

Reflections on Conceptual Art and its relation to New Media, a month long conversation at Empyre

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I was a guest speaker on Empyre during the month of April 2005. The following text is a revision of two particular postings on Conceptual art, which were part of a long debate that took place between Raul Ferrera Balanquet (CU/MX), Kate Southworth, Patrick Simons(UK), and myself. Other invited guests included Lucrezia Cippitelli (IT), Heidi Figueroa Sarriera (PR), Raquel Herrera Ferrer (ES), Lucas Bambozzi (BR), Andres Burbano (CO), and Joeser Alvarez. This text is also part of a larger essay which will be published at a later date in its entirety.

The theme of the month:

“Do conceptual art and curatorial practice merge in post digital cultural production? How are new media art, criticism and curatorial practice a ‘transgressive’ ecology”?

To be precise, I will focus on the relation of Conceptual art to new media. While it is true that artists part of the net.art group were influenced by a certain type of conceptualism, the premises of conceptual art as it is understood according to its origins in the New York scene is practically irrelevant in new media practice. When it is brought up it is often in allegorical form. In relation to this, we can consider MTAA’s One Year Performance, [1] which allegorizes one of Sam Hsieh’s performances. In the original project Hsieh did not leave an enclosed space for one whole year. A person brought him food and took away his refuse. A lawyer notarized the performance to give it authenticity.

T. Whid and M. River, who collaborate under the name of MTAA (M.River & T.Whid Art Associates) have extended Hsieh’s concept of committing to an activity for one year on to the web by presenting themselves in a room apparently spending time alone in 1 Year Performance Video (samHsieHupdate). At first glance they mimic Hsieh’s activities in the cell, as the artists appear juxtaposed in two video feeds, doing simple things that always correspond with the time of day when the

internet user is accessing the website. In reality the artists prerecorded their activities and created computer files which now can be accessed according to the Internet user's computer clock.

In MTAA's update, the visitors are encouraged to watch the video files for the period of one year, and to sign up for an online account in order to keep track of their time. The visitors do not have to be logged on for the whole time at once, and can leave and comeback according to their personal schedules.

While the online piece may allegorize Hsieh's performance, it does so in a very unexpected way. Particularly, it exposes the drastic changes in art production since Hsieh developed his one-year performances (He did a few of them). At the time that Hsieh was performing, the object of art was in question, and like conceptual art, performance art was a way to negotiate meaning as a cultural product (these movements obviously overlap). But what is most important is that MTAA allegorizes the critical methodology of conceptualism, in this case, to also comment on performance art, and not on an actual object of art (the performance of Hsieh), but on the critical position behind the object — it is a meta-critique — a critique of a critique. In this way direct criticism on the object of art is allegorical commentary; it is a discourse that is developed as a comment on conceptualism, but which does not directly depend on the critical foundations and notions of resistance of conceptual art. The reason why this is so will now be explained.

Conceptual art, mainly in the New York scene, developed in reaction to Greenbergian modernism; this is specific to Joseph Kosuth and his contemporaries. However conceptual practice became quite diverse and took on many approaches around the world. [2] However, here in order to be specific, we shall keep the New York scene in mind.

Critical art practices since the turn of the twentieth century have relied on a materialist approach to art making. [3] To be specific, the artist looks at the subject and considers key elements to then make them obvious to the viewer, who, if the work is developed carefully, will come to question it according to exposed contradictions, coherences, limitations, and excess of meaning, which often can be read as open-ended questions, or at times as subjects of the sublime (the latter may be problematic for some conceptualists who are critical of ideology). The artist can claim that what she has done is nothing but show what was already there, thus appearing critical and detached with proper distance, thus questioning not only what the role of the artist is, but also the idea of originality. This is what Duchamp did with his famous *Urinal*. [4] As it is commonly known, he did nothing but choose a mass produced object which exposed the artist's role in art practice and her/his relation to the growing industrial world. However, Duchamp was not directly questioning the material aspect of the work of art. Conceptualism did — New York conceptualism to be exact. [5] Whether moving towards or away from the object, the point is that, in conceptualism, the materiality of the object of art was in question, or at least it was the direct subject of reflection. Yet, if this is to be contested, what can be said about Conceptualism is that its subject was the idea as the object of art. [6] (This should be considered in direct relation to New York conceptualism, realizing that conceptual strategies were quite diverse internationally).

With new media we experience works that are not materialized in the conventional sense to which conceptualism reacted. This is in part because new media works are easily reproducible. What is unique about new media is that in its beginnings, in order to be legitimated, it did not face what other mediums had faced in the past, because issues of originality and purposiveness were previously dealt with by other media such as photography and most importantly film. In fact, new media, as a general discipline, was understood so quickly as a vehicle for efficient dissemination that it swiftly moved to affect previously existing media. New media is considered to have pronounced major reciprocal effects, especially in Cinema. As Lev Manovich explains:

Computer media redefine the very identity of cinema. In a symposium that took place in Hollywood in the spring of 1996, one of the participants provocatively referred to movies as “flatties” and to human actors as “organics” and “soft-fuzzies.” As these terms accurately suggest, what used to be cinema’s defining characteristics are now just default options, with many other available. [7]

Here we notice how new media’s language comes to redefine pre-existing media. And so, it can be stated that new media art (a more specific discipline within new media) rides on the histories of previous media. It is allegorical. It uses the language of film and photography – not to mention painting to create works that take on different forms according to specific contexts, and the viewers accept such work because the codes at play are already common knowledge. The power of such language allows for the actual object to disappear and eventually lets information take over. This we can experience in MTAA’s allegorization of Hsieh’s performance. There is no actual action or object in their work, just pure information configured to represent the allegorical concept of a performance. It is worth noting here that MTAA is extending a method of critique; they are “updating” it (to use their own term) but not taking a critical position with the resistance that is vital to conceptualism.

However, this dematerialization paradoxically makes the object of new media art incidental and often misunderstood, and new media curators, critics, theorists and artists often find themselves explaining why new media work is important in art discourse. Why this is so is a more complex question that must be considered in a separate text. But suffice it to say that it is in part due to the fact that new media art appears to be quickly understood or misunderstood because it relies on codes previously introduced by other media; thus it appears unimportant in part to the general art audience, who in the past has assumed that it is so obvious that new media art lacks potential to be a vehicle for critical discourse. It is often dismissed as “techie” or leaning toward “techno-fetishism” [8].

It is important to emphasize again that there is no physical object of art with many new media projects – especially Internet art. Of course we can say that we have moved on to the actual discourse and its form as information becoming the object, but when this shift happens the criticism also shifts. We can consider the

role of an electronic mailing list such as Empyre in relation to intellectual capital and its new power position within the gift economy as an example where discourse becomes the object of contemplation. Their description reads:

“Empyre facilitates critical perspectives on contemporary cross-disciplinary issues, practices and events in networked media by inviting guests-key new media artists, curators, theorists, producers and others to participate in thematic discussions.” [9]

In such a list, discourse is always incomplete, ongoing, as the list moves through discussions from month to month; here, discourse is full of slippages due to the immediacy of e-mail correspondences. Those who participate in such lists have intellectual Capital that can be spent online to further their network connections. The list directly depends on the academic institution to make it possible for those with the knowledge and the time to write, to participate in an activity where no actual pay is expected. This is important to consider in relation to early paradigms of conceptualism, which aimed to critique institutions of art discourse, because, even if the Empyre list is not dealing with the object of art specifically, it depends on a type of criticism that is similar if not the same as conceptualism — the notion of an avant-garde, which also at this point may be treated allegorically as something that can no longer be taken seriously, but which still echoes in critical discourse. [10] In Empyre, however, we find a range of intellectuals including historians, artists, curators and theoreticians, who are quick to exercise different forms of critical resistance that often echo if not directly use forms of resistance now comfortably expected to function within the academic institution. At this point, at least an awareness of such methodology is expected in some form from a cultural critic. To critique the institution is no longer a form of resistance, but a form of open legitimization — a way into the institution and a way to stay in. This is what conceptualism achieved for itself. [11]

With this assimilation of criticism in mind, what actually happens with the shift from object to information is that the artist --in particular the new media artist — can develop work using a materialist approach following the parameters of conceptualism while not worrying about objecthood — as theorized by Michael Fried [12] — and this may be why some people confuse new media practice following a materialist analysis with Conceptualism as understood with the likes of Michael Asher or (to show the complexity of Conceptual art) Adriane Piper. However, the basic criticism that made conceptualism a specific movement of resistance is no longer there; meaning, the object of art is no longer expected to be present, or critiqued in order to call something art, in the realm of new media. This type of criticism itself is institutionalized; it is part of what today is known as “Institutional Critique.” This does not mean that there is no such thing as a conceptual online practice that of critiquing the object of art or the institution, only that the criticism of such practice is quite different because the object of art is information (data) that can be presented in various forms. And the resistance of the object based on its co-option by a commercial market is conveniently supported by the rise of the gift economy. [13]

The object of art (of new media) is metadata/data. [14] Materialization of information (however this may be) is an after effect of power relations ending in careful distribution through diverse forms--for the information can be reconfigured to meet the demand of a locality according to a global market. This is the object of contemplation in new media practice and this is where artists who have made works of note in such a field have focused. Here we can find renewed forms of resistance, and new forms of criticism.

To further complicate this, the new media artwork is not easily labeled as just "art"; much of it crosses over to activism, hacktivism, and pervasive media. Without going into detailed definitions of these terms, it should be pointed out that they are all activities that actually influence the political spectrum around the world. It would appear then that the lines between art for a selective audience and mass media start to blur in New Media Art practice. And this is the model that carries the conceptual trace. However, in new media, and especially online practice, because there is no actual material object directly connected to a market that in the past the conceptualist is expected to resist; the focus is by default on the idea. This is the major difference in the aesthetics at play; meaning that the type of resistance expected of a New York conceptual avant-garde practice is not expected of new media practice. But as it was previously explained, this does not mean that some artists are not critical following the tradition of previous conceptualists, it just means that such practice is actually a specific choice. The model for new media practice is dependent on ideas not material forms, and this is particular to new media, just like objecthood is to painting and sculpture – and in terms of institutional critique, conceptualism in the fine arts.

Notes

[1] MTAA, <http://turbulence.org/Works/1year/> See Review: http://www.netartreview.net/weeklyFeatures/2005_01_09_archive.html

[2] Alexander Alberro, "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977," *Conceptual Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: MIT Press, 1999), xvi-xxxvii.

[3] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Materialism>

[4] The pros and cons are reviewed by Thierry De Duve, see Thierry De Duve, "Contra Duchamp," *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1998), 454-462.

[5] Joseph Kosuth, "Intentions," *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, 460-469.

[6] Sol Le Witt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," *Conceptual Art...*, 12-17.

[7] Lev Manovich, "Digital Cinema and the History of a Moving Image," *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: 2000), 293.

[8] This comment is made after having attended lectures by Christiane Paul, who actually experienced such indifference from another curator in the audience, during a major conference at LACMA titled, "Institutional Critique." Paul found herself giving a quick historical explanation to the audience because of the indifference I explained above. See "Institutional critique conference" May 21, 2005. <http://finearts.usc.edu/events/detail.cfm?id=307> (November 10, 2005).

[9] Empyre, April 2005. <http://www.subtle.net/empyre/> (November 10, 2005).

[10] Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1984).

[11] Andrea Frasier admitted to this cooption in the same conference at LACMA in which Christiane Paul presented as mentioned in footnote 8. See "Institutional critique. conference".

[12] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 116-147.

[13] See Barbrook, Richard. "The Hi-Tech Gift Economy." *First Monday*, 1999. http://firstmonday.dk/issues/13_12/barbrook/ (10 May 2004).

[14] Manovich describes information and its relation to new media. I am specifically extending it here to the object of art, *Ibid*.