

Handling Conceptual Art

Charles Gagnon
Concordia University

In 2006 I visited an exhibition titled *Art Metropole: The Top 100*, at the National Gallery in Ottawa. It consisted of objects collected by General Idea, a Canadian art collective that lived and produced art together between 1969 and 1994. Art Metropole is a Toronto gallery and distribution center for artists' work, initially established by General Idea in 1974. The exhibition consisted of books, postcards, vinyl records, videos, magazines, posters and small art objects, which have come to be known as multiples, as they are made in small editions. This collection, upon viewing, looked a lot like the stuff I collected; to someone who would not recognize the names of the artists, it might look like the stuff that simply just accumulates in one's home or office.

Here were some items that are now considered part of art history; things that we read about, or have seen reproduced in publications. These artifacts, now archived as part of the Art Metropole Collection at the National Gallery, had once been the private collection of Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal and AA Bronson, the three individuals who made up General Idea. For the collectors, these objects were more than just examples of Conceptual art; they were full of memories. In the exhibition catalogue, each item on display is accompanied by a small descriptive text, written by the curators and librarian of the Gallery, and by AA Bronson, the last living member of General Idea. Bronson offers a series of small texts about a few selected items, recounting how specific items came to be part of the collection or how such and such artist became friend with General Idea. What the catalogue makes evident is that these objects vehicle emotional and personal memories, two notions that are seldom discussed when looking at the art of that period.

My handling of several "conceptual" pieces from the Art Metropole collection revealed that these material items were not only meant to exist on their own, in a vacuum, or as a pure idea, but rather to be circulated and made use of. In many ways these things propose, or, institute new ways of making and encountering art. Instead of saying that the artist makes the work, we can say the opposite, by stating that the work of art is instituted, with the artist being the one who "welcomes, gathers, prepares, explores,

invents –as one invents a treasure – the work’s form [*accueille, recueille, prépare, explore, invente-comme on invente un trésor-la forme de l’œuvre*].¹

Objects from the Collection were examined individually, but mostly along other items, as part of a group of objects found within publications like *Aspen* (fig.1), *S.M.S.* (fig.2), and *FILE* (fig.3), or through the various catalogues produced by the then gallery owner and publisher, Seth Siegelau, or again, in mail-art projects, an item amongst all others.

I spent six days at the National Gallery archives, manipulating and examining several works and artifacts amassed by Art Metropole, several of them having been part of the *Top 100* exhibition. What these encounters with the objects revealed to me, is that Conceptual art is not only the result of what we have come to call the de-materialization of the art object, as first proposed by Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler in their 1967 article for *Art International*, ‘The Dematerialization of Art’.² For artists and critics of the time, art was not to be found in the presentation of the art object; the material aspect was considered secondary information to the proposed idea, its primary information as Seth Siegelau affirmed.³

In their article Lippard and Chandler define a new type of art, one that turns back on the emotional and intuitive processes of art making of previous decades, and towards “an ultra-conceptual art that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively.” The end result need not be an object anymore, and perhaps this dematerialization may eventually result “in the object becoming wholly obsolete.”⁴

I want to try to convey how Conceptual artworks can be experienced sensually, and that many artists identified as conceptualists at the time were interested in situating the body and its acts, gestures, and various makings, as a prime definitions of the art. One of the main aspects which links these artists together is their interest in exploring the limits of art, of defining art not as an object nor as form, but as idea. These ideas, to reach a public, nevertheless needed a support, to inform potential viewers of the acts that had been exercised, without necessarily emphasising the end product, except for the information the chosen medium vehicles.

In many cases, materials and techniques were chosen because they were deemed to be neutral, unexpressive, as they did not belong to the usual techniques of art making. This was expressed in Sol LeWitt’s ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’ stating that the conceptual artist’s idea become a machine that makes the art, making work that is to be mentally

¹ Bruno Latour, ‘Sur un livre d’Etienne Souriau: les Différents modes d’existence’, 2006 (<http://www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/index.html>, accessed Nov. 3, 2009), p.9

² Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, ‘The Dematerialization of Art’, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 1999)

³ Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 2003), p. 56

⁴ Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, p. 46

interesting to the spectator, and wanting it to become “emotionally dry”.⁵ While they mainly belonged to the printing and publishing field, they still functioned within the realm of the sensual.

Photography was one of the techniques used by Conceptual artists to disseminate their work, used pragmatically as a tool to document and to be reproduced in publications. These images were not the art, but witnesses to the actual art event that now belonged to the past. The photographs of Robert Barry’s *Inert Gas Series* (1969) are a perfect example. The project consisted of Barry releasing different types of gas in several locations, with the photographs and captions describing the actions, such as *Inert Gas Series: Helium* one can read: “On the morning of March 6, 1969, somewhere in the Mojave Desert in California, 2 cubic feet of helium were returned to the atmosphere.” The photograph depicts an area of the Mojave Desert, a landscape with a gas tank.

In other cases, written documents acted as cues or clues to conceptualise, imagine, apprehend the work of art. Art could exist only as ideas, and did not need to be constructed, such as with the works of Laurence Weiner and Sol LeWitt, who proposed instructions or systems to make art, while indicating that the work did not need to be made. In 1969 Weiner in his “declaration of intent”, writes:

1. *The artist may construct the piece*

2. *The piece may be fabricated*

3. *The piece need not be built*

*Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.*⁶

The various artifacts produced, including recordings, videos and mainly photographs, have since reluctantly become part of the work, blurring at times the difference between documentation and art. Documentation was not used by all artists; for Joseph Kosuth “taking a photograph or bringing fragments of site-specific works into the gallery was nearly a blasphemous act that muddled the original premise and idea ‘into invisibility’.”⁷

⁵ Sol LeWitt, ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds), p.12

⁶ First published in the catalogue for the exhibition *January 5-31* (New York: Seth Siegelau, 1969), n.p.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.58



Fig.3-File magazine issues

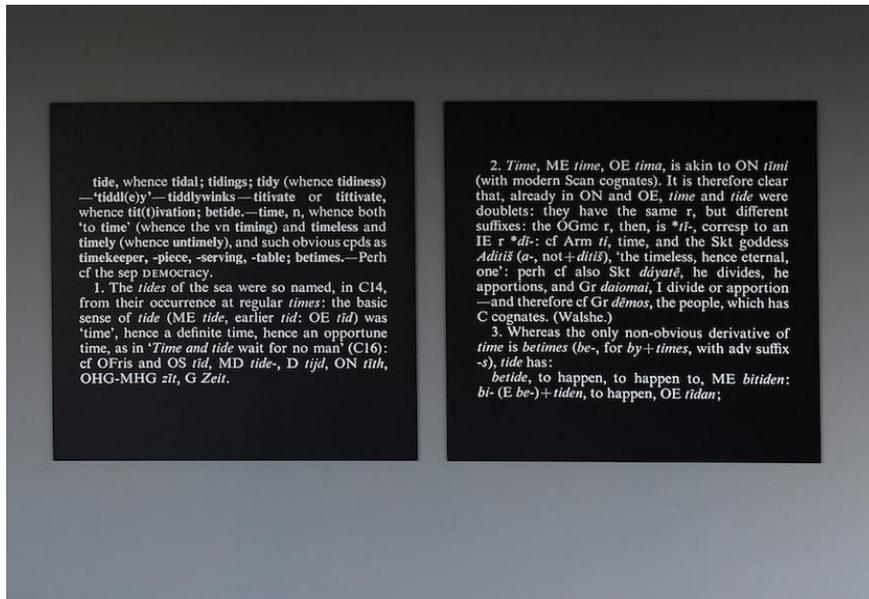


Fig.4- Joseph Kosuth, *Titled (Art As Idea As Idea)*, 1966
 Photostat. 120x120 cm

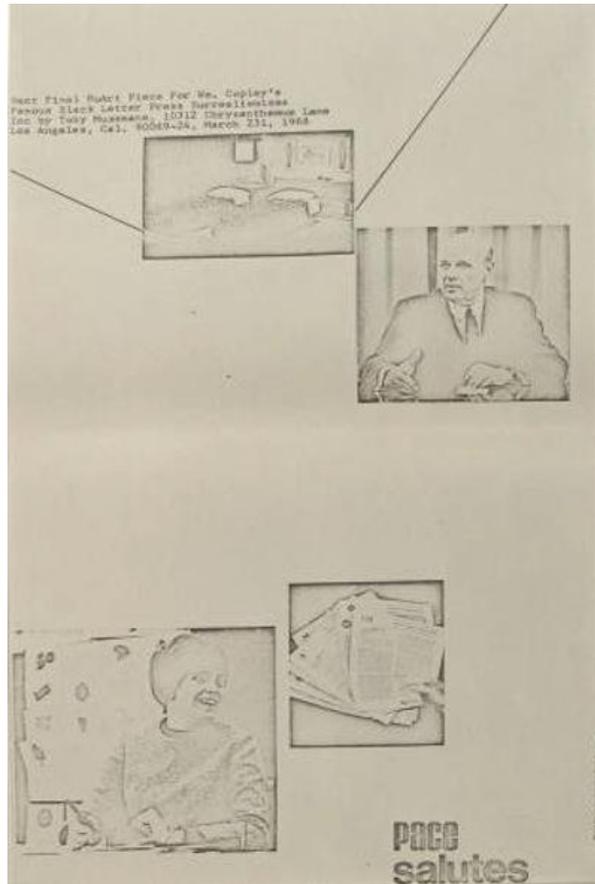


Fig.5- Toby Mussman, Xerox sheet from S.M.S.#6, 1968,
Xeroxed paper, 21.6 x 35.6 cm

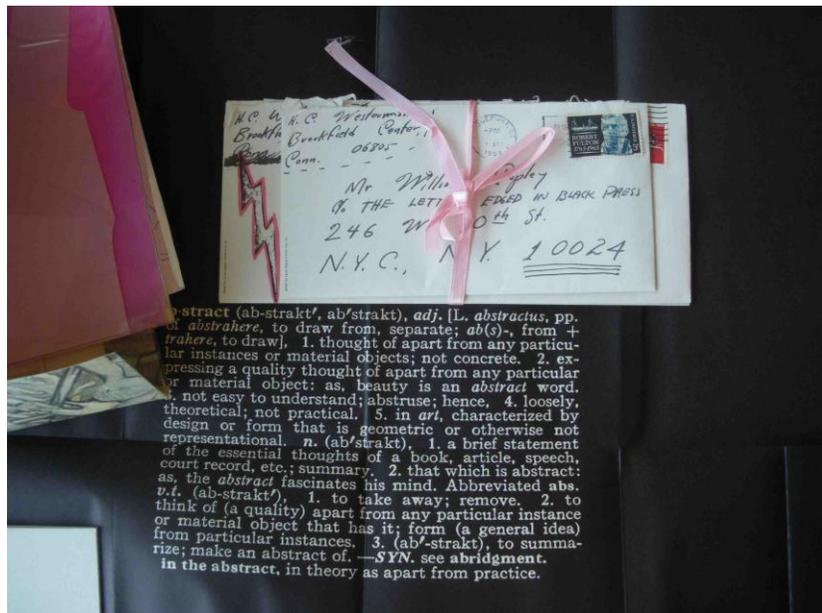


Fig.6-Joseph Kosuth, one of the *Four Titled Abstracts*, 1968. Four offset prints, Sheet (each, unfolded): 50.7 x 50.7 cm. Sheet (folded): 12.7 x 12.7 cm.
Photo taken at the archives of the National Gallery of Canada

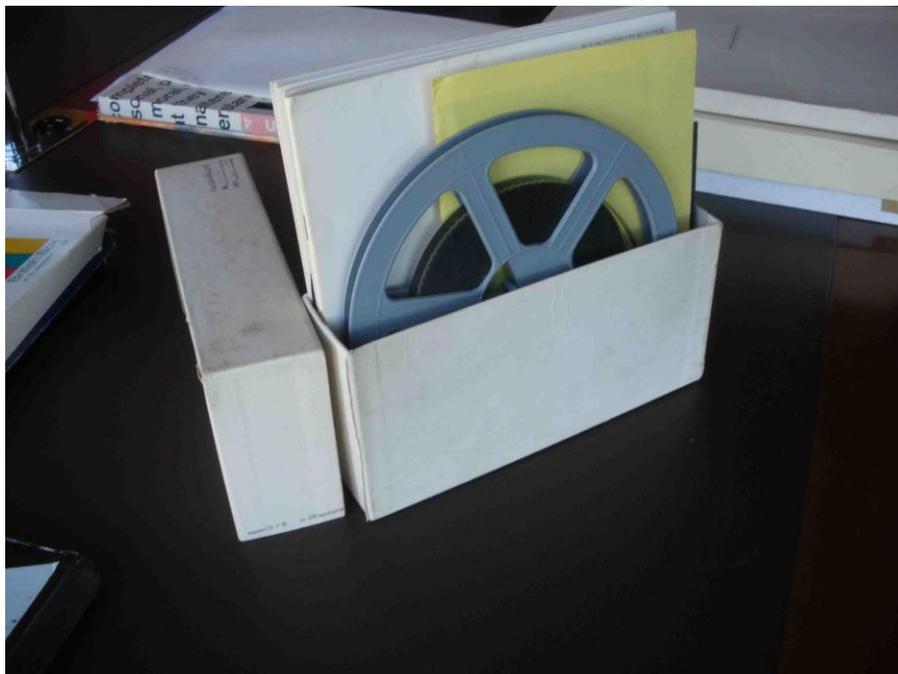


Fig.7- *Aspen*, issue 5 & 6, 1967
Photo taken at the archives of the National Gallery of Canada

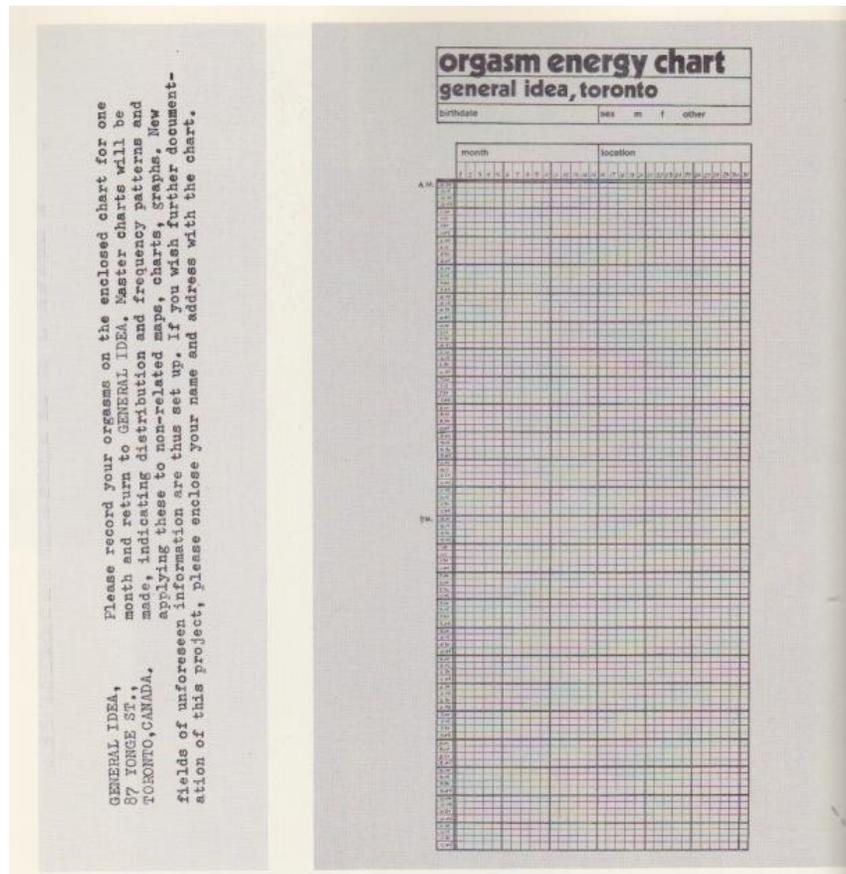


Fig.8 - General Idea, *Orgasm Energy Chart*, 1970, "Mailer to be filled in By recipients and returned, in two parts
a) mailer, offset on bond paper, 43 x 27.8 cm
b) instructions, offset on bond paper, 6.2 x 24 cm

Like Lippard and Chandler's differentiation between the emotive and the ultra-conceptual, Alexander Alberro divides Conceptual artists into two categories: the rational and the irrational. Sol LeWitt, Mel Bochner, Hanne Darboven, and Lee Lozano are designated as irrational, where the mode of production follows a logical sequence that does not require any decision making by the artist, once the process of making is set; while the linguistic inquiries of Joseph Kosuth are "characterized by a rational mode of artistic production that affirms the centered and authorial artist—the decision maker from beginning to end."⁸

For many, Joseph Kosuth's name has become synonymous with Conceptual art. Kosuth, along with the work of Art & Language, all rely on texts investigating the nature of art, and of the use of language to make art appear. Lippard and Chandler write of Kosuth's works of art, which are words, therefore signs, "that convey ideas, they are not things in themselves but symbols or representatives of things."⁹

Perhaps, as Tony Godfrey writes, we tend to associate conceptualism with writing, because, "[t]hose who supported the most theoretical tendencies in Conceptual art have remained the most vocal, with the result that much that was poetic, witty and humorous has been, in comparison, underrated or neglected,"¹⁰ forgetting that Mel Bochner in his article 'Excerpts From Speculation' (1967-1970), distanced himself from the term dematerialization, and the "original fiction" created by conceptualism that ideas can exist without support: "There is no art which does not bear some burden of physicality. To deny it is to descend to irony."¹¹

The decision to make Conceptual art was a political act for many artists of the period. Perhaps not always taking an overt form, it was meant to stand in opposition to the current states of affairs in the mid 1960's, standing against Clement Greenberg's formalism, and in reaction to the Viet Nam war. For many, it was also an attempt to negotiate a space outside of the traditional art market and of the museum. Conceptual art was the result of the different liberation movements that were becoming more vocal, and making use of the available medias as a way to communicate and undermine the status quo. Artists thought of ways to infiltrate the mainstream media, to create change.

Conceptual art has been portrayed as belonging to a different order of art, as if it had no antecedents, except for Marcel Duchamp and his readymades. By examining the making

⁸ Alexander Alberro, 'Reconsidering Conceptual art, 1966- 1977', *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds) p. xx

⁹ Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, p. 49

¹⁰ Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1998), p. 15

¹¹ Mel Bochner, *Solar System & Rest Rooms: Writings and Interviews, 1965-2007* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 2008), p.75

and handling of the artifacts produced by these artists, it becomes evident that there is an emphasis on ideas, but also on the use and the mimicking of mass media techniques of distribution. This strategy is to interpose a barrier between the artist and the finished work, suggesting a removal of the artist's hand and touch, and consequently devalue the traditional skills that belong to the world of art making. In many instances the works come to resemble products of mass consumption. In fact as Alexander Alberro writes, these artists, "many with advanced degrees and middle-class aspirations, seemed to parallel developments in the world of business and the emergent managerial class,"¹² a comparison that echoes the words of Benjamin H.D. Buchloh who has become perhaps the most often quoted critic of Conceptual art, with his text, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions'.¹³

Debates regarding Conceptual art

I am going to propose that Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, along with another critic of Conceptual art, Stephen Zepke, are wrong in their assessment of Conceptual art as a failure and as a dead end. Also, I will suggest that Joseph Kosuth chooses to ignore the materiality of his own work. This will be done by examining his use of the Photostat technique as support for his early work, instead of making use of Xerox. In fact, my criticism of Kosuth will make use of some of the points made by Buchloh, but only to show that they are all too myopic and have not acknowledged the whole sensorium as part of the making and experiencing of art.

Σ

A first myth that Alexander Alberro topples is the utopian gloss that was given to Conceptual art being a movement that sought to negate the commodity status of art. Lucy Lippard in a later text from 1973, laments the fact that Conceptual art was not able to "avoid the general commercialization" and that all were surprised when people started paying money for "a xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting an ephemeral situation or condition, a project for work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded."¹⁴ Alberro makes it very clear that there was never any doubt about the marketing of Conceptual art. The challenge was to find methods to convince potential collectors of the validity of buying documentation.¹⁵

For Stephen Zepke, it is this very point that is problematic. Zepke, using the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, argues that Conceptual art takes as its material, linguistically defined concepts, and "dematerialise sensation by banalizing it"; by

¹² Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, p. 2

¹³ First published for the retrospective exhibition catalogue *L'art conceptuel, une perspective*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989, and later in *October* 55, 1990, pp. 105-143

¹⁴ Lucy R. Lippard, 'Postface, in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966-1972*', in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, p.294

¹⁵ Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, p.4

dematerializing art, it is “rendered indiscernible from everyday life,”¹⁶ by producing documents. In fact for Zepke, it is contemporary art in general that is primarily committed to the conceptual. He locates in Deleuze and Guattari’s *What is Philosophy?* the conceptual strategies that they reject, said to be attempts of bringing art towards philosophy, a notion that they reject. Their book explores the fields pertaining to the categories of art, philosophy, and science, insisting that each field should proceed with its own methods and materials.

For Deleuze and Guattari, Conceptual art tends towards the neutral, therefore rejecting the compositional process. The strategies used permitting such work are identified as: ones that take on the form of mass publications, such as the catalogue as art, or of placing art directly in newspapers or magazines as advertisement; the ground covered by its own map, referring to the proliferation of map usage in Conceptual art; the use of non-sites, or abandoned sites, without architecture, which artists might call site-specific; and the flat bed plane, (a term initially coined by Leo Steinberg with respect to Jasper Johns’ paintings), referring to a surface that does not open itself to imaginary space, but offers the viewer paint as a thing, along with actual everyday objects.

The reason for this last rejection is that this strategy used mainly by painters, is said to dematerialise sensation into information. It is basically a rejection, on the part of Deleuze and Guattari, of all post abstract expressionist paintings. Zepke also identifies three points that are responsible for making art mundane. First, by prioritizing concepts, this means that any material can be used, concluding that anything can be art. Secondly, these artists are said to have enthusiastically embraced technologies of reproduction, transforming sensation into information that is reproducible to infinity. And finally, the ontological status of art is neutralised by making sensation depend on the viewer’s own interpretation regarding if it is art or not.

So, what did these artworks of information “look” like? Zepke mentions the catalogue as a work of art, such as Mel Bochner’s *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art* (1966), and the different catalogues and books put out by Seth Siegelaub between 1968 and 1969, including the book known as *The Xerox Book*, which I will discuss later. Zepke also mentions in a footnote, other works that could illustrate Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of art that is indistinguishable from the “ordinary perceptions and affections of the viewer –John Baldessari’s *The Back of All the Trucks Passed While Driving from L.A. to Santa Barbara, California, Sunday 20 January, 1963*; art where the concept is reduced to a proposition stating an opinion- Cildo Meireles’ *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* (1970); and art as a doxa confirming the generic subject of urban American social life- On Kawera’s (sic) *I’m Still Alive* postcard project begun in the late 1960s.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Stephen Zepke, ‘The Concept Of Art When Art Is Not A Concept, Deleuze and Guattari Against Conceptual Art’, *Angelika* 2(1), April 2006, p. 158

¹⁷ Stephen Zepke, footnote number 9.

What Zepke, and Deleuze and Guattari see in these artifacts is a rejection of sensations, with only information offered to the viewer. For the two French philosophers art is to be visionary, while Conceptual art can only offers information, not unlike what is used to document the world: diagrams, definitions, lists, photographs from image banks, and plenty of photocopied texts. The works take on the look of standartised office stationary or instruction manuals. Metrology,¹⁸ the scientific organization of stable measurements and standards, has taken over the making of art. This brings me to my second critique of Conceptual art, here described as an “aesthetic of administration” by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh.¹⁹

Buchloh’s essay first appeared as part of the catalogue for the first museum retrospective dedicated to Conceptual art, in Paris in 1989. A controversial essay, it explains Conceptual art through the work of Marcel Duchamp, while denying the “utopianism of the artists and denigrated [Joseph] Kosuth for his covert formalism.”²⁰ Included in the catalogue are two responses to Buchloh’s text, one from Kosuth and the other from Seth Siegelaub. The essay was re-printed in issue 55 of *October*, while the responses were published in issue 57 of *October*.

Buchloh closely analyses the various strategies of Conceptual art, from the transformation of the format and space of exhibition, to an interest in random “sampling and aleatory choice from an infinity of possible objects” such as the different books produced by Ed Ruscha (*Twentysix Gasoline Stations, Thirtyfour Parking Lots, Every Building on the Sunset Strip*) to the projects of Alighiero Boetti’s *The Thousand Longest Rivers*, or Robert Barry’s *One Billion Dots*, this last work included in *The Xerox Book*. Buchloh identifies the square and the cube as the visual forms “corresponding most accurately to the linguistic form of the tautology,”²¹ with tautology being at the time a concept favoured in many Conceptual artworks, especially Kosuth. Kosuth’s work is based on the fact that art can only show itself as art, and that art does not refer to anything beside itself. Whatever is offered as art is to be taken as art.

Buchloh’s insistence on the term administration is not without reason, as it is to underline the fact that Conceptual art wanted to blur the division existing between maker and audience, by eradicating the traditional “hierarchical model of privileged experience based on authorial skills and acquired and specialized competence of reception,”²² and try to create work that would result from the relationship between artist and viewer, exemplified by this Sol LeWitt project: “The aim of the artist would be to give viewers information... He would follow his predetermined premises to its

¹⁸ Here we can think of the relationship between the term metrology, and the name Art Metropole.

¹⁹ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, ‘From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique’, exhibition catalogue for *L’art conceptuel, une perspective*, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989

²⁰ Tony Godfrey, p. 387

²¹ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, p. 48

²² Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, p. 52

conclusion avoiding subjectivity. Chance, taste or unconsciously remembered forms would play no part in the outcome. The serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as an clerk cataloguing the result of his premises."²³

For Buchloh the artist as clerk illustrates the lack of a utopian vision, which he longs for, and finds in the early twentieth century work of the avant-garde movements of Russia. Conceptual art is portrayed as refusing any transcendence through its "bureaucratic rigor and deadpan devotion to the statistic collection of factual information."²⁴ Buchloh states that Conceptual practice reached its height at the same moment that it started functioning similarly to the ruling culture of late capitalism and positivist instrumentality, "in order to liquidate even the last remnants of traditional aesthetic experience in this auto-critical investigation, in that process entirely purging itself of imaginary and bodily experience, of physical substance and the space of memory, as well as of all residue of representation and style, of individuality and skill."²⁵

Photostat

Kosuth's early work were realized using Photostat (fig.4), making his text more akin to small textual advertisement found in newspapers, or the back of magazines. It also distanced them from the reproducible, lithography-based work of the Pop movement, particularly of Warhol. Though there were many similarities between Kosuth's work and Warhol, the use of the Photostat was to blur, yet again, the boundaries conventionally drawn between high art, with its emphasis on singularity and non-utilitarian objects, and the plethora of objects from mass culture. This is the boundary that Deleuze and Guattari are nostalgic of.

The Photostat is a copying camera making a photographic reproduction directly onto sensitized paper. It was mainly used to copy original documents for remote distribution and for their preservation. It was used from the 1910s until the mid 1980s. But starting in the mid-1950s with the introduction of the "quick copy" services and the introduction of the Xerox 914, the use of the Photostat diminished. At the New York Public Library the use of Photostats in 1962 was restricted to oversize and illustrated material. It became a burden as it involved many procedures to make a single print; it was not as fast as the new Xerox 914, plus for many institutions, microfilms were chosen, being more compact. By the 1960s, the "photostat basically outlived its usefulness."²⁶

Kosuth's choice of the Photostat over what was becoming the primary mode of copying in libraries and businesses seems to point towards an interest with an obsolete

²³ Ibid. p. 52

²⁴ Ibid. p. 53

²⁵ Ibid. p. 53

²⁶ Thomas A. Bourke, 'The Photostat-Microfilm War at the New York Public Library in the 1930s, the 1940s, and the 1950s', *Microform Review*, vol.18, No. 3, 1989, p.149

technique, along with a wish to keep the appearance of the work as a semblance to both photography and painting, which xerography does not have.

The Photostat does have a quality that is similar to a photograph, as it makes use of similar paper, and has a uniform, smooth surface, whereas a copy produced through an electrostatic process, such as by Xerox machines, retains its paper quality, except for certain areas that may become somewhat reflective, due to the excessive amount of dye that would be needed to create a very dark image. A completely black electrostatic copy would have sheen, but not to the extent that a photograph has; it would actually be textured, revealing a slight covering of toner on the paper.

Two artists working with Xerox copiers in the late 1960s were Paul Bergtold and Toby Mussman (fig.5). The works done on regular 8 x 22 sheets of paper, not only depict mundane subject matters, but also emphasize the cheap quality of the process, as there is a lack of definition and detailing. By today's standards they look like bellow standard photocopies retrieved from the recycling box.

For his Photostats Kosuth isolates each dictionary definition, literally removing them from their original source, by cutting them out. The Photostat camera captures the text; the dictionary definition now exists as a single, enlarged definition. Though Kosuth emphasized the anonymity of execution, the finished work maintains a close relationship to art making. Alexander Alberro signals Kosuth's relationship with Warhol by comparing the former's first one-person exhibition at the Eugenia Butler's gallery 669 in Los Angeles in 1968, to Warhol's 1962 installation at the Ferrus gallery, also in Los Angeles. Warhol's Campbell's Soup cans, though looking similar, in fact depicted all the flavors available at the time. Kosuth, on his part, exhibited several definitions of the word *nothing*.

Contrary to Pop artists, Kosuth did not place his imagery on canvas. The Photostat process allowed for enlargements, which meant that the dictionary definitions could become an object, giving them an affinity with Minimalism: "An affinity with minimal art was considered meritorious by many in the mid to late 1960s art world. Minimal art, with its preference for prosaic, everyday material and its emphasis on anonymity, repetition, and equality of parts, was thought to possess a sense of rigor and seriousness of purpose, as well as an inherent noncommerciality, that gave it an edge of social criticism."²⁷

The pristine aspect of Photostat is to stand in opposition to xerography's artisanal-like quality. The xerox process can register unwanted marks, such as dust, fingerprints, or other uncontrollable stains, all becoming part of the overall surface. Though both techniques are considered anonymous and mechanical, and were used in institutions, and businesses, Kosuth overlooks xeroxing in favor of photostat. Perhaps it is not only

²⁷ Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, p.34

that the results are not so easily controllable, but that the xerographic process was indeed too anonymous, available to anyone, whereas the Photostat on its way out as a technique, becoming obsolete, as it was slow and costly. Kosuth was in fact rescuing it, making it synonymous with his work. As Alberro states: "The new medium that Kosuth advanced in the context of 1960s art - the Photostat- quickly came to serve as his trademark, similar to the way lighting fixtures became associated with (Dan) Flavin and firebricks with (Carl) Andre. The medium comes to resemble a corporate logo, easily identifiable and recognizable."²⁸

By 1969 Kosuth put an end to his use of the Photostat, and prompted by fellow artists Lee Lozano and Dan Graham's own artwork for magazine pages, inserted several works as anonymous advertisements in newspapers and periodicals. What initially took the appearance of a typographical text in the form of a large Photostat, was now inserted in publications, affirming itself as a typographical text. In 1969, for the Bern exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, Kosuth placed together newspapers containing his work *The Second Investigation*, and titled it *Spaces (Art as Idea as Idea)*. In the catalogue, he states that the work is not a precious object, and is accessible to many. It can be brought either in one's home or in a museum; "it can be dealt with by being torn out of its publication and inserted into a notebook or stapled to the wall- or not torn out at all- but any such decision is unrelated to the art."²⁹

The possibility to either save completely the newspaper, or to tear out what one wants, is beside the point for Kosuth. The art is to be found in the idea transmitted by the text, not in its materiality; "[a]rt 'lives' through influencing other art, not by existing as a physical residue of an artist's ideas."³⁰ Kosuth locates his conceptualism by interpreting Marcel Duchamp's readymade as the moment when art moved from a question of morphology, or appearance, to a question of function. "This change —one from "appearance" to "conception"—was the beginning of "conceptual" art."³¹

Kosuth makes use of the word "conception" as pertaining only to ideas, to thinking, and that there is no connection between ideas and matter. As previously mentioned, it is the ideas that influence other art, not the objects per se. Kosuth categorises works of art as "historical curiosities," belonging to particular time, and to look at a Cubist 'masterwork' as art today is, for him nonsensical. The art object becomes static, without any potential to be reinterpreted, or for other definitions to be conceived.

Stuff

²⁸ Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, p. 41

²⁹ Anne Rorimer, 'Siting the Page: Exhibiting Works in Publications-Some Examples of Conceptual Art in the USA', *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, Michael Newman and Jon Bird (eds), (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1999), p. 19

³⁰ Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds), p.165

³¹ *Ibid*, p.164

A first artifact from the Art Metropole Collection: Joseph Kosuth's *Four Titled Abstracts* (fig.6), published in William Copley's periodical *S.M.S. (Shit Must Stop)*. A custom-made periodical, publishing six issues between February and December 1968, *S.M.S.* was meant to by-pass the gallery and museum system, and bring art directly to people, with each issue containing the work of several artists. The third issue, containing Kosuth's piece, was a compilation of works by John Battan, Aftograf, Enrico Baj, William Bryant, Dick Higgins, Ronnie Landfield, Roland Penrose, Man Ray, H.C. Westerman, Hannah Wiener and Terry Riley.

S.M.S. did not make use of a single standard format. It came in various sizes and formats, mostly as folders, as they could easily accommodate various types of small artwork. In the case of *Four Titled Abstracts*, the work consists of a large black envelope containing four folded black pieces of paper. These are reproductions of four Photostats, with the black envelope recalling Kosuth's favored medium.

Each sheet of paper contains a definition of the word *abstract*, taken from four different sources. Each sheet of paper is numbered 1 to 4. The four definitions accentuate the fact that the word *abstract* denotes the domain of ideas, and of immateriality. The four definitions of the word, having been removed from their original placement in the dictionary, now exist as specimens. The black surrounding the white text frames and isolates the chosen words.

It is the printed nature of this early work that interests me, considered within a history that includes both typography and word. Kosuth insists on separating form and content, considering the idea to be independent to the form it takes. The material aspect is inconsequential. Kosuth treats each chosen material support as neutral and transparent. In earlier works, his use of materials such as glass, water and air, are chosen for having a "neutral, low information yield."³² With these transparent materials, he felt he could escape the pressure of composition and colour; if colours were chosen for other works, it was black, white, and gray, as he "found that according to color psychology there was more of a transcultural response to achromatic color —black, white, and gray— than to the chromatic scale, which had a much more marked difference among specific individuals as well as between cultures."³³ His use of newspapers, magazines, billboards, are also seen by him as being neutral, which was important for him as a way to neutralize what he saw as an iconic quality of art. Simply put, Kosuth wanted to make art that would not be recognized as art, or, not recognized as formalist. Abstract painting for Kosuth is still lodged in the concrete, while he is striving for pure abstraction.

³² Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966- 1990* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 87

³³ *Ibid*, p. 49

Compared to the informality and improvising qualities of the Xerox works of Toby Mussman, from issue 6, or Paul Bertgold, from issue 4, *Four Titled Abstracts* looks precious, made meticulously, with its single isolated definition per sheet. Besides the centrally placed definition, there is a rigid application of typographical techniques that is not considered so important for other Conceptual artists, such as Mussman, Bertgold, Mel Bochner and James Lee Byars. For these artists, the random use of various typefaces or types of handwriting also stems from the attitude of achieving neutrality, towards something impersonal. For them, neutrality is found in randomness, while Kosuth chooses specific supports, be they materials or typefaces, to elicit neutrality.

Randomness does not necessarily produce a neutral text, as the random choice can in fact give specific connotations. Kai Bernau, a Dutch graphic designer and author of the Neutral typeface, categorises the indifference towards a typeface as “defaultism”: “One must be aware that while tempting, using ‘default’ to achieve neutrality is a less than optimal approach: while the typographer (or whoever puts the text in its final form) can, by using a default typeface, minimize his own influence on the design by explicitly not choosing a typeface, the default typeface that is (randomly) used then (a typewriter typeface, handwriting or a default computer font such as Arial, Times New Roman or Courier) can give very specific connotations, and may often even be self referential, by looking default and ‘unchosen’.”³⁴ The Neutral typeface was designed and “aims at minimising these associations and connotations, and aims at becoming a standard typeface for Conceptual artists.” To minimize the associative and the connotative is what Kosuth aimed at.

The letters of the alphabet play an important role in Conceptual art. Many pieces make use of handwriting, but a great deal rely on typography. Although most of Kosuth’s early texts employed sans-serif type, his dictionary definition series, taken straight from the printed page of dictionaries may have led to his increasing use of serif type in the 70s. The sans-serif type, which is often perceived as neutral, gives way to the serif, but a serif taken from a source that is also deemed to be neutral, transparent: the dictionary. All are treated as being transparent, as if unrelated to human use and making. In fact, each typeface has a history, and a designer. The use of a particular typeface is to convey a particular effect.

Early pieces such as *Clear Square Glass Leaning* (1965) make use of a capitalized modern sans-serif typeface³⁵ such as GILL SANS or HELVETICA. John D. Berry writes of our perception of Helvetica as neutral stemming from its ubiquity, becoming the “default” sans serif typeface,³⁶ whereas Bernau mentions that it is not neutral at all, but “self-referential, or connoted to graphic design itself... the myth of Helvetica’s neutrality has

³⁴ Kai Bernau, *Neutral*, 2005, p.15 (<http://www.letterlabor.de/book.php>), last accessed, May 28, 2010)

³⁵ In typography, a sans-serif or sans serif typeface is one that does not have the small features called “serifs” at the end of strokes.

³⁶ John D. Berry, ‘dot-font: Neutral Sans?’, 2005, <http://www.creativepro.com/article/dot-font-neutral-sans->, last accessed, July 8, 2010

turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophesy, and this is true whether the graphic designer that uses it is actually aware of the myth or seriously considers it neutral.”³⁷

Sans serif types got popularized in the 19th century, in the heyday of the Industrial Revolution, and so they, along with some other newly popular type styles, came to embody the modern machine age. It made its first appearance as a specimen in 1816, but became a recognizable style of type in the 1830's in England. The sans serif came about following the “interaction of demands for new kinds of printing with new means of transmitting information.”³⁸ The aim of modernist new typography was to communicate directly to the reader.

Kosuth's texts could be said to follow the first three statements of El Lissitzky's 1923 *Topographie der Typographie*:

1. The words on the printed surface are taken in by seeing, not by hearing.
2. One communicates meaning through the convention of words; meaning attains form through letters.
3. Economy of expression: optics not phonetics.³⁹

The modernist use of sans serif was motivated by the belief that it was the appropriate form for the time. This was a different position from an earlier one taken by writer Stefan George, attracted to the simplicity of sans serif, which was part of his aesthetics research towards a total approach to literature and to life. The new typography aimed at industrializing and standardizing the form of letters. The neutrality of typeface that Kosuth perceived was the result of a demand for standards in manufacturing. Sans serif was also an attempt to do with the use of national connotation of particular types. In Germany the blackletter was to make place to a new typeface that would make international exchange easier.

The neutrality perceived in specific typeface has as much a history as a typeface that is said to be eccentric. Kosuth has since made use of several serif types such as Garamond,⁴⁰ designed by Claude Garamond (1480-1561) a Parisian publisher, who also introduced the apostrophe, the accent and the cedilla to the French language. Garamond, and other older typefaces have been revived at the beginning of the 20th century. For many typesetters, “typographic quality was to be found by scouring the past.”⁴¹ Kosuth makes use of often-lengthy philosophical texts, from Wittgenstein and Freud, which he prints using serif typefaces, conjuring up scholarly institutions, intellectual rigour, the archive, and library stacks filed with books.

³⁷ Kai Bernau, p.14

³⁸ Robin Kinross, *Modern Typography, an essay in critical history* (London: Hyphen Press, 2004), p. 37

³⁹ Ibid. p. 105

⁴⁰ Susan Hapgood, 'Fonts of Wisdom', *Frieze* 29, 1996

⁴¹ Robin Kinross, p. 70

The *Four Titled Abstracts* as found in *S.M.S.* are four small notices that could be used as small posters. The poster, for Susan Sontag, is different from a public notice; though both address the person “not as an individual, but as an unidentified member of the body politic,” the poster takes its public as being one of spectators or consumers, whereas the public notice aims at informing or commanding. “A poster aims to seduce, to exhort, to sell, to educate, to convince, to appeal.”⁴² I can imagine these four folded pieces of paper, tacked on some wall, along with all the other works from the *S.M.S.* portfolio. All of a sudden the definitions become ironic amidst all this stuff; *abstract* becomes concrete.

The by-products, the effluvia of Conceptual art, the things that were not meant to be art, but to document the absent art, the indicators and the accounts that reported on what had passed, all this material that was collected by General Idea, is an extension of their own artistic production. Plus, all this collected stuff addresses the history of the museum, invoking its beginning, the cabinet of curiosities, while resembling on a larger scale, the cohabitation of various art pieces as found in publications such as *Aspen* and the *S.M.S.* portfolios.

As mentioned previously, Conceptual works took part and made use the different systems of circulation available, making them visible,⁴³ perceptible, and known. Duchamp’s famous demand for a non-retinal art is often taken to refer to ideas only, forgetting that a movement away from vision does not only refer to the intellect, but also means to attend to the other senses, and to invisible phenomena, such as electricity and magnetism. Duchamp does not make the invisible visible, but perceptible. This is how we must encounter Conceptual art and its by-products.

I have found in the work of art historian Eve Meltzer, an approach towards Conceptual art that I share, by her attention to small details that refer to the hand. She asks viewers to carefully look at what is given by Conceptual artists, such as Sol LeWitt, whose work proposes a “structural logic governing its form that cannot nor even need to be seen with our eyes.”⁴⁴ The information that LeWitt proposes, in the form of a text, to help us imagine the work, is all that is needed. But, there is still something to look at: a hand

⁴² Susan Sontag quoted in Rob Giampietro, ‘The Problem with Posters’, *Lined & Unlined*, 2004, <http://blog.linedandunlined.com/post/404938991/the-problem-with-posters>, last accessed July 8, 2010

⁴³ Johanne Sloan in her analysis of Bill Vazan’s use of postcards writes: “Each mailed item makes visible a communication network, which also implies the existence of transportation and commercial networks.” Johanne Sloan, ‘Bill Vazan’s Urban Coordinates’, *Bill Vazan: Walking Into the Vanishing Point*, (Montreal: Vox, 2007), p. 88

⁴⁴ Eve Meltzer, ‘The Dream of the Information World’, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2006, p. 119

written note on paper, allowing the reader to “accede to the tactile, temporal, and affective registers of meaning that inhere in [LeWitt’s] process and materials.”⁴⁵

The collection amassed by General Idea resembles the type of artifacts that they were producing. Whereas historians have traditionally described Conceptual art as not interested in its material leftovers, Vincent Bonin suggest that we should pay attention to these items, as they are eventually absorbed by the market as by-products with a surplus value, and do succumb “to the logic of fetishism.”⁴⁶ But more precisely, these items for the most part were printed and published, as publishing became for many Canadian artists an extension of exhibiting. It made possible the simultaneous presence of a work of art at various locations, and, as mentioned earlier, making use of various communication networks. At the time, Marshall McLuhan discussed these networks, influencing many artists. Curator Catherine Moseley points to a reliance towards a documentary infrastructure as what distinguished conceptual work from the traditional art object, not its ephemerality.⁴⁷ Artists also saw the possibility of the instauration of new networks, by not only piggy-backing on already existing modes of communication, but due to the multiplicity of existing data, creating information that gives individual artifacts new meaning via their relation to other artifacts.

AA Bronson made reference to the importance and influence of another theorist of the 1960s, Roland Barthes, particularly his article ‘The Death of the Author.’ It was first published, part of the 1967 multi media issue 5 & 6 of *Aspen* (fig.7 & 8), translated by Richard Howard. The issue, edited by Brian O’Doherty, was dedicated to Stéphane Mallarmé’s dream of an ideal book, one capable of “encapsulating the entire universe”.⁴⁸ Barthes’ essay was later published in French, by the magazine *Manteia*, 5 (1968), and appeared in an anthology of Barthes’ essays, *Image-Music-Text* (1977).

Barthes’ text questions the authority of the author as the originator of a text, emphasizing instead the multiplicity of voices that speak through a text, including the reader’s own voice. For Barthes, the text stands in between the words of the author and the reader’s eyes, and is to be treated as an autonomous object, “where criticism is ambitious to constitute it as a scientific object so as to analyse with precision the formal, meaningful and functional system that constitute it” [*que la critique ambitieuse de constituer en objet scientifique pour pouvoir analyser avec précision le système de formes, de significations et de fonctions qui le constituent*].⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 133

⁴⁶ Vincent Bonin, *Documentary Protocols (1967-1975)*, (Montreal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University, 2010), p.28

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.26. As mentioned by Vincent Bonin in footnote 28.

⁴⁸ Alex Alberro, ‘Inside the White Box- Brian O’Doherty’s *Aspen 5+6*’, *Artforum*, September 2001, p.1 (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_mo268/is_1_40/ai_78637313/) accessed June 9, 2010

⁴⁹ Louis Hay, ‘Le texte n’existe pas: réflexion sur la critique génétique’ *Poétique*, 62, 1985, p. 149

This perception of the text opens up art to the future, to the ones who will encounter it. Marcel Duchamp also spoke of including as part of his artwork the meeting with the spectator. Barthes wants the author-as-person to be disassociated from the text, so as to posit the text itself as the source of its own meaning. Barthes finds in Mallarmé the first writer to “see and foresee in its full extent the necessity of substituting language itself for the man who hitherto was supposed to own it; for Mallarme, as for us, it is language which speaks, not the author;”⁵⁰ The notion of the author is to be replaced by the writer, the one who lets language proceed as a text, and is “born simultaneously with the text.”⁵¹

What is of importance when considering the artifacts of Art Metropole, is that Barthes does not eliminate the person, but only the idea of the author, making the writer a performer, a maker, or marker, whose *hand*, “detached from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin –or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, that is, the very thing which ceaselessly questions any origin.”⁵² Barthes points to the possibility of multiple origins and readings. To decipher a text is then rendered useless, as the reader becomes the one who unites the text. For Barthes, the unity of a text is not in its origin, but in its destination. A text has no determinate meaning, but many; literature is *intertextual*.

Helen Molesworth discusses the importance of Barthes’ text for many artists of the late 1960s, who found the idea of “the author’s metaphoric death liberating, and ...deployed a variety of means to undermine or downplay their own authorship.”⁵³ But do both Duchamp and Barthes actually favor the reader, or viewer, from the producer-author, as Molesworth suggests? Barthes has already mentioned the transformation of the author into a writer, “who lets language speak” and “who writes to reach”. The writer, and in the case of the conceptual artist, the maker sets herself/himself also, as a reader among others. The instituted work reveals in its deployment, the corporeal, as Meltzer sees in LeWitt’s notes for his grids: the corporeal, “which structuralism would rather have us forget.”⁵⁴ As an example, let us examine the *Aspen* issue, in which ‘The Death of the Author’ was first published.

All ten issues of *Aspen* magazine are part of the Art Metropole Collection. The publication is considered a predecessor to William Copley’s *S.M.S.* project. *Aspen* was a multi media publication, started in 1965 by Roaring Fork Press publisher Phyllis Johnson, and former editor for *Women’s Wear Daily* and *Advertising Age*. Ten issues of *Aspen* appeared, with various editors, including Andy Warhol (issue 3, 1966) and Dan Graham (issue 8, 1970-71). Johnson wanted it to be like a time capsule. The publication performed this by taking the form of boxes, varying in size with each new number.

⁵⁰ Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, *Aspen* 5+6, 1967, n.p.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Helen Molesworth, ‘Work Ethic’, p. 30

⁵⁴ Eve Meltzer, p. 133

Inside, the various loose projects cohabited as a collection of pamphlets, floppy records and 8mm film. Small advertisement cards float in the box with the other artifacts. As with *S.M.S.*, *Aspen* was also a travelling, reproducible, cabinet of curiosity.

The various elements are to affect each other, and are to be compared. “The marvelous compilation revealed the mysterious, powerful creativity of a throw of the dice, which, governed solely by unpredictable rules of chance, improbably manages to link normally separate and unrelated objects.”⁵⁵ These were in a dialogue with each other. The “magazine” to be experienced properly today, would oblige us to get a hold of a 8mm projector, and a record player. It also solicited the reader to become a maker, through Tony Smith’s *Maze* project, which consisted of a plan and a miniature cardboard cutout. Time needs to be taken to experience each type of work, and then eventually, one can start assembling the excessive meanings that Barthes wished for.

Advertisements accompanied the various projects, loose in the box, amongst all the other stuff. Initially, I thought they were fake ads produced by artists, but it became apparent to me, after viewing several issues, that they were real advertisements. Perhaps at the time, I immediately would have recognised them as such, but looking at it more than 40 years after, I took it for a parody of advertising. This encounter effectively indicated the proximity that can exist between advertisement and art. Dan Graham, writing in 1985 about his early magazine projects, says of art that it can be analyzed as belonging only to institutions, such as galleries and museums, but it can also be perceived as belonging “to the general cultural framework which the magazine is part of.”⁵⁶ By placing art beside advertisement in various publications, Dan Graham, along with other artists such as Stephen Kaltenbach, Joseph Kosuth and General Idea, with their own publication *File*, the reader can perform an informational gesture, through the relation between the ad and the art. The relation constitutes art.

Σ

As Eve Meltzer argues, LeWitt’s work and, as I want to argue, other conceptualists allow for data to inform, and perhaps express not sentiments, but the corporal. Many Conceptual artists, like many previous modernists such as Arthur Rimbaud, and Paul Klee, guard their sentiments, or feelings. Sensing is discussed in terms of sensed data. For Klee, “the inner self of the artist should develop into a receptive apparatus that elevates the artistic product over subjective and moral meanings.”⁵⁷ Throughout the process of repetitive making, the slight variations that appear offer evidence of the uncontrollable, of the somatic and psychic. If Conceptual art by-products are the work of clerks, then they are clerks with an interest in registering the ineffable, the

⁵⁵ Alex Alberro, ‘Inside the White Box- Brian O’Doherty’s *Aspen 5+6*’, p.1

⁵⁶ Dan Graham, ‘My Works for Magazine Pages: “a history of conceptual art”’, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds), p.421

⁵⁷ Bettina Gockel, ‘Paul Klee’s picture-making and persona: tools for making invisible realities visible’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, vol. 39, 2008, p. 423

infra-mince of Duchamp, or clerks that would eventually become like Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, and prefer "not to" do what is asked, but instead prefer to do "otherwise."

For the Conceptual artist, once a set of rules has been established, the body produces the work, the results becoming graphic registrations of the work done. The body becomes an instrument of production, of measurement, but also to be measured, as the graphic registrations offer themselves as results or data to be analyzed. There is a transition from the psychological towards the physiological. The work of both the irrational and the rational conceptualists depict the productive modes of the body. The various marks, or transcriptions, serve as documentation of activity.

Pascal Rousseau in his essay on technological innovations and transcription procedures of the late nineteenth century, signals the setting up of "a conception of the thrifty, where graphic refinement, and abbreviative systems instruct a proceeding of abstraction." [*une pensée de l'économie où l'épure graphique et les systèmes abrégatifs instruisent le procès de l'abstraction.*]⁵⁸ The physicality of presence and its graphic memory are replaced by codification. In the nineteenth century, Jules-Etienne Marey was responsible for many studies on human, animal and insect movements, along with many inventions to measure and record movement. Marey wanted to refine his recording procedures so to be able to seize the most imperceptible movement, "that no language can express." [*qu'aucun langage ne peut exprimer.*]⁵⁹ Marey wanted to produce an extra language, one that could express this inexpressible bodily language.⁶⁰ Making use of these positivist tools, Conceptual artists attempted to approach the inexpressible, but without attempting to make sense of it. Graphic notations, such as in the work of LeWitt or Darboven, occupy a space that is both notational and in need of interpretation; the body is the instrument in these cases.

Other artifacts from the Art Metropole Collection take on formats that are similar to information or instruction manuals. This is the case with the various exhibition catalogues, photocopied pages, either through the use of Xerox or mimeograph machines, or of typewritten texts; all have aspects of official publications. For example, Dan Graham's *End Moments* (1969) and Seth Siegelaub's catalogues for the exhibitions *January Show (January 5- 31, 1969)* and *March 1- 31, 1969*, have the look of either instructional books, or of some sort of data, scheduling, or ledger book.⁶¹ They are very plain looking, and their respective covers are very matter-of-fact. Perusing the books, I realized that though they were imitating a certain office look, what they contained was of a different nature. *End Moments* consists of several articles by Graham, who like

⁵⁸ Pascal Rousseau, 'Figures de déplacement. L'écriture du corps en mouvement', *Exposé 2*, 1995, p.86

⁵⁹ Ibid, p.88

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.88

⁶¹ Ledger books come from the Commonplace books of the Renaissance. See Ann Blair, 'Humanist Methods in Natural Philosophy: The Commonplace Book', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 53, No. 4, 1992, pp. 541-551

other artists of the period, such as Donald Judd, Mel Bochner, Robert Morris and Robert Smithson, had come to art making via art criticism.⁶²

Of interest was an article by Graham discussing in part, the work of Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra in terms of the effects of gravity both on material and on the body of the artist. Considering Serra, Graham emphasises the various actions performed on his material, such as to fold, to tear, and to throw. By including a quote by James J. Gibson on kinaesthesia, Graham suggest that Serra's actions are not abstract verbs that have affected his material; Serra's body is also a material. Reading about these work, one should imagine not just the specific characteristics of the material, but how the artist's body is positioned for these actions, along with the various contacts perceived by the skin. Following this passage on kinaesthesia, Graham includes a small text about Lee Lozano's *Grass Piece*, being another artwork that manipulate the artist' own body, by smoking grass.⁶³

As for Siegelau's catalogues, they offered the reader quirky propositions, that could be taken as either serious, or not. The *March 1- 31, 1969* catalogue is considered by both Lippard and Godfrey as the first exhibition to exist in catalogue form alone. The previous exhibition, *January Show* in fact had objects exhibited along with the catalogue, plus there was a receptionist, Adrian Piper, a then young unknown artist, who could answer questions for the visitors. It is important to remember that these projects by Siegelau came about through his involvement with the exhibiting artists. As he states in a 1987 interview: "It grew out of my personal economic situation, which was—and still is—extremely modest, compared to other people in the art world, and out of the nature of the work that was being produced by artists with whom I was working. It was a symbiosis of these two elements."⁶⁴

Austerity has been mentioned as an aspect both visually and theoretically of certain conceptual projects, while some try to be deliberately boring, acting as an alternative to "frenetic expressionist individualism and crowd-pleasing Pop," writes Lippard.⁶⁵ But these object to me seem somewhat quaint. They are old. I did not find the catalogue for *January Show (January 5- 31, 1969)*, having "an austere aspect [*un aspect austère*],⁶⁶ as Claude Gintz wrote in the Paris retrospective catalogue. The *January Show* catalogue contains the works of Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Laurence

⁶² Jeffrey Weiss, 'The Painted Word', *Artforum*, February 2009, p. 49

⁶³ Dan Graham, *End Moments*, self published, 1969. Reprinted in *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects 1965-1990*, Brian Wallis (ed) (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 41-45

⁶⁴ Seth Siegelau, 'Some Remarks On So-Called "Conceptual Art"', exhibition catalogue for *L'art conceptuel, une perspective*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989, p. 91

⁶⁵ Lucy R. Lippard, *Six years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972; a cross-reference book of information on some esthetic boundaries* (New York: Praeger, 1973) p. xvi

⁶⁶ Claude Gintz, "'L'art conceptuel, une perspective": notes sur un projet d'exposition', exhibition catalogue for *L'art conceptuel, une perspective*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989, p. 17

Weiner, offering a series of photographs, and texts. The emphasis was to stand against the then dominant form of art, painting, as championed by Greenberg; Kosuth writes in the catalogue: "This way the immateriality of the work is stressed and any possible connections to paintings are severed." If art were deemed to be *a* painting or *a* sculpture, the catalogue would definitely not offer its reader/ handler a work of art.

Handling Stuff

The Xerox Book, another project of Siegelau's, contains the work of Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol Lewitt, Robert Morris and Laurence Weiner. Each artist was asked by Siegelau to make a work of twenty-five pages, to be photocopied and put together as a book. The book is printed on cheap paper. Though it may seem like a plain publication, the content reveals itself to be quite playful. The quality of the Xeroxed pages can be compared to the earliest photographs, with its lack of details, as the first Xerox machines could not properly reproduce grays, or the mid-tones. Many of the projects emphasise repetition, such as Andre's piece, which consists of the addition of a square shape one each page, and Barry's *One Million Dots*. Huebler project offers the reader a series of dots or points and lines, accompanied with instruction on how to view and think of them. These instructions are meant to change the reader's perception: "For example, I can say that the point is situated in the exact center of a given surface, which can be the literal truth, or that it is the 'end of a line oriented to the plane of the surface at a 90 degree angle, and extending away from its percipient towards infinity at the speed of sound,' etc., etc."⁶⁷ The image, reconceptualised by the text, is not altered for the eyes, but for the mind, which reinterprets the images seen. Huebler in fact opens up a dialogue between the book one is holding, "reading", and what one is thinking and visualizing. A similar effect is produced by Kosuth's piece *Title of the Project*. The piece consists of one sentence per page, describing the fabrication of the Xerox Book:

PHOTOGRAPH OF THE XEROX MACHINE USED
XEROX MACHINE'S SPECIFICATIONS
PHOTOGRAPH OF OFFSET MACHINE USED
OFFSET MACHINE'S SPECIFICATION

Each sentence states a production fact, which we can imagine. These facts, not unlike Wittgenstein's own facts from the *Tractatus*, that are meant to determine the world:

- I The world is everything that is the case.
- I.I The world is the totality of facts, not of things.

⁶⁷ Robert C. Morgan, *Art Into Ideas: Essays on Conceptual Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 48

I.II The world is determined by the facts, and by these being *all* the facts.

Wittgenstein's facts are immaterial. Kosuth applies the philosophers thinking onto his own work, where the facts that are stated to describe the fabrication of the work, can be imagined. Their function is to inform, as a photograph or a description would. Kosuth includes other sentences that refer to photographs of the paper, ink, toner, glue, the workers at Xerox, the artists, and each of the artists' projects, and finally of the whole book. Kosuth's sentences emphasise the making of the book at hand. Though supplying the reader with plenty of information, the work points towards the imaginary, withholding the mentioned information, such as photographs and the various technical specifications.

As I was reading each sentence, it made the book-thing into a process that one comes to know about, but generally does not take into account. The various indications are simple, and do not in any way fully divulge what it is to make a book. Yet, it makes evident the fact that the book is a thing made. The sentences read as a short story. The work being about itself, is also about modes of representation. By writing about a photograph of the Xerox machine used, and the machine's specifications, we become aware of the simultaneous existence of the machine as an image, and the machine as a series of processes. The information that Kosuth is giving forth, simple as it may be, alludes to making. *The Xerox Book* in my hands, that I have been flipping through, which AA Bronson writes that it was bought, with multiple other copies from a sale bin in Texas for \$5 each, reveals itself to have been deliberately pieces together. "Of all the assemblage-style books of the period, it is the most pure and most memorable," reminisces AA Bronson.⁶⁸ Kosuth is not usually thought of as an artist interested in the making of objects, as his investigations on the nature of art are meant to preclude materiality. However, the works I've encountered reveal themselves as more than facts, but manipulated chosen materials.

Conceptual projects took the form of catalogue, advertisement and articles in publications, but also took the form of lists, diagrams and measurements. These new vehicles for art made it easy to distribute. Art could be had by anyone who bothered to save these ephemera. Of course one had to recognize it as art, but the point was not that it be recognized as art, but that it entered the public space as art. Though aimed at the world, the work remained secretive. "Communication (but not community) and distribution (but not accessibility) were inherent in Conceptual art. Although the forms pointed towards democratic outreach, the content did not."⁶⁹

This new aspect of art as concept, that a photograph or a document could instantiate, meant that it could be reproduced by different techniques and disseminated via various

⁶⁸ AA Bronson, 'Bound to Please: The Archive from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion', *Art Metropole: The Top 100* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006), p. 122

⁶⁹ Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years*, p. xvi

channels. This is very different from the idea of André Malraux's *musée imaginaire*, as the images from his book refer to actual artworks, while the photographs or texts of the Conceptualists refer to themselves, or to an activity that is no longer. Simple activities, in most cases following an a priori scheme, are documented as being results of experiments. At other times, activities are prescribed to participants, who can take part in the work; such was the case with many of General Idea's projects.

Could these documents, which traveled for the most part through the mail, be compared to what Bruno Latour calls "immutable mobiles"?⁷⁰ In his 1986 essay 'Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Eyes and Hands', Bruno Latour tries to show that there is no such thing as a passage towards a new way of thinking, such as the modern scientific culture; the "divide between prescientific and scientific culture is merely a border—like Tijuana and San Diego."⁷¹ The difference between the two modes is one of the scales of effects; if we compare for example the output of the National Institute of Health to folk knowledge of medicinal herbs, the Institute produces far more consequences than local knowledge. The enormous effect of science and technology does not result from new modes of thinking, but depends on the use of "paper, signs, prints and diagrams."⁷² For example, we might consider the transformation of laboratory experiments into inscriptions, which can then be combined, superimposed, or integrated in texts. These inscriptions stand for various scientific theories that cannot always be verbally explained, but can be represented as data, to become meaningful. But why put so much trust in images and print? Can they really help explain theoretical projects?

The way inscriptions gather their force of persuasion depends on what use they are being put towards. Inscriptions have the ability of being "mobile... immutable, presentable, readable and combinable with one another."⁷³ Plans, maps, diagrams all help to take an object of interest, such as a particular coastline, and transfer it onto paper, so as to be able to show it somewhere else. Also, it permits information to be added on. Geometry permits one to enlarge or reduce a particular structure, and move it from one site to another. But more importantly, as Gilbert Simondon suggests, this allows for one's thoughts to be externalized, for the realization of particular tasks, from the use of tools, to the domestication of animals, and further to the invention of signs and symbols that can be shared. "Order and organisation, given order and execution structure are formal aspects of the task, depending on the demands of information sharing, from the one who knows and wants, to the one who executes and obeys" [*Ordre et organization, ordre donné et structure de l'exécution se trouvent être des*

⁷⁰ Bruno Latour, 'Visualization and Cognition: Thinking With Eyes and Hands', *Knowledge and Society*, 1986 volume 6, p. 1-40

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 2

⁷² Ibid. p. 3

⁷³ Ibid. p. 7

*formalisations de la tâche selon les exigences de la transmission d'information de celui qui sait et veut à celui qui exécute et obéit].*⁷⁴

Information gave rise to a rationalization, but as Latour writes: “The rationalization that took place during the so-called ‘scientific revolution’ is not of the mind, of the eye, of philosophy, but of the *sight*.”⁷⁵ What is then seen on paper becomes written in a homogeneous language, which allows for scale transformation, through linear perspective drawing. All other information about a site, or an object become dependant on its optical aspects; to convince someone of what was experienced somewhere else, all others senses are shifted towards vision; inscriptions represent absent things. “No one can smell or hear or touch Sakhalin Island, but you can look at a map and determine at which bearing you will see the land when you send the next fleet. The speakers are talking to one another, feeling, hearing and touching each other, *but* they are now talking *with* many absent things presented all at once.”⁷⁶

The absent island is made present with the help of various inscriptions that have traveled from the island and back. This can also be applied to fictitious or sacred subjects, represented through linear perspective, which can become as real as the map of Sakhalin Island. Having various types of information available together, and reproducible on paper, has, as a consequence, the ability to be perceived and compared with other inscriptions.

General Idea took on the collection of various artifacts as an extension of their own production. All this stuff was circulating, and making possible a variety of meanings. The work produced by General Idea was a way to invent, encourage, and mythologise their own work within all other cultural and commercial products. To attempt a sensualist reading of Conceptual art, in the shadow of the criticism of both Buchloh and Zepke, can only be done *à la lumière de General Idea*.

General Idea

General Idea is not often discussed in the literature on Conceptual art. Blake Stimson in his article ‘The Promise of Conceptual Art’, points out that Conceptual artists have established new ways to distribute art, produce collective statements, and new working relationships. General Idea is mentioned along with Art & Language, and the initial association of Daniel Burren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni.⁷⁷ The book does include two illustrations of their work, *The Garb Age Collection* (1969) and *Orgasm Energy Chart* (1970) (fig.9).

⁷⁴ Gilbert Simondon, *Imagination et invention (1965-1966)* (Chatou: Les Éditions de la Transparence, 2008), p. 154

⁷⁵ Bruno Latour, ‘Visualization and Cognition: Thinking With Eyes and Hands’, p. 7

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 8

⁷⁷ Blake Stimson, p. xi

Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, makes no mention either of General Idea. Her book consists of a list of events, exhibitions, books, artworks that depict the dematerialization of art, or the appearance of Conceptual art. The book came out in 1973, four or five years after the birth of General Idea, and not long before the opening of Art Metropole. *Six Years* could be thought of as a list from which the Art Metropole Collection was amassed. In its preface, Lippard urges to think of the collector of Conceptual art as a patron, one who helps artists, and participating in their artistic experiments.⁷⁸ But unlike the book, which has a conventional presentation, the Collection gives evidence of the eclectic nature of works that have come to be known as Conceptual pieces.

The work that General Idea produced made use of formulas to produce work, as Sol LeWitt did, but their form of conceptualism addressed the senses; ideas were treated as to enter, and affect fully the body, making use of optical illusions, as in their *Carmen* (1968-69), or later, in *Cornucopia* (1982), mimicking Walter De Maria's film *Hard Core* (1968). While the later films a desert horizon that keeps revolving 360 degrees around a rifle-bearing cowboy, *Cornucopia* shows a stick that changes colour, circling in front of a girl's mouth: "The time had come to make people's mouth water and then to parch them before they had a chance to swallow", wrote General Idea.⁷⁹

Barthes' absent author becomes with General Idea a trio, freeing each member from the tyranny of the individual genius: "It leaves us free to assimilate, synthesize, and contextualize influences from our immediate cultural environment."⁸⁰ One of General Idea's projects, *The Miss General Idea Pavillion* (1968-78) served as a framework to encompass other projects. The project proposed artifacts from the burnt out building that was to commemorate *The Miss General Idea Pageant*, a previous project. The building in fact had never existed; its fiction served to encompass various works together, as a collection of artifacts.

What is of interest are the various depictions of the planning of the pavilion, suggesting that General Idea does not regard ideas as immutable and transcendent, but as part of making. While Kosuth emphasizes ideas as something to contemplate, General Ideas makes use of ideas as techniques; for example, the use of numbers to measure, seen in various images depicting men in a state of planning, or reading architectural plans.

The two works taken from Alberro's book on Conceptual art, *The Garb Age Collection* (1969) and *Orgasm Energy Chart* (1970), are pieces that make use of instructions to produce work. The first one asking people to collect plastic garbage bags, and then to arrange and display them on the street. It also indicates that photos, and drawings can

⁷⁸ Lucy R. Lippard, p.8

⁷⁹ *General Idea, 1968-1984*, (Kunsthalle, Basel; Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Musée d'art contemporain, Montréal, 1984-85), p. 13

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 25

be made following the initial set up of the bags. The second piece consists of an empty grid, where one is asked to chart one's orgasms. The charts were sent by mail to various people, had to be filled-in, and returned to General Idea for analysis.

Both these pieces address production; one perceived as waste, or garbage, the other as physiological, the orgasm. Both could also suggest either excesses, or necessities, or again collecting. I would suggest that what these two simple work reveal, and ultimately is to be found in the work and collection of General Idea: the pleasurable, and the erotic. This is made evident with their publication *File*, with its racy photographs. While most conceptual artists were for the most part discreet about sexuality and eroticism, except perhaps Lee Lozano⁸¹, General Idea affirmed its importance both as subject matter, and as part of art making. List making does not need to be described as clerk work. To list can provide pleasure in the act of repeating similar acts, which become altered over time, creating variations, or differences.

1

Listing, diagrams, charts, questionnaires, these devices in fact, were used by many artists and writers, who were exploring similar subjects through their own medium, and influencing each other, during the Conceptual art period. Writers were making use of inscriptions as a method to redefine and expand the notion of the poem and the novel. Diagrams, lists, maps, drawings have been part of literature for centuries, from the mid-16th century lengthy lists of François Rabelais's *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, enumerating the various foods ingested in one meal, to the blank pages of Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759), are predecessors to concrete poetry and the experimental novels of Denis Roche, and Donald Bartheleme. Bartheleme has commented on the influence of Mel Bochner and Robert Smithson's 1966 experimental text, *The Domain of the Great Bear*, on his own writing.⁸² As much as the machines of the Industrial revolution had influenced artists and writers in the 19th and 20th century, an interest in office wares was becoming apparent in art.

For example General Idea's production of surveys and application forms for their pageants, or Ed Ruscha's fascination with stamps and post marks on envelopes, can be found in the work of novelists of the period, such as Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), where patents of inventions, the stock market, stamps and the postal system, are all signs to be deciphered, while Donald Bartheleme (whose brother Frederick Bartheleme was part of the Conceptual art movement, before turning to writing), self-consciously wrote about the act of writing itself, and incorporated in several stories, lists, various typefaces, and the Question and Answer mode aimed at the reader:

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you like the story so far? Yes () No ()
2. Does Snow White resemble the Snow White

⁸¹ Lee Lozano, *Thesis (All Men Are Hardly Created Equal)*, as seen in *S.M.S.* #1, 1968.

⁸² Mel Bochner, *Solar Systems & Rest Rooms: Writings and Interviews, 1965-2007*, p. 201

- you remember? Yes () No ()
3. Have you understood, in reading to this point, that Paul is the prince-figure? Yes () No ()⁸³

Another author, William Gaddis, after twenty years of working for the government and big businesses, published in 1975 his gigantic novel *JR*, where newspapers, flyers, coupons, equipment information, all become part of the narrative. In France, Georges Perec's various writing experiments, between the 1960s and his death in 1982, were influenced by sociology and its methods of inquiry, and his early experience as an archivist, with its daily handling of records and various forms of data. This primary interest in writing and informational documentations, from post cards to pseudo-scientific charts to books, can equally be found in the work of composers such as Iannis Xenakis, himself trained as an engineer before turning to composing, and Mauricio Kagel. In the case of Kagel, the composer did not only rely on musical notations, but gave written instructions to his musicians for the realization of his music-theater. In many cases, drawings are included to illustrate the movements that the musicians need to perform. Kagel's partition becomes a composite of various types of instructions.

Buchloh mentions Samuel Beckett and Alain Robbe-Grillet as being fetish-authors for artists of the mid to late 1960's. Artists are said to be attracted to both Beckett's radical atopism, and to the positivism of Robbe-Grillet, or as Buchloh puts it, "the affirmative petit-bourgeois positivism of Alain Robbe-Grillet."⁸⁴ As mentioned previously, Robbe-Grillet's work was also included in the issue 5 & 6 of *Aspen*, not as a text, but as a recording of himself reading from his novel, *La jalousie*. The writer's voice is heard, or should I say the author's, cohabiting with Barthes' text about the author's death.

By stating that both Robbe-Grillet and Conceptual artists are in fact interested in positivism, and producing positivist work, I can only suggest that, perhaps Buchloh is reiterating André Breton's famous distaste for the novel, and its boring descriptions; descriptions remove, if not resist poetry, and poetry is art for Breton. He equates the novel with realism, while being inspired by a positivist attitude: "The realist attitude... inspired by positivism, from Saint Thomas to Anatole France, seems to hostile towards all intellectual and moral expansion. ... Each one goes on with his small 'observation.' " [*L'attitude réaliste... inspirée du positivisme, de Saint Thomas à Anatole France, m'a bien l'air hostile à tout essor intellectuel et moral. ... Chacun y va de sa petite 'observation.'*]⁸⁵ Breton uses as example an imaginary incipit to make his point: "The marquise left a five o'clock." [*La marquise sortit à cinq heures.*], meant to describe a boring, poetry-less beginning to a novel. Pierre Brunel wonders what Breton would have thought of another incipit that upset many, the first phrase of Robbe-Grillet's *Instantanés*: "The

⁸³ Donald Bartheleme, *Snow White* (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), p.82

⁸⁴ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, p. 53

⁸⁵ Pierre Brunel, 'Récit poétique et récit mythique. La question des *incipit*', *Mythe et récit poétique*, Véronique Gély-Ghedira (ed) (Clermont-Ferrand: Association des Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Clermont-Ferrand, 1998), p. 23

coffee pot is on the table.” [*La cafetière est sur la table.*]⁸⁶ Brunel proceeds to analyse the conservative forces that attacked Robbe-Grillet, and *le nouveau roman*. What is offending for the critics, Brunel states, are the lengthy descriptions with no narrator, and a world that exist only as perceptions, without poetry.

Without going into the rest of the text, Brunel does in fact find poetry, suggesting that descriptions of objects, which is what was deemed the *nouveau roman* was doing, should perhaps be compared to still-lives, which again were themselves sources for poets, such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Francis Ponge. Can we compare the aesthetic of administration, with the poetry Rilke saw in his objects? For Kosuth, there is no interest in poetry:

“I gather you see little connection of your art to poetry?
Absolutely no relationship at all.”⁸⁷

Kosuth does not really discuss the subject, as much as dismiss it. Concrete poetry for him is “a kind of formalism of typography—it’s cute with words, but dumb with language.”⁸⁸ Kosuth separates the physicality of words from language’s abstraction. “For Kosuth, art does not have a true object, an isolated form or work. A work of art is not a given object, but rather represents the result of mental choices that are intentionally pursued at the time of both its production and reception, an ‘object of thought’.”⁸⁹ The work is to engage the viewer/reader in an experience of actualizing art; one has to become involved in the “*process of the work*,”⁹⁰ creating an event, where the viewer is part of the meaning-making process. There is willingness on the part of Kosuth, to ignore effects of words, and emphasize the idealism of language, as if ideas did not belong to the body, as if ideas, and objects were unrelated. The opticality that Greenberg prescribed, which in fact differed from what the artists thought of their own work, comes close to Kosuth’s own views of his work; the unacknowledgement of the effects of the media that presents his art.

The birth of the text and the textual, and the disappearance of the author, soon gave place to an increasing interest with the genesis of texts. What eventually became problematic was the definition of *text*, as it broadened. On top of the notion of textuality, was added those of transtextuality, intertextuality, matatextuality, paratextuality, and architextuality, “in other words everything which establishes an obvious or discreet relation [of the text] with other texts.”⁹¹ What came of these

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 23

⁸⁷ Joseph Kosuth, p. 51

⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 52

⁸⁹ Gabriele Guercio, ‘Introduction’, Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966- 1990*, p. xxxviii

⁹⁰ Joseph Kosuth, p. 225

⁹¹ Gérard Genette quoted in Martine Reid, ‘Editor’s Preface: Legible/Visible’, *Yale French Studies*, 84, 1994, p. 2

investigations is that it put an end to the notion of the text as an isolated thing, which eventually led to this interest in textual genetics, and authors' manuscripts. "Textual genetics reasserts the value of the active, fluid process that is textual production of the writer 'at work', the evolution of the writing towards its final form."⁹² The manuscript reveals the author, the day-to-day aspects of working. The written marks give importance to the author's hand gestures. This does not exclude the "increasingly large share of textual creation which is performed by machine, starting with the computer."⁹³

Conclusion

Kosuth's technical choice of Photostat reveals a dependence on the display codes of painting. The photostat was primarily a clerical technique used in governmental offices and libraries, previous to micro-fiche, while also belonging to photography. Mechanical, and suggesting anonymity, the photostat is of a higher standard than a photocopied sheet of paper of the period, such as was being produced by both Toby Mussman and Paul Bertgold.

General Idea's use of xeroxed paper would ultimately have acted as blemishes on Kosuth ideas, due to its impoverished materiality. Looking at more recent works by Kosuth at the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts, the quality of paper used for a series of lithographies indicates the importance material support does have for Kosuth. It is a choice that is perhaps dictated by the market itself. Alberro writes: "For despite pronouncements that [Kosuth's] art was not made for a gallery, and that the physical components that communicated the art were secondary and purely residual, the fact that his Photostats could easily be hung flat on the wall in a way that closely resembled traditional paintings made them a comfortable fit in any gallery or traditional exhibition space."⁹⁴

The materials of Conceptual art are for the most part ignored. It is we viewers who need to acknowledge their physicality and consider materials as choices.

⁹² Martine Reid, p. 3

⁹³ Serge Tisseron, 'All Writing is Drawing: The Spatial Development of the Manuscript', *Yale French Studies*, 84, 1994, p. 30

⁹⁴ Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, p. 39

Postscript

Part of the research on which this essay is based was made possible by a subvention from the project entitled “The Hands-On Museum: Transition Periods” under the direction of Dr. Constance Classen of the Centre for Sensory Studies. “The Hands-On Museum” project is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). My research has also been supported by a doctoral fellowship from the Fonds Québécois de Recherche sur la Société et la Culture (FQRSC). I wish to thank Dr. Classen, the SSHRC and FQRSC for their generous support of my research.

This essay evolved out of one of the chapters of my PhD thesis, “Touching and Making.” My thesis in turn grew out of my studio practice and was meant to answer a single question: Why do I feel so drawn by the physicality of materials, compelled to handle stuff, to manipulate it, work with it, at times with simple tools?

I chose to approach my topic as an interdisciplinary research project, first, because it would allow me to pursue my art making practice, and secondly, I could make use of my studio practice as a research field. My artwork making was consequently combined with anthropological and art historical studies that are attentive to materials, techniques, and the senses, specifically the sense of touch. With the interdisciplinary nature of this thesis I wanted to create a new type of research, applicable to any objects.

What makes it interdisciplinary is not only the combination of these three research fields, but essentially that it consists of a written section, and a drawn one. A series of drawings served simultaneously as research, and like the written section, is an articulation of touching and making.

While my interest with touch and material might seem evident when speaking of art, my research pointed out to contradictory attitudes. On the one hand, there is a growing interest in the social sciences, art history, as well by many artists, to address the senses, tactility and materiality. But on the other hand, the material and technical aspects of art making are often treated as secondary to theoretical, or abstract notions.

Most of the artists I have analysed do acknowledge the material and sensual qualities of their work, by insisting, for example on the size, thickness and weight of books, the sonic qualities of words, also by displaying the methods of fabrication as part of the work, by describing their work as giving form to neuroses, or of curing neuroses.

I chose to include Conceptual art to my research, because the classical separation of the material from the theoretical is particularly evident when encountering Conceptual art. Conceptual art is said to be dematerialized art, an art practice prioritising thinking, with an end result that need not be an object anymore. The emphasis on dematerialisation and ideas consequently suggested a lack of interest with the senses.

While several art historians have recently been concerned with the material aspects of Conceptual art, I wanted to push further, and insist on re-materialising, and re-sensualising Conceptual art, by paying close attention to the materials and techniques used to make and generate the work, including the various documents and communication networks that the movement relied on to disseminate its work.

While many artists and theorists may have insisted on the secondary aspect of the objects, my archival research suggested otherwise. As artists had moved from traditional art materials and techniques, to an exploration of industrial ones, Conceptual artists were now making use of office stationary, and clerical procedures to expand what art making could be.

The attention given by artists and writers from the 1950s onward, including myself, to ordinary, everyday materials, as well to techniques used in offices, or found in various construction industries, led me to the work of philosopher Gilbert Simondon, and his study on the technical object from 1958, and to the more recent work of anthropologist Martin Holbraad on material culture.

Both thinkers are very much concerned with objects. But instead of applying, or assigning meaning onto an object, like form is said to be given to matter, both Simondon and Holbraad seek to identify a mode of existence that belongs to things. They believe that things should be approached as being able to generate their own meanings. Holbraad prescribes to anthropologists that they need to move beyond what “we hear and see people say and do around things”, and attend to “what we hear, see, smell, taste and touch of the thing as we find it.”

As for Simondon, his analysis of the technical object identifies the modern technical objects as having as much humanity as a handmade one, consequently blurring an often used division between the handmade and the industrial. His overall analysis is very much indebted to a hands-on point of view, attentive to procedures and details provided by material, tools, instruments, and the senses. While Holbraad and Simondon are not discussed in the following text, their attitude informs the encounters.

The following text seeks to re-materialises and the re-sensualises Conceptual art, and further questions whether the relationship between concepts and things “ought to necessarily be considered as distinct in the first place” as anthropologist Martin Holbraad suggests.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, Sari Wastell, *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 2

Bibliography

Alberro, Alexander, 'Inside the White Box- Brian O'Doherty's *Aspen 5+6*', *Artforum*, vol. 40, no. 1, Sept. 2001, pp. 170-174.

Alberro, Alexander and Blake Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 1999).

Alberro, Alexander, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 2003).

Alexander, Darsie, 'Reluctant Witness: Photography and the Documentation of 1960s and 1970s Art', *Work Ethic*, Helen Molesworth (ed) (Baltimore, Md.: Baltimore Museum of Art; University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), pp. 52- 64.

Bartheleme, Donald, *Snow White* (New York: Bantam Books, 1965).

Bernau, Kai, *Neutral*, 2005, p.15 (<http://www.letterlabor.de/book.php>).

Barthes, Roland, 'The Death of the Author', Richard Howard, trans., *Aspen 5+6*, 1967, n.p.

Berry, John D., 'dot-font: Neutral Sans?', 2005, (<http://www.creativepro.com/article/dot-font-neutral-sans->).

Bezzola, Tobia and Roman Kurzmeyer (eds), *Harald Szeemann, with by through because towards despite, catalogue of all exhibitions 1957-2005* (Zürich: Edition Voldemeer, 2007).

Blair, Ann, 'Humanist Methods in Natural Philosophy: The Commonplace Book', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 53, No. 4, 1992, pp. 541-551.

Bochner, Mel, *Solar System & Rest Rooms: Writings and Interviews, 1965-2007* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 2008).

Bonin, Vincent, *Documentary Protocols (1967-1975)*, (Montreal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University, 2010).

Bourke, Thomas A., 'The Photostat-Microfilm War at the New York Public Library in the 1930s, the 1940s, and the 1950s', *Microform Review*, vol.18, No. 3, 1989, pp. 145-150.

Bronson, AA, 'Bound to Please: The Archive from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion', *Art Metropole: The Top 100*, Kitty Scott and Jonathan Shaughnessy (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006), pp. 120-134.

Brunel, Pierre, 'Récit poétique et récit mythique. La question des *incipit*', *Mythe et récit poétique*, Véronique Gély-Ghedira (ed) (Clermont-Ferrand: Association des Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Clermont-Ferrand, 1998), pp. 21-34.

Buchloh, Benjamin H.D., 'From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique', *L'art conceptuel, une perspective* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989), pp. 41-53

Galison, Peter, 'Aufbau/Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism', *Critical Inquiry* 16, 1990, pp. 709-752.

General Idea, 1968-1984, (Kunsthalle, Basel; Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Musée d'art contemporain, Montréal, 1984-85).

Giampietro, Rob, 'The Problem with Posters', *Lined & Unlined*, 2004, (<http://blog.linedandunlined.com/post/404938991/the-problem-with-posters>).

Gintz, Claude, "'L'art conceptuel, une perspective": notes sur un projet d'exposition', *L'art conceptuel, une perspective* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989), pp. 13-18.

Gockel, Bettina, 'Paul Klee's picture-making and persona: tools for making invisible realities visible', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, vol. 39, 2008, pp. 418-433.

Godfrey, Tony, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1998).

Graham, Dan, 'End Moments', *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects 1965-1990*, Brian Wallis (ed) (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 41-45.

Graham, Dan, 'My Works for Magazine Pages: "a history of conceptual art"', *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 418-422.

Guercio, Gabriele, 'Introduction', Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966- 1990* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), pp. xxi-xxxviii.

Hapgood, Susan, 'Fonts of Wisdom', *Frieze* 29, 1996, (http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/fonts_of_wisdom/).

Hay, Louis, 'Le texte n'existe pas: réflexion sur la critique génétique' *Poétique*, 62, 1985, pp. 146-158.

January 5-31, exhibition catalogue (New York: Seth Siegelaub, 1969).

Jones, Caroline A., *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's modernism and the bureaucratization of the senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

Kinross, Robin, *Modern Typography, an essay in critical history* (London: Hyphen Press, 2004).

Kosuth, Joseph, *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966- 1990* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

Latour, Bruno, 'Visualization and Cognition: Thinking With Eyes and Hands', *Knowledge and Society*, Vol.6, 1986, pp. 1-40

Latour, Bruno, 'Sur un livre d'Etienne Souriau: les Différents modes d'existence', 2006 (<http://www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/index.html>).

LeWitt, Sol, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 12-16.

Lippard, Lucy R., *Six years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972; a cross-reference book of information on some esthetic boundaries* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

Lippard, Lucy R., 'Postface, in Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966-1972', in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 294-295.

Lippard, Lucy R. and John Chandler, 'The Dematerialization of Art', in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 46-50.

Meltzer, Eve, 'The Dream of the Information World', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2006, pp. 115-135.

Molesworth, Helen, 'Work Ethic', *Work Ethic* (Baltimore, Md. : Baltimore Museum of Art ; University Park, Pa. : Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), pp. 24- 51.

Morgan, Robert C., *Art Into Ideas: Essays on Conceptual Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

North, Michael, 'Authorship and Autography: theories and methodologies', *PMLA*, vol.16, no.5, 2001, pp. 1377-1385.

Reid, Martine, 'Editor's Preface: Legible/Visible', *Yale French Studies*, 84, 1994, pp. 1-12.

Rorimer, Anne, 'Siting the Page: Exhibiting Works in Publications-Some Examples of Conceptual Art in the USA', *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, Michael Newman and Jon Bird (eds), (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1999), pp. 11-26.

Rousseau, Pascal, 'Figures de déplacement. L'écriture du corps en mouvement', *Exposé 2*, 1995, pp. 86-97.

Siegelaub, Seth, 'Some Remarks On So-Called "Conceptual Art"', *L'art conceptuel, une perspective* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989), pp. 91-94.

Gilbert Simondon, *Imagination et invention (1965-1966)* (Chatou: Les Éditions de la Transparence, 2008).

Sloan, Johanne, 'Bill Vazan's Urban Coordinates', *Bill Vazan: Walking Into the Vanishing Point*, (Montreal: Vox, 2007), pp. 86-89.

Souriau, Etienne, 'Du mode d'existence de l'œuvre à faire', *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie*, janvier-mars 1956, pp. 5-58.

Stimson, Blake, 'The Promise of Conceptual Art', *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 1999), pp. xxxviii-lii.

Tan, Eugene, 'Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, 1965', *Understanding Art Objects, Thinking through the Eye*, Tony Godfrey (ed), (Farnham, UK and Burlington, Vermont: Lund Humphries, 2009), pp. 53-61.

Tisseron, Serge, 'All Writing is Drawing: The Spatial Development of the Manuscript', *Yale French Studies*, 84, 1994, pp. 29-42.

Weiss, Jeffrey, 'The Painted Word', *Artforum*, February 2009, pp. 49-50.

Zepke, Stephen, 'The Concept Of Art When Art Is Not A Concept, Deleuze and Guattari Against Conceptual Art', *Angelika 2*(1), April 2006, pp. 157-167.