

Words and Objects After Conceptualism

by Dave Beech

Art objects have persisted after Conceptual Art had “put texts where paintings had been” but art objects have not survived without loss. Conceptualism’s insertion of text into the field of the art object – of presenting text *as art* – has destabilised the customary distinction between art objects and the various texts that accompany, frame, explain, promote and name them. That is to say, the normative idea that the artwork should ‘speak for itself’ can no longer be sustained after the historical emergence as art of the catalogue, the magazine ad, the private view card, the essay, the slide talk and so on – strictly speaking, it never could. It was not so much that Conceptualism elevated text to the status of art, exactly. The significant transformation here is how Conceptualism pressed art up against the institutional, historical and social conditions of art, including the linguistic conditions for art, without which there would be no art at all, never mind art ‘speaking for itself’. On the contrary, art objects are inert without their texts. Inertia, I want to argue, is not a physical characteristic but a social one. And in social terms, art objects are no competition for postconceptualism’s events, multiples, broadcasts and publications – texts and text-like things.

Art objects have been under siege since – though they have not quite been ousted. Titles, for instance, can not be the innocent neighbours of art objects that they once seemed after Conceptualism, following Duchamp, had used the title to intervene between artwork and viewer. If titles had traditionally been thought of as descriptive or denotative, Conceptualism showed them to be illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. In J.L. Austin’s terms, titles in Conceptualism do not only describe a state of affairs in the artwork but can bring a state of affairs in the artwork into existence by virtue of a performative utterance. The illusion of art’s independence from language in general and ‘supporting’ texts in particular is finally put to bed by Conceptualism. Art objects are art objects only insofar as they are situated within certain contexts. To rearticulate the relationship between art objects and their texts is, therefore, to reinsert art into its social contexts. As such, we need to go beyond Lucy Lippard’s interpretation of the political value of Conceptualism and extend Seth Siegelaub’s important if limited theorisation of Conceptualism’s technical strategies for rearticulating art’s contexts and preconditions.

During the heyday of Conceptualism, Lucy Lippard argued, in the Preface to 'Six Years', "The artists who are trying to do non-object art are introducing a drastic solution to the problem of artists being bought and sold so easily, along with their art". Before the end of 1972, however, that utopianism had turned sour:

It seemed in 1969... that no one, not even a public greedy for novelty, would actually pay money, or much of it, for a xerox sheet referring to an event [etc]... it seemed that these artists would therefore be forcibly freed from the tyranny of a commodity status and market-orientation. Three years later, the major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by... the world's most prestigious galleries. Clearly whatever minor revolutions in communication have been achieved by the process of de-materialising the object... art and artist in a capitalist society remain luxuries."¹

Lippard's simplistic economic reductionism (which also includes an ontological reductionism) omits any discussion of the transformation of art's social relations, of the extension of art into the contexts that are its precondition. I want to reconsider the legacy of Conceptualism in terms of the social relations it unlocks. So, instead of characterising Conceptualism in terms of Lippard's 'dematerialisation' – which was never truly liberated from materiality – we might reconsider Conceptualism and postconceptualism in terms of the inertia of the object cut off from its texts and the increased mobility, dispersal, temporality and speed of textual and contextual practises. Thus, it is not the materiality of the traditional art object that is disputed by Conceptualism; it is the art object's inertia.

Not that speed in itself is a value – a 45 rpm song is no better than a 33 rpm song. My model for rethinking Conceptualism in terms of mobility and speed is not a film (24 frames per second) or anything of that type; it is a postcard. Not any old postcard. I want to explore the social implications of the mobility of the private view invitation card (this carrier of promotional, navigational, connotative, instructional text) as the basis of thinking about the potential mobility of art and the redefinition of art's social relations. I won't go so far as to say that the future of art belongs to the mechanisms, pleasures and powers of the invitation card. The invitation card, faster and more broadly distributed than the exhibition it broadcasts, holds social promises which the art object must deny. In fact, the art object denies the promises of the invitation card by putting those promises to another use, by subsuming them to the purposes of art. The pv card is deployed by the administrative offices of galleries and museums to do the work (publicity, branding, promotion, etc) that the art does not do. This makes the invitation card, like other texts such as titles, both the poor cousin of the art object and one of its biggest threats.

The private view card lines up with Seth Siegelaub's inversion of primary (art) and secondary (supporting) information². Siegelaub's work with conceptual artists challenged the given relationships between art, artist, gallery, viewer, space and time. Siegelaub used advertising and mass media, the textual and contextual underlabourers which occupy a dispersed space beyond museums and galleries, to set up encounters with art that had previously been impossible because of the art object's inertia. Instead of the viewer taking a trip to see the art object in its place of display, the works were distributed over distances in reproducible forms. "You don't need walls to show ideas", he said. The publicity material for a show of conceptual art was, for the first time, drawn into the currency of art proper. Siegelaub's ad for Douglas Heubler's November 1968 exhibition, for instance, was a document of the show and a material part of it. Publicity material was thus not restricted to the customary function *for* art objects.

In comparison with the pv card, the art object is an inert, lifeless thing. Walter Benjamin's concept of aura contrasts the supernatural activity of art objects with their immobility and deathliness. The auratic art object is dead like all commodities, according to Benjamin, which he compares with inorganic matter.³ Aesthetics, which is cut off from lived experience, can not breathe life into these dead objects because the life of objects is given to them through the social processes in which they participate. From a social point of view, aesthetic objects, being inert, live a kind of zombie existence. To understand the social implications of the transference of art into the materials and processes of art's publicity we have to go back a step and analyse the event that the ad and the invitation card announce.

Despite appearances, the terms *opening* and *private view* are interchangeable in art's calendar. This is because *opening* does not refer to a quality of the event, in which perhaps it might contrast with the closure of a *private view*; *opening* identifies the sequence of events. The *opening* or *private view* is the inaugural event of an exhibition: when the gallery is open before it is open.

The *opening*, in this special sense, immediately precedes the opening of the exhibition. Before the gallery is open to the public, then, the gallery is already open. But if the gallery is not open to the public, then to whom is it open? Prior to the public viewing of the exhibition, another public, a putatively private public, enters the gallery for a previewing. The *private view* is private only insofar as it precedes the opening of the exhibition to the public. It is by virtue of arriving early that this public is inscribed as private.

In other words, the alleged privacy of the *private view* is not due to the character of the public that attends the preview. On the contrary, it is the timing of the *private view* – the view as preview – that accords the public of the private view its character as private (simply by virtue of preceding the

public – a purely mechanical distinction, we might say). The private public and the public public are indistinguishable except by the time at which they attend the gallery. There are not two publics in existence prior to the event to which the distinction between the preview and the public view corresponds.

There is not a constituency of the public that the exhibition opens itself to prior to the opening of the exhibition to the public. Quite the reverse. The *opening* or *private view* is the event that enacts a particular codification of the public. A public, in the guise of its differentiation from *the* public, is differentiated from the public through its attendance of the preview. It is possible that the effect of such a differentiation is to characterise the private public as special; it is not, however, the character of the private public that sets it apart, it is its being set apart that calls for the explanation of why it is set apart which may result in the speculation that the private public has a special character.

Of course, inaugurations are not originary. The inaugural event that precedes and announces the exhibition is in turn preceded by the announcement itself, namely, the invitation or private view *card*. In order for the inaugural event (the private view) to be inaugural, then, the preceding events (the distribution of the private view card, the compilation of a mailing list, etc) has to be drained of significance, neglected and suppressed through neglect. How is the glamour of priority held by the private view prevented from being attached to the private view card, too? Why is value conferred on the preview for preceding the exhibition, while the private view card, which precedes the private view, is remote from the power of art? The reason the private view seems to be originary, then, is because the events that precede it are codified as insignificant.

Within the wider field of cultural strategies and techniques, the invitation card fails to signify except as a peripheral device. It is art's version of the movie trailer: the attention-seeking servant of that which purportedly deserves the attention (the movie, or art). If value is conferred on the private view because it immediately precedes the exhibition, then the value prohibited to the private view card is snatched from it because its purpose is to signify a presence that it precedes, rather than constitutes. As such, the attention-seeking invitation card is rendered invisible by its very visibility. Invisibility is written all over the invitation card because its *raison d'être* is a proxy form of visibility.

Unlike the private view, which it announces, the invitation card is cast out of the culture it heralds. Instead of gaining momentum – and the privilege that accrues to speed – the invitation card seems to lag behind rather than sprint ahead. Stuck, like an 'entrance' sign that is fixed on the exterior of the building, in a permanent state of never arriving because it paves the way for everyone else. This paradoxical state is not a play of shadows; it follows a

precise pattern. According to the dialectical logic of the extraction of value, the exhibition profits from the work of the invitation card not only by exploiting it (extracting the value from it), but also by alienating it: precluding the invitation card from partaking in the value that it produces.

So, the visibility of the invitation card protects the artwork and the gallery from seeking visibility itself. It is, in this respect, possible to regard the invitation card as the repressed and unguarded *other* of what is proper to art. That is to say, the indispensable *preliminary* act of art's signification is the signifying, or framing, of the artistic event which, in turn, renders itself insignificant and inevitably dispensable. This trajectory of decline is the signature of the logic of the supplement.⁴ In this instance what is supplementary to art – what art requires but cannot incorporate without surrendering itself – is the unselfconscious form of address, namely, to invite.

The invitation card, in a sense, *has* to become dispensable because it makes the mistake of inviting or – even worse perhaps – of being inviting. Stamped with a miniature image taken from the exhibition, as the invitation card so often is, the *dependence* of the invitation card (and by virtue of this sign, the *independence* of the exhibition as a real and significant experience) is worn by the invitation card like a disgraceful uniform, while the exhibition itself pushes the invitation card into architectural insignificance (corridor, entrance, office, information desk, etc).

What prevents the invitation card from enjoying the full cultural significance of the inert art object? Having described in part the conditions under which the proxy significations of the invitation card decline to zero (get returned, as it were, to their so-called proper place in the artwork), I want to consider the exchange under other conditions. Insofar as the invitation card is set up by the administration of the gallery as an insignificant substitute for the artwork and the exhibition display, the invitation card is a threat to the code of what is proper to the gallery and to art if it fails or refuses to return its temporary signification back to the gallery and the artworks it houses.

What is promising about contemporary art that takes up the Conceptualist critique of the inert art object is the social promise of textual and contextual mobility. Lippard's concept of dematerialisation does not reveal what is promising about such works, nor does it identify how postconceptualism redeploys art's social relations. Siegelub gives us the technical basis of postconceptualism's breakout from the gallery and the objects that it displays but in order to grasp fully the implications of these works we need to rearticulate Conceptualism's challenge to art's institution. Siegelub's inversion of the primacy of the art object can be rethought, socially, through what we might call, following Žižek, the universalisation of the point of exclusion.⁵

The private view card, I am suggesting, is as good a model as we are likely to find for a remodelling of art (that goes further than Siegelub's inversion) to challenge the art object's inertia and centripetalism. The invitation card, like all of art's textual and contextual 'supplements', is inaugurated as art's proxy, as secondary, temporary and minor – in fact, as non-art – but the inert art object is dependent on the mobility, dispersal, speed, multiplicity and generosity of the pv card, indeed of a range of art's texts. The future of art can not fully inoculate itself from the systems of deployment, the mechanisms, pleasures and powers, and the forms of address of the invitation card, which does not remain art's proxy. There is something about the private view card (which I have tried to describe) that art must take seriously if it is to do more than rely on cultural capital for its social impact.

Art can be imagined without text only by suppressing the art object's dependence on titles, pv cards, adverts, catalogues, interviews, reviews, art history, theory, biography, commentary, lectures, seminars, tutorials, interpretation and so on. In fact, we can invert the formula following Bhaskar's inversion of the positive and negative. A packed world without absences is impossible, he says, but there is no good reason to exclude the opposite. Non-being is a condition of possibility for being, but there is no logical incoherence in totally no being.⁶ Similarly, art objects without texts are impossible, but there is no good reason to exclude the opposite. Text is a condition of possibility for art but there is no logical incoherence in an art of texts without inert art objects.

¹ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (New York: Praeger, 1973), extract in Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (eds), *Art in Theory*, London: Blackwell, 1993, 895pp

² See Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

³ Terry Eagleton makes the same point in *Walter Benjamin or towards a revolutionary criticism*, London and New York: Verso, 1981, pp 33-34.

⁴ Derrida's 'logic of the supplement' is an inversion of Rousseau's conception of the supplement as "an inessential extra added to something complete in itself." In Derrida's thinking, if the complete thing were complete without the supplement, the supplement would have no job to perform. The supplement, which is both necessary and external, therefore calls into question the completion and independence of that which it supplements simply because its job is to enhance the presence of something which is already complete and self-sufficient. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (trans), 1976.

⁵ Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London and New York: Verso, 1999, p. 224

⁶ Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: the pulse of freedom*, London and New York: Verso, 1993, p. 46

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