

CONCEPTUAL ART

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What is Conceptual Art?

Conceptual art, also known as Idea art, Post-Object art, or Dematerialized art, is based on the notion that the most significant part of an artwork is the idea rather than its visual or formal components. The creation of a Conceptual art piece begins with the artist's idea. Thoughts about material, technique and presentation come later in the process. Conceptual artists may use whatever material is most appropriate to convey their message. This may include writing, photographs, maps, everyday objects, videos, etc. Often, artists will outsource much of the fabrication of their work in order for the idea to be fully realized. Because of this, most Conceptual art looks unlike traditional art and sometimes has no physical form at all. One of the most significant components of Conceptual art is viewer interaction. The artist shares the work with the viewer, who interprets the piece and comes to their own conclusions on its meaning. In this sense, the audience plays a participatory role in the completion of the piece. Though this movement has no distinct style or form, certain trends began to develop in the 1960s as Conceptual art began to emerge as a definable genre.

Influences

Prior to the 1960s when the Conceptual art movement began to fully develop, Conceptualism was preceded by various avant-garde movements such as Cubism, Dada, Abstract Expressionism and Pop. These movements redefined the notion of what art could be. Conceptual artists were influenced by the tradition of expanding the boundaries of art. Conceptual artists were considerably influenced by the work of Dada artist Marcel Duchamp and his Readymades, which were found objects chosen by the artist to be a work of art, with no further adaptations made to it apart from a signature and date. Duchamp's most famous Readymade *Fountain*, 1917, is a porcelain urinal, placed on a stand, dated and signed under the alias R. Mutt. Readymades dismissed the idea that works of art must be measured by beauty and skill. In 1950, when Duchamp recommissioned *Fountain* and other Readymades to be displayed in the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, a renewed interest in idea-based art was sparked in the art world. Conceptual artists were also influenced by the simplicity of Minimalism, and the departure from tradition by artists like Donald Judd and others who created works that were too large to be displayed on a pedestal, and usually made of non-traditional materials such as sheets of steel or bricks. Another important precedent for Conceptualism was the Fluxus movement. Fluxus artists embraced change or "flux" as an essential part of life and sought to assimilate life and art through found objects, sounds and stimulations. Overall, many artists during the 1950s and 60s sought to directly defy the art market with their new and untraditional approaches to creating works of art.



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917

The Emergence of Conceptualism

By the late 1960s, modern art began to shift from Fluxus and Minimalism as Conceptual art started to become its own identifiable movement. Artists in the United States, Europe and Latin American began to experiment with idea-based art and questioned the true nature of art; what is art and what is it expected to be? Conceptual artists took the ideas of previous movements and pushed them further, reducing the physical presence of a piece to the bare minimum. In Sol LeWitt's 1967 essay *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* he stated, "The idea itself, even if it is not made visual, is as much of a work of art as any finished product...What the work of art looks like isn't too important...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 artists is concerned." The

importance placed on the concept rather than the physical piece challenged theories of art critics such as Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg who defined the aesthetic criteria of art for the preceding generation of artists through their intense examination of objects, materials, colors and forms. Conceptual artists were critical of the art institution, and from the mid-1960s to 1970s artists produced works and writings that completely rejected the standards that art was traditionally judged by, such as skill, expression, beauty, and most of all marketability. Artists began to explore the idea of art as knowledge, and created pieces that engaged their audiences, presenting them with open-ended questions and provoking them to reconsider their own understanding of what art is. Viewers were challenged to think deeply about a work of art while viewing it.



Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965

This artwork comprised of a chair, a photograph of a chair, and a definition of the word “chair”. But is this art? What exactly constitutes a chair and which of these is the best representation of that? Is there only one chair or [are](#) there three? With this display Kosuth, turned an ordinary chair (or chairs?) into a something worthy of thought and debate.

Formation of a Movement and Artist Collectives

In the late 1960s, artists began to form coalitions. The group Art and Language, a collective of British artists, was formed in Coventry, England in 1976. They taught and published journals that made their outright distaste of modern art and the market place known. Members such as Joseph Kosuth wrote many theoretical essays questioning how art acquires meaning, sometimes turning the text into artwork. The potential for Conceptual art to convey a message to its audience generated the creation of various political groups such as General Idea, a Canadian group formed in 1967 that addressed pharmaceutical companies and the AIDS crisis. Collectives also provided anonymity. The formation of groups like the CADA, formed in Chile, or the Peruvian group Parenthesis, provided protection from oppressive authorities and the opportunity to make bold political and social statements.

Concepts and Trends

Conceptualism started to gain more momentum towards the end of the 1960s. In 1968, the exhibition *Information*, organized by dealer and curator Seth Siegelaub at the Museum of Modern Art, helped promote the movement in New York City. As the movement grew, Conceptual art developed no identifiable or unique style.-Other art movements in the 1960s such as performance art, installation, body art and earth art could be mistaken as a Conceptual art. Though these developments are all different, they share common ground. They were all prompted by the rejection of the ways in which art was traditionally judged and of the commodification of art. For conceptual artists particularly, the desire to expand the boundaries of art and emphasize the idea is what connected them. Though no discernable styles developed, certain trends

did emerge that are characteristic of the movement such as limited material presence, language, photography, and the involvement of others in the creation of the work.

In 1969 in his three-part essay *Art after Philosophy*, Joseph Kosuth pushed “art-as-idea” further by pursuing the notion that physical works of art were no longer necessary. For art to remain self-critical, he insisted that the use of traditional media in art must be completely abandoned even to the point that the end product may not even be physical. Artists like Kosuth sought to remove the aesthetics and marketability of their artwork. Many Conceptual artworks have a minimal physical presence, something that critic Lucy Lippard described as “dematerialization of the art object.” The rejection of beauty by Conceptual artists was a great challenge to Western ideas of art, and artists took many other innovative approaches to challenge preconceptions of what art could or should be.

Language was utilized by many Conceptual artists to fully explore art as a means of creating or dispersing knowledge. The intellectualism of these works is due to the fact that unlike the previous generations, many conceptual artists had pursued college degrees. Artists like Lawrence Weiner, Ed Ruscha, Joseph Kosuth and John Baldessari often used language as the principal aspect of their work. Many artworks contained commands, ambiguous statements, or single words, urging the viewer to think about the meaning of the piece.



John Baldessari, *What is Painting*, 1966-68

Another persistent trend in Conceptual art is photo-conceptualism. It is often thought that the finished piece is more important than the documentation of the work, but photo-conceptualism equalizes the value of both. The photographs are often not meant to provoke any sort of emotional response, rather they are objective or methodic, could be lacking in quality and give no insight to the personality of the artists.

In many ways Conceptual artworks are not the sole product of a single artist and require outside participants to finish the piece. As the main goal of Conceptual art work is to share ideas, there must be a viewer who takes in that information, and the sharing of knowledge is what truly finishes the artwork. In some cases, outsiders are unknowingly involved in the creation of the artwork. For example, in Vito Acconci's *Following Piece*, 1969, he chose random people to follow around New York City, and would stop as soon as they entered a building, pursuing them from anywhere to a minute or several hours. He created a photocollage and documents of the pathways. In this instance he cannot be considered the sole creator of the finished piece. Many Conceptual artworks are often outsourced, bringing into question the authorship of a work of art. For example, Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds*, 2008, is an installation comprised of over 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds and included over 1,600 participants to complete.

Using Conceptual Art to Critique

For years the art market had been consistently guided by rich, white, men who directed the flow of the market with their demand for highly aesthetic works of art they deemed “good” or “bad”, thereby benefiting few and isolating many artists from profiting in the art world. In opposition to the beneficiaries of this system, conceptual artists pushed for new and radical forms of art. In a 1975 edition of *Artforum*, Ian Burn wrote “*What can you expect to challenge in the real world with 'colour', 'edge', 'process', systems, modules, etc. as your arguments? Can you be any more than a manipulated puppet if these are your 'professional' arguments?*” By the late 1960s a form of Conceptualism known as Institutional Critique began to form. Artists like Hans Haacke, Michael Asher and Marcel Broodthaers critiqued the role museums played in benefiting trustees in the art world by promoting certain artists and “important” works of art. Conceptual artists were in a compromising position. They critiqued the museum and its beneficiaries but could not completely reject the institution.

Instead, many artists continued to stage their works in museums, exposing the connectedness of the established art world, society, and the role viewers play in these social relationships.



Hans Haacke, *MoMA Poll*, 1970

This artwork was displayed at the exhibition *Information* in the Museum of Modern Art. Asking:

Question:

Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November ?

Answer:

If 'yes'

please cast your ballot into the left box

if 'no'

into the right box.

Ballots were dropped into either of two plexi-glass ballot boxes (visitors chose "yes" twice as often as "no").

New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller was a member of the board of trustees of MOMA and planning a run for the U.S. Presidency at the time.

Source: http://www.arts.ucsb.edu/faculty/budgett/algorithmic_art/haacke.html

Similar to the political collectives that had formed in previous years, individual artists began using Conceptual art to critique society. Artists such as Ai Weiwei, Alfredo Jaar, Jenny Holzer and many others used their work to highlight issues such as poverty, censorship, and labor and gender relations. This form of social critique had limited popularity, mostly because the public often had difficulty interpreting the messages of these works, and the movement began to disband in the mid-70s.

Controversy

The stray from traditional forms of art, and the intellectual and often political nature of Conceptual art has drawn more controversy and debate than most art movements. This is not unexpected, as the purpose of Conceptual art is to engage the audience and push them to think. Whether an artwork is meant to prompt viewers to reconsider their definition of art, or to question society and their role in it, all Conceptual art purposefully challenges its audience. It provokes strong emotions and can be received as invigorating and relevant, or shocking and offensive. Not only does the intellectual aspect of these works spark debate, but the physical component as well. The lack of material object and the complete break from traditional art styles upsets preconceived Western ideas of what art should look like, often causing many to deny that it is art at all. Regardless of whether artworks were well received by their audiences, Conceptual artists succeeded in their mission to create innovative, unexpected works of art that provoked thought and created meaning. Though the movement dwindled in the late 70s, Conceptual art inspired new generations of artists. The interests and techniques of the movement are reflected by artists today through performance art, installation, and other methods. Conceptual artists elevated photographs, musical scores, language and more to the respectability of sculpture and painting, and while Conceptual art may not be considered traditionally beautiful, it has achieved an important place in art history.

Sources:

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