

Conceptual

Many people who have not travelled through art school find conceptual art ridiculous. They are baffled by their experience of apparently impenetrable absurdity alongside serious claims by artists and curators for the deep cultural relevance of, for example, a gallery with 13 legs of smoked ham hanging from the ceiling.¹ Even as an art-world initiate I have sometimes struggled to appreciate or submit to the often demanding and obscure experience of conceptual art.

Rather than only being a distinct historical art movement, conceptual art continues to be practiced today. I suggest that almost all contemporary art is informed by the practice and theory of conceptual art because we have all been soaking in it for years whilst moving through our art education, visiting galleries and reading art magazines. The ideas of conceptual art are a fundamental part of the psyche of most contemporary artists to the point that it would be challenging to attempt to remove oneself from them and create not-conceptual art.

The inspiration to develop this exhibition arose from my perception of how the term 'conceptual art' has accumulated an ambiguity through over-application. It is used as both a noun, to denote the revolutionary Conceptual Art movement of the late 60s - early 70s, and a verb to denote the activity of many contemporary artists. Some people use it as a positive value while others see it as a negative. Because the term is employed so widely, suggesting art-cultural credibility, it has become difficult to use accurately unless it is linked with a contextual anchor. So it seemed relevant to invite six local contemporary artists to intentionally make conceptual art as a way to focus enquiry and assist us to reconsider that contentious term.

The pedigree lineage and associated historical baggage of conceptual art sets a weighty precedent and yet that intimidating thought almost disappears when one considers it - after all, what does conceptual art look like? Beyond the familiar clichés it becomes apparent that it has no defining form and that almost anything could be conceptual art. It is the very openness of the category that makes it challenging.

Many conceptual artists have critically addressed ideas and activities associated with the making and display of art. By developing and adhering to documented strategies which have often accompanied or replaced the display of the physical artwork, they have also engaged with presumptions about the form that art should take, the way that institutions manage the art we see in public museums and galleries, the actual site for viewing art, the relationship between art, artist and viewer and the consumption of art as a commercial product. Political issues have been embraced by many conceptual artists while others have focused upon philosophical questions associated with art.

Anne Mestitz is intrigued by the possibility of the intersection of conceptual art with perceptual art. Are these terms mutually exclusive or not? Traditional forms

¹ Haim Steinbach, *Untitled (thirteen pigs)*, Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris, 2007

of art, even recent traditions such as Minimalism, which carry certain expectations with them have often been employed by conceptual artists to address presumptions about whether the way something looks will always align with what it means. *Interference Field* is intentionally confusing.

Kevin Leong investigates the blurred edge of the real through temporarily becoming *CAST Officer for Contradictory Requirements*, thus actually addressing real but unlikely issues within the organization (eg. Be an institution and also support institutional critique). Art allows for fluid states to occur where normal boundaries can become elastic. To assist CAST staff to maintain a balance between pragmatism and open mindedness the artist has developed the *Daydreaming Kit*, a product teetering on the edge of reality.

Leigh Hobba reacts to one notice among many on a public wall offering *Self-storage*. Recently he has found himself frequently shifting address, which has resulted in his artefacts being stored in boxes but then, he wondered, where should he store himself? In relation to early conceptual art practices Leigh has focused upon the relationship between performance, concept, materiality and immateriality. The signs on that public wall reflect the commodification of our lives, reduced to a series of objects for sale. But where are we?

Lucia Usmiani values her home-time, hours of which are manifested in the knitted and crocheted kitchen furniture covers she has made – handcrafted, unique objects not normally associated with conceptual art. Whilst busy with her yarn and needles myriad thoughts have occurred to her. Not only a record of time and labour, the artwork is also a record of thoughts passing, however, not just any thoughts but ones she can own. Taken at her leisure, *My Time* strongly suggests the domestic but it is just as much about the hours we trade at work.

Megan Walch adapts the traditional readymade strategy by looking online for her resources. She found a site that conveniently reduced conceptual art to an easy five-step process. Following the instructions led her to order an online wall mural from Decorama, one in keeping with the *eHow* injunction to sit with a notebook in an inspiring place. The internet has given us rapid access to an ocean of ideas or concepts that become used, worn and outmoded, like any found object they can be re-presented and re-considered in a different cultural context.

Scot Cotterell's cross-media melange leaves us in the middle of a struggle for domination between two rappers at generational bookends. The artwork stretches between reproductions of old amp ads in the gallery and videos in the storeroom where the *BEEF* takes place. In the midst of objects, sound and moving image we can try to reduce our experience to a single unified meaning or make peace with the complex and conflicting world we inhabit. Sometimes an idea is not represented through conceptual artwork but produced because of it.

Art as a vehicle for generating critical thought in the viewer through upsetting conventional ways of seeing and thinking about the world seems to be the common factor here. It has been the deep shift in art practices after Marcel Duchamp that has radically unbalanced any comfortable preconceptions artists may have had about what they were doing. Contemporary artists now practice in a field of self-doubt, instability, uncertainty and continually shifting parameters –

they not only make the work but they also provide the contextual ground within which their practice sits. The unbounded nature of conceptual art has created opportunities and dilemmas for artists wrestling with the limits of the unlimited and the physical manifestation of the non-physical - it is this tension that is apparent in the contemporary art we see.

Dr Colin Langridge

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