision that its effect can be registered and thematised.

To give two examples: one of the topics of chapter 5 is the art world taboo on the decorative application of contemporary art in domestic environments, a social “use” that appears not to be considered truly social. In chapter 6 I focus on the special status granted by the contemporary art world to photography, the medium that seems to function as the conceptual art form par excellence. I look at Elspeth Diederix’s *Blue Ridge*, for instance, through the lens of the art milieu; yet the context will make the

reader understand my scepticism regarding the qualities attributed to that work.

It should be kept in mind, however, that the art world is not some external force or enemy. While adding to or intervening in the discourse of contemporary art, one is always part of this “milieu” oneself. It would clearly be impossible for me as an academic to distance myself completely from it. Especially as I come from a mixed practice (as a critic, freelance writer and researcher), I have penetrated deeply into it. It is only as a participant in the art world that I have been able to construct for myself an ironical perspective as insider/outsider.⁴¹⁵ Moreover, contemporary art is itself discursive: it has integrated the critical discourse of art into its modes of production. Qualities attributed to a work result from the ongoing conversations and critical exchanges surrounding it in the art milieu. There is no way to bypass that discursive environment, as it forms the context in which contemporary art is necessarily produced and received.

The second manifestation of irony in this dissertation is situated at a different level. Almost every chapter revolves around one or more ironies of history – instances of historical objects turning into their opposite or having unforeseen and antithetical effects.⁴¹⁶ They contribute to what Hayden White has called, in his study of the use of literary tropes in historiography, a “satirical emplotment” of history.⁴¹⁷ Before looking at some implications, I will summarise the most substantial of these ironical inversions.

Chapter 1 shows how in 1971 the model of site-specific art represented a move from centre to periphery, whereas in 1993 it amounted to a move from periphery to centre. In another ironical twist, that chapter also claims that activist contemporary artists rely on the heritage of the

⁴¹⁵ Cf. Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 2: “The ‘scene’ of irony involves relations of power based in relations of communication. It unavoidably involves touchy issues such as exclusion and inclusion, intervention and evasion.”

⁴¹⁶ Claire Colebrook has called this type of irony “cosmic irony”, as it “imagines a higher or God-like viewpoint”. Colebrook, *Irony in the Work of Philosophy* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), xiv-xv.

⁴¹⁷ Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* [1973], 2nd ed. (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 10.

avant-garde as a tool allowing them to counter or deny that very heritage. Next, chapter 2 shows how the separation between the concept and the realisation of an artwork has changed over time from a detached and liberating strategy into a convention and a precondition for success in the contemporary art world. Chapter 3 demonstrates that the most radical conceptual art forms have always faced the ironical fate of collapsing into “pure design”. That chapter also shows how by the late 1960s the use of directions and instructions by artists, originally a way to undermine authorship, was at risk of being perceived as a confirmation of corporate or managerial authority. Then, chapter 4 argues that in modernity, as the responsibility for the production of works of art had shifted from the patron to the artist, the responsibility for *the interpretation* of the work shifted from the artist to the viewer. That chapter also concludes that in the 1960s conceptual art ushered in the managerial revolution in art, whereas the outcome of that change, several decades later, has been counter to the spirit of conceptualism. Chapter 5 points out that site-specificity evolved from a radical strategy into a conformist attitude centred on adaptation and suitability. And chapter 6 traces the ironical development of “conceptual photography” from unskilled and dilettante to professional and technically advanced.

According to Hayden White, the structural use of irony in historiography is related to a sceptical attitude with respect to the likelihood of major social or cultural change. In ironical accounts of history, the “belief in the possibility of positive political actions” tends to dissolve. One of the outcomes may be “a Mandarin-like disdain for those seeking to grasp the nature of social reality in either science or art”.⁴¹⁸ Not surprisingly, the use of irony also folds back upon the self-image of the historian and his or her application of figurative language. Scepticism is extended to the relationship between language and historical reality.

The trope of Irony ... provides a linguistic paradigm of a mode of thought which is radically self-critical with respect not only to a

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 38.

given characterization of the world of experience but also to the very effort to capture adequately the truth of things in language.⁴¹⁹

Satirical emplotments of history, guided by an ironical imagination, are therefore both radical and relativistic.

Kenneth Burke, however, whose study *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) is referred to by White, denies the relativistic aspect of irony and emphasises instead its dialectical nature. For Burke, irony is dialectical for the very reason that it transcends the relativity of any one-sided or partial perspective.⁴²⁰ Despite the representation of multiple perspectives on historical events, there is still a “resultant certainty”, a meta-perspective (or “perspective of perspectives”) that is necessarily ironical “since it requires that all the sub-certainties be considered as neither true nor false, but *contributory ...*”.⁴²¹

According to Burke, true irony involves the understanding of an “internal fatality” that characterises any historical given, implying that “the development that led to the rise will, by the further course of their development, ‘inevitably’ lead to the fall”. Thus, the historical appearance of X will sooner or later trigger a number of developments that in turn make X become redundant and disappear from the stage. Burke sees it as the historian’s job “to decide exactly what new characters, born of a given prior character, will be the ‘inevitable’ vessels of the prior character’s deposition”. Despite the quotation marks around “inevitable” and “inevitably”, he concludes by presenting his theory of the dialectics of history in the form of a law: “what goes forth as A returns as non-A”.⁴²² This law seems to imply a kind of parody or perversion of Hegelian dialectics.⁴²³

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁴²⁰ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945), 512-513. On the relationship between irony and metaphors of seeing (such as “perspective” and “point of view”), see Colebrook, *Irony in the Work of Philosophy*.

⁴²¹ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 513.

⁴²² Ibid., 517.

⁴²³ Cf. Joseph G. Kronick, “The Limits of Contradiction: Irony and History in Hegel and Henry Adams”, *Clio* 15:4 (1986), 391-410. Kronick describes irony as a parody of dialectics, which would explain Hegel’s aversion to it. “Irony is so intimately bound up with dialectics and the progress of the Idea in history that we might say that irony is dialectics without a telos” (ibid., 395-396).

I will end by showing how Burke's model of historical irony applies to my own writing. I will present three perspectives on conceptual art, distilled from a round-table discussion that was published in *October* in 1994, followed by my own dialectical meta-perspective that shows the three "sub-certainties" to be neither true nor false, but merely insufficient and incomplete. This meta-perspective brings together some of the ironical inversions that feature in the chapters of my dissertation.

In the round-table discussion on "Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp", Alexander Alberro, Benjamin Buchloh and Thierry de Duve give the following evaluations of conceptual art. Alberro represents what could be called the micro-historical perspective by insisting that "Conceptual art in the mid-sixties was a contested field of diverse artistic practices" – "there was not one theoretical model ... but several competing models".⁴²⁴ Buchloh counters this by proposing that conceptual art essentially revolved around "the radical redefinition of audience, distribution, institutional critique".⁴²⁵ This could be called the paradigmatic perspective. Then De Duve, the third voice lifted from this art historical debate, states that conceptual art was altogether a "failure" and a "dead end". Since (according to him) art is not a concept, conceptual art is "simply a contradiction in terms".⁴²⁶ I will call this point of view the aesthetic perspective.

As I have shown in my dissertation, the three perspectives can each claim to represent its own limited, or relative, portion of the truth. Kenneth Burke would say that they are relativistic – and therefore devoid of irony – because they represent a one-sided point of view.⁴²⁷ Each of the three perspectives plays down the other two. The micro-historical perspective undermines the theoretical reduction of conceptual art to a single, univocal and coherent movement. The paradigmatic point of view relativises the significance of any artistic activity not involved in radical systemic change. And the aesthetic perspective minimises both the historical and the

⁴²⁴ "Round Table: Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp", *October* 70 (Fall 1994), 142 and 128.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 143-144.

⁴²⁷ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 512.

theoretical relevance of conceptual art by pointing to the impossibility of its supposed aim (the reduction of the work of art to a mere concept).

The threefold relativity of these limited perspectives can be undone by applying the following dialectical meta-perspective. Conceptual art was the historical prefiguration of a fully professionalised and managerial – or entrepreneurial – form of artishood. The three conditions that would come to determine contemporary art as a system – the cultural dominance of information; the professionalisation of artistic practices; and the application of design criteria – announced themselves in a compressed, more or less allegorical form. This happened at a historical turning point: the moment when the late-modernist paradigm of art had become obsolete.

The conceptual prefiguration of the conditions of contemporary art was a brief phase. Its peak lasted from 1965 to 1970; its tail (1970-75) overlapped with the early years of contemporary art – the art that is post-conceptual in the sense that it has digested, or at least passed, the phase of allegorical prefiguration. In retrospect, this transition from conceptual to contemporary art was marked by a number of ironical inversions: deskilling and dilettantism fed into professionalisation and entrepreneurship; and the autonomy of art blended with notions of applied art and design. These inversions are more than ironical; they are dialectical, meaning that the first pole of each opposition is encapsulated and implied in the second, where it continues to be active. (Without this implication, no prefiguration could have occurred.) Deskilling has remained an essential truth in the professional practice of contemporary artists; it is where artists come from; it is what they are; it affects what they do. And the autonomy of contemporary art is a precondition for its survival of the application of design criteria.

This ironical perspective is an interpretative strategy that helps to make sense of the unresolved aspects of conceptual art. It has the benefit of showing how the dialectics of deskilling and professionalisation, of autonomy and application, have formed the roots of contemporary art since its emergence around 1970. Moreover, it allows us to abandon the idea that conceptual art was a revolution, or a failure, or a failed revolution. Conceptual art will appear to be so only if the dialectics I have sketched are

not taken into account. What appears to be a failed revolution or a “dead end” was in fact the realisation of a dialectical potential that is still in many ways decisive for the art of today.

If I were to analyse, in somewhat more personal terms, the origins of the ironical tendency in my writing, I would have to admit that it can be traced to an aesthetic preference, among other things. To plot history satirically as a series of ironical inversions tends to give me a deep aesthetic satisfaction. It would clearly take me too far from the core of my research to look for a psychological explanation of this affection. However, the aesthetic preference is paralleled by a strong aversion to any form of discursive legitimation in texts on contemporary art – something that may have been equally decisive in my adoption of the ironical mode. Rereading the texts included in this dissertation, it strikes me that my relation with contemporary art is remarkably detached. I tend to position myself outside or above it by way of premature historicisation. This creates not just a distance but also an imaginary power over the art in question – a power that I apply through the emplotments discussed above. In my writings, I often find fault with claims of a direct social and political effect of contemporary artistic practices – claims that, despite their mostly unfounded and utopian nature, are promoted by large sections of the art world.⁴²⁸ Hayden White’s characterisation of the “satirical mode of representation” applies here:

... Satire represents a different qualification of the hopes, possibilities, and truths of human existence revealed in Romance, Comedy, and Tragedy respectively. It views these hopes, possibilities, and truths Ironically, in the atmosphere generated by the apprehension of the ultimate inadequacy of consciousness to live in the world happily or to comprehend it fully.⁴²⁹

To write history in the satirical mode is to “perceive behind the welter of events contained in the chronicle an ongoing structure of relationships or

⁴²⁸ For an example of an essay in which I aim to pick apart such claims, see “The Rhetorics of Manifesta”, in: Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic, eds., *The Manifesta Decade: Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 219-230.

⁴²⁹ White, *Metahistory*, 10.

an eternal return of the Same in the Different.”⁴³⁰ In my case, that chronicle would consist of contemporary art magazines that aim to provide their readership with evidence and discursive support for important developments, trends, and even so-called paradigm changes in the art of the day. (The mere fact that these changes occur seems more significant than what they actually entail; leafing through the magazines without reading any of the articles, a cynic would say, is enough to stay “up-to-date”.)

My ironical approach to conceptual and contemporary art results in a model of interpretation that is intended to avoid at least the most flagrant forms of discursive legitimation. However, it seems likely that the production of discourse on contemporary art is always to some degree a legitimating affair. This also applies to my writing. The chapter on Jeff Wall, originally published in a monograph on the occasion of a photography prize awarded to the artist, is perhaps the most obvious case. I defend Wall’s work against his critics in a manner that, in retrospect, seems to lack nuance or argumentative depth. The rhetoric of the text – “Isn’t it true that ... ?” – is too emphatic. In the context of my dissertation this essay fails to provide a critical assessment of Wall’s production in terms of the legacy of conceptualism. In fact, it is the only text in this compilation that is not constructed around one or more historical ironies. Perhaps not surprisingly, commissioned monographic catalogue essays do not lend themselves very well to experiments with a satirical mode of representation.

Then again, another chapter (“The Obsession with a Pure Idea”) suffers from an excessive ambivalence that makes its argument to some extent unclear and unresolved. This text is unsure whether or not conceptual art is to be considered a proper art historical movement. It initially treats “conceptual art” as an a-historical label. Although this generates certain refreshing insights, it does not provide a lasting and viable alternative to a critical-historical framework.

Even if these two essays therefore have their obvious weaknesses, I nevertheless included them in the dissertation as they represent a certain limit – the point where the dialectic fails or the irony stops short. Thus, they

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 11.

contribute in their own way to the project of mapping the ironies of art history, by bringing the borderland within sight.

Altogether, I hope that my dissertation shows it is possible to write a coherent study of a twentieth-century artistic movement without deciding – let alone declaring – whether or not one “supports” it. This is not a matter of the author keeping his or her personal evaluation private, but of working through the historical ambivalences of the art in question and treating them as meaningful in themselves. This is an important aspect of the proposed ironical approach to art history. The fact that these essays, written for various non-academic occasions, find themselves compiled in an academic context, a context in which a certain degree of detachment is still a relevant quality for authors, should therefore be considered logical rather than ironical.