

## Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It's a Good Idea

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Tags: Benjamin Buchloh, Brian O'Doherty, Conceptual art, Rosalind Krauss

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### 1. Conceptuality versus medium specificity

What continues to give an edge to any discussion about the current status of painting as a medium is that this particular debate raises the following fundamental question: which forms of artistic production can count as contemporary and which should be rejected as irrelevant? Precisely because the theory of High Modernism pronounced painting to be the 'Royal Road' of artistic practice, it seems that ever since that doctrine was challenged it has been the fate of painting as a medium to provide the forum for all arguments about the road that art should follow in the future. Even if some of the original heat has gone out of these arguments in the course of their cyclical resurrection and abandonment since the late 1960s, it still remains a burning issue. An increasing interest in painting has begun to emerge, particularly in recent years. There are today, quite simply, a multitude of interesting positions in painting, each in its own way doubtlessly relevant to our times. Nevertheless, painting still has to fend off the latent reproach of being reactionary, not least because populist apologists for the medium often use reactionary arguments in its support, for example when they celebrate the 'return of painting' as a renaissance of authentic artistic skills. Faced with this situation, it seems useful to reconstruct the fundamental questions inherent in the arguments about the validity of painting in particular, and about the definition of contemporary artistic practice in general, in the hope of finding a way out of this notoriously intractable discussion.

One question that inevitably arises when painting is being discussed is why painting should be considered in isolation from other media? Does it make sense to make a single medium the subject of a text or an exhibition? Is this still relevant? Or is it not? A possible first answer is, 'No it is not. Any consideration of painting in isolation tends to be reactionary, because the dismissal of Modernism's dogmatic restriction of artistic practice to a particular medium must be understood as the most significant progress in art in recent decades. Today every medium represents only one possibility among many. The only thing that counts is the artist's conceptual project. The choice of a particular medium only has meaning inasmuch as it relates to a strategic gain within the overall project. If a conceptual statement can be adequately formulated in terms of painting, then artists paint, but if a different medium proves to be more useful, they turn to video or build installations. In this context anybody who looks at the medium alone is missing the most important thing.'

A second possible answer is, 'Yes it is. It is even necessary to discuss painting qua painting, because that is the only way to investigate its true significance. The enormous potential of what art can do as *art* only emerges when art deals with the laws, limits and history of a specific medium. The semantic depth of a painterly formulation can only be adequately appreciated if it is understood as the result of a process of dialogue with the medium. Any kind of art or art criticism that excludes all of that must necessarily be superficial. Anyone who reduces art to transferable concepts and readily comprehensible ideas has lost sight of what art is, and what it can achieve by virtue of its nature as a non-verbal language. Any art that defines itself solely in terms of content, and not in terms of its medium-specific form, becomes the kind of issue-related speciality art that critics and curators love, because it always comes with ready-made categories to file it under, such as "identity politics", "institutional critique", "critical urbanism" and so on. No valid art or criticism can avoid dialogue with the medium qua medium.'

Both positions seem well founded in principle. So perhaps it is unnecessary to opt for either one or the other, as one may adopt a different perspective from one case to the next. A painter's paintings may be regarded fruitfully as engaging with the medium of painting in terms specific to that medium, while painting by conceptual artists working with a range of media, for instance, may be more readily understood with reference to the conceptual themes it proposes. From a pragmatic point of view this may be a useful approach. A convincing solution to the fundamental problem it is not. The conflict between a conceptual and a medium-specific understanding of artistic practice only becomes comprehensible in all its intensity and depth of meaning when it is viewed not pragmatically but historically. By proving that art can only exist as a concept and must be evaluated in terms of its conceptual performance alone, Conceptual Art in fact could be understood to have irrevocably severed the connection between art and its medium. Seen in this light the arguments produced by Conceptual Art at the end of the 1960s refute once and for all the 'High Modernist' theory (adduced by a critic such as Clement Greenberg) that true art must be conceived and executed in medium-specific terms. If one follows this argument through to its conclusion, then the refutation of the primacy of medium-specificity by Conceptual Art marks a historical caesura with normative effect and consequences that must inevitably be faced. It represents a

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threshold that no one can step back over.

## 2. The change to conceptuality as the historical norm

The assertion of the normative validity of the turn towards conceptuality became canonical largely because the school of American art criticism around the journal *October* made this claim one of the central tenets of its art-historical theories. In her essay 'A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the age of the post-medium condition', for instance, Rosalind Krauss characterises the effects of the conceptual turn at the end of the 60s as normative and irrevocable.<sup>1</sup> To begin with, Krauss reiterates the argument Joseph Kosuth proposed in 1969 in *Art after Philosophy that Conceptual Art* dismisses the relevance of medium-specific art practice in favour of a general and fundamental inquiry into the nature of art - in whatever medium. Acknowledging this thesis, she describes Conceptual Art's strategic coup as a successful refutation of the doctrine proposed by Clement Greenberg, according to which art, by necessity, concentrates on a thorough exploration of the laws of the given medium, in particular painting. According to Krauss, this global privileging of the concept over the medium in effect created entirely new, historically irreversible conditions for the production of art. After Conceptual Art, the practical basis and the historical horizon for the production of all art is set by the 'post-medium-condition'.

For Krauss, this historical caesura manifests itself in the 'mixed-media' installations of Marcel Broodthaers - for example his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures* (1972), a fictitious museum exhibition consisting of an obscure collection of artefacts (stuffed animals, books, prints, etc.), all of which show or represent eagles in one way or another. Broodthaers restricts himself in this work to the conceptual gesture of a spatial *mise-en-scène*. This gesture not only makes every included object into a readymade, but it also declares each one to be interchangeable. One eagle is worth as much as any other. What medium is used to represent the eagle is likewise a matter of complete indifference. Picture, object and text are all accorded the same status. Krauss interprets their equivalence as a radical withdrawal of all meaning from specific artistic media. Apart from being an attack on the traditional concept of art, the assertion that artwork is interchangeable also counts as a cynical embrace of the fact that artwork can be exchanged like any other commodity. By releasing art from the specificity of the medium, Krauss argues, Broodthaers effectively equated it to its pure exchange value.

In this way, she claims, the art object has been 'reduced to a system of pure equivalency by the homogenising principle of commodification, the operation of pure exchange value from which nothing can escape'.<sup>2</sup> For Krauss the liberation of art from the fetters of medium-specificity therefore leads directly to a new form of dependency, its dependency on the market.

In his essay 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the aesthetic of administration to the critique of institutions', Benjamin Buchloh offers a variation on this argument.<sup>3</sup> He too concedes that Kosuth, through his bold demands for an examination of the general conditions of art, successfully abolished the dogma of the primacy of reflection on the medium in post-war American painting. At the same time, however, Buchloh warns that the freedom Conceptual Art gained through its emancipation from the material art object and its manual production is a deceptive freedom. The suspension of all traditional criteria for judging art, he argues, in the end only strengthens the power of the art institutions. For if an object, or the practice of producing it, no longer qualifies as art on the basis of recognisable material properties, then in the end it is the museums or the market that determine whether it is art or not. Buchloh describes this dubious triumph of Conceptual Art as follows:

*In the absence of any specifically visual qualities and due to the manifest lack of any (artistic) manual competence as a criterion of distinction, all the traditional criteria of aesthetic judgement - of taste and of connoisseurship - have been programmatically voided. The result of this is that the definition of the aesthetic becomes on the one hand a matter of linguistic convention and on the other the function of both a legal contract and an institutional discourse (a discourse of power rather than taste).<sup>4</sup>*

Here Buchloh relativises the emancipatory status of conceptual art by pointing out that it can also be understood as a reflex of the latest metamorphosis in the capitalist conditions of production. Thus whereas pop art and minimal art still celebrate industrial production and mass consumption in their materials and subjects, conceptual art, through its fixation on the immaterial qualities of language and the written word, involuntarily replicates the way in which real work has become immaterial in the service society, and thus erects a monument to the aesthetics of bureaucracy.

These arguments lead up to two substantive conclusions about possible modes of artistic practice after conceptual art. If one follows Krauss, Marcel Broodthaers's intervention shifts the practice of art onto a new level: while he demonstrates that all media are interchangeable and thus proves that media-immanent work is meaningless, he simultaneously establishes the conceptual gesture as the ultimate possible artistic act which can still create meaning. According to this view, the only art that has any significance at all in the historical framework of the 'post-medium-condition' is one that declares its subject to be the system of art, its conditions and its history as a whole. Media-immanent practice is dismissed as irrelevant as the meta-historical conceptual gesture alone can lay claim to artistic relevance. If one





*history and tends to eliminate itself. It resurrects itself when the context mimics the one that stimulated it, making it 'relevant' again. So a gesture has an odd historical appearance, always fainting and reviving.<sup>5</sup>*

O'Doherty here replaces the hard normative criteria of transparency and singularity with the more dynamic parameters of elegance, didacticism, irony and perspectivity. By stressing the particular aesthetic and pedagogic effect of the gesture on its public, he emphasises that the staging of the conceptual gesture constitutes a practice in material terms, which possesses a formal language of its own and achieves particular effects by use of particular means. Such an understanding of the material and medial aspects of the conceptual gesture as a form of artistic practice questions the ideal transparency of the gesture as an inscription in history, just as the concepts of irony and perspectivity relativise the idea of the gesture as a unique event. O'Doherty's concept of history is not linear and normative but multi-perspectival and relational. The meaning of a gesture cannot therefore be taken directly from the gesture itself, but is dependent upon the historical context that it both actively construes and is retroactively perceived in. The meaning of the gesture (just like that of an ironic remark) is therefore not transparent but latent. The historical context is furthermore not given by history *per se*, nor has it one single meaning. O'Doherty understands the construction and reconstruction of historical connections as a form of artistic and critical practice in its own right. In this way, O'Doherty avoids the Modernist reduction of the gesture to one single throw of the dice by describing the staging of the conceptual gesture as material practice that opens up history as a dynamic field for action.

#### 4. Painting as situative strategic practice which does not take its own legitimacy for granted

In principle you might say that a postmodern theorisation of the conceptual gesture differs from the modernist definition in that it understands the gesture not as a singular event with normative validity but as a strategic intervention into the history of art with a situational meaning. From the postmodern point of view conceptual gestures reflect the history and conditions of art by producing situations that show art in a light that is constantly new and changing. In practice it is probably easier to meet the challenge of producing surprising reflective situations than to cope with the pressure of producing singular grand events. This is probably why, in the context of the postmodern debate in art in the late 1970s, it again seemed possible to integrate painting situatively and strategically into conceptual practice. A common form of situative integration was the inclusion of painting as one object among many in comprehensive spatial setups (see, for example, Ilya Kabakov and the 'Sots-Art' artists). Another way to remodel painting according to a logic of situative strategic choices was to forcibly disseminate the meaning of the individual picture in a luxuriant web of references (for example, in Kippenberger's paintings, where meaning can only be accessed through a multiplicity of cryptic references to other artworks and social events).

Yve-Alain Bois develops the idea of painting as conceptual practice along similar lines in his book *Painting as Model*.<sup>6</sup> Referring to the theses Hubert Damisch proposes in his book *Fenêtre jaune cadmium, ou les dessous de la peinture*, Bois describes the 'strategic model' in painting as the well-considered location of a work within a network of references: 'Like chess pieces, like phonemes in language, a work has significance, as Lévi-Strauss shows, first by what it is not and what it opposes, that is, in each case according to its position, its value, within a field...'<sup>7</sup> Bois then underlines the situative significance of such a strategic intervention in the field of art by distinguishing it sharply from the normative understanding of the historical validity of the work of art.

*The strategic reading is strictly anti-historicist: it does not believe in the exhaustion of things, in the linear genealogy offered to us by art criticism, always ready, unconsciously or not, to follow the demands of the market in search of new products, but neither does it believe in the order of a homogeneous time without breaks, such as art history likes to imagine.<sup>8</sup>*

Bois, however, goes a decisive step further in his defence of painting as conceptual practice. Referring to Damisch he argues that the medium of painting is by nature conceptual, and its conceptuality is produced not only by way of positioning a work within a particular set of external references. For Bois painting is essentially conceptual when it self-referentially and self-critically addresses its material qualities as well as the symbolic grammar of its own formal language. In relation to this immanent criticality, the strategic instalment of painting in a network of external references has the status of a meta-critical gesture. This means that this gesture essentially derives its critical force from the structural self-inquiry of a medium-specific art practice it simply takes it to another level. This conceptuality, however, only exists as a potential. Consequently, Bois differentiates between a progressive type of painting, one that recognises and develops this conceptual potential, and a more conventional painting that relies uncritically on a traditional understanding of the medium. In Bois's view, in order for the conceptual potential to be activated, a painting must produce its own justification by means of continuous formal self-scrutiny and the creation of contextual relations. In support of this he quotes the following from Damisch:

*It is not enough, in order for there to be painting, that the painter take up his brushes again,' Damisch tells us: it is still necessary that it be worth the effort, it is still necessary that [the painter] succeed in demonstrating to us*





painting has been subtly complicated by means of conceptual self-criticism. The counter-objection would be that, as Buchloh and Krauss point out, the abandonment of painting in favour of a purely conceptual process is no guarantee that such a practice will not also be appropriated - there are plenty of institutions specialising in the administration of conceptual types of work, and because of the absence of any material resistance, conceptual practices are even more likely to become trapped in institutional dependency. The choice of medium *per se* therefore says little about the critical potential that a work might develop in cases of doubt. With this contentious point we now arrive at a stalemate. It can only be resolved by a double appeal to criticism: painting's present commercial boom certainly requires an acute conceptual critique of contemporary positions. At the same time the boom in interdisciplinary and project-based approaches at international biennales raises the question of how resistant ephemeral forms of practice are to the administrative logic of the global exhibition industry, and whether a renewed examination of the intractable materiality of certain media-specific approaches might not actually be what is needed at this precise moment.

Translated by Hugh Rorrison

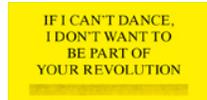
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#### Footnotes

1. Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea. Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London: Thames Hudson, 1999 ↑
2. Thomas Lawson, 'Last Exit Painting', *Artforum*, October 1981, pp.40-47 ↑
3. The transfer of the strategic model from the American school into German art criticism in this sense has produced a neurotic fixation on the examination of the legitimacy of art in discussions in the journal *Texte zur Kunst*, and a corresponding paranoid fear of illegitimacy among German artists.↑
4. *Ibid.*, p.15 ↑
5. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the aesthetic of administration to the critique of institutions', in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999 ↑
6. *Ibid.*, p.519 ↑
7. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1986, p.70 ↑
8. Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990↑
9. *Ibid.*, p.254. See also Hubert Damisch, *Fenêtre jaunecadmium, ou les dessous de la peinture*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984 ↑
10. Y.-A. Bois, *op. cit.*, p.256 ↑
11. *Ibid.*, p.255 ↑



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