Conceptual art

Conceptual art is art in which the concept(s) or idea(s) involved in the work take precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns. Many of the works, sometimes called installations, of the artist Sol LeWitt may be constructed by anyone simply by following a set of written instructions. This method was fundamental to LeWitt's definition of Conceptual art, one of the first to appear in print:

"In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."

—Sol LeWitt

Tony Godfrey, author of "Conceptual Art" (1998), asserts that conceptual art questions the nature of art, a notion that Joseph Kosuth elevated to a definition of art itself in his seminal, early manifesto of conceptual art, "Art after Philosophy" (1969). The notion that art should examine its own nature was already a potent aspect of (the influential art critic) Clement Greenberg's vision of Modern art during the 1950s. With the emergence of an exclusively language-based art in the 1960s, however, conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner and the English Art & Language group began a far more radical interrogation of art than was previously possible (see below). One of the first and most important things they questioned was the common assumption that the role of the artist was to create special kinds of material objects.

Through its association with the Young British Artists and the Turner Prize during the 1990s, in popular usage, particularly in the UK, "conceptual art" came to denote all contemporary art that does not practise the traditional skills of painting and sculpture. It could be said that one of the reasons why the term "conceptual art" has come to be associated with various contemporary practices far removed from its original aims and forms lies in the problem of defining the term itself. As the artist Mel Bochner suggested as early as 1970, in explaining why he does not like the epithet "conceptual", it is not always entirely clear what "concept" refers to, and it runs the risk of being confused with "intention." Thus, in describing or defining a work of art as conceptual it is important not to confuse what is referred to as "conceptual" with an artist's "intention."
History

The French artist Marcel Duchamp paved the way for the conceptualists, providing them with examples of prototypically conceptual works — the readymades, for instance. The most famous of Duchamp’s readymades was *Fountain* (1917), a standard urinal basin signed by the artist with the pseudonym “R.Mutt”, and submitted for inclusion in the annual, un-juried exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York (it was rejected). In traditional terms, a commonplace object such as a urinal cannot be said to be art because it is not made by an artist or with any intention of being art, nor is it unique or hand-crafted. Duchamp’s relevance and theoretical importance for future "conceptualists" was later acknowledged by US artist Joseph Kosuth in his 1969 essay, "Art after Philosophy," when he wrote: "All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually."

In 1956, recalling the infinitesimals of G.W. Leibniz, quantities which could not actually exist except conceptually, the founder of Lettrism, Isidore Isou, developed the notion of a work of art which, by its very nature, could never be created in reality, but which could nevertheless provide aesthetic rewards by being contemplated intellectually. Also called *Art esthapériste* ('infinite-aesthetics'). Related to this, and arising out of it, is excoördism, the current incarnation of the Isouian movement, defined as the art of the infinitely large and the infinitely small.

In 1961 the term "concept art," coined by the artist Henry Flynt in his article bearing the term as its title, appeared in a Fluxus publication. However it assumed a different meaning when employed by Joseph Kosuth and the English Art and Language group, who discarded the conventional art object in favour of a documented critical inquiry into the artist's social, philosophical and psychological status. By the mid-1970s they had produced publications, indexes, performances, texts and paintings to this end. In 1970 *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects*, the first dedicated conceptual art exhibition, was mounted at the New York Cultural Center.

The Critique of Formalism and the Commodification of Art

Conceptual art emerged as a movement during the 1960s. In part, it was a reaction against formalism as it was then articulated by the influential New York art critic Clement Greenberg. According to Greenberg Modern art followed a process of progressive reduction and refinement toward the goal of defining the absolutely essential, formal nature of each medium. Those elements that ran counter to this nature were to be reduced. The task of painting, for example, was to define precisely what kind of object a painting truly is: what makes it a painting and nothing else? As it is of the nature of paintings to be flat objects with canvas surfaces onto which colored pigment is applied, such things as figuration, 3-D perspective illusion and references to external subject matter were all found to be extraneous to the essence of painting, and ought to be removed.

Some have argued that conceptual art continued this "dematerialization" of art by removing the need for objects altogether, while others, including many of the artists themselves, saw conceptual art as a radical break with Greenberg's kind of formalist Modernism. Later artists continued to share a preference for art to be self-critical, as well as a distaste for illusion. However, by the end of the 1960s it was certainly clear that Greenberg's stipulations for art to continue within the confines of each medium and to exclude external subject matter no longer held traction.
Conceptual art also reacted against the commodification of art; it attempted a subversion of the gallery or museum as the location and determiner of art, and the art market as the owner and distributor of art. Lawrence Weiner said: "Once you know about a work of mine you own it. There's no way I can climb inside somebody's head and remove it." Many conceptual artists' work can therefore only be known about through documentation which is manifested by it, e.g. photographs, written texts or displayed objects, which some might argue are not in themselves the art. It is sometimes (as in the work of Robert Barry, Yoko Ono, and Weiner himself) reduced to a set of written instructions describing a work, but stopping short of actually making it—emphasising that the idea is more important than the artifact.

**Language and/as art**

Language was a central concern for the first wave of conceptual artists of the 1960s and early 1970s. Although the appearance of text in art was by no means novel, it was not until the 1960s that the artists Lawrence Weiner, Edward Ruscha, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Barry, and the English Art & Language group began to produce art by exclusively linguistic means. Where previously language was presented as one kind of visual element alongside others, and subordinate to an overarching composition (see for example Synthetic Cubism), the conceptual artists used language in place of brush and canvas, and allowed it to signify in its own right. Of Lawrence Weiner's works Anne Rorimer writes, "The thematic content of individual works derives solely from the import of the language employed, while presentational means and contextual placement play crucial, yet separate, roles."[16]

The British philosopher and theorist of conceptual art Peter Osborne suggests that among the many factors that influenced the gravitation toward language-based art, of vital importance for conceptualism was the turn to linguistic theories of meaning in both Anglo-American analytic philosophy, and structuralist and post structuralist Continental philosophy during the middle of the twentieth century. This linguistic turn "reinforced and legitimized" the direction the conceptual artists took.[17] Osborne also notes that the early conceptualists were the first generation of artists to complete degree-based university training in art.[18]

**Conceptual Art and Artistic Skill**

"By adopting language as their exclusive medium, Weiner, Barry, Wilson, Kosuth and Art & Language were able to sweep aside the vestiges of authorial presence manifested by formal invention and the handling of materials."[16]

An important difference between conceptual art and more "traditional" forms of art-making goes to the question of artistic skill. Although it is often the case that skill in the handling of traditional media plays little role in conceptual art, it is difficult to argue that no skill is required to make conceptual works, or that skill is always absent from them. John Baldessari, for instance, has presented realistic pictures that he commissioned professional sign-writers to paint; and many conceptual performance artists (e.g. Stelarc, Marina Abramovic) are technically accomplished performers and skilled manipulators of their own bodies. It is thus not so much an absence of skill or hostility toward tradition that defines conceptual art as an evident disregard for conventional, modern notions of authorial presence and individual artistic expression (or genius).
**Contemporary Influence**

The first wave of the "conceptual art" movement extended from approximately 1967 to 1978. Early "concept" artists like Henry Flynt, Robert Morris, and Ray Johnson influenced the later, widely accepted movement of conceptual art. Conceptual artists like Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, and Lawrence Weiner have proven very influential on subsequent artists, and well known contemporary artists such as Mike Kelley or Tracey Emin are sometimes labeled "second- or third-generation" conceptualists, or "post-conceptual" artists.

Many of the concerns of the conceptual art movement have been taken up by contemporary artists. While they may or may not term themselves "conceptual artists", ideas such as anti-commodification, social and/or political critique, and ideas/information as medium continue to be aspects of contemporary art, especially among artists working with installation art, performance art, net.art and electronic/digital art.

**Controversy in the UK**

In Britain, the rise to prominence of the Young British Artists (YBAs) after the 1988 Freeze show, curated by Damien Hirst, and subsequent promotion of the group by the Saatchi Gallery during the 1990s, generated a media backlash, where the phrase "conceptual art" came to be a term of derision applied to much contemporary art. This was amplified by the Turner Prize whose more extreme nominees (most notably Hirst and Emin) caused a controversy annually.[7]

The Stuckist group of artists, founded in 1999, proclaimed themselves "pro-contemporary figurative painting with ideas and anti-conceptual art, mainly because of its lack of concepts." They also called it pretentious, "unremarkable and boring" and on July 25, 2002 deposited a coffin outside the White Cube gallery, marked "The Death of Conceptual Art".[19] [20] They staged yearly demonstrations outside the Turner Prize.

In 2002, Ivan Massow, the Chairman of the Institute of Contemporary Arts branded conceptual art "pretentious, self-indulgent, craftless tat" and in "danger of disappearing up its own arse ... led by cultural tsars such as the Tate's Sir Nicholas Serota."[21] Massow was consequently forced to resign. At the end of the year, the Culture Minister, Kim Howells (an art school graduate) denounced the Turner Prize as "cold, mechanical, conceptual bullshit." [22]

In October 2004 the Saatchi Gallery told the media that "painting continues to be the most relevant and vital way that artists choose to communicate."[23]
Notable examples of conceptual art

- 1953: Robert Rauschenberg exhibits *Erased De Kooning Drawing*, a drawing by Willem De Kooning which Rauschenberg erased. It raised many questions about the fundamental nature of art, challenging the viewer to consider whether erasing another artist's work could be a creative act, as well as whether the work was only "art" because the famous Rauschenberg had done it.

- 1956: Isidore Isou introduces the concept of infinitesimal art in *Introduction à une esthétique imaginaire* (*Introduction to Imaginary Aesthetics*).

- 1957: Yves Klein, **Aerostatic Sculpture (Paris)**. This was composed of 1001 blue balloons released into the sky from Galerie Iris Clert to promote his *Proposition Monochrome; Blue Epoch* exhibition. Klein also exhibited 'One Minute Fire Painting' which was a blue panel into which 16 firecrackers were set. For his next major exhibition, *The Void* in 1958, Klein declared that his paintings were now invisible and to prove it he exhibited an empty room.

- 1960: Yves Klein's action called *A Leap Into The Void*, in which he attempts to fly by leaping out of a window. He stated: "The painter has only to create one masterpiece, himself, constantly."

- 1960: The artist Stanley Brouwn declares that all the shoe shops in Amsterdam constitute an exhibition of his work. In Vancouver, Iain and Ingrid Baxter of N.E. Thing Co. exhibited the contents of a four room apartment wrapped in plastic bags.

- 1961: Robert Rauschenberg sent a telegram to the Galerie Iris Clert which said: 'This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so.' as his contribution to an exhibition of portraits.

- 1961: Piero Manzoni exhibited Artist's shit, tins purportedly containing his own feces (although since the work would be destroyed if opened, no-one has been able to say for sure). He put the tins on sale for their own weight in gold. He also sold his own breath (enclosed in balloons) as *Bodies of Air*, and signed people's bodies, thus...
declaring them to be living works of art either for all time or for specified periods. (This depended on how much they are prepared to pay). Marcel Broodthaers and Primo Levi are amongst the designated ‘artworks’.

• 1962: Christo’s Iron Curtain work. This consists of a barricade of oil barrels in a narrow Paris street which caused a large traffic jam. The artwork was not the barricade itself but the resulting traffic jam.

• 1962: Yves Klein presents Immaterial Pictorial Sensitivity in various ceremonies on the banks of the Seine. He offers to sell his own ‘pictorial sensitivity’ (whatever that was, he did not define it) in exchange for gold leaf. In these ceremonies the purchaser gave Klein the gold leaf in return for a certificate. Since Klein’s sensitivity was immaterial, the purchaser was then required to burn the certificate whilst Klein threw half the gold leaf into the Seine. (There were seven purchasers.)

• 1962: Piero Manzoni created The Base of the World, thereby exhibiting the entire planet as his artwork.

• 1963: George Brecht’s collection of Event-Scores, Water Yam, is published as the first Fluxkit by George Maciunas.

• 1963: Henry Flynt’s article Concept Art is published in “An Anthology of Chance Operations”; a collection of artworks and concepts by artists and musicians that was published by Jackson Mac Low and La Monte Young (ed.). “An Anthology of Chance Operations” documented the development of Dick Higgins vision of intermedia art in the context of the ideas of John Cage and became an early Fluxus masterpiece. Flynt’s “concept art” devolved from his idea of “cognitive nihilism” and from his insights about the vulnerabilities of logic and mathematics.

• 1964: Yoko Ono publishes Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings. An example of Heuristic art, or a series of instructions for how to obtain an aesthetic experience.

• 1965: A complex conceptual art piece by John Latham called Still and Chew. He invites art students to protest against the values of Clement Greenberg’s Art and Culture (much praised and taught in London’s St. Martin’s School of Art where Latham taught). Pages of Greenberg’s book (borrowed from the college library) are chewed by the students, dissolved in acid and the resulting solution returned to the library bottled and labelled. Latham was then fired from his part-time position.

• Joseph Kosuth dates the concept of One and Three Chairs in the year 1965. The presentation of the work consists of a chair, its photo and a blow up of a definition of the word “chair”. Kosuth has chosen the definition from a dictionary. Four versions with different definitions are known.
1967: Sol LeWitt’s *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* were published by the American art journal *Artforum*. The *Paragraphs* mark the progression from Minimal to Conceptual Art.

1968: Lawrence Weiner relinquishes the physical making of his work and formulates his "Declaration of Intent," one of the most important conceptual art statements following LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art." The declaration, which underscores his subsequent practice reads: "1. The artist may construct the piece. 2. The piece may be fabricated. 3. The piece need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership."

1969: Robert Barry's *Telepathic Piece* of which he said 'During the exhibition I will try to communicate telepathically a work of art, the nature of which is a series of thoughts that are not applicable to language or image'.

The first issue of "Art-Language" is published in May. It is subtitled as "The Journal of conceptual art" and edited by Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin and Harold Hurrell. The editors are English members of the artists group Art & Language.

The English journal "Studio International" published Joseph Kosuth’s article "Art after Philosophy" in three parts (October–December). It became the most discussed article on "Conceptual Art".

1970: Painter John Baldessari exhibits a film in which he sets a series of erudite statements by Sol LeWitt on the subject of conceptual art to popular tunes like ‘Camptown Races’ and ‘Some Enchanted Evening’.

1970: Douglas Huebler exhibits a series of photographs which were taken every two minutes whilst driving along a road for 24 minutes.

1970: Douglas Huebler asks museum visitors to write down ‘one authentic secret’. The resulting 1800 documents are compiled into a book which, by some accounts, makes for very repetitive reading as most secrets are similar.

1971: Hans Haacke's 'Real Time Social System'. This piece of systems art detailed the real estate holdings of the third largest landowners in New York City. The properties were mostly in Harlem and the Lower East Side, were decrepit and poorly maintained, and represented the largest concentration of real estate in those areas under the control of a single group. The captions gave various financial details about the buildings, including recent sales between companies owned or controlled by the same family. The Guggenheim museum cancelled the exhibition, stating that the overt political implications of the work constituted "an alien substance that had entered the art museum organism". There is no evidence to suggest that the trustees of the Guggenheim were linked financially to the family which was the subject of the work.

1972: Fred Forest buys an area of blank space in the newspaper Le Monde and invites readers to fill it with their own works of art.

1974: Cadillac Ranch near Amarillo, Texas.

1975–76: Three issues of the journal "The Fox" were published in New York. The editor was Joseph Kosuth. "The Fox" became an important platform for the American members of Art & Language. Karl Beveridge, Ian Burn, Sarah Charlesworth, Michael Corris, Joseph Kosuth, Andrew Menard, Mel Ramsden and Terry Smith wrote articles which thematized the context of contemporary art. These articles exemplify the development of an institutional critique within the inner circle of Conceptual Art. The criticism of the art world integrates social, political and economic reasons.

1977: Walter De Maria’s ‘Vertical Earth Kilometer’ in Kassel, Germany. This was a one kilometer brass rod which was sunk into the earth so that nothing remained visible except a few centimeters. Despite its size, therefore, this work exists mostly in the viewer's mind.

1977: John Fekner creates hundreds of environmental and conceptual outdoor works consisting of stenciled words, symbols, dates and icons spray painted in New York, Sweden, Canada, England and Germany.
1989: Christopher Williams' *Angola to Vietnam* is first exhibited. The work consists of a series of black-and-white photographs of glass botanical specimens from the Botanical Museum at Harvard University, chosen according to a list of the thirty-six countries in which political disappearances were known to have taken place during the year 1985.


1991: Ronald Jones exhibits objects and text, art, history and science rooted in grim political reality at Metro Pictures Gallery.[25]

1991: Charles Saatchi funds Damien Hirst and the next year in the Saatchi Gallery exhibits his *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, a shark in formaldehyde in a vitrine.

1992: Maurizio Bolognini starts to "seal" his Programmed Machines: hundreds of computers are programmed and left to run ad infinitum to generate inexhaustible flows of random images which nobody would see.[26]

1993: Matthieu Laurette established his artistic birth certificate by taking part in a French TV game called 'Tournez manège' (The Dating Game) where the female presenter asked him who he was, to which he replied: 'A multimedia artist'. Laurette had sent out invitations to an art audience to view the show on TV from their home, turning his staging of the artist into a performed reality.

1993: Vanessa Beecroft holds her first performance in Milan, Italy, using models to act as a second audience to the display of her diary of food.

1999: Tracey Emin is nominated for the Turner Prize. Part of her exhibit is *My Bed*, her dishevelled bed, surrounded by detritus such as condoms, blood-stained knickers, bottles and her bedroom slippers.

2001: Martin Creed wins the Turner Prize for *The Lights Going On and Off*, an empty room in which the lights go on and off.[27]

2004: Andrea Fraser's video *Untitled*, a document of her sexual encounter in a hotel room with a collector (the collector having agreed to help finance the technical costs for enacting and filming the encounter) is exhibited at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery. It is accompanied by her 1993 work *Don't Postpone Joy, or Collecting Can Be Fun*, a 27-page transcript of an interview with a collector in which the majority of the text has been deleted.

2005: Simon Starling wins the Turner Prize for *Shedboatshed*, a wooden shed which he had turned into a boat, floated down the Rhine and turned back into a shed again.[28]

**Notable conceptual artists**

- Vikky Alexander
- Art & Language
- Marina Abramović
- Billy Apple
- Shusaku Arakawa
- Michael Asher
- Mireille Astore
- John Baldessari
- Artur Barrio
- Robert Barry
- Lothar Baumgarten
- Joseph Beuys
- Mel Bochner
- Allan Bridge
- Marcel Broodthaers
- John Fekner
- Henry Flynt
- Andrea Fraser
- Kendell Geers
- Thierry Geoffroy
- Gilbert and George
- Allan Graham
- Dan Graham
- Hans Haacke
- Iris Häussler
- Oliver Herring
- Jenny Holzer
- Greer Honeywill
- Zhang Huan
- Douglas Huebler
- John Latham
- Matthieu Laurette
- Sol LeWitt
- Mark Lombardi
- Piero Manzoni
- Danny Matthyss
- Allan McCollum
- Cildo Meireles
- Marta Minujín
- Bruce Nauman
- Yoko Ono
- Dennis Oppenheim
- Adrian Piper
- William Pope.L
- Dmitri Prigov
- Adrian Piper
- William Pope.L
- Dmitri Prigov
• Victor Burgin  •  David Ireland  •  Martha Rosler
• Chris Burden  •  Ray Johnson  •  Allen Ruppersberg
• Daniel Buren  •  Ronald Jones  •  Hiroshi Sugimoto
• Sophie Calle  •  Ilya Kabakov  •  Stelarc
• Roberto Chabet  •  On Kawara  •  Tyler Turkle
• Martin Creed  •  Jonathon Keats  •  Wolf Vostell
• Mark Divo  •  Mary Kelly  •  Peter Weibel
• Marcel Duchamp  •  Yves Klein  •  Lawrence Weiner
• Olafur Eliasson  •  Joseph Kosuth  •  Gillian Wearing
• Christopher Williams

Further reading
Books:
• Peter Osborne, Conceptual Art (Themes and Movements), Phaidon, 2002 (See also the external links for Robert Smithson)
• Klaus Honnef, Concept Art, Cologne: Phaidon, 1972
• Ermanno Migliorini, Conceptual Art, Florence: 1971
• Ursula Meyer, ed., Conceptual Art, New York: Dutton, 1972
• Thomas Dreher, Konzeptuelle Kunst in Amerika und England zwischen 1963 und 1976 (Thesis Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München), Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992
• Tony Godfrey, Conceptual Art, London: 1998
• Anne Rorimer, New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality, London: Thames & Hudson, 2001
• Daniel Marzona, Conceptual Art, Cologne: Taschen, 2005

Exhibit catalogues:
• When Attitudes Become Form, exh.cat., Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1969
• 557,087, exh.cat., Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1969
• Konzeption/Conception, exh.cat., Leverkusen: Städt. Museum Leverkusen et al., 1969
• Art in the Mind, exh.cat., Oberlin, Ohio: Allen Memorial Art Museum, 1970
• *Software*, exh.cat., New York: Jewish Museum, 1970
• *Situation Concepts*, exh.cat., Innsbruck: Forum für aktuelle Kunst, 1971
• *Art conceptuel I*, exh.cat., Bordeaux: capcMusée d’art contemporain de Bordeaux, 1988

Notes and references

[6] Ian Burn, Mel Ramsden: "Notes On Analysis" (1970). Reprinted in Osborne (2003), p. 237. E.g. "The outcome of much of the 'conceptual' work of the past two years has been to carefully clear the air of objects."
[9] The first text in which the category "concept art" appeared was written by Henry Flynt around 1961-1963. (http://www.henryflynt.org/aesthetics/conart.html)
[16] Rorimer, p. 76
[18] Osborne (2002), p. 28
[27] BBC Online (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/art/1698032.stm)
[28] The Times (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-1905555,00.html)
External links

- Conceptual Art (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conceptual-art) entry by Elisabet Shellekens in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
- Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (http://www.ddooss.org/articulos/idiomas/Sol_Lewitt.htm)
- Conceptualism (http://www.art.dostweb.com/)
- Minus Space.com (http://www.minusspace.com/), reductive and concept-based art
- conceptual artists, books on conceptual art and links to further reading (http://the-artists.org/artistsbymovement/Conceptual-Art/)
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