Art without the Aesthetics?
Defining Conceptual and Post-Conceptual Art Practices

Abstract

The paper focuses on explaining why today (conceptual) and post-conceptual art practices generated from specific theories during the 1960s and 1970s would precipitate the need for the decline of philosophical aesthetics in discussing today's contemporary art. Today, since "aesthetic experience is to be conceived as conforming to the ruling cultural ideology" much of the "visual turn", would derive from street artists, sub-cultures and darker cultures who, rebellious by nature use (conceptual) and post-conceptual art practices, which increasingly produce theoretical positions, which contribute to the discursive paradigms adopted by today's theoreticians of visual culture. Also contributing to the "visual turn", is the active role played by gallery audiences who help to produce the meaning of the work itself—their role now has largely changed from passive contemplation to active participation. The paper defines why the preponderance of perspectives accumulated today (used by theoreticians of visual culture) informed by the artist's intention as a new theory in itself and the audience as "participant" is currently outweighing the significance of aesthetic theory. In the paper, I define and evaluate why philosophical aesthetics is no longer being seen as necessary to provide critical reflection of new media, post-conceptual art practices and the digital revolution.

I. Today's post-conceptual practices: relating to the current aesthetic dimensions of visual culture

Due to the ever-expanding girth of what is now considered art, art criticism today has been substantially widened. Contributing to this "visual turn", in opposition to the idea that aesthetic experience conforms to the ruling cultural ideology", today's artists use (conceptual) and post-conceptual art practices, which increasingly produce theoretical positions, which contribute to the discursive paradigms adopted by today's theoreticians of visual culture. Often the starting point of creation for these artists is to make new works that constantly break boundaries and go against tradition. This would indicate an ongoing course of action by them to counter through pluralist practices and tendencies what was felt to be "the regimentation and stuff-shirt proprieties of mainstream post-war culture." (Wood 2002, 23)[1] For today's post-conceptual artists like their predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s would continue to attempt to demystify and demythologise art's previous ideologies and take their inspiration from an ever-increasing range of sources, materials and philosophies, including graffiti, geometry, painting and music. Through this process, they would critique and transgress much modernist and traditional aesthetic criteria. (This attitude, fuelling the "visual turn" against philosophical aesthetics today, would generally be related to an even more critical, technologically driven, and less idolatrous mood than ever before). (Murdoch 2003, 4)[2] After producing their art, today's artists' own views are often validated as theories themselves by today's visual theorists.

Also contributing to what might be considered a "visual turn" against philosophical aesthetics today is the active role played by gallery audiences who help to produce the meaning of the work itself. Today their role has largely changed from passive contemplation to one of active participation. For today's theoreticians of visual culture who would have to take into account

the artists' and audience's views this would lead to an almost limitless variety of interpretations of what each work may be about (since their views are often increasingly open-ended). This would be problematic for certain branches of philosophy that would question whether such works can convey fundamental ideas and whether formal philosophical aesthetics can provide a valid critical reflection on them.

Following the trajectory begun with Marcel Duchamp in particular, who showed that ideas for new art can come from anything existing in the everyday world, post-conceptual artists such as the Australian artist Joshua Yeldum would not be afraid to take any risks with his work. Yeldum would employ minerals from the Australian landscape to integrate music and audience participation to create abstract paintings that contemporary visual theorists writing today would label a "sacred theatre" for audiences. (Falvo 2007)[3] Using a variety of materials previously used within an arts and crafts-based context, one of his recent works and part of his *Death Bird* series of works *Fertility Owl,* (2008) (oil and mixed media on two carved boards and paper) reflects aspects of Robert Rauschenberg's *Combine Paintings* and combines music and painting to make a "musical landscape painting" that would entice audiences to participate directly with the work. With guitar strings running across the wings of the bird depicted the work exists free from traditional painting integrating the idea of live music and audience participation to create a kind "sacred theatre" for the audience. (Yeldum 2009)[4] In order to mirror the textures found in the Australian environment Yeldum "builds the work" using carpentry techniques in which patterns are carved on the paper. In the work, real guitar strings are stretched across an image of an owl for the audience to play. Another contemporary post-conceptual artist, Jackson Slattery, also practising in Australia would coalesce photography with painting to create what some art criticism would call a kind of "photorealism," which would be produced by the artist out of watercolours based on photographs in National Geographic Magazines and his own photo collection. (Tsitas)[5] Also making a new kind of sub-art/sub-genre/pseudo art, which would need to be described by visual theoreticians today as existing between the realm of graffiti and contemporary painting, Texan arts and crafts artist and *knitter* or *tagger* Magda Sayeg would use her knitting as a form of graffiti. By adapting traditional arts and craft making for very different purposes Sayeg would *tag* various locations all over the world such as the Musée du Louvre in Paris, a brick in the Great Wall of China, an entire bus in Mexico, Notre Dame Cathedral, and a Sydney street sign. (Chapman 2007)[6] Yet in contradistinction to such aspects of artistic production, previous discussions related to art were quite different.

II. The Previous Aesthetic Dimensions of Visual Culture

In fact, previously, from Greek times, until around the early twentieth century, more traditional aesthetic perceptions of art theory and criticism had contributed to form understandings of the qualities of art closely tied to requirements that often could best fulfil the concept of conventional *beauty* and religion defined by formal categories of art where often "the god was the ideal of beauty" (Meier-Graefe 1993, 54)[7] and truth. Art of this previous time had in fact been synonymous with equating to *beauty* (particularly physical *beauty* as a paradigm for aesthetic quality) via three intrinsic conditions: perfection, coherence, unity of form and content (Kuhns 1966, 42)[8] to comprise the unity of the *limited whole* (by which I mean a self-contained work of art aligned to plausible concepts of *beauty* as an empirical or ontological quality).

Similarly, within the Enlightenment period, by comparison with much post-conceptual art produced today, art and the traditional aesthetic dimensions of visual culture had largely been concerned with measuring the quality of the content of the work in a similar way to the Greeks that is, in relation to the idea of conventional *beauty* formed from the creation of a *limited whole* work of art. These ideas had been brought back by Winckelmann, who had helped inspire a climate for a classical revival in art and architecture of around 1770 onwards, which had helped inspire the institutional development of the classical structure of the Louvre in Paris. (Manasseh 2009)[9] Here aesthetics had related to a theory of art which would be dependent upon its classification within a fixed framework derived from, and embedded in, Enlightenment rationalist principles that would also aspire to the condition of conventional *beauty* as the paradigm for aesthetic quality. (Manasseh 2009) In such enclosures for the displaying of art, formal philosophical aesthetics and more familiar concepts of art than those used today were linked to the idea of the work of art existing as a separate(d) *limited whole* within an environment where a sufficient critical spatial distance between object and audience would be organised to encourage the overall intentional conventional *beauty* of the work, its authenticity, and link to the spirit of the past.

For artists within the Romantic movement although opposing the strict doctrinaire systems created by Winckelmann, one of the most important ways for understanding art had come from looking at nature from a critical distance and to uphold it in awe inspired by scenery. Indeed, in Romantic fiction, the Romantics would feel "...inspired only by what was grand, remote, and terrifying Science..." and "...often...cut loose from actually, either past or present, altogether. (Russell 2008, 618)[10] Within the Romantic period, paintings by Cozens, Friedrich, Turner, Ward or Wilson for example, which would often show nature or objects from a distance were often constructed to transcend and escape the real world in order to approach the divine since they believed "...that the painting of nature was a form of worship, a means of approaching the divine" (Blaney Brown 2001, 126)[11] which had elevated "...nature to a kind of religion...". (Blaney Brown 2001, 123)[12] In art museums based upon the Louvre's paradigm such artworks supported by an historical framework elevated within a hierarchy of genres and styles would be judged from a certain distance and aligned to the notion of a solitary aesthete's observation in the public's mind. For audiences and theorists at the time, artworks viewed in this way, which were not meant to be touched, would be organised to invite a set of assumptions relating to ideas of conventional *beauty*, truth, genius, civilization, form, status and taste. (Berger 1972, 11)[13] This idea of passive contemplation, facilitated via the necessary critical distance between viewers of the artwork within hierarchical viewing environments of the classical museum environment structure which had become synonymous with traditional applications of aesthetic viewpoints and concomitant with modernist, pre-conceptual ways of viewing art would eventually evolve into the viewer's active participation.

III. *Addressing the authority of the past: defining conceptual and post-conceptual practices from the 1960s to the present*

During the 1960s and 1970s,—(a period when many previous *behaviors* were changed and new ones developed) saw a dismantling of previous aesthetic theory and convention. The

demise of the previously indefatigable practices of traditional painting and sculpture occurring from this time would reflect a new culture that would outweigh much in previous aesthetic theory making it out of date. This overall approach would come from the new artist-theorist who arose from a critical discourse which rejected the loftiness (or perceived loftiness) and extensive histories of the art of the previous era to address every way it was being presented within art institutions based on those paradigms defined by the Louvre or The Museum of Modern Art.

Much of this *visual turn* can be traced right back to the early twentieth century when Marcel Duchamp's *ready-mades* from 1913, and Kasmir Malevich's painting *Black Square* of 1915, would help to raise new questions for an art practice that would undermine the validity of formal philosophical aesthetic positions and the criteria that would surround them relating to conventional *beauty*, truth and religion. Coupled with Duchamp's artistic statement that *anything can be art if the artist says so*, which would help abolish the notion of art from traditional conventional *beauty* over to idea, in the early twentieth century, Malevich in fact, would avoid representing anything in his paintings from the outside world altogether. In many ways, this new course for art from the early twentieth century had also been able to develop due to a capitalising on the new space made for it by the Cubist artists, who had abstracted away from their paintings the depiction of reality from the world outside. (Wood 2002, 11-12)[14] Operating as a kind of "visual manifesto" (Wood 2002, 11)[15] this had helped to move art "...towards [becoming] a fully abstract art;...'purified' of narrative or [any] descriptive features [which would be meant to act]...on the spectator like a 'visual music.' (Wood 2002, 10-11)[16]

From the 1950s, against Clement Greenberg's campaign to make painting more pure by formalising its parameters within an unyielding frame of reference and system of classification, that would reinforce the idea of the traditional *limited fixed whole* artwork, the international avant-gardes, via the re-appropriation of Dada strategies would use art to critique the existing formal hierarchies and extensive histories seen to be dividing the arts in general. In relation to this, Neo-Dadaist Robert Rauschenberg's proto-conceptual gestures, which were focused on abolishing the concept of the conventional beautiful artwork and art as an institution had reinforced much of the spirit of anarchy found in Duchamp's work bringing forward a new faith that could easily justify the art object on the sole basis of an *idea* rather than *beauty* or religion or both. Rejecting the idea of the traditional *limited whole* work of art of the past and joining different kinds of art together (along with avant-garde musician Cage, artist Oldenburg and choreographer Merce Cunningham), Rauschenberg's combining of painting, music and dance into single heterogeneous performance events in the 1950s and 1960s, would position audiences on an equal footing with art. This had helped encourage a climate for an art of the 1960s and 1970s, which no longer aimed for conventional *beauty*, and would reject the authority and loftiness of traditional forms of painting and sculpture. As part of this, Oldenburg's criticism that art must do "...something other than sit on its ass in a museum"(Wood 2002, 28)[17] instead of just existing merely for the sake of looking singular and beautiful would encourage new conceptual and later post-conceptual artists to directly oppose the time-honoured belief in the supremacy of high works of art or masterworks which were condemned as obsolete wallpaper divorced from the audience and social life.

During the 1960s, the conceptual art movement would see modernist criticism by the new artists-theorists being "...written in defence of abstract painting and sculpture...and

[becoming] more specified in defence of the form of painting described by Clement Greenberg as 'Post-Painterly Abstraction'." (Harrison and Wood 1993, 686)[18] For conceptual artists during the 1960s and 1970s the addressing of the previous aesthetic had been extremely important and would lead to a much wider scope of reference from two-dimensional painting or three dimensional sculpture to "...potentially become anything, an object, a sound or an action. In later conceptual art, the question of the aesthetic was strategically put in brackets: not so much a goal for critical art as an issue for it to address". (Wood 2002, 26–27)[19] For artists then, the cognitive over the concept of traditional beauty and religion had been paramount as new ways of uniting different art forms with non-art, were looked for, making it particularly hard to see the difference. Anything for the artists related to previous ideas on art that could be contained within institutional structures such as MoMA, whose academic *white cube* iconographic display programme would present separated *limited whole* artworks positioning them meticulously on plain white walls in a strict pedagogical and ceremonial sequence would be rejected and abolished. This process would arise from the artists' approaches to *pedestrianise* art and to oppose the idea of class distinction, linked to an art of a past seen to separate works from audiences not part of an aristocracy or ruling class invoking the questioning of whether traditional demarcations between audience and work created by *objective* critical viewing distance related to formal philosophical aesthetic theory and the concept of the *limited whole* artwork was still wholly appropriate. Through this process, artists had hoped to reflect social life and regenerate society. Due to this, different kinds of artworks would be designed to dismantle through "...discontinuity, shock and paradox" (Murdoch 2003, 7)[20] the formal and traditional philosophical aesthetic positions which had previously been linked to pre-modernist and modernist views on art and conventional *beauty* disseminated by such theoreticians of the visual arts as Alberti, Leonardo, Winckelmann, Greenberg, Fried and Shapiro.

Against tradition, and in an attempt to create a new kind of *beauty*, conceptual artist Jasper Johns and avant-garde composer John Cage had declared that Modern art was a paradox in which "Anything goes only in so far as there is a language in which to say it". (Harrison and Wood 1993, 684)[21] In 1967, in this spirit, the artist Sol LeWitt in the journal 'Artforum' the leading journal of the period had stated that the idea, or concept, is the most important aspect of the work which "…is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman". (Harrison and Wood 1993, 834) Also in the 1960s, calling for an end to the art of the past aligned with formal philosophical aesthetics conceptual artist Piero Manzoni had written that, "New conditions and problems imply different methods and standards and the necessity of finding original solutions". (Manzoni 1993, 709)[22] Cage again writing in the 1960s had stated that painting is now "...an entertainment in which to celebrate unfixity [and that]...any incentive to paint is as good as any other". (Cage 1993, 717)[23] These manifestoes for an art that could be almost *limitless* would resonate strongly for today's artists and visual theorists.

Such virulent transgressions against traditional and formal philosophical aesthetics in the 1960s had come out of a strong desire to change the status quo which had led to a rejection of western art, and western tradition in general. This saw an embracing of eastern religions and philosophies, which were found to be "…more intuitive and carefree, whereas western art…" was seen to serve "…religion and its dogmas." (Murdoch 2003, 8)[24] Against the formalist theorist Michael Fried's criticisms of an increasing theatricality occurring in artworks during the time and following Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage and Claes Oldenburg, Happenings, Performance and Fluxus events in the 1960s and 1970s both inside and outside gallery space

would increase the heterogeneous climate for art. Also Alan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, Pierre Restany's advocacy of the *Action Spectacle* (Harrison and Wood 1993, 711)[25] and Guy Debord's *Situationist* audience participation writings such as his *Towards a Situationist International* for example (which had advocated a revolutionary action that included the creation of new art forms which should "...no longer correspond to any of the traditional aesthetic categories") (Harrison and Wood 1993, 694)[26] had helped shape the collective mass audience participation and live performance art events which surfaced from this time. Much of this would be in direct opposition to traditional notions and modes of viewing art and had concurred with Andy Warhol who had wanted all classes of people to think alike. (Harrison and Wood 1993, 731)[27]

In a similar vein, and against previous aesthetic criteria, the theorist Marshall McLuhan's belief in the 1960s that new technology could be used positively and that the medium used to produce the artwork was the message and more important than the content of the work itself had influenced artists to employ the latest art forms such as analogue video art to critique the status quo. By doing this, many of these artists turning against the convention of depicting conventional *beauty* in art would attempt to form a new dialogic and *synethstesia* between audience and gallery as audiences were invited to create the spectacle of the works through active participation instead of their passive contemplation from afar. Whilst many analogue video artworks had displayed abstract and ephemeral imagery in real time on TV monitors which would both reject and involve the audience more directly within traditional gallery settings, they could also be reproduced dissolving the idea of the original (and *authentic*) single *limited whole* masterpiece related to previous (traditional) aesthetic criteria. Such transgressive practices would be responsible for helping re-shape and re-make the meaning of the art and the critical discourse that it would continue to engender, its institutionalisation and the art institutions, and had resulted from the emerging influence of the artists-theorists, who, from the 1960s and 1970s, had argued for the need to expand the conception of art as a way to embrace a much broader assortment of human artefacts.

As a result of the integration and pluralisation of the arts devoid of boundaries or hierarchies to become something almost *limitless*, new kinds of art spaces antithetical to traditional viewing environments and previous philosophical theories and criteria for viewing beautiful works of art would develop from the late 1970s. Defying traditional aesthetic criteria, and influenced by theorists such as George Kuber conceptual artists during the 1960s and 1970s such as Robert Morris and Robert Smithson who would move their works completely outside the confines of the gallery, would altogether define entirely new ways of making and viewing art. (Harrison and Wood 1993, 735)[28] By the 1990s, in contrast to traditional museum paradigms, which were integrally linked to theoretical discourses more in keeping with traditional aesthetic criteria, in *non-hierarchical* or *anti-hierarchical* black box museums all manner of shapes, imagery, sounds and objects would aspire to make museums heterogeneous places of flexibility and entertainment. (Manasseh 2009)

Today, much contemporary art and the critical discourse that would surround it would be embedded in theories of art based upon, and emanating from, many of the ideas which had surfaced in the 1960s and 1970s. As such, for today's theoreticians of visual culture who discuss new media, post-conceptual art practices and the digital revolution, their art criticisms are now distinct from previous traditional philosophical aesthetic positions on art more linked to the idea of the *limited whole* artwork. With the ongoing proliferation of images ever increasing via digital technology and digital art, which now compiles and comprises one

heterogeneous muddle "...full of anything and everything, from sharks to photographs, piles of rubbish to multi-screen video..." (Wood 2002, 6) revealing the banishment of traditional demarcations between different kinds of art, the decline in the authority of philosophical aesthetics for discussing today's contemporary art is ensured. Validating Yeldum's work today, one contemporary visual theorist wrote that the artist "…takes us on an intimate journey along the Hawkesbury, into his inner world of prayers and secret offerings.... The stark seclusion of the desert is replaced by the thriving kinship of the river." (Falvo 2007)[29] Similar discussions by today's visual theorists claiming that Slattery's works create a new reality in visual art embed a new theoretical discourse in a context outside previous aesthetic theories. (Tsitas 2009)[30] Also contributing to new theoretical positions today, *Knitta Please*'s website already has a large audience who discuss their points of view on contemporary post-conceptual artists of this kind and the new non-traditional aesthetic theories/criteria which surround them. Inspired by the ideas/behaviours of the conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s much of this takes us away from the traditional aesthetic criteria and formal philosophical aesthetics, which previously had once been mainly concerned with discussing the *beauty* and the *limited wholeness* of the single art object to be seen from a certain critical distance in order to inspire *beauty*, awe and reverie in the audience.

Cyrus Manasseh, PhD
Sessional Lecturer at the University of Technology, Sydney
Sessional Lecturer at the University of New South Wales, Sydney

References

Adorno, Theodor. *Prisms*. London and Cambridge, (Mass.): The MIT Press, 1990.
Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London and New York: Penguin Books, 1972.
Blaney-Brown, David. *Romanticism*. London: Phaidon Press, 2001.
Chapman, Matt. "Knitta Please: Graffiti You Can Cuddle Up To." (2007). *Inhabitat*. http://www.inhabitat.com/2007/01/11/knitta-please-graffiti-you-can-cuddle-up-to/ (accessed August 20, 2009).
Falvo, Rosa Maria. "Joshua Yeldum Exhibition Review." (2007). *Entertainment Home Page*. http://joshuayeldham.com/deathbirdmovienew.html (accessed August 20, 2009).
Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood, eds. *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Oxford and Cambridge, (Mass.): Blackwell, 1993.
Hook, Sidney, ed. *Art and Philosophy*: *A Symposium*. New York: New York University Press, 1966.
Manasseh, Cyrus. *The Problematic of Video Art in Museum 1968-1990*. New York: Cambria Press, 2009.
Murdoch, Iris. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Moral* . London and Sydney: Random House, 2003.
Russell, Bertrand. *History of Western Philosophy*. Oxford: Routledge Classics, 2008.
Tsitas, Evelyn. "Jackson Slattery." *RMIT: Profile: Jackson Slattery*. http://www.alumni.rmit.edu.au/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=918 (accessed August 20, 2009).
Wood, Paul. *Conceptual Art*. London: Tate Publishing 2002.

Notes

---

[1] Wood, Paul. 2002. *Conceptual Art.* London: Tate Publishing.
[2] Murdoch, Iris. 2003. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals.* London and Sydney: Random House.
[3] Falvo, Rosa Maria. "Joshua Yeldum Exhibition Review," (2007). *Entertainment Home Page*, http://joshuayeldham.com/deathbirdmovienew.html (accessed August 20, 2009).
[4] "Artists at Work: Joshua Yeldum," *Artscape*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Public Television, (ABC 1, August 18, 2009).
[5] Tsitas, Evelyn. "Jackson Slattery." *RMIT: Profile: Jackson Slattery*, http://www.alumni.rmit.edu.au/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=918 (accessed August 20, 2009).
[6] Chapman, Matt. "Knitta Please: Graffiti You Can Cuddle Up To." (2007). *Inhabitat*, http://www.inhabitat.com/2007/01/11/knitta-please-graffiti-you-can-cuddle-up-to/ (accessed August 20, 2009).
[7] Meier-Graefe, Julius. 1993. 'The Mediums of Art, Past and Present.' In *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood: Oxford and Cambridge, (Mass.), Blackwell, 1993. Originally published in 1904.
[8] Kuhns, Richard. 1966. *Art and Philosophy: A Symposium.* Ed. Sidney Hook. New York: New York University Press.
[9] Manasseh, Cyrus. 2009. *The Problematic of Video Art in the Museum 1968-1990*. New York: Cambria Press.
[10] Russell, Bertrand. 2008. *History of Western Philosophy*. Oxford: Routledge Classics.
[11] Blaney Brown, David. 2001. *Romanticism*. London: Phaidon Press.
[12] Blaney Brown.
[13] Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London and New York: Penguin Books.
[14] Wood.
[15] Wood.
[16] Wood.
[17] Wood.
[18] Harrison and Wood.
[19] Wood.
[20] Murdoch.
[21] Harrison and Wood.
[22] Manzoni, Piero. 1993. 'Free Dimension' In Harrison and Wood. Original published in 1960.
[23] Harrison and Wood.
[24] Murdoch.
[25] Harrison and Wood.
[26] Harrison and Wood.
[27] Harrison and Wood.
[28] Harrison and Wood.
[29] Falvo
[30] Tsitas.