

Three Essays on Concept in Art

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Within a span of five years, three pivotal essays appeared, which address the role of concept in art: “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” by Sol Lewitt,¹ “Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition” by Peter Eisenman, and “Music as a Gradual Process,” by Steve Reich. Although the authors have somewhat different goals and positions on the role of concept, and on conceptualism; they share a similar general methodology and address three specific issues with respect to concept, i.e., the way in which this concept contributes to a work’s aesthetic value, the role of the concept in relation to its medium, and the way in which the concept is received by the viewer.

The issue of concept in art is most often associated with conceptualism. Conceptualism refers to a collection of practices in art which emerged in the mid-1960s. The collective Art and Language characterizes conceptualism as “a form of response to intolerable conditions on the part of individuals for one reason or another unable to act in accordance with the protocols of a dominant culture”² Among these intolerable conditions is the formalist concept of art with its rigid definition for media. There are two basic senses for conceptualism: in the more

¹ Alexander Alberro, “Conceptual Art: History and Theoretical Overview,” *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 415.

² Art and Language (Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison, Mel Ramsden), “Conceptual Art: History of the Unformed,” *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 419.

common, narrow sense, it refers to an art movement which was active from the mid-1960s to the early-1970s, while, in its broad sense, it refers to a set of practices which emerged in the mid-1960s “examine preconceived notions and presuppositions and attempt to expand the range of artistic activities.”³

Conceptualism is not a unified theory; indeed, some strains of conceptualism are rigidly opposed to one another.⁴

Generally recognized as the first essay on conceptualism, Lewitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” first appeared in the June 1967 issue of *Artforum*.⁵ Lewitt’s primary goal with this essay was to describe his process at that point and to characterize it as conceptualist. He espouses a model of art in which the focus of the work shifted away from the perceptual object to the concept underlying its creation. Though written in 1968, Reich’s brief essay, “Music as a Gradual Process,” first appears two years after Lewitt’s essay in an exhibition catalogue at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1969. In a characteristically aphoristic style, reflecting the influence of Wittgenstein, Reich expresses his desire for audible processes in music. As with Lewitt, Reich seeks mainly to describe his process at that point; however, Reich does not characterize his work as conceptualist and he strongly refutes any such claim. Reich claims that he was not aware of Lewitt’s essay until years later.⁶ Eisenman’s essay “Notes on a Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition” appeared two years after Reich’s essay in the December 1971 issue of

³ Yair Guttman, “Conceptual Art: Conceptual Art and Philosophy,” *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 421.

⁴ Alberro, 415.

⁵ Guttman, 424.

⁶ Steve Reich, “Second Interview with Michael Nyman,” *Writings on Music*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 91.

Casabella. Unlike Lewitt and Reich, Eisenman does not explicitly address his working process in this essay; rather, he seeks to establish a theoretical foundation for a conceptual architecture, in much the same way that Lewitt's essay does so for conceptual art. By the time of Eisenman's essay, the discourse of conceptualism had reached its zenith. Although Eisenman does reference Lewitt in this essay, he adopts a somewhat different model of conceptualism. Whether Eisenman had been influenced by Reich's essay is not immediately clear from the text; however, it is quite likely given that Reich and Eisenman were active in New York City from 1968 onward.

Lewitt observes that subjectivity and formalism have made art oppressive; thus, he argues, it is necessary to abandon perceptual art in favor of conceptual art. Conceptual art is distinct from perceptual art in that, "it is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions."⁷ For Lewitt, this shift toward conceptual art involves shifting the emphasis on creation away from the object as perceived and toward the conceptual process used to conceive the object. "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."⁸ By working with a set plan, Lewitt argues, subjectivity and chance decisions are kept to a minimum and the final object becomes nothing more than a material manifestation of the concept. Thus, the value of the object can only be understood in terms of a concept. Thus, what the art object "looks like" is unimportant in that it can only be understood in

⁷ Sol Lewitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Critical Texts*, ed. Adachiara Zevi (Rome: I Libri di AEIOU, 1994), 81.

⁸ Lewitt, 78.

terms of the concept. Despite the shift away from the importance of the art object, execution of the work remains absolutely essential in that, “The work of art can be perceived only after it is completed.”⁹

Unlike Lewitt, Reich is not primarily concerned with a definition of conceptual art or conceptualism in music. Rather, his goal is to explain his interests and creative process at that point. Reich does not identify himself as a conceptual artist, “because concept does not necessarily precede the work but, rather ... not only may the form precede the content but the content may precede the form.”¹⁰ Although Reich does not identify himself with conceptualism, his essay does address some of the same issues as in Lewitt. In “Music as a Gradual Process,” Reich argues in favor of “gradual music” in which musical processes can be heard in sounding music¹¹ A process, for Reich, can be seen as a set of rules which define the way music sounds: “The distinctive things about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note (sound-to-sound) details and the overall form simultaneously.”¹² For Reich, musical processes are contrary to improvisation and chance. They effectively put the music into motion. By drawing music out over long periods of time and using repetition effectively, Reich seeks to make these processes clear to the listener. “Listening to an extremely gradual musical process opens my ears to it, but

⁹ Lewitt, 79.

¹⁰ Steve Reich, “Second Interview with Michael Nyman,” 92.

¹¹ Steve Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process,” *Writings on Music*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34.

¹² Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process,” 34.

it always extends farther than I can hear, and that makes it interesting to listen to that musical process again.”¹³

Upon initial observation, there are a number of direct similarities between Reich’s call for gradual music and Lewitt’s call for conceptual art; however, in an interview from 1976, published in *Studio International*, Reich observes that some of these similarities are superficial. Lewitt’s notion of the concept is analogous to Reich’s notion of the process in that both have the form of a rule which defines the work; however, Reich disagrees with Lewitt’s contention that all the planning and decision making are done beforehand. Reich points out that, in his work, a non-trivial number of details are always left for the performers to decide. As with Lewitt, Reich’s argument for gradual music can be seen as a reaction against the prevailing attitudes in music. At the time of the essay, Reich observes, “much of the stress in new music was on chance and free improvisation.” He continues, “I was trying to separate myself from that and to show that one could work in a more traditional way. What I wanted was a blend of controlled individual choice and impersonality.”¹⁴ Reich’s goal was to mitigate more extreme forms of subjectivity. He accepts that a degree of subjective judgment on the part of the performer contributes to the aesthetic value of the piece. Reich’s desire to make processes audible to the listener is similar to Lewitt’s desire focus on concept. Both agree that the artist or composer cannot force the viewer or listener to hear the concept as intended. Reich observes that, in his piece *Drumming*, the acoustic byproduct of a stick hitting a drum may be “more present” for a listener than the fundamental pitch of the drum. What one focuses on when listening to one of his pieces isn’t ultimately important to

¹³ Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process,” 35.

¹⁴ Reich, “Second Interview with Michael Nyman,” 92.

one's enjoyment of the piece; however, he argues that one should be able to hear the process.

Eisenman's essay can be seen as a response to Lewitt's in that it challenges the view of the latter that architecture is innately non-conceptual. Lewitt argues that the constraints of architecture as a medium prevent it from becoming a form of conceptual art:

Architecture and three-dimensional art are of completely opposite natures. The former is concerned with making an area with a specific function. ... When three-dimensional art starts to take on some of the characteristics, such as forming utilitarian areas, it weakens its function as art.¹⁵

Thus, for Lewitt, architecture may aspire to be art, but its physicality prevents it from being conceptual. Eisenman agrees with Lewitt's observation that the fundamental difference between architecture and art is that the former must have reference to utility; however, he disagrees that the presence of utility necessarily detracts from the concept of a building. In justifying this view, Eisenman adopts view of conceptualism distinct from that of Lewitt. Eisenman adopts the view of conceptualism, proposed by Art and Language, wherein, "the object is replaced by the language used to describe the object."¹⁶ That is, the object becomes both form and meaning simultaneously. For example, this view holds that Marcel Duchamp's readymade "Fountain" is conceptual in that the placement of a urinal within the context of an art gallery focuses the viewer on the object, its relationship to the context of the art gallery, and, therefore, the concept of art itself. Thus, the work

¹⁵ Lewitt, 81.

¹⁶ Peter D. Eisenman, "Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition," *Casabella* 359-360 (December 1971), 51.

becomes a form of language which “tells” the viewer of its underlying concept. In this view, the way in which physical space is manipulated determines the way in which the work is conceptual. As with Lewitt, Eisenman holds that the formal qualities of the work are unimportant insofar as they contribute to anything other than the understanding of the concept.

Eisenman contends that, following the linguistic definition of conceptualism, conceptual architecture is possible. The physical presence of functional elements does not detract from the conceptual quality of the work; for example, if Duchamp’s “Fountain” functioned as a urinal, it would retain its conceptual quality as long as the relationship between the piece and the context of the gallery remained intact. Following this view, the functional component of architecture can be “suppressed” in much the same way that the perceptual component of conceptual art is suppressed. That is, one can “encode” a building in such a way that its concept is manifest in its primary reading, while its function is perceivable only as a secondary meaning. The mechanism for encoding in such a way emerges from the deep structure theory of language as described by Noam Chomsky. The main challenge for a conceptual architect, Eisenman concludes, lies in finding the “transformational method” which engender space with these deeper meanings exclusively through the manipulation of form.¹⁷

To some degree, Lewitt’s concept, Reich’s process, and Eisenman’s transformational method are similar in that all characterize a set of operations used to create a work; a set of operations which Gilles Deleuze characterize as a diagram.

¹⁷ Eisenman, “Notes on Conceptual Architecture,” 55.

For Deleuze, the diagram consists to the set of “operative set of traits” which are used to execute a work.¹⁸ The traditional function of a diagram is, “to be suggestive” or “to introduce possibilities of fact” into a work.¹⁹ The diagram has a quality of chaos which, when used by the artist in a traditional manner, causes the artist to react, thus introducing a potential for the new. While Lewitt, Reich, and Eisenman have a common interest in the role of the diagram, they do not view its role in the same way. Lewitt sees the selection of diagrams, almost exclusively, his labor. His goal is to remove all subjectivity from the execution of a work by selecting a diagram which does not require the artist to make any decisions during its application, other than the decision to apply it. By moving all decisions into the selection of the diagram, and ignoring the way in which it is executed, Lewitt seeks to minimize the role of object in its own creation. This is, ultimately, why the appearance of the final art object does not matter to Lewitt; he allows the chaos introduced by the diagram’s application to penetrate the work fully, thereby leaving the mark of the diagram’s application. Eisenman views the role of the diagram similarly to Lewitt. Eisenman’s goal is to impart the bulk of the aesthetic value of his work into the process of generating the diagram. Thus, his “transformative rules” for encoding the building with concept become the primary focus of his work, and remain so to this day. That architecture must contain functional elements, which are judged on the basis of utility, does not mitigate the primary coding of the work for Eisenman. Reich differs from Lewitt and Eisenman with respect to the relative importance of the diagram. Reich’s position is less extreme in that, for Reich, the ultimate value of the work is

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, 1981, tr. Daniel Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 83.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

dependent upon the form of the final product. For Reich, the diagram is a focus of the work; however, it is not the exclusive focus.

In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze identifies “three great paths” which characterize most modern painting with respect to the relative importance of the diagram.²⁰ Lewitt and Eisenman follow the path taken by abstract expressionism in that their work is entirely diagrammatic, that is, the final product is almost entirely a reflection of the diagram. In much the same way that Pollock covers his canvases with marks that betray the method with which they are applied, Lewitt and Eisenman allow the method of creation to penetrate the work and show through to the final product. Reich, on the other hand, follows the path with which Deleuze associates Francis Bacon. To Bacon, it was important for a painting to reflect its method of production; however, it was of equal importance that the work represent the purpose to which he initially attributed it. Thus, the work exhibits a basically diagrammatic quality, but this diagram does not dominate the work.

One issue addressed by all three is how the role of the diagram in relation to the medium. Beyond the requirement that an artwork have some representation, Lewitt rejects the assertion that art can have a set definition. Indeed, conceptualism, for Lewitt, emerges as a strategy against such definitions. Since Lewitt sees the art object as nothing more than a material reference to a concept which might have been used to create it, the diagram effectively is a definition for the medium. Unlike art, architecture is restricted by the intrinsic requirement that it make reference to the real world and, therefore, some basic notion of utility. Eisenman observes, “the idea of architecture demands the idea of an object presence, while the idea of art does

²⁰ Deleuze, 84.

not.”²¹ For Eisenman, the diagram emerges as a way to overcome this restraint and architecture to function as art in its most pure sense. Just as Lewitt claims there is no intrinsic limitation to art, Reich recognizes that there is no intrinsic limitation to music, but he sees a potential for value in such limitations. Reich acknowledges that one can think of any sound as music; whether this sound is interesting, for Reich, is another matter. For example, the score for one of Reich’s early compositions, *Slow Motion Sound*, states simply “Very gradually slow down a recorded sound to many times its original length without changing its frequency or spectrum at all.”²² In 1967, when this score was produced, the technology required to slow a sound without changing its frequency was not available; thus, Reich refers to this composition as a “concept piece,” however, it did not become music until the technology required to perform the technology became available to perform it. Reich does not see the diagram as a way to transcend the definition of the medium as Lewitt and Eisenman do, but a way to explore it.

Lewitt, Reich, and Eisenman also address the importance of an artist’s original concept to the final aesthetic value of the work. All three recognize that that the viewer cannot be forced to see the original concept; however, they take different positions with regard to the importance of the original concept to the work. Lewitt is entirely open to alternative readings in his work. It is of no importance that the viewer perceive the artist’s intention.; it is only important that the viewer be able to construct a concept of intention through the piece: “Once out of his hand, the artist has no control over the way that a viewer will perceive the work. Different people

²¹ Reich, 51.

²² Steve Reich, *Slow Motion Sound*, score, 1967 in *Writings on Music*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 28.

will understand the same thing in a different way.”²³ Eisenman also recognizes that one cannot force a viewer to read the artist’s intention; however, he argues that different coding systems give the architect a wide degree of control over the perceptibility of a particular meaning. For example, systems which make reference to historic precedent are more plural than those which attempt to speak in a language of pure form. Since architecture has traditionally operated with a language, the architect’s ability to portray an original concept is greater than that of most other artists. For Reich, the concept is slightly more important than it is to Lewitt; however, he makes a distinction between a concept and the musical operation used to carry out that concept: “In Music for 18 Musicians, you can hear exactly what’s going on in that the melodic pattern is getting longer; however, you might not realize that this is happening because the pattern is being repeated and that it is being reaccented.”²⁴ He adds, “If some people hear exactly what’s going on, I’m glad of it, and if other people don’t, but they still like the piece, that’s fine with me.”

²³ Lewitt, 80.

²⁴ Steve Reich, “Second Interview with Michael Nyman,” 94.

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