

sensibility. . . Both employ imagery that is at once holistic and, in a sense, fragmentary, incomplete; both resort to a similar anthropomorphizing of objects or conglomerations of objects . . . both are capable of achieving remarkable effects of 'presence'; and both tend to deploy and isolate objects and persons in *situations* – the closed room and the abandoned artificial landscape are as important to Surrealism as to literalism. . . This affinity can be summed up by saying that Surrealist sensibility, as manifested in the work of certain artists, and literalist sensibility are both *theatrical*. [. . .]

7 Sol LeWitt (b. 1928) 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art'

LeWitt's work is characterized by the use of repetition and permutation and by the systematic exclusion of any individuality of touch. This is not, however, to say that LeWitt's output should be unproblematically identified with a tradition of rationalism in twentieth-century art. At the time this text was written his typical works were open-framed, rectangular structures presented in series. In 1968 he began formulating proposals for wall drawings, to be executed according to his instructions. Although the notion of a 'Conceptual Art' had been variously canvassed since the early 1960s, publication of this text provided the first public grounds for recognition of a movement. First published in *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 10, Summer 1967, pp. 79–83, from which the present text is taken.

[. . .] I will refer to the kind of art in which I am involved as conceptual art. In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work.¹ 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. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman. It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become emotionally dry. There is no reason to suppose however, that the conceptual artist is out to bore the viewer. It is only the expectation of an emotional kick, to which one conditioned to expressionist art is accustomed, that would deter the viewer from perceiving this art.

Conceptual art is not necessarily logical. The logic of a piece or series of pieces is a device that is used at times only to be ruined. Logic may be used to camouflage the real intent of the artist, to lull the viewer into the belief that he understands the work, or to infer a paradoxical situation (such as logic vs. illogic).² The ideas need not be complex. Most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple. Successful ideas generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable. In terms of idea the artist is free to even surprise himself. Ideas are discovered by intuition.

What the work of art looks like isn't too important. It has to look like something if it has physical form. No matter what form it may finally have it must begin with an idea. It is the process of conception and realization with

which the artist is concerned. Once given physical reality by the artist the work is open to the perception of all, including the artist. (I use the word 'perception' to mean the apprehension of the sense data, the objective understanding of the idea and simultaneously a subjective interpretation of both.) The work of art can only be perceived after it is completed.

Art that is meant for the sensation of the eye primarily would be called perceptual rather than conceptual. This would include most optical, kinetic, light and color art.

Since the functions of conception and perception are contradictory (one pre-, the other postfact) the artist would mitigate his idea by applying subjective judgment to it. If the artist wishes to explore his idea thoroughly, then arbitrary or chance decisions would be kept to a minimum, while caprice, taste and other whimsies would be eliminated from the making of the art. The work does not necessarily have to be rejected if it does not look well. Sometimes what is initially thought to be awkward will eventually be visually pleasing.

To work with a plan that is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity. It also obviates the necessity of designing each work in turn. The plan would design the work. Some plans would require millions of variations, and some a limited number, but both are finite. Other plans imply infinity. In each case however, the artist would select the basic form and rules that would govern the solution of the problem. After that the fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work, the better. This eliminates the arbitrary, the capricious, and the subjective as much as possible. That is the reason for using this method.

When an artist uses a multiple modular method he usually chooses a simple and readily available form. The form itself is of very limited importance; it becomes the grammar for the total work. In fact it is best that the basic unit be deliberately uninteresting so that it may more easily become an intrinsic part of the entire work. Using complex basic forms only disrupts the unity of the whole. Using a simple form repeatedly narrows the field of the work and concentrates the intensity to the arrangement of the form. This arrangement becomes the end while the form becomes the means.

Conceptual art doesn't really have much to do with mathematics, philosophy or any other mental discipline. The mathematics used by most artists is simple arithmetic or simple number systems. The philosophy of the work is implicit in the work and is not an illustration of any system of philosophy.

It doesn't really matter if the viewer understands the concepts of the artist by seeing the art. Once out of his hand the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way.

Recently there has been much written about minimal art, but I have not discovered anyone who admits to doing this kind of thing. There are other art forms around called primary structures, reductive, rejective, cool, and mini-art. No artist I know will own up to any of these either. Therefore I conclude that it is part of a secret language that art critics use when communicating with each other through the medium of art magazines. [. . .]

If the artist carries through his idea and makes it into visible form, then all the steps in the process are of importance. The idea itself, even if not made visual is as much a work of art as any finished product. All intervening steps – scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed work, models, studies, thoughts, conversations – are of interest. Those that show the thought process of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product.

Determining what size a piece should be is difficult. If an idea requires three dimensions then it would seem any size would do. The question would be what size is best. If the thing were made gigantic then the size alone would be impressive and the idea may be lost entirely. Again, if it is too small, it may become inconsequential. The height of the viewer may have some bearing on the work and also the size of the space into which it will be placed. The artist may wish to place objects higher than the eye level of the viewer, or lower. I think the piece must be large enough to give the viewer whatever information he needs to understand the work and placed in such a way that will facilitate this understanding. (Unless the idea is of impediment and requires difficulty of vision or access.)

Space can be thought of as the cubic area occupied by a three-dimensional volume. Any volume would occupy space. It is air and cannot be seen. It is the interval between things that can be measured. The intervals and measurements can be important to a work of art. If certain distances are important they will be made obvious in the piece. If space is relatively unimportant it can be regularized and made equal (things placed equal distances apart), to mitigate any interest in interval. Regular space might also become a metric time element, a kind of regular beat or pulse. When the interval is kept regular whatever is irregular gains more importance.

Architecture and three-dimensional art are of completely opposite natures. The former is concerned with making an area with a specific function. Architecture, whether it is a work of art or not, must be utilitarian or else fail completely. Art is not utilitarian. When three-dimensional art starts to take on some of the characteristics of architecture such as forming utilitarian areas it weakens its function as art. When the viewer is dwarfed by the large size of a piece this domination emphasizes the physical and emotive power of the form at the expense of losing the idea of the piece.

New materials are one of the great afflictions of contemporary art. Some artists confuse new materials with new ideas. There is nothing worse than seeing art that wallows in gaudy baubles. By and large most artists who are attracted to these materials are the ones that lack the stringency of mind that would enable them to use the materials well. It takes a good artist to use new materials and make them into a work of art. The danger is, I think, in making the physicality of the materials so important that it becomes the idea of the work (another kind of expressionism).

Three-dimensional art of any kind is a physical fact. This physicality is its most obvious and expressive content. Conceptual art is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions. The physicality of a three-dimensional object then becomes a contradiction to its non-emotive intent. Color,

surface, texture, and shape only emphasize the physical aspects of the work. Anything that calls attention to and interests the viewer in this physicality is a deterrent to our understanding of the idea and is used as an expressive device. The conceptual artist would want to ameliorate this emphasis on materiality as much as possible or to use it in a paradoxical way. (To convert it into an idea.) This kind of art then, should be stated with the most economy of means. Any idea that is better stated in two dimensions should not be in three dimensions. Ideas may also be stated with numbers, photographs, or words or any way the artist chooses, the form being unimportant.

These paragraphs are not intended as categorical imperatives but the ideas stated are as close as possible to my thinking at this time.³ These ideas are the result of my work as an artist and are subject to change as my experience changes. I have tried to state them with as much clarity as possible. If the statements I make are unclear it may mean the thinking is unclear. Even while writing these ideas there seemed to be obvious inconsistencies (which I have tried to correct, but others will probably slip by). I do not advocate a conceptual form of art for all artists. I have found that it has worked well for me while other ways have not. It is one way of making art: other ways suit other artists. Nor do I think all conceptual art merits the viewer's attention. Conceptual art is only good when the idea is good.

¹ In other forms of art the concept may be changed in the process of execution.

² Some ideas are logical in conception and illogical perceptually.

³ I dislike the term 'work of art' because I am not in favor of work and the term sounds pretentious. But I don't know what other term to use.

8 Sol LeWitt 'Sentences on Conceptual Art'

By the time this text was published, Conceptual Art was widely recognized as an international avant-garde movement with a large number of adherents, and incorporating a number of theoretical positions in addition to LeWitt's. The 'Sentences' were originally published in *Art-Language*, vol. 1, no. 1, Coventry, May 1969 (for this opening issue alone designated 'The Journal of Conceptual Art').

- 1 Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.
- 2 Rational judgements repeat rational judgements.
- 3 Illogical judgements lead to new experience.
- 4 Formal Art is essentially rational.
- 5 Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically.
- 6 If the artist changes his mind midway through the execution of the piece he compromises the result and repeats past results.
- 7 The artist's will is secondary to the process he initiates from idea to completion. His wilfulness may only be ego.
- 8 When words such as painting and sculpture are used, they connote a whole tradition and imply a consequent acceptance of this tradition, thus placing

- limitations on the artist who would be reluctant to make art that goes beyond the limitations.
- 9 The concept and idea are different. The former implies a general direction while the latter are the components. Ideas implement the concept.
 - 10 Ideas alone can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical.
 - 11 Ideas do not necessarily proceed in logical order. They may set one off in unexpected directions but an idea must necessarily be completed in the mind before the next one is formed.
 - 12 For each work of art that becomes physical there are many variations that do not.
 - 13 A work of art may be understood as a conductor from the artist's mind to the viewer's. But it may never reach the viewer, or it may never leave the artist's mind.
 - 14 The words of one artist to another may induce an ideas chain, if they share the same concept.
 - 15 Since no form is intrinsically superior to another, the artist may use any form, from an expression of words, (written or spoken) to physical reality, equally.
 - 16 If words are used, and they proceed from ideas about art, then they are art and not literature, numbers are not mathematics.
 - 17 All ideas are art if they are concerned with art and fall within the conventions of art.
 - 18 One usually understands the art of the past by applying the conventions of the present thus misunderstanding the art of the past.
 - 19 The conventions of art are altered by works of art.
 - 20 Successful art changes our understanding of the conventions by altering our perceptions.
 - 21 Perception of ideas leads to new ideas.
 - 22 The artist cannot imagine his art, and cannot perceive it until it is complete.
 - 23 One artist may mis-perceive (understand it differently than the artist) a work of art but still be set off in his own chain of thought by that misconstrual.
 - 24 Perception is subjective.
 - 25 The artist may not necessarily understand his own art. His perception is neither better nor worse than that of others.
 - 26 An artist may perceive the art of others better than his own.
 - 27 The concept of a work of art may involve the matter of the piece or the process in which it is made.
 - 28 Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist's mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. There are many side-effects that the artist cannot imagine. These may be used as ideas for new works.
 - 29 The process is mechanical and should not be tampered with. It should run its course.

- 30 There are many elements involved in a work of art. The most important are the most obvious.
- 31 If an artist uses the same form in a group of works, and changes the material, one would assume the artist's concept involved the material.
- 32 Banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful execution.
- 33 It is difficult to bungle a good idea.
- 34 When an artist learns his craft too well he makes slick art.
- 35 These sentences comment on art, but are not art.

9 Robert Barry (b. 1936) Interview with Arthur R. Rose

In January 1969 the avant-garde dealer Seth Siegelau staged an exhibition in a temporarily empty office space in New York. The exhibition was given the title of its duration, 'January 5-31 1969'. The artists involved were Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, each represented by a small selection of recent works, with others documented in an accompanying catalogue. Among those listed were Weiner's *One Standard Air Force dye marker thrown into the sea* and Barry's *88 mc Carrier Wave (FM)*. To provide publicity for the exhibition, the artists concocted four interviews, using the Duchampian name 'Arthur R. Rose' for their fictitious interlocutor. These were originally published in *Arts Magazine*, vol. 43, no. 4, New York, February 1969, pp. 22-3. Barry here gives voice to that extreme form of reductivism which was characteristic of some American forms of post-Minimal and Conceptual Art.

Q: How did you arrive at the kind of work you are now doing?

BARRY: It's a logical continuation of my earlier work. A few years ago when I was painting, it seemed that paintings would look one way in one place and, because of lighting and other things, would look different in another place. Although it was the same object, it was another work of art. Then I made paintings which incorporated as part of their design the wall on which they hung. I finally gave up painting for the wire installations (two of which are in the show). Each wire installation was made to suit the place in which it was installed. They cannot be moved without being destroyed.

Color became arbitrary. I started using thin transparent nylon monofilament. Eventually the wire became so thin that it was virtually invisible. This led to my use of a material which is invisible, or at least not perceivable in a traditional way. Although this poses problems, it also presents endless possibilities. It was at this point that I discarded the idea that art is necessarily something to look at.

Q: If your work is not perceivable, how does anyone deal with it or even know of its existence?

BARRY: I'm not only questioning the limits of our perception, but the actual nature of perception. These forms certainly do exist, they are controlled and have their own characteristic. They are made of various kinds of energy which exist outside the narrow arbitrary limits of our own senses. I use various devices to produce the energy, detect it, measure it, and define its form.