

Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again?

Because They Think It's a Good Idea

Jan Verwoert

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.¹ 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.

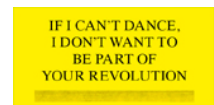
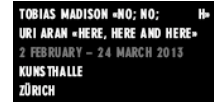
In this way, she claims, the art object has been 'reduced to a system of pure equivalency by the homogenising principle of commodification, the operation of pure exchange value from which nothing can escape'.² For Krauss the liberation of art from the fetters of medium-specificity therefore leads directly 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.³ 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).⁴

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



considers the contribution of conceptual art to constitute a normative caesura in the history of art, then the conceptual gesture is the only available sphere of activity left open to artists who seek to make work in the full awareness of the current historical condition of art production.

This conclusion is then reinforced by a second: as Krauss, and more particularly Buchloh, argue that the arrival of the 'post-medium-condition' in artistic practice coincides with art's subjugation to the dictate of institutions and laws of the market, it then is not only a historical but a political necessity to adopt a detached, meta-critical position in relation to the system of art. From this point of view, those who continue to work in media-immanent terms, for example in painting, not only condemn their practice to historical insignificance, but also risk direct appropriation by the institutions and the market. The conclusion is then that only a form of art that through conceptual gestures articulates a critical position with regard to the institution of art is capable of resisting the historical devaluation of artistic media and the subjugation of production to the laws of the art-system. In this way, both Krauss and Buchloh posit the significance of institutional critique from a historical point of view as the last form of art still capable of making a difference.

3. From strategic logic to the practical aesthetics of conceptual gestures

The question now is how, in practice, are we to imagine an art of conceptual gestures? Taking the arguments of Krauss and Buchloh literally, the only conclusion that can really be drawn is that with the entry of art into the 'post-medium condition' the notion of practice - if one understands it as continuous work on particular subject matter using particular formal media - has lost its meaning as such. The art of the conceptual gesture stages the artistic act as a direct entry in the book of art history. A successful gesture rewrites history. Such a gesture is therefore, by definition, legible and unique. Its meaning must be as transparent as an argument in textual form, so that the general understanding of art and its history is altered by its clarity and persuasiveness. If this gesture has a revolutionary effect, that is, if it constitutes a profound intervention in the history of art, then it acquires the status of a singular event. This definition of the conceptual gesture as a unique historical event with a convincing meaning has serious consequences for the understanding of artistic production: in conceptual terms it limits the significance of an artistic work to the contribution it makes to a new understanding of art. And this contribution tends to be unique. After all, how often can anyone achieve a conceptual gesture of historic dimension?

Modernism still permitted artists to produce revolutions through continuous work in their own medium (that is to say in practice). A radical understanding of historical critical conceptualism, however, requires every producer of art to change history by coming up with a unique idea starting from absolute zero - he/she must do this in a manner that is both clear and lucid. The pressure to succeed, which modernism's dedication to relentless avant-gardeism had already introduced, is now experienced even more acutely. As a result, we now have the tragic figure of the melancholy conceptualist, alone in an empty room waiting desperately for a revolutionary idea to come to him or her, or worse still, waiting for the next idea to come, trying to reinvent their work after their first success.

The irony here is that the type of art that in recent years has actually succeeded in turning the ideal of a historically influential and universally comprehensible gesture into reality, is in fact the so-called 'one-liner' art of the 1990s. The dead shark in a tank of formaldehyde fulfils all the necessary criteria, as does the artist's self-portrait as a wax figure with the features of Sid Vicious in the pose of Andy Warhol's Elvis: these represent unique statements demonstrating the new possibilities for interpreting both the concept of sculpture and the art-historical conventions for the representation of *vanitas* or self-portraiture, respectively. These works were universally understood and widely reported in all the media. So, strictly speaking, the successful conceptual gesture turns out to be nothing more than a well-told wisecrack. By taking the criteria of historical-critical conceptualism at its very word, 'one-liner' art demonstrates that the principle of the conceptual gesture scarcely differs from the commercial logic that lies behind the skilful launch of a publicity stunt or the effective placement of a hit single.

One might assume that the effective realisation of the conceptual gesture in the 'one-liner' idiom must seal the bankruptcy of the logic of strategic conceptualism. In some respects this conclusion might well be justified, if perhaps just a little premature. For only if one reduces the conceptual gesture to its strategic value alone does it cease to be possible to distinguish its significance from the media logic of the publicity stunt and the hit single. But how else is one to understand the gesture if not strategically? Brian O'Doherty suggests a more flexible definition in *Inside the White Cube*. He describes the conceptual gesture not only in terms of the logic of strategic intervention in history, but also in terms of an aesthetics of its own:

I suppose the formal content of a gesture lies in its aptness, economy and grace. It dispatches the bull of history with a single thrust. Yet it needs that bull, for it shifts perspective suddenly on a body of assumptions and ideas. It is to that degree didactic, as Barbara Rose says, though the word may overplay the intent to teach. If it teaches, it is by irony and epigram, by cunning and shock. A gesture wises you up. It depends for its effect on the context of ideas it changes and joins. It is not art, perhaps, but artlike and thus has a meta-life around and about art. Insofar as it is unsuccessful it remains a frozen curio, if remembered at all. If it is successful it becomes



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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.⁵

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

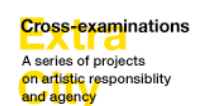
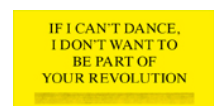
In principle you might say that a postmodern theorisation of the conceptual gesture differs from the modernist definition in that it understands the gesture not as a singular event with normative validity but as a strategic intervention into the history of art with a situational meaning. From the postmodern 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*.⁶ 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...'⁷ 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.⁸

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



that painting is something we positively cannot do without, that it is indispensable to us, and that it would be madness - worse still, a historical error - to let it lie fallow today.⁹

In that he pleads for the possibility of justifying the medium of painting by developing its immanent conceptual potential, Bois mediates between a conceptual and a medium-specific perspective. He tries to break down the conflict between the normative account of the conceptual turn and a medium-specific perspective on art practice. Various general conclusions relating to a resolution of this conflict could be derived from Bois's line of argument.

The medium-specific approach to painting is still possible in artistic practice and in critique. All it has lost is its status as self-evident. Since painting is realised today within the horizon of conceptual practice, it must be grounded in a context that is no longer its own. That means, on the one hand, that an appeal to the specifics of the medium as its sole justification is no longer possible. Painting can no longer just be painting. Today it is also necessarily a form of conceptual art, and as such it must be judged in relation to conceptual practices in other media, and in turn it must hold its own in this comparison. (Every group exhibition where different media are presented demonstrates this at a quite banal level.) But this also means that painting as practice can take strength precisely from the fact that by way of an immanent dialogue with its own history and conditions as a medium it arrives at a (situative strategic) self-justification within a more widely-spread conceptual horizon. In principle these conclusions correspond exactly to the thesis formulated by Thomas Lawson in his essay 'Last Exit Painting', in which the crisis in painting is understood as a positive opportunity, and the loss of its self-evident justification as a productive possibility that could provide painting with a conceptual basis again.¹⁰

5. Open Questions

The definition of situative strategic painting as an immanent conceptual practice has proven to be a practicable one. It supplies the arguments for the necessary critique of retrograde approaches that repudiate the challenge of conceptual self-justification. It also allows for painting to be discussed as a relevant medium again, and thereby liberates it from the curse of a premature rejection at the hands of a normative understanding of history. Nevertheless, the 'strategic model' remains limited. To begin with, it can only describe the meaning of a painting in metaphors that are drawn from the conceptual field of argumentation; the main concepts that Bois finds for the meaning of painting are 'position', 'verification' and 'demonstration'. From this perspective, the agency of the artist would be limited to the declaration of his or her own position over and over again. 'Here I stand, where do you stand?' would be the invariable formula for any exchange that painting could provoke. This model is depressingly static. The description of positions in a field of opposites says nothing about the possibility of transforming that field, or any potential process of change that a work sets in motion.

Furthermore, a model that concentrates on interpreting a work only in terms of the strategic position it claims, effectively reduces the discussion of art in a no-less dismal fashion to the matter of its legitimization.¹¹ No doubt, the question of whether a position is legitimate and how it legitimises itself is necessary if a critique is to investigate a work's conceptual core and symbolic political standpoint. For the critique to have a conceptual edge it needs to discuss the legitimization of a work as a position. Yet, at the same time, every discussion of legitimacy is always based on the more than questionable assumption that something like legitimate art might actually exist. The experience of criticism, on the contrary, is precisely that all art can be adjudged legitimate from some viewpoints, and equally illegitimate when viewed from others. So in this sense the strategic model might be said to confuse the judgement of the completed work with the initial motivation of its production. For it does not follow from the fact that art will be scrutinised for its legitimacy that it was actually made with the intention of being legitimate, or that it can even be legitimate *per se*. Against this objection one of course could hold that a crucial point in the conceptualisation of art was precisely that the criticism of art was no longer considered to be a process that happened after the event, but an inner dynamic inherent in its production. Conceptual art is by definition art-critical art and the cogency of its critical position must therefore also be amenable to interrogation. Nevertheless, whether the critical potential of a work can be equated with the legitimacy of its strategic position is another question again, and one that still has to be discussed.

A further obvious limitation of the 'strategic model' is that, given the conceptual apparatus at its disposal, it does not provide any useful steps toward grasping the immanent qualities of a painting, even if it happens to actually recognise their existence in principle. All it can do is state *that*, for particular conceptual reasons, a painting is what it is. Any statement about what experience a painting communicates qua painting can scarcely be formulated with concepts like position, verification and demonstration. In fact it is questionable whether this quality of experience can be comprehended in conceptual categories at all, or whether the moment when the 'strategic model' reaches its limits really is the time when the art of describing aesthetic experiences comes into its own once again.

The final question that remains open is how painting, understood in terms of immanent conceptual practice, relates to the market and art institutions. A cynical position would be that as long as there are enough canvases to sell, and as long as the buyers perceive the conceptualisation of painting as just another refinement added to the commodity (one that does not trouble their bucolic conception of art), the market cares not a bit about the way



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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

— Jan Verwoert

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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