

One and Five Ideas: on Conceptual Art and Conceptualism

Terry Smith

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Image and Text in Conceptual Art: Critical Operations in Context

Eve Kalyva

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‘There is a widespread sense in today’s sloppy art babble, that any art that has resulted from the artist having any kind of idea is “conceptual”. Not so’. Terry Smith is a critical thinker who back in the day, advanced critical approaches to art making as phenomena essential to social transformational practice. He

reprints here essays based on lectures given between the early 1970s and 2011, as a means to clarifying the complexities of interventions made by artist *grupuscules* in Europe and the USA, arising in the mid-sixties and through into the 1970s. The discourses as they developed and his later reflections map out a description of conceptual art as an approach to art-making the ramifications of which are still evident in contemporary practice today. Writing such a history from the inside can be fraught with distortion but your reviewer, also a young practitioner in those times, vouches for the even-handedness Smith has brought to his account, particularly through the exposure of contradictions and personal differences he had with the tendency across the period.

Eve Kalyva, a recent academic, writes a different history; one based on the documents, documentation, the art works mainly and some direct contact with the protagonists. Where Smith's practice (initially in Australia) was in the perceived centres of fine art politics in Britain and the USA (the 'Abstract Expressionist Empire'), his critique possessed a rhetoric *implying* an international dimension to the social context. As a contemporary writer, Kalyva's investigations of the machinations of conceptual art take her further into the hinterlands, to include Latin America and the confrontations that developed between artists and their governments, very often lethal back then. Her terms of reference meanwhile remain based in the broader histories of ideas and philosophy, richly and engagingly expressed in language which avoids glib reference to fashionable theory.

Both writers examine the Art & Language group, (Smith, a member for a time), as the focus point for a discourse that became dispersed across practitioners for interpretation in ways beyond the rigor applied by the group itself. In transition the

discussions generated were subtle, initially wide-ranging, seeking to define the agenda, then dealing with complexity, often with conclusions (deliberately) deferred. Exhibitions the group made were in total contrast to the phenomenological art experience and '*..the restriction of the cognitive in the name of the visual; of the suppression of the critical in the name of the creative; and of the marginalisation of the participant in the name of the beholder.*' Works in vitrines or mimeographs pasted onto walls pushed the gallery visitor away from the pleasure of the media, demanding attention be given to the attitudes on display painstakingly deployed in 12-point.

'Yea. I get it....'.

Reaction could be dismissive as there were careers and investments embedded in institutionalised structures where the role of the critic was to affirm or deny the efforts of the artist hero according to a historical sense of aesthetic revision; or in the context of Cold War politics, national prestige. Critical theory in practice became the antidote, where the context of production and its point of reception were considered a part of the artwork, thus placing meaning-making into permanently contested space. (To attend a contemporary exhibition of new work today, the catalogue or wall plaque often provides vital information to initiate this reflexive process: besides the title of a work the artist's national or ethnic background, the current place of residence; histories, through dates of birth (personal) and production (public) become essential to the process of understanding a work through thought and intuition).

Creating interpretive space can be regarded as a radical assault on the sensibilities of gallery goers who, prior to a range of practices emerging under the rubric Conceptual Art, were attuned to the appreciation of an artwork rather than its

interrogation. Both writers acknowledge the primacy of language as a component of the experience of art, having roots in the philosophical work of Wittgenstein among others. Artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Le Witt, Ian Burn, the Art & Language collective are recognised by both as a vanguard of the tendency, whilst others of note (and notoriety) are variously referenced within each volume by way of illustration of each of the writer's distinctive approaches.

Smith's essays chart a course over forty-years, the later ones tending in parts to read as apologia for the earlier ones. As such the collection mirrors thinking about art as process, a series of provisional actions and thoughts leading to moments of crystallisation.

Kalyva's appraisal of those who have introduced critical discourse into our engagements with art, specifies the socially transformative potential of art at a pan-international level. The challenge to such possibility comes when curatorial practice intercedes on behalf of the established institutions of government and commerce, the galleries and museums.

The attitudes and principles, the dialectics and rhetoric that emerged from this era, reverberate still through the international biennales forty-years later. These major events have introduced colloquiums as a means of managing the discourse emerging from new work, useful to artists spread across the globe and useful to new audiences eager to understand.

Both books are well illustrated, with exhaustive bibliographies and indexes.

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