

WHAT IS Conceptual Art **?**





1967

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THE WHAT IS

IMMA talks series?

There is a growing interest in contemporary art, yet the ideas and theoretical frameworks which inform its practice can be complex and difficult to access. By focusing on a number of key headings, such as conceptual art, installation art and performance art, this series of talks is intended to provide a broad overview of some of the central themes and directions in modern and contemporary art.

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This series represents a response to a number of challenges. Firstly, the inherent problems and contradictions that arise when attempting to outline or summarise the wide-ranging, constantly changing and contested spheres of both art theory and practice, and secondly, the use of summary terms to describe a range of practices, many of which emerged in opposition to such totalising tendencies.

Taking these challenges into account, this talks series offers a range of perspectives, drawing on expertise and experience from lecturers, artists, curators and critical writers and is neither definitive nor exhaustive. The intention is to provide background and contextual information about the art and artists featured in IMMA's exhibitions and collection in particular, and about Contemporary Art in general, to promote information sharing, and to encourage critical thinking, debate and discussion about art and artists. The talks series addresses aspects of Modern and Contemporary Art spanning the period from the 1940s to the present.

Each talk will be supported by an information leaflet which includes a summary, the presenter's essay, a reading list, a glossary of terms and a resources list. This information can also be found on IMMA's website along with more detailed information about artworks and artists featured in IMMA's Collection at www.imma.ie.

WHAT IS Conceptual Art?

introduction

The Irish Museum of Modern Art is the national cultural institution for the collection and presentation of Modern and Contemporary Art. IMMA exhibits and collects Modern and Contemporary Art by established and emerging Irish and international artists. The Temporary Exhibitions Programme features work by established and emerging artists, and includes work ranging from painting, sculpture, installation, photography, video and performance. IMMA originates many of its exhibitions but also works closely with a network of international museums and galleries. IMMA's Collection includes artworks spanning a range of media and genres, acquired through purchase, donations, loans and commissions, many in association with IMMA's Temporary Exhibitions Programme and, on occasion, IMMA's Artists' Residency Programme.

This introductory text provides a brief overview of Conceptual Art. Associated terms are indicated in CAPITALS and are elaborated on in a glossary on page 21. We invited Mick Wilson, Dean of the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media (GradCAM) to contribute an essay entitled *What is Conceptual Art?*, which considers the relevance of Conceptual Art both as an influential art movement during a particular period of time but also, more broadly, as a framework for creating and understanding art which remains relevant to Contemporary Art practice.

IMMA's Collection includes works by a number of artists associated with Conceptual Art, such as Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner, Dennis Oppenheim, Art and Language, Matt Mullican, Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland, Michael Craig-Martin, James Coleman and Gilbert and George. The legacy of Conceptual Art is evident in the work of a new generation of artists whose work is also featured in IMMA's Collection, including Damien Hirst, Marc Quinn, Douglas Gordon, Rebecca Horn, Liam Gillick, Philippe Parreno and Garret Phelan. We hope to draw attention to the potential of IMMA's exhibitions and Collection as resources in the study and consideration of Conceptual Art, and that these texts will encourage critical engagement with the debates that continue to inform Contemporary Art.



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what is conceptual art?

CONCEPTUAL ART refers to a diverse range of artistic practice from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, where emphasis was placed on the concept or idea rather than the physical art object. It also refers more generally to a framework for creating and understanding CONTEMPORARY ART, which prioritises a consideration of the idea or concept, and the intergration of context when encountering the work. The origin and meaning of the term is disputed, as Conceptual Art defies traditional forms of definition and categorisation, and cannot be identified by a uniform style or medium.

Conceptual Art emerged during a period of social, political and cultural upheaval in the 1960s. It was a reaction to the perceived constraints of MODERNISM and the increasing commodification of the art object. Artists sought the means to think beyond the medium-specific aspects of traditional art forms, such as originality, style, expression, craft, permanence, decoration and display, attributed to PAINTING and SCULPTURE. They used LANGUAGE and TEXT to directly disseminate ideas, demystify artistic production and negate visuality. Artworks took the form of written statements, declarations, definitions and invitations. As a consequence, this period has been described in terms of the 'dematerialisation' of the art object; a notion contested by some artists who argue that all ideas are accompanied by some form of artistic material, whether it is a photograph, sketch, instruction or map. Internationally, Conceptual Art is recognised for its use of both text and ephemeral or everyday materials, such as FOUND OBJECTS, READYMADES, PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO, PERFORMANCE, DOCUMENTATION and FILM.



image: Michael Craig-Martin,
on the table, 1970.

Historically, French artist MARCEL DUCHAMP pioneered a conceptual approach to art with his readymades, pre-empting many questions pursued by Conceptual artists regarding what is art and who determines it. Conceptual tendencies can also be found in the 'anti-art gestures' of DADAISM, CONSTRUCTIVISM, POP ART, MINIMALISM and FLUXUS. But it was Conceptual artists who interrogated the normative cultural status and perception of the visual art object with most rigour, believing art could act as a cultural intervention, and that it cannot be considered in isolation from its social, political and economic environment.

This newly acquired scepticism questioned traditional forms of marketing the art object as a decorative, visual COMMODITY, challenging the ownership, distribution and authorship of the art object. The shift in emphasis from art's material value was a deliberate attempt to subvert the autonomy and power of the art market, and the GALLERY or MUSEUM as the location, arbiter and sole representative of art. Central to disrupting the conventional logic of art systems was the role placed on the audience, who were viewed as active participants in the dissemination and expansion of ideas and the democratisation of art. Beholding the idea was to behold the artwork; undermining the private ownership of art as object and the conventional conditions of spectatorship. Artists employed strategies from the mass MEDIA, such as magazines, billboards and television broadcasts, to bypass the museum and gallery and to distribute art within the public domain. To expand on the critique of art, ideas were sourced from philosophy, LINGUISTICS, SEMIOTICS and CRITICAL THEORY.

Conceptual Art is hugely influential, considered by some to be the turning point from Modern to Contemporary Art practice. Its influence can be seen in performance art, LAND ART, INSTALLATION ART, PARTICIPATORY ART, SITE SPECIFIC ART, NEW MEDIA ART, RELATIONAL ART and PUBLIC ART. It replaced an object-based practice with a reflexive preoccupation with the objectification of art. Artists took on the positions of CRITIC and CURATOR, and set out the parameters of a debate that art practitioners continue to address. For some, Conceptual Art is considered an overly intellectual and anti-aesthetic art form. Within the discourse of INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE, Conceptual Art is considered a paradoxical exercise, in that the very institutions which were the focus of its critique have now appropriated and instrumentalised its strategies and methodologies, whilst simultaneously neutralising its broader social and political impact. Conceptual Art continues to inform Contemporary Art theory and practice, and has contributed to a revised understanding of art, radicalising modes of presenting, exhibiting and collecting art.

Sophie Byrne, Assistant Curator
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What is Conceptual Art?

Mick Wilson

Conceptual art is not about forms or materials, but about ideas and meanings. It cannot be defined in terms of any medium or style, but rather by the way it questions what art is. In particular, Conceptual art challenges the traditional status of the art object as unique, collectable and/or saleable. [...] This art can take a variety of forms: everyday objects, photographs, maps, videos, charts and especially language itself. Often there will be a combination of such forms. [...] Conceptual art has had a determining effect on the thinking of most artists.¹

Tony Godfrey, 1998

I will refer to the kind of art which I am involved in as conceptual art. In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. [...] The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. [...] Conceptual art is not necessarily logical. [...] The ideas need not be complex. Most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple.²

Sol LeWitt, 1967

Conceptual art, for me, means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or “dematerialized.” [...] This has not kept commentators over the years from calling virtually anything in unconventional mediums “Conceptual art.” [...] There has been a lot of bickering about what Conceptual art is/was; who began it; who did what when with it; what its goals, philosophy, and politics were and might have been. I was there, but I don’t trust my memory. I don’t trust anyone else’s either. And I trust even less the authoritative overviews by those who were not there.³

Lucy Lippard, 1972

Concept art is first of all an art of which the material is concepts, as the material of e.g. music is sound. Since concepts are closely bound up with language, concept art is a kind of art of which the material is language.⁴

Henry Flynt, 1961

I chose to work with inert gas because there was not the constant presence of a small object or device that produced the art. Inert gas is a material that is imperceptible - it does not combine with any other element [...] That is what gas does. When released, it returns to the atmosphere from where it came. It continues to expand forever in the atmosphere, constantly changing and it does all of this without anybody being able to see it.⁵

Robert Barry, 1969

introduction

The quotations which begin this essay establish most of the key themes in discussing conceptual art: the priority given to ideas; the ambiguous role of actual objects and materials; the need to rethink the mechanisms of 'display' and distribution of art; the increasingly important role for language; and the tendency to trouble core definitions both of 'art' in general and of 'conceptual art' itself in particular. This repeated play with definitions - 'What is the limit of what can be included under the heading "art"?' 'What is the most reduced and concise way in which a conceptual artwork can be "given" for the audience to "experience"?' - makes answering the question 'What is conceptual art?' a little tricky, but also very worthwhile.

Perhaps the easiest way to introduce conceptual art is to consider some examples of work typically described as 'conceptual'. Robert Rauschenberg sends a telegram to the Galerie Iris Clert which says: 'This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so' as his contribution to an exhibition of portraits in the gallery, (1961).⁶ Stanley Brouwn asks passers-by in Amsterdam to show him the way to a particular spot in the city using pen and paper, (*This way Brouwn*, 1961).⁷ John Baldessari instructs a sign painter to paint the following words on a canvas: 'Study the composition of paintings. Ask yourself questions when standing in front of a well-composed picture. What format is used? What is the proportion of width to height?', (*Composing on a Canvas*, 1966-8).⁸ Cildo Meireles screen-prints subversive messages onto Coca-Cola glass bottles and re-circulates these so that they are re-used for selling Coca-Cola (*Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project*, 1970).⁹ Joseph Kosuth exhibits a series of black-and-white photostats of dictionary definitions for words such as 'meaning' and 'universal', (*Art as ideas as idea*, 1966). Adrian Piper exhibits a short text saying: 'The work originally intended for this space has been withdrawn. [...] I submit its absence as evidence of the inability of art expression to have a meaningful existence under conditions other than those of peace, equality, truth, trust and freedom,' (1970).¹⁰

Less the medium,
more the message

This term 'conceptual art' has become the most widely used name for works such as these, which form a broad spectrum of experimental artworks and practices that developed from the 1960s onwards. These new art practices no longer necessarily depend on the production of discrete one-off physical objects; nor necessarily use traditional media and techniques like picture-making with paint or modelling with clay or casting with bronze or assembling with metal and wood; nor even demonstrate a specifically pronounced 'visual' or 'hand made' aspect. Typically, though not without important exceptions, art making prior to this development had been a matter of working directly within relatively familiar art forms and media – painting, sculpture, drawing, and print-making – to produce discrete objects. Conceptual art can make use of these forms on occasion, but it no longer requires these forms in order to produce something that claims an audience's attention as an artwork – the emphasis is generally not placed on a specific material artefact nor on hand-crafting or technical-making processes as such, nor even on the 'expressive' personality of the artist, but rather on a range of concerns that emphasise the role of 'ideas'. However, such generalisations are really only rough approximations – in many ways the list of works provided above could be used as counter-examples: for example, Robert Barry's work with inert gases is centrally based on a material process, the diffusion of the gases into the atmosphere; however, this process is not available to perception in the usual terms of art viewing. This play off between percept (what is given in the experience) and concept (what is proposed as organising the experience meaningfully) is a recurrent feature of much conceptual art which makes use of the ambiguous interplay of language, perceptual experience and the conceptual organisation of experience.

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when was
conceptual art?

Most commentators identify the period from 1966 to 1972 as the key phase of development: a period that concludes with the canonisation of conceptualism in the controversial international survey exhibition Documenta V in Germany organised by Harald Szeeman,¹¹ and the first publication of Lucy Lippard's often cited book that maps conceptual art, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, in the US.¹² However, this neat packaging of cultural practices in such crisply delimited movements and periods, with clear beginnings and endings, is always, to a greater or lesser degree, misleading, although such periodisations are sometimes useful in summarily introducing complex cultural historical material.

The key problem presented by mapping conceptual art is the degree to which it has come to reorient the entire field of modern art, so that producing an account of conceptual art opens up a whole range of unresolved issues that continue to vex participants in contemporary art debate.

A rough answer to the question

So as a first rough attempt at an answer to the question 'What is conceptual art?', we could propose something like: conceptual art, is the name for a broad tendency to shift the priorities for making, describing, thinking about, giving value to, and distributing works of art, toward questions of idea rather than technique. This is a tendency that is strongly evident since the 1960s. This is a shift from questions of craft process, material artefact, medium, tradition and virtuosity as primary, to questions of intention, meaning, idea and information as foremost in importance. This broad shift in emphasis is evident internationally in the work of artists from many countries including Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Italy, Japan, Russia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the UK, and the United States, from the 1960s onwards. While some have identified conceptual art primarily with New York and North America, and thus with an English-speaking cultural context, others have worked hard to overcome this bias by exploring the rich and culturally diverse examples of conceptualism globally.¹³

problems with this answer

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But one of the problems with this answer is that it seems to isolate conceptual art from a broader set of developments in post World-War II culture, such as pop art and minimalism, as well as wider developments in literature, poetry, theatre, performance and mass media. Part of the problem here is the way in which the academic discipline of art history, especially in its popularised form in glossy publications and television programmes, likes to talk of 'styles' and 'movements' and to anchor these notions by describing the visual appearance of, and techniques used in producing artefacts such as paintings and sculptures. Clearly, when artists begin to prioritise ideas and begin to use ideas from a wide range of sources – science, philosophy, sociology, literary theory, media and communications studies, cybernetics, ecological activism, and counter cultural politics for example – the old art historical conventions of 'movements' and 'styles' potentially become obstacles to establishing a broad and rich sense of a wide-ranging re-orientation of the global art system. (Of course another problem of academic art history can often be its preoccupation with being 'correct' and exact in its use of terms, which can lead to a lot of hair-splitting and angels dancing on the heads of pins, so let's not lose too much sleep over our rough answer to the question 'What is conceptual art?')



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One important dimension of conceptual art (which it is difficult to address in an answer like the one given above), is its relationship with counter-cultural tendencies and with various forms of international cultural politics such as feminism, the anti-war movements, and various forms of activism and dissent. A key work of the 1970s and critically important for the development of feminist cultural practice and debate is Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, which is in part a reworking of conceptual art approaches to the exhibition as 'system' and a use of the archive as a medium of display (presenting images, diagrams, documents, artefacts in a systematic manner).¹⁴ The exhibition as 'system', refers to the use of cybernetics and systems thinking in various conceptual art projects and in the rethinking of the function and role of exhibition and display.¹⁵ This is not to say that all conceptual art manifested a counter-cultural tendency: this was not the case.¹⁶ This is to make a claim for the broadening effects of conceptual art in terms of themes and methods in art making which enabled (not caused) the emergence of new cultural practices and debates which foregrounded questions of identity, gender, and class.¹⁷

Another dimension of conceptual art, which is not fully addressed in this definition, is the ambiguous and complex relationships between conceptual art and changes in the contemporary art market. Some commentators like Lippard emphasise conceptual art's 'dematerialisation' of the art object and identify this with attempts to resist the commercial logic of the art market. Other commentators foreground the role of conceptual art in reshaping the dynamics of the art market and the nature of what can feasibly be bought and sold. Seth Siegelaub, a key New York gallerist and curator since the 1960s, has written: 'The economic aspect of conceptual art is perhaps most interesting. From the moment when ownership of the work did not give its owner the great advantage of control of the work acquired, this art was implicated in turning back on the question of the value of its private appropriation. How can a collector possess an idea?'¹⁸ Of course this talk of a new economy of ideas has a familiar ring for contemporary ears, and indeed some writers have identified a connection between such 1960s radical art ideas and twenty-first-century notions of 'knowledge economy' and 'cognitive capitalism.'

In the 1990s, French sociologists argued that there is a relationship between the kind of creative and imaginative idea-based work proclaimed by 1960s artists and activists as progressive and transformative for society, and the kinds of 'flexible' 'creative' 'idea-generating' and 'immaterial labour' proclaimed by more recent champions of information capitalism and 'flexibilisation' as economically progressive and transformative.¹⁹ This is a very controversial matter, suggesting as it does that in some way work that sought to be socially, politically and culturally progressive in the 1960s has become taken-over as economically instrumental thinking by a new form of capitalism that seeks to exploit ever more totally our creative and social being.²⁰ Others go right back to the 1960s and identify a connection between the new art ideas of conceptualism and the new marketing cultures of corporations. Alexander Alberro has argued that: 'The infusion of corporate funds was a major element in the expansion of the art market during the mid-1960s. [...] Many in corporate practice [...] imagined new, innovative art as a symbolic ally in the pursuit of entrepreneurship.'²¹ This is just one way in which conceptual art continues as a live controversy for contemporary art practice and cultural debate.

conceptual art now

For some commentators the rise of conceptual art has been nothing less than the betrayal of the visual arts by overly literary and anti-visual cultural practices.²² For other commentators conceptual art has generated the basis on which current practice proceeds and, for them, it has established the basic problems and themes with which artists must continue to work. Arguably, conceptual art continues to be the key background for a number of important debates in contemporary art: the role of the curator; the functions and limits of art institutions (galleries, museums, exhibitions); art as exemplary economy of the 'dematerialised'; the meaning of 'public'-ness in art; the appropriate role and limits of mediation, publicity and explication in contemporary art; the inclusions and exclusions that operate in the circuits of global culture; and the relationship between art practice and knowledge.

In the most simple and everyday terms conceptual art has given rise to a new criterion in judgements on art. Encountering a work of art, instead of the question 'Is it beautiful?' or 'Is it moving?' we now find ourselves more often than not, first asking ourselves, 'Is it interesting?'

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- 1 Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, Phaidon, 1998.
- 2 Sol LeWitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', *Artforum*, June 1967.
- 3 Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California Press, 1997. [Orig. 1973].
- 4 Henry Flynt, 'Essay: Concept Art.' in *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, La Monte Young and Marion Zazeela (eds.), 1963. See [<http://www.ubu.com/historical/young/AnAnthologyOfChanceOperations.pdf>].
- 5 Robert Barry in Meyer, 'Conversation with Robert Barry', 12 October 1969. See [www.ubu.com/papers/barry_interview.html].
- 6 See Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (eds.), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*. University of California Press, 1995, p. 804.
- 7 Susanna Heman, Jurrie Poot, and Hripsime Visser (eds.), *Conceptual art in the Netherlands and Belgium 1965-1975*. Amsterdam: NAI Publishers/Stedelijk Museum, 2002, p. 124.
- 8 See [<http://www.lunacommons.org/luna/servlet/detailAMICO-1-1-98226-61526:Composing-on-a-Canvas>].
- 9 See Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss (eds.), *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999, p. 59.
- 10 See Lucy Lippard.
- 11 From 1961 to 1969, Harald Szeemann was Curator of the Kunsthalle Bern, where in 1968 he famously gave Christo and Jeanne-Claude the opportunity to wrap the entire museum building in an emblematic work of the period. Szeemann's important 1969 exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, at the Kunsthalle, introduced European audiences to artists like Joseph Beuys, Eva Hesse, Richard Serra and Lawrence Weiner. It is often cited as a key moment in the emergence of the modern figure of the 'curator' as indeed has Szeemann's practice in general. See Hans-Joachim Muller, Harald Szeemann: *The Exhibition Maker*, Hatje Cantz, 2006. *Documenta V* took place in 1972 as the fifth in the series of major survey shows of international art, which began in 1955. Curated by Szeemann, it provided a broad representation of European and North American conceptual art and sparked controversy because of the strong authorial input of Szeemann into the project. *Documenta V* has become a key reference in debates about the nature of the curator's function in contemporary art.
- 12 Lippard's book prioritises New York and emphasises the 'dematerialisation' of the artwork. This is a matter of some contest and debate. Jon Bird and Michael Newman have argued: 'Lippard's term implies a logic of subtraction as the materiality of the art object is systematically reduced or redefined, and the concept 'art' and the context increasingly carry the burden of meaning. No single term can adequately describe the various formal and theoretical investigations pursued by artists during this period.' See their 'Introduction' in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, Reaktion, 1999, p. 4. See also Michael Corris's 'An Invisible College in an Anglo-American World', the introduction to his edited anthology on *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, Cambridge University Press, 2004. Corris cites Art & Language's disparaging perspective on this position, whereby they asserted that 'most of the 'dematerialisations' of the time were absurd reifications of discursivity, perfectly formed for co-option' (p. 1).

- 13 Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss (eds.), *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*. Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999. But this has by no means become the dominant approach. There is a notable preference still to prioritise east coast American artists and their associates from Europe in accounts of conceptual art.
- 14 See Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, University of California Press, 1999. The work was first exhibited in 1976 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, where she showed three of the six 'Documents' from this extended project. The book version was first published in London in 1983.
- 15 Michael Corris notes that: 'The concept of a 'system' which became part of the lingua franca of the 1960s, was not destined to remain the exclusive property of a technologically minded elite of engineers, scientists, and mathematicians. In the hands of intellectuals, artists, and political activists, it would become an essential ideological component of the 'cultural revolution'. *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 189. For an online version see [<http://www.metamute.org/en/Systems-Upgrade-Conceptual-Art-and-the-Recoding-of-Information-Knowledge-and-Technology>].
- 16 Indeed, Gregory Battcock specifically critiqued an important New York show of conceptual art, 'Information' at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970, precisely because it lacked political vitality. See Gregory Battcock, 'Informative Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art', *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 44, No. 8, 1970, p. 27.
- 17 Adrian Piper's trajectory is interesting in this regard. See her *Out of Order. Out of Sight. Vol. 1: Selected Writings in Meta-Art: 1968-1992*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996.
- 18 Seth Siegelau, in Michael Claura and Seth Siegelau, "L'art conceptual," Xxe siecle, 41 (December 1973) reprinted in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, (eds.), Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999, p.289. (Cited also in Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003, p. 1.)
- 19 See Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, and Gregory Elliott, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, 2006. [Orig.] While Boltanski et al., do not specifically cite 'conceptual art', they refer to a broader 'artistic critique' which correlates strongly with key themes in conceptualism and with the cultural dissent associated with '1968'. They ask: 'Must we not ask [...] if the forms of capitalism which have developed over the last thirty years, while incorporating whole sections of the artistic critique and subordinating it to profit-making, have not emptied the demands for liberation and authenticity of what gave them substance...?'.
- 20 Victor Burgin's pronouncement from 1988 is revealing here: 'The original conceptual art is a failed avant-garde. Historians will not be surprised to find, among the ruins of its utopian program, the desire to resist commodification and assimilation to a history of styles'. See Victor Burgin, 'Yes Difference Again...' in A. Alberro & B.Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999, p. 429.
- 21 Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003, p. 13.
- 22 For an entertaining read in this vein see Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975.

mick wilson

mick wilson is an artist, writer and educator and a graduate of the national college of art and design (ncad) and trinity college dublin. he is currently dean of the graduate school of creative arts and media (gradcam). he was previously head of fine art at dublin institute of technology and prior to that head of research at ncad (2005-2007). before this he was director of MAVIS and the BA visual arts practice programmes at IADT (1998-2004) and an associate lecturer at ncad, ccad, IADT and TCD (1991-1998). he has exhibited artwork in ireland, europe and the united states.

Meaning ['mi:nɪŋ], I. *adj.* bedeutsam, bedeutungsvoll; well—, wohlwollend, wohlmeinend. II. *s.* die Bedeutung (*also of a word*), der Sinn; (*intention*) die Absicht, Bestimmung, das Vorhaben; full of —, bedeutungsvoll; what's the — of all this? was soll dies alles bedeuten? that was not my —, das war nicht der Sinn meiner Worte. —less, *adj.* bedeutungslos; ausdruckslos (*face*).

meaning [meening] οὐσ. ἔ
meaning ἔπ. ἔχων (κ
φορτισμένος με νόημ
στικός ~meaningly ἔπ

έννοια, νόημα, σημασία ~
αλλάς ἢ κακάς) προθέσεις ||
α, ποῦ λέει πολλά, ἐκφρα-
σίπ. με σημασίαν, με νόημα.

meaning², s. (a) Ciall *f*, bri *f*, míniú *m*
(focail). *What is the meaning of that word?*
cén chiall atá leis an bhfocal sin? *F:* What
is the meaning of this? cad é is ciall dó seo?
(b) *He mistook my meaning*, níor thuig sé mar
ba cheart mé; bhain sé an chiall chontráilte as
mo chuid cainte. (c) **His look was full of meaning**,
níor cheil a rosc a rún.

conceptual art:
further reading

Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003.

Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999.

Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Idea Art: A Critical Anthology*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1973.

Michael Corris, *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss (eds.), *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999.

Frances Colpitt, *Knowledge: Aspects of Conceptual Art*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1992.

Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, Phaidon Press, 1998.

Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (eds.), *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, Clarendon Press Gloucestershire, 2007.

Klaus Honnef, *Concept Art*, Cologne: Phaidon, 1971.

Liz Kotz, *Words to be Looked At: Language in 1960 Art*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007.

Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Daniel Marzona, *Conceptual Art*, Cologne: Taschen, 2005.

Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972.

Robert C. Morgan, *Between Modernism and Conceptual Art: A Critical Response*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1997.

Catherine Moseley, *Conception: Conceptual Documents 1968 to 1972*, Birmingham: ARTicle Press, 2002.

Michael Newman and Jon Bird (eds.), *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, London: Reaktion, 1999.

Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, Phaidon Press, 2002.

Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality*, Thames & Hudson, 2004.

Paul Wood (ed.), *Now they are. Texts of Paul Wood and Art & Language*, Brussels: Editions Labor et Galerie Isy Brachot, 1992.

ART MUSEUM

A venue for the collection, preservation, study, interpretation and display of significant cultural objects and artworks.

COMMODITY

A product or article of trade which is marketed for a commercial exchange of equal value, and broadly refers to artefacts or object-based art forms.

CONCEPTUAL ART

Originating in the 1960s, Conceptual Art pushed arts practice beyond the conventional limits of the art object, placing an emphasis on the idea or concept rather than a tangible art object. The ideas and methodologies of Conceptual Art inform much contemporary art practice.

CONSTRUCTIVISM

An abstract art movement founded by Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko in Russia around 1915, which embraced developments in modern technology and industrialisation.

CONTEMPORARY ART

Refers to current and very recent art practice. Attributed to the period from the 1970s to the present, it also refers to works of art made by living artists. Contemporary Art can be driven by both theory and ideas, and is also characterised by a blurring of the distinction between art and other categories of cultural experience, such as television, cinema, mass media, entertainment and digital technology.

CRITICAL THEORY

A range of theories, drawn mainly from the social sciences and humanities, and associated with the Frankfurt School, which adopt a critical approach to understanding society and culture.

CRITIC

A person who passes judgement, appraisal or analysis on various aspects of the arts.

CURATOR

A person who makes decisions with regard to the selection, acquisition, display and storage of artworks. A curator may be independent or freelance, or may be affiliated to a museum or gallery. The curator of Contemporary Art is concerned with display, research and preservation but is also interested in experimentation and innovation.

DADA

An anti-establishment and anti-war art movement founded in 1916 which used abstraction, nonsense texts and absurd performances to protest against the social and political conditions prevailing in Europe during World War I. Associated with the work of Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp and Marcel Duchamp.

DOCUMENTATION

The process of making records with the use of photography, film, video, audio or text to identify or report factual details.

DUCHAMP, MARCEL (1887 - 1968)

French avant-garde artist associated with Dada and Surrealism, whose radical ideas and practice, most notably his Readymades, have had a significant influence on twentieth-century art and Conceptual Art in particular.

FILM

The medium used for the creation of still or moving images. The term is also used to describe a motion picture which is a sequence of images projected onto a screen, collectively referred to as cinema. In Contemporary Art, film is referred to as an art form.

FLUXUS

An international, avant-garde, art movement in the 1960s, which witnessed artists, writers, filmmakers and musicians creating experimental, multi-media work in film, video and performance informed by social and political activism.

FOUND OBJECTS

The re-use of objects, either manufactured or occurring in nature, which are not designed for artistic purpose, and are kept for their inherent qualities. Often exhibited in random juxtapositions to create new meanings.

GALLERY

An internal space or series of spaces dedicated to the exhibition of artworks.

INSTALLATION

An art work made for a specific site or location which engages with its context and audience.

INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

A systematic interrogation of the workings of the art institution, through art practice and discourse, which exposes and challenges assumed normalities, such as the autonomy and neutrality of the museum or gallery space. Associated with both Minimalism and Conceptual Art, and with artists such as Hans Haacke, Andrea Fraser, Marcel Broodthaers and Daniel Buren.

LANGUAGE

The use of verbal and written text as a medium in Conceptual Art.

LAND ART

A US art movement from the 1960s which emerged out of environmental and ecological concerns, and the perceived limitations of the conventional art object or sculpture to respond to these concerns. Artworks were created within the landscape often using the materials of the landscape.

LINGUISTICS

The scientific study of language methodologies, such as grammatical structure, perception, meaning, the action and sound of speech, and how these methods are acquired.

MINIMALISM

An abstract art movement developed in the US in the 1960s which emphasised the use of simple, geometric forms and modern materials drawn from industry. It was an extension of abstraction focusing on the properties of the materials used but also a rejection of

the ideology and discourse of Abstract Expressionism.

MODERN

Generally refers to the present or the contemporary, it is associated with the period of Modernism from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Modern can also be used to describe the period since the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century or the Renaissance in the fifteenth century.

MODERN ART

Refers to art theory and practice from the 1860s to the late 1960s and is defined in terms of a linear progression of styles, periods and schools, such as Impressionism, Cubism and Abstract Expressionism.

MEDIA

In general usage, media refers to forms of communication, such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio and the Internet. In the arts, media, the plural of medium, refers to the materials, methodologies, mechanisms, technologies or devices by which an artwork is realised. Traditional or old media include painting, sculpture and drawing and the specific materials used, such as paint, charcoal or marble, can also be referred to as media. In Contemporary Art practice media artists use a wide range of media, such as technology, found materials, the body, sound, etc.

NEW MEDIA

A range of materials and technologies developed relatively recently and utilised in the creation, presentation and dissemination of New Media Art.

NEW MEDIA ART

Artwork created using new media, such as film, video, lens-based media, digital technology, hypertext, cyberspace, audio technology, CD-ROMs, webcams, surveillance technology, wireless telephones, GPS systems, computer and video games and biotechnology.

PAINTING

The application of a pigment or colour to a surface such as canvas, paper or plaster. It was the dominant artistic medium for pictorial representation until the twentieth century.

PARTICIPATORY ART

Places the emphasis on the input and active reception of the audience for the physical or conceptual realisation of the work.

PERFORMANCE ART

Involves an artist undertaking an action or actions where the artist's body is the medium. Performance art evolved in the late 1950s and is closely associated with Video Art as this was the primary means of recording this ephemeral art form.

PHOTOGRAPHY

The process of recording an image, a photograph, on light-sensitive film or, in the case of digital photography, via a digital electronic or magnetic memory.

POP ART

An art movement which developed in the UK and US in the 1950s and which drew on aspects of popular culture and entertainment as subject matter.

PUBLIC ART

Artwork located outside the museum or gallery, usually sited in a public space and supported by public funding.

READYMADE

Works of art made from assembled manufactured objects that are placed in juxtapositions to create new meanings, applied by the artists' interpretation, signature and title. A term coined by French artist, Marcel Duchamp who recognised that an object's function could be transformed into a work of art by placing it in a different context.

RELATIONAL AESTHETICS

A term coined by the French curator Nicholas Bourriaud in his book of the same name published in 1998. He describes a set of art practices which place an emphasis on the social context in which the work is created and/or presented, and on the role of the artist as facilitator, where art is information exchanged between the artist and viewer. He calls examples of this practice Relational Art.

SCULPTURE

A three-dimensional art object which is either created or constructed by an artist. Includes constructions, assemblages, installations, sound, new media, etc.

SEMIOTICS

The study of the relationship between signs and symbols in visual and written communication.

SITE SPECIFIC

Artwork that is created with the intention of being located in a specific site or context, wherein removal from that site or context would change the meaning of the art work. Often associated with Installation Art.

TEXT BASED

Artwork created using written or printed words as the material and/or subject matter.

VIDEO ART

Artwork created using a video recording device. Video Art emerged as an art form in the 1960s and 1970s due to the development of new technology, and it is a prevalent medium in Contemporary Art practice.

conceptual art: general resources

The following is a select list of resources. A more detailed list can be found on IMMA's website www.imma.ie

Information Websites

Intute

Online service providing information about web resources for education and research. www.intute.ac.uk

STOT

Platform providing online links relating to Contemporary Art. www.stot.org

Artcyclopedia

Internet encyclopedia on art and artists. www.artcyclopedia.com

The Artists

Database of modern and contemporary artists. www.the-artists.org

Ubu

An educational resource for Conceptual and Performance Art. www.ubu.com

Artist Led Spaces and Initiatives

16 Beaver, New York
www.16beavergroup.org

Cubit, London
www.cubitartists.org

Minus Space, New York
www.minusspace.com

Sparwasser HQ, Berlin
www.sparwasserhq.de

Southern Exposure, San Francisco
soex.org/about.html

Studio Voltaire, London
www.studiovoltaire.org

Vitamin Creative Space, Beijing
www.vitamincreativespace.com

YYZ Artist Outlet, Toronto
www.yyzartistsoutlet.org

Museums and Galleries International Museums and Galleries

Art Institute of Chicago
www.artic.edu

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Victoria
www.accaonline.org.au

Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead
www.balticmill.com

Centres Georges Pompidou, Paris
www.cnac-gp.fr

Dia Art Foundation, New York
www.diacentre.org

Drawing Center, New York
www.drawingcentre.org

Gagosian Gallery, New York
www.gagosian.com

Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao
www.guggenheim-bilbao.es

Hayward Gallery, London
www.haywardgallery.org.uk

ICA
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London
www.ica.org.uk

Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin
www.kw-berlin.de

Maxxi, Rome
www.maxxi.parc.beniculturali.it/english/museo.htm

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
www.metmuseum.org

Moderna Museet, Stockholm
www.modernamuseet.se

MOMA
Museum of Modern Art, New York
www.moma.org

Mori Art Museum, Japan
www.mori.art.museum/eng

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
www.mcachicago.org

Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Finland
www.kiasma.fi

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
www.moca.org

Musee d'Orsay, Paris
www.musee-orsay.fr

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
www.mca.com.au

New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York
www.newmuseum.org

Palais de Tokyo, Paris
www.palaisdetokyo.com

Paula Cooper Gallery,
New York
www.paula.coopergallery.com

Reina Sofia, Madrid
www.museoreinasofia.es

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
www.sfmoma.org

Saatchi Gallery, London
www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk

Serpentine Gallery, London
www.serpentinegallery.org

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
www.guggenheim.org

Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam
www.stedelijk.nl

Tate Modern, London
www.tate.org.uk

Whitechapel Gallery,
London
www.whitechapel.org

White Cube, London
www.whitecube.com

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
www.whitney.org

Witte de With, Rotterdam
www.wdw.nl

Irish Museums and Galleries

Butler Gallery, Kilkenny
www.butlergallery.com

Catalyst Arts Gallery
www.catalystarts.org.uk

Context Gallery, Derry
www.contextgallery.co.uk

Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, Cork
www.crawfordartgallery.com

Cross Gallery, Dublin
www.crossgallery.ie

Dock Arts Centre,
Carrick on Shannon
www.thedock.ie

Douglas Hyde Gallery,
Dublin
www.douglashydegallery.com

Draiocht, Dublin
www.draiocht.ie

Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane
www.hughlane.ie

Farmleigh Gallery, Dublin
www.farmleighgallery.ie

Fenton Gallery, Cork
www.artireland.net/sys-tmpl/door

Four, Dublin
www.fourdublin.com

Gallery of Photography,
Dublin
www.galleryofphotography.ie

Galway Arts Centre
www.galwayartscentre.ie

Green On Red Gallery,
Dublin
www.greenonredgallery.com

Hallward Gallery, Dublin
www.hallwardgallery.com

Highlanes Gallery,
Drogheda
www.highlanes.ie

Irish Museums Association
www.irishmuseums.org

IMMA
Irish Museum of Modern Art
www.imma.ie

Kerlin Gallery, Dublin
www.kerlin.ie

Kevin Kavanagh Gallery,
Dublin
www.kevinkavanaghgallery.ie

Lewis Glucksman Gallery,
Cork
www.glucksman.org

Limerick City Gallery of Art
www.limerickcitygallery.ie

Model Arts and Niland Gallery, Sligo
www.modelart.ie

Mother's Tankstation,
Dublin
www.motherstankstation.com

Pallas Contemporary Projects, Dublin
www.pallasprojects.org

Project Arts Centre, Dublin
www.projectartscentre.ie

RHA
The Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin
www.royalhibernianacademy.com

Rubicon Gallery, Dublin
www.rubicongallery.ie

Temple Bar Gallery & Studios, Dublin
www.templebargallery.com

Taylor Galleries, Dublin
www.taylorgalleries.ie

Biennales and Art Fairs

Art Basel
www.artbasel.com

Documenta, Kasel
www.documenta.de

ev+a, Limerick
www.eva.ie

Freize Art Fair, London
www.freizeartfair.com

Istanbul Biennial
www.iksv.org/bienal11

Liverpool Biennial
www.biennial.com/

Manifesta, European Biennale of Contemporary Art
www.manifesta.org

Moscow Biennale
www.2nd.moscowbiennale.ru

Bienal de São Paulo
www.bienalsaopaulo.globo.com

Shanghai Biennale
www.shanghaibiennale.com

Skulptur Projekte Münster
www.skulptur-projekte.de

Venice Biennale
www.labiennale.org

Journals and Magazines

Afterimage
Journal of Media Art and Cultural Criticism
www.vsw.org/afterimage

Art Forum Magazine
www.artforum.com

Art and Research
www.artandresearch.org.uk

Art Monthly
www.artmonthly.co.uk

Art Newspaper
www.theartnewspaper.com

Art Review
www.artreview.com

Cabinet cultural magazine
www.cabinetmagazine.org

Circa Art Magazine
www.recirca.com

Contemporary
www.contemporary-magazines.com

Critical Inquiry
www.criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu

Curator: The Museum
www.altamirapress.com

E-flux
www.e-flux.com/journal

Flash Art
www.flashartonline.com

Frieze Art Journal
www.frieze.com

The International Journal of Cultural Policy
www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/10286632.asp

Irish Arts Review
www.irishartsreview.com

Journal of Visual Culture
www.sagepub.com/journals

Modern Painters
www.modernpainters.co.uk

On-Curating
www.on-curating.org

Printed Project
www.visualartists.ie

Third Text
www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/09528822.asp

The Visual Artists New Sheet
www.visualartists.ie

The Vacuum
www.thevacuum.org.uk

Variant
www.variant.randomstate.org

what is series 1?

In the most simple and everyday terms conceptual art has given rise to a new criterion in judgements on art. Encountering a work of art, instead of the question 'Is it beautiful?' or 'Is it moving?' we now find ourselves more often than not, first asking ourselves, 'Is it interesting?'

Mick Wilson

What is Conceptual Art? is the second in a series of talks which aim to provide a general introduction to key concepts and themes in Contemporary Art. *What is Conceptual Art* provides a brief overview of Conceptual Art, both as an influential movement, and as a framework for creating and understanding art. This is accompanied by an essay by **Mick Wilson**, titled *What is Conceptual Art?*

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