

Issues in Contemporary Art: Conceptual Art

Jessica Griggs – January 28, 2009

The whole point of conceptual art is the idea; with this in mind is it even necessary to 'make' an artwork?

What is conceptual art? Is conceptual art, art? According to Elisabeth Schellekens, other art movements do not arouse as much debate or controversy as conceptual art. Conceptual art has an inclination to provoke viewers, causing them to react for or against the artwork. Some may find conceptual art very refreshing because it seems to be a relevant art practise in today's world. Others may consider it outrageous, offensive, skill-less, negative or not art at all (Schellekens, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy* 2007). Is it necessary to make an artwork if only the idea exists or can the idea be just an artwork? These questions will be discussed through this essay along with references and examples of conceptual artists such as Mel Ramsden, Joseph Kosuth, Keith Arnatt, and Sol LeWitt.

'Conceptual art is based on the concept that art may exist solely as an idea and not in the physical realm' (World Wide Art Resources 2006). The question about conceptual art is that if the idea exists, is it necessary to create the art piece? Can the artist just write the concept? In saying this, writing alone can be an artwork. So real conceptual art is not seen or heard, it is in the mind of the artist and must be either spoken or made known to the viewer by publishing the idea.

Sol LeWitt argues that ideas can independently be an artwork because an idea is succession in development, which will inevitably find some form. Ideas do not need to be made physical (Harrison & Wood 1992, p. 837). This statement is true in some aspects. If an artist wanted to portray a message or a simple idea to spectators, then the idea would have to be created, performed, written or displayed in some way to expose the ideas, even if the artist did not make the physical object.

'All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually... In conceptual art, the idea of the work matters more than its physical representation' (The-artists.org 1998-2008). So all art is conceptual because the ideas come before the artwork. Conceptual artworks are created by artists to express ideas, therefore artists are free to use anything to exhibit an idea and consequently an object or performance is still classed as Art. According to LeWitt no form in itself is greater than another form. An artist could use any approach, from a written or spoken expressive word to make it a tangible reality (Alt X, *Art-Language*, 1969). Paul Wood stated that conceptual art was about 'Reconsidering the Object of

Art'. It was about elevating questions in regard to the products of art activities and about artistic intentions in relation to the history of modernism (Wood, 2002; 29).

Minimalism was an art movement in the 1950's which focused on describing artworks in a simplistic view of content and form, making personal expressions and creativity obsolete so the work did not have distracting compositions, themes or intricate detail. According to Doyle (n.d.) minimal art is comparable to other art movements such as conceptual art because the artworks endure solely to convey a theory or idea.

Minimal art is like conceptual art because the artists focus on the ideas rather than what the art piece is actually going to look like, aesthetically. Even though some conceptual artworks have the appearance of an empty meaning to the viewers, it still has meaning to the artist; the idea is therefore left up to the imagination or perception of the viewer.

Mel Ramsden's abstract artwork, *Secret Painting* 1867-68, portrays two canvases, one painted black and the other with text that reads: "The content of this painting is invisible; the character and dimensions of the content are to be kept permanently secret, known only to the artist" (Wood, 2002; 31). This kind of conceptual art is a good example of how art can be displayed as an idea rather than an aesthetically pleasing artwork. It shows an idea that can be understood by anyone. Call it what you like, resemble or relate it to something of the past, this is art whether you like it or not.

The idea behind Ramsden's art piece makes fun of the 'black square' idea which is supposed to have great significance and reference from the history of monochrome painting. The idea of the black square proceeded from the artists Kazimir Malevich and Ad Reinhardt. Malevich's artwork, *Black Suprematist Square* 1914-15, gave credit to a speculated performance, like a religious icon (English, 2008; 7). Reinhardt simplified his art and made it non-representational to life. He felt that illustrative imagery and deceptive spaces were impure matters in art (MSN Encarta 2008).

A. English (2008, p.7:7) also states that Ramsden ridicules the entire aesthetic purpose of abstract art and that the idea of abstraction is likened unto orchestral music because you cannot sufficiently put the meaning into words if the meaning is a secret. Sol LeWitt wrote many statements that related to his conceptual artworks but in a way his writings also outline other conceptual artist ideas. LeWitt wrote that an artwork is like a 'conductor' from the artist's mind to the viewer's mind, but the viewer may never understand the idea or the idea may never leave the artist's mind (Alt X, Art-Language, 1969). This is to say that an artwork may be displayed, but the idea behind it may never be known to anyone but the artist.

'Proto-investigations' is the terminology that Paul Wood used to describe Joseph Kosuth's unusual artworks. Kosuth expressed his ideas by creating art that used everyday objects, materials and words (Wood, 2002; 34). Kosuth's artworks drew attention to the connection between tangible objects and diverse representations. He used photos for visual effects and dictionary definitions to express verbal statements (Wood, 2002; 34). 'Kosuth's work operates at the intersection of language and vision, dealing with the relationship between the abstract and the concrete' (Kleiner, 2005; 1020). '*One and three chairs*' is a good example of this statement because Kosuth gave value to the concept and defined components of the artwork while focusing on composition, space, balance and unity. Kosuth stated:

Like everyone else I inherited the idea of art as a set of formal problems. So when I began to re-think my ideas of art, I had to re-think that process... [T]he radical shift was in changing the idea of art itself...It meant you could have an artwork which was that idea of an artwork, and its formal components weren't important. I felt I had found a way to make art without formal components being confused for an expressionist composition. The expression was in the idea, not the form – the forms were only a device in the service of the idea (Kleiner, 2005; 1020).

Kosuth arranged a real chair along with a photo of the chair and displayed the definition of the word "chair". His idea was to cause viewers to contemplate the idea of what established "chairness" (Kleiner, 2005; 1020). There are many ways in which ideas can be displayed and the idea can change if there are contrasting objects within the artwork. The idea of this artwork would not be as effective if only the real chair or the definition of the word "chair" was displayed. Kosuth reinforced the idea three times so that it would not be mistaken for anything but what a chair is. Kosuth stated that there was only one statement to say about art because to Kosuth, art was only one thing, as he states 'Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else' (Wood, 2002; 43).

Paul Wood writes about Kosuth's statement that art no longer requires the creation of objects, it can be just the concept of art.

The claim he arrives at is that art no longer requires the making of objects, that it is the prepositional affair: that is, a prepositional to the effect that *this* is a work of art. In effect, the work of art is an analytical proposition, a tautology, akin to 'A triangle has three sides'. As Kosuth writes, 'the "purest" definition of conceptual art would be that it is an inquiry into the foundations of the concept "art" (Wood, 2002; 43).

According to Wood's philosophy writers such as Peter Osborne, they were quick to specify the flaws in Kosuth's rationale. 'Osborne indicated the inconsistency involved in claiming for a work of art the status of an *analytic* proposition, while simultaneously arguing that it achieves such

status only when presented in the *context* of art' (Wood, 2002; 43). However, Wood (2002; 43) denotes that Kosuth's work distinguished a prominent element in the development of conceptual art.

What is an artist and what is an artist supposed to do or make? These statements have become challenging and unavoidable questions for artists. They are issues that need more than the simple processes of creating artworks (Wood, 2002; 43). Conceptual artworks by Keith Arnatt raised questions about the nature of artworks, the role of the artist and the role of the viewer or critic. Wood says that Arnatt took an emphatic analytical written statement, by philosopher John Austin, to arouse claims on what a 'real' artist was. Arnatt created a photographic design, entitled *Trouser word piece* 1972 (Wood, 2002; 44), which shows Arnatt holding a sign with the words I'M A REAL ARTIST written on the board. The written text of Austin is displayed alongside the photograph. This artwork is like a performance, a photographic statement or something that is advertised; it asks questions to viewers and tries to make them think.

George Dillon (2000) described Arnatt's art piece as being a "philosophic theme". Tony Godfrey (1998; 172) argues that this is questionable whether the photograph acted as a study of the philosophy or was just an excuse for quoting Austin's statement. According to Dillon, Godfrey is saying that he is uncertain of whether the photograph illustrates the text or undermines it. Godfrey finds the text unremarkable and nonessential, saying that after a while it assists only to emphasise on what is practical. Is this real art? Does the accompanying text make the art piece more real? Dillon says that the text does help in explaining or giving some idea to the photo, he says it is art that makes you think (Dillon, 2000). A photo of something, such as *Trouser word piece* 1972, is an artist's impression of something, therefore anything can be created, displayed, performed or written to communicate the idea or subject.

Sol LeWitt was another well-known conceptual artist who created simple geometric sculptures and drawings with exhilarating colours and stylish wall paintings. In 1980 LeWitt created a book artwork entitled *Autobiography* which contained over a thousand photos of every 'nook and cranny' of his loft in Manhattan. Almost everything was included from the plumbing equipment, to empty jars and other items, which had been gathered over time, LeWitt only appears once in all these pictures. LeWitt also documented everything that happened to him during the events of taking all the photos ((Kimmelman, The New York Times, 2007).

According to Baicker (Medill Reports, 2001-07), LeWitt was famous for influencing the conceptual art movement and also for not wanting to be famous; therefore *Autobiography* acted as part of his personal image. Kimmelman (The New York Times, 2007) discussed that LeWitt determined '...life in art as an unimaginable and unpredictable experience'. Most of LeWitt's artworks were basic shapes and patterns to test viewer's visual flexibility. His idea was to portray a 'line', whether it be straight, curved, angled, broken, thin, thick or soft it is still a line. LeWitt's message to viewers was to cause viewers to open their eyes and minds, to realise that a line could be enjoyed in many diverse ways as an artistic element.

Many of LeWitt's mural-sized wall drawings or paintings took weeks to finish with a team of people. 'The concept of a work of art may involve the matter of the piece or the process in which it is made' (LeWitt on Art X, Art-Language, 1969). LeWitt always gave his team ample working space and believed that the contribution of others was an element that should remain as part of the artwork, for example, the enjoyment in making the work, frustration, boredom or emotions were all expressions and elements in the finished art piece. Viewing audiences may not have known this element in the finished artworks, but it was a notion known by the artist. By executing this method, LeWitt encouraged others to participate in creative ways and possibly influencing them into becoming an upcoming artist themselves (Kimmelman, The New York Times, 2007).

Although LeWitt did create some artworks to show an idea, other times the contribution and participation of others was what made the idea an artwork. Conceptual artists are free to do what ever it takes to express their idea, whether it be a fully completed traditional art piece or something simpler like a black square or blank canvas. Art is art and in our world today, nothing really surprises people what an artist produces because we live in a world with many extraordinary things happening every second of the day. Almost anything is given some form of acceptance. The traditional methods of creating something aesthetic or realistic have been partly replaced by minimalism or "modern" art styles and techniques. In most cases the Avant-garde style of art will always be the inspiration, method and idea in all art styles in this day and age.

In conclusion, conceptual art can be anything that an artist does to express their idea. Conceptual art or the ideas can be displayed without the artist even making the work. Displaying an everyday item, possibly with some text, can portray an idea immediately; it depends on how the object, performance or artwork is exhibited. Conceptual art makes people contemplate and interpret art in a diverse way and shows art in a distinct perspective compared to the traditional art styles and movements. The ideas do not need to be made physical (Harrison & Wood, 1992; 837).

Conceptual art can be a live performance, an object made by a manufacturer, photographs, a blank canvas or text on a board. It is not necessary for a conceptual artist to create the artwork, why should they? If some element can show the idea, without the object being re-made, then all the artist has to do is display the item or perform the act to demonstrate the idea. LeWitt says that all ideas are art if they are related with art and if the idea takes place within the conventions of art (Art X, Art-Language, 1969). Conceptual art is a relevant practise in today's world, therefore making it a common sight in many galleries or an icon in public spaces. Conceptual art is an avant-garde style; it is radical and daring.

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