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Theoretical Perspectives on Interactivity

Art and Freedom

-“Left to itself art would have to be something very simple - it would be sufficient for it to be beautiful. But when it's useful it should spill out of just being beautiful and move over to other aspects of life so that when we're not with the art it has nevertheless influenced our actions or our responses.” (John Cage)

Section 1: Propositions

1. Art must eschew capitalism. The moment you create a commodity, the moment your labor is materialized in an object, you are enslaved. It is not possible to make work with the aspiration of sale that is not dominated by saleability. The moment you sell your art you sell your voice and your voice becomes the mouthpiece of capitalism. This is not to say it is impossible to make art that is simultaneously critical of capitalism and operating by its rules. The moment your expression begins to defy the system, to deviate from the mainstream, the system opens its gaping mouth and swallows it whole. Passing through the intestines of the beast the art is anesthetized, commodified, homogenized, to a palatable form. It emerges from the other end a pile of trivial pseudo-critique. It becomes a new style, a new fashion for the masses to try on, as vapid as the rest of the marketplace.

The only way for art to escape this feedback cycle is to operate entirely outside the loop. Art cannot be made for money. To think you can be employed as an artist, that you could possibly make a living from your art, is to strive for imprisonment. To think you can exhibit your work in a gallery or museum is to reinforce the system as it stands. To think you can make a saleable work of art that is a genuine expression of yourself is to show that you have already been consumed.

2. If art can avoid being beholden to corporate-government-academic rules it is in a unique position for creative inquiry. Outside of the system art is allowed to tackle questions which would otherwise be stifled or ignored, to use processes which would otherwise be dismissed, and to arrive at conclusions which aggressively question the foundations of our established modes of being and shake the ground on which we

stand. Outside of the system art could awaken us to what is happening all around us. It could bring an awareness of our environment, of the culture we willfully participate in, of the society we re-affirm each day that we fail to dismantle it. Outside of the system art could destroy the system by showing it for what it really is, an empty, powerless illusion which depends on the passive participation of its members to continue.

This is not to say that art must be political. It is to say that art is already political by its very nature. Silence says acceptance by its exclusion of statement. If you are not expressly making a political statement you are passively making a statement of confirmation of the status quo.

The artist's ability to operate outside the system is not relegated to politics for politics' sake. All disciplines are essentially political. From biology to psychology, from philosophy to astronomy, art can penetrate any field with questions and methods which give rise to not only new perspectives but also a critical self-reflexiveness making the discipline more aware of its internal biases and contradictions.

3. "Art" does not exist. Art is one gradient in a continuous spectrum of human creativity. Distinguishing art as "art" serves only the purpose of excluding things deemed not to be "art" by way of semantics. Art does not "represent" anything. Art presents, in the first place, ideas and processes which are as much a part of life as a tree growing in the forest. The distinction between art and life is specious. We must dismantle this contradiction. A human being is a perpetual process of input and output. Creativity arises from the tangential overlapping areas of learning, the connections which branch out and become something new, something unlearned, something in and of itself. To draw borderlines around areas of creative output is to limit it, to qualify it, to dissect it. These distinctions are our own, they are not external, "real world" facts, but are individual, arbitrary, semantic judgments. The impossibility of defining art is well known. Why then continue to try? Why then continue to support an artificial distinction? To the artist it does not matter if what they are making is defined as art or not. They are compelled to create. What matters is their dedication to the process and their determination to explore.

Section 2: History

These ideas are not new. There was a time in its history when art became relentlessly self-critical, probing the very nature of its definition. The status of art as commodity and

the institutions which supported this power dynamic came under attack.

Conceptual Art brought a level of self-reflexiveness to the art world. It was an inquiry into the foundations of the very concept of "art". It challenged the role of the material art object as a unique commodity and demanded active participation in its creation, transforming the audience into the participants.

"Art is not an escape from life, but rather an introduction to it." Beginning in the 1950s John Cage's work centered around the idea of breaking down distinctions between art and everyday life. "Art is imitation of nature in her manner of operation". By incorporating silence into his compositions he questioned the definition of music, much as Duchamp had questioned the definition of visual art, asserting that all sound is of equal value. His work sought to embody nature, rather than conquer or represent, by removing his hand from the compositional process and leaving decisions up to chance. Cage's work, along with Duchamp's, served as the soil from which the self-criticality of the Conceptual Art movement would grow.

In 1969 Joseph Kosuth began making work which consisted simply of categories from a thesaurus republished in spaces he purchased in newspapers and magazines. This work was concerned solely with ideas, it was dematerialized, non-precious, accessible, and unconcerned with the art market.

Paul Kos 'The sound of ice melting' in 1970 brought together ideas of the dematerialized object and art as a natural process. Two 25 lb. blocks of ice were surrounded by eight microphones which amplified and recorded the sound of ice melting. The role of the audience was simply to experience this phenomena. The experience itself could not be bought or sold and could never be repeated. It was the unique shared experience of the audience.

Meanwhile Bernar Vernet worked with the idea of art as knowledge, as documentation of intellectual pursuits by presenting scientific books, treatises, lectures and documentation to an art audience, questioning the boundaries between disciplines.

Also in 1970 Adrian Piper realized that increasingly political times called for more dynamic forms of art. She criticized the cool detachment of the art object, whether physical or conceptual, and its inability to actively engage mass society. Piper took her work to the street performing "Catalysis actions" with the intention of disrupting everyday life.

By 1973 Conceptual art was effectively dead. Lucy Lippard published a book "Six Years: the dematerialization of the art object" which was essentially its postmortem. "The major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are

represented (and still more unexpected - showing in) the world's most prestigious galleries." (1., p.254) Conceptual art had been devoured by the great beast of capitalism and excreted as just another style. Certain ideas of conceptual art have lived on, for example the use of installation, electronic media, and interactivity all stem from this history. But the quintessential edginess, the very nature of what made conceptual art appear so revolutionary at the time, had been filed down leaving only an established path to art world success in its wake.

It is interesting to contrast what happened to conceptual art in the West with what was simultaneously occurring in Eastern Europe. There was no art market in the Soviet Union. Art was either government sanctioned or it operated outside the system. Since there was no financial impetus for the creation of art objects, artists came to view their work as a way of learning, thinking, interacting, and existing. In a sense it was exactly what conceptual artists of the West were striving for. In the words of Andrei Monastyrsky (theorist of the art group Collective Actions), 'In Russia, where there is no market to promote artistic objects, it is not worth creating them. That is why many artists who work with objects leave Russia for the West. Only artists like us can survive here because we do not make "things", but rather perceive art as one form of existence.' (1., p.268-269) The fact that these artists were able to effectively free their art from the chains of both capital and government control shows that such a pursuit is in fact viable.

Section 3: Present

Following the selling out of Conceptual Art came a period of postmodern disillusionment. Artists, tired of what had become the conceptual aesthetic, frustrated by the ability of the art market to consume even its staunchest opponents, became reactionary. Now art was about futility, relativism, meaninglessness. It embraced style, decadence, and spectacle, accepting the art market as essential to its existence. Idealistic notions of the past were seen as naive and hopelessly romantic. Artists like Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and Mathew Barney gained fame and notoriety for work which embraced the processes and practices of capitalism, thriving as part of a grotesque spectacle of virtuosity, sensationalism and Hollywood style media celebration of the art star.

'For me, it makes a lot of sense to be part of the market... it's more threatening that people like me are operating as part of the market - selling the work... These contradictions have a lot of meaning' (Felix Gonzalez Torres, CA, p. 398)

Artists have become all too willing to design products, sell their ideas, and reinforce the

art market as its stands. Even the artists who term themselves "interventionist" are still perfectly happy to exhibit in museums and galleries, as if critique and capitulation were not mutually exclusive.

Section 4: Future

I am not calling for a rebirth of Conceptual Art. But I feel that Conceptual Art had a sense of idealism that we could desperately benefit from today. We have to get over the last thirty years of disillusionment and realize that it is time to get back to work; it is time for action. We have been programmed to be passive, to believe attempts at societal change are futile, to feel consumed in the infinite layers of meaning and implications of our every gesture. We are so consumed by the implications of our actions we fail to make them. It is time to move on. It is time to refuse to be pushed into positions of infinite regress; time to refuse the art market, refuse artificial distinctions between disciplines and genres, refuse to be classified, packaged, advertised, bought and sold. It is time to be overtly critical, time to be loud and angry and aggressive. It is time to bring our work into the open. The end product is of no importance. It is the creative process and the fact of sharing this process with everyone else, destroying its mysteriousness, destroying its capitalist value that is vital.

Creation is simply a mode of existence. Human beings are essentially creative but our creativity is stifled by the false authority of education and media that tell us how to think, tell us our impulses are incorrect or invalid or futile. We must approach creativity as a collaborative process of mutual exploration. There is no end goal, no ideas of progress or success or failure. There is only motion, interaction, curiosity and play. The idea is not to "change the world" ; the world is in a constant state of change. The idea is to direct this change in a way that allows human beings to recognize the reality of their freedom, creativity, and collaboration in the whole process.

References

1. *Conceptual Art*, Tony Godfrey, Phaidon Press, 1998
2. *Conceptual Art*, Ursula Meyer, Dutton Paperbacks, 1972
3. *Fluxus Experience*, Hannah Higgins, University of California Press, 2002