

VIVID[RADICAL]MEMORY		V[R]M
Workshop Barcelona	Radical Conceptual Art revisited: A social and political perspective from the East and the South	

**Re-writing Conceptual Art (Seminar presentation)
Barcelona**

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First I would like to thank Antoni Mercader and the other organizers for inviting me to this event: it is a real honor to participate in this conversation, especially since it includes so many of the artists and curators and historians who were so integral to the period we are discussing. They know much more, and more directly, about all of this and so I will mostly limit my own contribution to some remarks about why and how I got involved in the battle over historicizing early conceptualism.

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I have been asked to talk about the exhibition *Global Conceptualism*, which was organized for the Queens Museum of Art in 1999. I will confess that, while I'm honored by the invitation, I find this a little confusing as a task. At the time, friends joked with us that our show could only have been done in Queens—then considered even more of a backwater than Brooklyn or New Jersey. We took this as a friendly observation, more a recognition of the project's renegade

approach than a comment about sophistication. But it is interesting to remember it in light of the strange second life that GC seems to be having now, in institutions that are considerably more august than the ones available to us back in 1999. But it's not just us: I can't remember a time when I've seen the word 'revolution' in so many press releases. *Revolution is not a Garden Party* (quoting Mao Tse Tung!), claims the title of an exhibition about 1956 Hungary, and *The Revolution will not be Curated*, according to the title of an art history symposium held recently at—of all places—the Museum of Modern Art. So, I feel compelled to start with a question: why all this interest, now, in these radical legacies? What does this resurgence tell us about our present moment?

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In an Addendum to the second edition of the catalogue for the 1989 exhibition *l'art conceptuel: une perspective*, organized for the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville in Paris, Seth Siegelaub attacked the way that conceptualism was being historicized in the exhibition and, especially, in the catalog essay by Benjamin Buchloh. "Despite claims and occasional footnotes to the contrary," he wrote, "Buchloh's text is a formalistic and idealistic one, a sort of tautological "art history as art history as art history," which has little, if any, relationship to the social,

economic or cultural, i.e. historical, period which it pretends to describe. Although the text claims to deal with the production of art between 1962-69, it is hard to imagine how one can deal with that period without mentioning, even in a passing footnote, for example, May '68 or the US war in Vietnam, which marked the period, even the art world." This was especially egregious, Siegelaub noted, since Conceptual Art was "an art whose spirit, ideas and practices were linked with the broad social issues of the time," works that "often open directly onto social, moral and political issues, both art-related and more general." He concluded with what he called a "random list of some actors 'missing in action'—dematerialized?—who contributed, in one way or another, to the formation of the art historical moment called, for lack of a better term, 'conceptual art'": among them (and I am editing here, for the sake of emphasis) the Art Workers Coalition, Woodstock, the Black Panthers, the Rosario Group, the Bay of Pigs, Abbie Hoffman, "and, lest we forget, the Vietnam War."

Siegelaub's point echoes one made as far back as 1975 by Joseph Kosuth, who had written that it was impossible to understand what conceptualism had accomplished "without understanding the 60s, and appreciating CA for what it was: the art of the Vietnam War era."

To insist on conceptualism as a political project, then, as Global Conceptualism did, was not new. Nonetheless, it had remained controversial to claim this—a fact that is attested to by the furious accusations of revisionism and ideologization that the exhibition was subject to in 1999, a full 25 years after Kosuth's pronouncement.

The effort to contain it under the umbrella of aesthetic innovation has accompanied the whole period of conceptualism's history. One of the effects of this delimitation is precisely to disqualify the work in terms of its activist ambitions, and to recast its politics as a subset of already-existing 'political' arts like agit prop. This, in turn, worked to deemphasize not only the radical shift that conceptualism proposed to an expanded recognition of the scope of the political—an expansion that was congruent, I might note, to that proposed in many other discourses at the time—, but also conceptualism's many ideas about the political operations of art. Another effect is to disallow any work that does not 'look conceptual', which as we discovered meant disallowing much of the production outside of the NY-London axis (not to mention an important strand of work made in NY too). In other words, this aesthetic containment defines conceptualism according to its symptoms rather than sources, and in the process evacuates its central challenge to operate, and to aspire, in ways that were radically different and radically ambitious.

As all of this suggests, to define conceptualism according to either visual rules or political doctrines would denature its project. What we tried to suggest in GC was, rather, the idea that conceptualism was

- in equal measure an aesthetic and a political project, and not a collapsing or conflation of the two;
- in equal measure a consequence of evolving artistic logics and of conditions of socio-cultural and political crisis;
- in equal measure both an indigenous, localized strategy and a global phenomenon, with a capacity to work on the unique problems of particular places and legacies, and on widely shared concerns.

Underlying all of this was an intuition about the precise suited-ness of conceptualist practice to undertake these ambitious tasks. This suited-ness, we suspected, came from conceptualism's interest not only in ideas, as is often claimed, but in their transmission. Ideas, in themselves, could be just another version of the object of art, even if a dematerialized one: but ideas in motion immediately pushed to the front questions of who receives them, and what happens as a result. In retrospect, it seems to me that the reason for organizing GC was to test this intuition, and to reclaim what seemed to us to be a legacy of immense importance.

Another main contention of GC had to do with our map. It is worth keeping in mind that conceptualisms emerged as an artistic strategy at specific historical moments: in NY, from the context of an extremely buttoned-down artworld dominated by powerful formalist critics; in Japan in the context of a postwar society heavily burdened by military defeat and by treaty obligations to the US; in much of Latin America amidst a noxious mix of US and military domination; in East and Central Europe under soviet occupation, and so on. Conceptualism, in each instance, was a bid not only to defy, but to transform those conditions of repression, and to assert an agency not penned-in by the institutions and mores of an increasingly subservient and commodified art system. Conceptualism was not deliverance, it was a way to fight back: for this reason it was different in different places and, while it was inherently and pointedly political, what that meant in each case was different.

After endless debate, we had settled on *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s* as the exhibition title. The show was structured as eleven, geographically-defined sections, each of them organized by a curator with expertise in that region: this approach arose from our observation that works that looked and felt like conceptualism had been produced all over the world, but in ways that seemed very local and specific. The exhibition

consisted mostly of works that, when considered at all, had been consigned to secondary status, as though made under the influence of the 'originary' conceptual art. With our array of sections, we substituted a different geography for that filter. The compulsion to make the case 'globally,' (even though to really do that was obviously impossible), was not only to make an argument about the breadth of practice that qualified as conceptual, but also to de-center the map of that production, pushing the argument to be more about differences, rather than influences.

GC occasioned some heated debate, though this was almost completely confined to the US where critics seemed to take the show as an irresponsible act of historical piracy and a personal affront. The small size of the "North American" section of the exhibition, and its placement following Japan, Western Europe, Eastern Europe and Latin America, was understood as an extension of the 'ideologization' of our account. Of course it was clear from the start that the US and West European sections of GC were going to be controversial. We could have just left them out, and done a show of Other Conceptualisms (or, more anthropologically, Conceptualisms of the Other), but this would have only barely inferred any discussion of those conceptualisms alongside those for whom they were Other. It would have left the usual assumptions intact about the naturalness of power relations in the art system, and would have left as settled

policy the supposition that, even if those Other locales adopted conceptual practices, in doing so they were only retooling an idea that came from a more advanced place because they were not modern enough to come up with it themselves. At issue, in other words, was agency. Hence, the idea of 'points of origin,' rather than points of contact, adoption or adaptation.

There were reasons to be wary of the fragile logic based on geographic proximities. This logic summoned unities that elided what were, in most cases, patchwork and riven remnants of colonialism and/or imperialism and, in all cases, fundamentally plural cultural environments. For example, in the case of East European artists, intraregional contact was scarce, while the fertile links were with Paris or, in the case of Petr Stembera and other artists working in Prague, with California. We also had intense discussions with the Turkish curator Vasif Kortun about the possibility of staging a section on the "Middle East," an idea that he rejected on the grounds that even the name "Middle East" was corrupted by its implication of Europe as the central referent, not to mention the problems tangent to claiming Israel and Turkey, for instance, as intrinsically linked. The essentialist whiff of the term 'regionalism' resonated uncomfortably in a time when the idea of national pavilions—even in Venice—was finally being forsaken as obsolete. On the other hand, when Okwui Enwezor had addressed questions

of globalization and the post-national in the context of the second Johannesburg biennale in 1997, he was doing so in a place that had, we could say, only recently become meaningfully national. What was arguable in one context was, in another, very abstract. While the discourse—and international capital—might have outgrown geography, it was still operative on many levels of experience. So, we had problematized this regionalism as a relatively blunt tool. I raise this today because we are again working with a framework that suggests regional coherences, so maybe another question I can leave on the table is about the issues that may still attend to such an approach: what might we be glossing in the process, for example, and what do we gain in being able to identify a broader trajectory?

In any case, this structuring proposition led us to a parallel decision about the form that our narrative should take. As a matter of corresponding logic, we chose to install the exhibition by section, rather than drawing out cross-geographic themes.

Interestingly, some critics saw this as the wellspring for a general narrative failure: in this view, the separate narratives contained in each of the sections did not accumulate into a unified judgment. I want to put an accent on this idea of 'adding up in a unified way,' in order to get at another of the questions that seems important here.

It was precisely that kind of 'overall sense' that we were contesting as intrinsically too manufactured and attenuated a consensus. The assertion, then, was of the exhibition form as agglomerative, but not, finally, linear: part of GC's experiment was with amassing contexts, to explore what might be the resonances and interplays between them.

But, even if the structure of sections was maintained as a difference machine, it is also of course true that proximities, groupings and sight lines are not the only organizing texts of an exhibition, which is always an associative and mnemonic proposition too.

Such less immediatist readings might have placed Gerhard Richter and Konrad Lueg's *Life with Pop: A Demonstration of Capitalist Realism* alongside Oscar Bony's *La familia obrera* (*Proletarian Family*), the first consisting of the artists sitting in the window of a department store as yet another 'commodity' and the latter of a proletarian family hired to sit in a gallery in Buenos Aires for the duration of an exhibition, compensated at a rate double their normal income. And perhaps Alberto Greco's *Vivo dito*, in which people on the street were randomly declared to be living works of art, by the artist's act of encircling them with a chalk line that he signed—work that was opposite, in some ways, to Bony's proletarians. All of these works underscore the class dimensions of art, and their relation to capital

and commodity. Could Daniel Buren's *Hommes Sandwiches* have been part of this grouping, with their striped placards carried around town? Richter, Bony, Greco and Buren's works shared an incorporation of non-art enactors, or non-art situations, but their performative frames were of varying tempos, elucidating the complexity of quotidian live-ness in much of GC's universe.

Great quantities of works in GC turned out to center on money: this surprised us, and presented a more direct Marxist current than we had suspected. It was fascinating to encounter that agenda, already so debilitated in 1999, and contemplate what it might mean to draw it out in such an alien moment. Might one of conceptualism's seductions be that it still resurrected a Marxist model? In this grouping we could imagine Akasegawa Genpei's elaborate 1963-66 work in which he printed phony 1,000 yen notes as exhibition announcements, for which he was charged with counterfeiting. The defense claimed that the work was Art, and for this reason turned the courtroom into an exhibition space—to no avail. What about Cildo Meireles's 1975 rubber-stamping onto Brazilian currency "Who Killed Herzog?" in reference to a journalist critical of the military regime who died while in police custody. In that case money was used for its circulatory properties rather than as representation of governmentality or capital value. Or Yves Klein's *Sale of a Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility: Sale to M.*

Blankfort, in which he 'sold' a zone in exchange for a quantity of gold supplied by the collector, which Klein then threw into the Seine. Or Tibor Hajas' *Restoration 2 (Restored Money)*, or Miklos Erdély's *Unguarded Money*, an action that collected donations for "the families of our martyrs" following the Revolution of 1956 that, according to Laszlo Beke, "test[ed] the limits of political protest and the will of the authorities to tolerate it."

Another strand ran through identity documents, including works by Komar and Melamid, Kendall Geers, Malcolm Payne, and, if we want to be a little tendentious, On Kawara. It's interesting to think about why conceptual art would be concerned with such authorizations and proofs. On the other hand, there were a couple of bricks in the show, the one from Prague and the other from Johannesburg: the first an emblem of resistance, and the second a remnant of the brutality of systematic poverty.

Groupings based in artistic methodology might have assembled the collectivist campaigns, processions and public actions such as Collective Action Group's 'trips in the direction of nothingness,' High Red Center's street-cleaning action in Tokyo; Tucumán Arde's complex media campaign denouncing rural poverty and oppression under the Argentinian dictatorship; Choi Byung-soo's *Funeral Procession for Lee Han-ryul*, a massive public march defying the military

government in Seoul; Mr. Peanut's mayoral run in Vancouver – which began as a multi-media project about the commercial and cultural ubiquity of the Mr. Peanut image, and escalated into an actual political campaign that garnered 3.4% of the vote; or, Grup de Treball's *Recorreguts (Journeys)*, which could be read as a meditation on mapping, the social body and the fragmentary nature of the archive, and/or as a record of the 113 members of the Assemblea de Catalunya arrested by police in 1973, and who travelled the same itinerary as that proposed in the work, from the church of Santa Maria Mitjancera, to police headquarters, and finally to the respective prisons for men and women. And we could even include here, in a different poetic register, Tadeusz Kantor's *Sea Concerto* or Ana Lupas' *Humid Installation*, a communal laundry line stretched, hauntingly, across a Transylvanian hillside. Or, swinging in another direction, Goran Trbuljak's *From time to time I stuck my finger through a hole in the door of the Modern Art Gallery without the management's knowledge*.

These groupings give us a kind of preliminary inventory of GC's assertions. They also, I think, propose an interesting thought experiment, which demands the mental construction of an extended idea, on the basis of disparate signals. To imagine such groupings amounts to a mental cross-referencing operation, in other words, very similar to that of conceptualism itself.

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As I have suggested, the sectioned structure underscored the ways in which these various conceptualisms differed from each other. This was not a great strategy if our aim had been to argue for conceptualism as something arrived at as a consequence of Minimalism, but it was very useful to make the political point about conceptualism as a form of artistic work fundamentally articulated around the particularities of local conditions and legacies, and able to act on them.

Not only histories but meanings were varied, even in terms of what we considered to be 'definitive aspects' of conceptualism: For example, while in US and European work 'institutional critique' was defined in terms of material institutions—museums, especially— in Japan, "theoretical postulations on conceptualism identified an 'internal' institution, where the idea of 'art' is most stringently located. In the case of some Eastern European artists, it was not art institutions *per se* but rather the ubiquity of institutions overall, and their agency on behalf of state ideology, that was seen as the problem."

Regarding 'dematerialization,' this meant something distinct in a Latin America coping with the disappointments of

postwar economic development schemes and the rise of military regimes. The 'recovery' of the common, mass-produced object substituted for a 'dematerialization' that was preconditioned by material plenty, and tended to put those objects into action rather than pull apart their commodity status.

Further, our initial operating definition of 'public' space had been largely informed by projects in Latin America, in which the appropriation of streets, plazas and civic buildings was crucial. However, this turned out to be a problematic sieve that disallowed conceptualist practices in the USSR and Eastern Europe, where "a decisively, even hermetically private course of action was pursued." In fact I remember that when I was asking artists in Prague and Budapest about conceptual work in public space I got a lot of blank looks: Tamas Szentjoby finally told me, in exasperation, and by way of criticism of Milan Knizak, that to work in 'public' space would have been corrupt since it was a space entirely controlled by the regime, and to suggest it as a workable arena would have been complicit. This question of public and private space, as we noted, "closely paralleled, and had important ramifications for, the concept of audience that was operative for these artists. Western conceptualists theorized conceptualism as a way of displacing the specialist, privileged spectator who typified the conventional art audience. In Russia,

conversely, work was propelled by the virtual lack of a conventional audience for nonconformist art. Meanwhile, Latin American conceptualists often aspired to address and mobilize the entire populace."

And then there was the matter of visibility. As we know, a pervasive caricature of conceptualism holds that it is a most ungenerous art, withholding the 'pleasures of the visual' in its obedience to its self-involved, puritanical and disciplinary prohibitions. From this stereotype, an indictment of conceptualism as radically divorced from life follows easily. But this was not our sense of things.

Confounding expectations of a museum stuffed with typewritten notes and fuzzy black and white photographs, 'with the occasional splash of red,' as one commentator put it—of an exhibition-as-Marxist-manual—GC moved through widely disparate visual and material registers. There was indeed a lot of text—in fact, Peter Wollen's selection for the North American section consisted almost entirely of it, including Sol LeWitt's "Sentences on Conceptual Art" instead of one of his wall drawings, for example. [Paradoxically, the most material of the works in this section was John Baldessari's documentation of the destruction of all his previous works in 1970. It was an unmistakably polemical take on the subject. But it also basically reproduced GC's operation in miniature, taking less space for canonical

works to free up scarce space for the lesser-known, by artists such as Lee Lozano, Robert Huot and Harry Gamboa Jr. Ditto, Wollen's inversion of the gender politics of the usual accounts of US conceptualism, which again suggested a reprise of the general idea that, even in the 'center' of conceptual art, an alternate list of key artists and works could plausibly be made.

But Wollen's textual discipline stood in contrast to much of the rest of the exhibition, which highlighted, among other things, a vastly playful sense of procedure. In this vein, we could cite Komar and Melamid's passports, Yves Klein's *Sale of a Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility*, Antonio Caro's appropriation of the Coca Cola logo, Liliana Porter's *trompe l'oeil* rendition of crumpled paper, Billy Apple's *Bleaching with Lady Clairol Instant Crème Whip*, or Park Buldong's election posters —among many others. And for that matter, Wollen had included Mr. Peanut's 1974 mayoral campaign as part of his selection, which had been conducted under the slogan of "Elect a Nut for Mayor!"...

Furthermore, not merely playfulness but the sensorial and relational was a crucial aspect of conceptualist practice, in our view. As Jacques Ranciere was to observe about what he called the 'aesthetic regime,' at its heart is "the loss of any determinate relationship between a work and its audience, between a sensible presence and an effect that

will be its natural end." Relations, that is, are inherently not predetermined—a crucial characteristic that they share with revolt. This was a point made repeatedly by Mari Carmen Ramírez with regard to the work of Lygia Clark, for example: sensation fused to the politics, and the means by which the work accumulated social force.

All of this takes us back to the question about what ties these disparate works together as 'conceptual.' Maybe from an orthodox art historical perspective conceptualism is inherently problematic. It does not conform to stylistic consistencies. The subject matter it takes up varies wildly from one place to another, and its subjectivity is equally eclectic. It is intensely local, but we claim it as global. If it is not institutional critique, or a withdrawal of visibility, or textual nature, or genesis among a certain group of artists who knew and competed with each other—to use the most habitual of nominators—then what makes a work conceptualist? Maybe it was the wrong question. So, we decided to locate the core of the argument in the work's ambitions, rather than its forms—entirely reasonable, we figured, in the case of an art about ideas. Our interest was, beyond the politics expressed in the work, also in the political nature that the work inevitably had, due to the expansiveness of its ambitions and the open-endedness of the orbits in which it set out to circulate. Defining conceptualism in terms of aesthetic and methodological open-

endedness rather than orthodoxy allowed us to make the exhibition fundamentally about the radicality of conceptualism's dare, to exist as a cross-field that intersects and interacts with an expanded range of social conditions, in potentially limitless invention. The other day I ran across a quote from Wilhelm von Humboldt, an early 19th century philosopher and the older brother of Alexander—he described language as making 'infinite use of finite means,' and that struck me as a good way to think about this.

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I have been using the word 'politics' pretty liberally, and it is a word probably more misused and misunderstood than most. When the artworld works itself into a tizzy over 'political art,' it is generally because of two doctrines. First, that normativity and coercion are closely twinned to, and definitive of, politics [but ironically, not of capitalism—but that's another matter]. In this scheme, politics pertains to state governance. Which brings us to the second doctrine, that such 'politics' is antithetical to 'poetics,' a murderous intruder in the house of aesthetics. Art's struggle, then, is to become 'free of the instrumentalism and partisan control of political movements.'

Sloganeering, of course, is neither good art nor good politics: it is, rather, a crude and reductive form of representation which seeks to define, confine and settle that which it purportedly names, removing it from a realm of active critique—in other words, from what I would argue is the realm of the truly political. Revelation, the slogan's close cousin, is also not what I'm trying to get at here.

Critique, here, means practice, not judgment: and one that privileges the question over the declaration. Practice that is necessarily specific rather than generalized and abstract; practice that is meaningful to particular situations or conditions, and which sets out not just to engage with, but to work on. Critique, in other words, has a horizon. So then, what I'm talking about is an art that is political in the sense of being committed to an ongoing process of critique and centrally concerned with ethical questions, while actively engaged in a poetics of its circumstances: an art that is socially honest and precise.

What made conceptualism so significant in these terms was its central concern with meaning, communication and critique, which made it a natural ally for rethinking the received systems of social and political power. It is in this sense of critical thinking that conceptualism's audacity lay—not just to renovate art in ways that left those instituted categories and ordered knowledges intact,

but to renew art as a means to think things like communication, freedom, ethics, meaning and power. Here, we can understand conceptualism's responses to conditions of political and cultural closure as a process of critical reopening.

Conceptualism was well-suited to a deeply political art in matter-of-fact ways as well: politically problematic works could be distributed more safely if they left no physical residue, and artworks made of ideas required neither cash for production nor permission to export, and so could exempt themselves, at least to a degree, from regulation by economic and bureaucratic systems. Conceptualism's informality and affinity for collectivity made it attractive to artists who yearned for a more direct engagement with the public during intense, transformative periods. And conceptualism offered an immediacy of production and circulation that allowed work to keep up with events that were moving fast—and this was, indeed, an art that wanted to keep up with events.

A great many of the works in GC pertain to these broad assertions, but this is a very heterogeneous cluster. Among the works that actively engaged with problems of the public sphere, there were some which seized the public as site and construed new meanings for it, while others rejected it in favor of alternate spaces. So we have a range of works, like

Miklos Erdely's *Unguarded Money*, in which a collective choice in favor of solidarity is staged in the exact space of brutal invasion, resignifying its meaning and ownership; or Tamas Szentjoby's *Prague Radio*, which conferred onto popular protest an alchemical valence by replicating the widespread act of carrying bricks when transistor radios were banned; or the Rosario Group's *Tucumán Arde*, which, through complex and often subtle acts of media piracy, systematically undermined the credibility of the Argentinian military regime; or Oscar Bony's *Familia Obrera*, which confronted gallery-goers with a spectacularization of the underclass; or Cildo Meireles' *Insertions Into Ideological Circuits*, that turned commerce into subversive counter-circuits of distribution; or Antonio Caro's *Homage to Quintin Lame* or his appropriation of the Coca Cola logo in *Colombia*, which complicated the instantaneity and naturalness of logotypic, corporate communication; or Kendell Geers' *Brick*, which turned the artwork itself into the scene of the crime or his *Untitled (ANC, AVF, AWB, CP, DP, IFP, NP, PAC, SACP)*, for which he joined every single one of the apartheid-era political parties in S. Africa; or Park Bul-dong's *Nightmare* series of electoral campaign posters; or Choi Byung-soo's *Design of a Funeral Procession for the Six Suicides*, which thronged Seoul's streets with protest at a time when such gatherings were forbidden; or Gyula Pauer's *Forest of Demonstration Signs*; or Hi Red Center's *Be Clean* performance, consisting of cleaning a

Tokyo street—an extremely absurd, nonsensical act, meant to confound traditional expectations of art, and a way of mocking authority, and ideas about labor, productivity, worth and public space; or, of course, Grup de Treball's *Recorreguts*, which overlaid personal and political space, we might say, and asserted what they described in 1973 as "a critical attitude toward the creative process itself, including the spectator-reader in this analytical dynamic, and liberating them from the mystic and intuitive contemplation of the sublimated object."

On the other hand, there were many proposals that asserted other spaces— psychological space, domestic space, rural space, the space of tradition, among others—as collective, meaningful, and proprietary. Here I could mention Petr Stembera's act of grafting a live branch into his arm and leaving it there until his blood became infected by its alien intrusion; or Lygia Clark's intersubjective, and interior, encounters; or Adrian Piper's *Hypothesis*, in which she connected her conceptual investigations with an observation of her own body in personal, everyday activities; or Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Mouth to Mouth*, with its unraveling of the naturalness of language; or Willem Boshoff's *Kykafrikaans*, a twenty year, obsessive project in which language struggles in futility—written in Afrikaans, during the apartheid era; or Gyula Pauer's *Pseudo*, another self-thwarting expressive regime; and Frederic Bruly

Bouabre's *Bete Alphabet*, in which the artist developed a written language—and therefore, recorded history—where none had existed previously. Or, how about Collective Action Group's 'empty actions' and 'trips in the direction of nothingness'; or Gorgona's insistence on the empty shop window; or Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*; or Ilya Kabakov's *Primakov Sitting in a Closet*; or Laboratoire Agit-Art's insistence on a private space of collectivity. And how about Victor Grippo's *Construction of a Traditional Rural Oven for Making Bread*; or, indeed, Hélio Oiticica's *Parangoles*.

And, with this in mind, it is worth noting that the range of relations that these works set up with their audiences, and of affects that it set into motion, was enormous. Artists were variously expository, cajoling and complicitous with their publics, challenging at some moments and interwoven at others. But, while I am emphasizing the importance of the 'relations' of conceptualism, I also want to hang a question mark over them, and insist on a set of questions that goes something like this: What does the work take up? Who does it hail? What does it require of them? Of the artist? Does it have a vector in the imagination and, if so, where does it point?

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We are in a strange moment. On the one hand, there are pervasive conditions that are incredibly depressing—at the beginning I mentioned 'revolution' in strange places, but I can't end without noting a couple of counter-indications: in the upcoming Prague Biennial, artists who we considered to be 'conceptualists' are consecrated under the banner of 'Czech Minimalism,' while at Art Brussels this year, part of the program consists of a debate about the "Reception of conceptual art; how it became part of the art system." But it is not simply a problem of history's voracious ability to absorb and contain, it is a problem of memory and its uses.

My sense is that we are in a moment that acutely measures the difference between, let's say, two topplings: the Budapest Stalin in the fierce and hopeful moment of 1956, and the one in 2003 in Baghdad, orchestrated, in full cognition of its many predecessors, by the US military. The first of these, accompanied by the painting out of street signs in order to disorient the invading troops, was something the Situationists must have loved: while the second was an act of stage managing the image of hope, for entirely dystopic ends. Maybe what's happening is that enough time has passed since 1968, 1975, 1989 and 9/11 that we can return to the whole argument about art and politics, which had become so overwrought and overdetermined for such a long time: or maybe we just can't wait any more.

I said something about memory. The project of memory here should not, I don't think, be in order to reinforce identities and typologies, and, in that, to establish and cement lineages from then to now and, in that, to reinvent or restore or recreate that past. Why? Because those works, those conceptualist positions, were themselves little concerned with the hardenings brought by identity, and were instead what Kristen Ross has referred to as a 'continuous commitment to interrogating what it is that makes politics possible.'

It was not a work that we can reduce to the Grand Figures of dictatorship, empire and rebellion—but was rather, as often as not, an art of the everyday realm, an art of small change, of small returns. Julia Kristeva tells us that revolt means continual questioning, probing of appearances. But more interestingly, she says that revolt means, among other things, returning. Conceptualism was an art of revolt, in that it willfully outstripped the available frames of analysis. We should be careful, now, that our reframings do not do violence to its surplus as a movement.

This brings us to the paradoxical status of GC as a museum exhibition. This seems especially pertinent to focus on today, since by now major, canonical exhibitions of this fundamentally anti-institutional work have become almost

routine. Early on, conceptualism had developed its own exhibitionary formats, in which the morphological distance between artwork and exhibition was very short. But now, with museum exhibitions of conceptual art, it is being fitted into formats that it had often explicitly rejected. For this reason, our introductory essay had ended with a litany of caveats. "We have had to grapple with the difficulties involved in constructing a museal display out of works that often were intended to counter or undermine the institutions of the museum and the art world," we wrote. "We regret that, unavoidably, intentions have been blurred and the sacralization of intentionally profane acts has occurred in the interest of recovering these histories."

In Havana, there is a Museum of the Revolution. I think that GC was exactly that kind of oxymoron—a museum of something that can never truly be museumified. I think that in some respects our desire to make a place in the history of art for this work was at odds with our other desire to recognize the full radicality of that works' challenge. One of the questions we might want to engage with today is about the further impacts of this process: are we, after all these exhibitions, histories and anthologies, actually dealing with those works, or are we encountering their retellings and their institutionalization? What can memory give us—radical memory, as the workshop organizers say—if it is not prematurely detonated into nostalgia?

GC arose from a desire to highlight a degree of radical ambition that seemed to have vanished from the landscape with incredible rapidity and totality. We read early conceptualism from a position of the lingering impulse toward utopia—utopia of a transformative art, and of an 'art' organically linked to and interdependent with the 'social' and the 'political'—that we felt had been ignited by conceptualism. GC was in that sense a kind of manifesto married to an exhibitionary apparatus, angry about the conditions of dense commodification of culture, and passionate in its refusal of defeat by those conditions. We became—indirectly, ironically, and perhaps immodestly, the historians of our own radical impulses.

Having said all that, though, we might note something else: while the image that appeared on the catalogue cover was Hikosaka Naoyoshi's "revolution" postcard, the image on the back was of Wei Guangqping's "Suicide Series": GC was suffused with a sense of its own unrequitedness, its openness as a project. Far from an opportunity for triumphalist hectoring, the project seemed more to us like a process of asking questions about the problem of art's real or possible agency. While certain aspects of conceptualism's legacy seemed prominent, we wrote, it was precisely its revolutionary political aspirations that "present an uncertain legacy."

The kind of fervent faith in art that coursed under GC may sit uncomfortably now. I wonder whether this is not part of the reason for the renewed interest in (historical) conceptualism, with its enormous ambitions for the valence and agency of the artwork. Whether art—conceptual or otherwise— can actually produce meaningful change has always been debatable, but this has never stopped being a question of exquisite importance. This is an almost impossibly painful question to ask these days— a fact that is probably the best measure of that question's continuing urgency.

This text correspond to the presentation that took place at the Barcelona Workshop in May, 2007.

We can see the illustrated version in the web of the project.

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