

Kornblau, Gary. "Review: 1965-1975: Reconsidering the Object of Art," *Art Issues* (January/ February 1996), p. 36-37.

"1965-1975: Reconsidering the Object of Art"

at MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART,
15 October-4 February

"In the sixties, I felt like a dog looking at a forest seeing countless trees and thinking, 'So little time, so much to do!' Now we're down to one tree that hundreds of dogs have already pissed on."

—John Baldessari

"I wanted very, very much to be in this...historically important exhibition, but there really is nothing in this world that I want so much that in order to get it I will knowingly help Philip Morris kill people."

—Adrian Piper



While the May 1968 student demonstrations in Paris may be more important to countless American art students reared on theory rather than experience, it's the antic rock masterpiece *The Who Sell Out* (1966) and *Saturday Night Live* television skits of the late nineteen seventies that bracket the most creative artistic material of the period. They also exemplify the fact that conceptual art exists in all strata of culture, from popular to elite. Indeed, the best art in the remarkable yet academic exhibition "1965-1975: Reconsidering the Object of Art" participates in a highly sophisticated form of intellectual mischief more reminiscent of Berkeley love-ins than Lacanian repression. Restrained aesthetic form is given to the intoxication that infected a generation.

The greatest legacy of early conceptual art is its extraordinary wit. Humor is the essential ploy for many artists of the exhibition's period, calling forth as it does some of the most immediate of our bodily responses—the laugh, the smirk, the grin—before deep thought sets in. It also makes possible any wholesale reconsideration of the object (and objectives) of art.

Because a mental reaction is produced before habits determining how we look at art take over, the spectator unwittingly becomes open to the radical possibilities embedded in the artwork. Consequently, such art succeeds only when it avoids the didacticism of a formal exercise intended to make an intellectual point, and instead functions as an aesthetic caper.

In the exhibition's handsome catalogue and otherwise helpful brochure, however, curators Ann Goldstein of the Museum of Contemporary Art and Anne Rorimer disregard this aesthetic revolution. Instead,

A PAINTING THAT IS ITS OWN DOCUMENTATION

JUNE 18 1968: IDEA CONCEIVED AT 10:25 A.M.
NATIONAL CITY CALL BY JOHN BALDESSARI
JULY 30: CANVAS BUILT AND PREPARED
JULY 31: TEXT REWRITTEN AND EDITED
AUGUST 1: PRINTING COMMISSIONED
AUGUST 3: PRINTING COMPLETED
OCTOBER 6: FIRST SHOWING: MOLLY
BARNES GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

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THE NEW MUSEUM
MAY 2008 - MAY 1981
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
MAY 22 - JUNE 24, 1988
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
SEP. 4 - OCT. 18, 1981
THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER
CINCINNATI, OHIO - FEB. 21 1982
CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM
SCOTTSDALE, AZ - MAY 6 - OCT. 18, 1981
THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
LOS ANGELES, CA - MARCH 25 - JUNE 11, 1980

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
SAN FRANCISCO, CA - JULY 12 - AUG. 6, 1980
HERRINGHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN
BIRMINGHAM, AL - OCT. 18 - NOV. 4, 1980
WALKER ART CENTER
PITTSBURGH, PA - FEB. 3 - APRIL 26, 1980
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
NEW YORK, NY - JUNE 18 - OCT. 20, 1980
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
MONTREAL, QC - NOVEMBER 1980 - JANUARY 1981
THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
LOS ANGELES, CA - OCT. 15, 1980 - FEB. 4, 1981

The Picture of Dorian Gray onto canvas in 1974, he was neither making a didactic point about painting as a casual commodity, nor identifying an artwork as a "text," as the exhibition catalogue suggests; rather, the work instantiates the romantic premise of the turn-of-the-century novel—that beauty is worth dying (and obsessively working) for. Art is of great consequence, Ruppertsberg's *Dorian Gray* proposes: Read its twenty panels at your peril.

Throughout the exhibition, such extra-visual impact is pervasive. While the clichéd definition of conceptual art is that it's about ideas (an attempt to make art more "serious"—i.e., European), as exemplified here it's really about a diverse array of bodily ticks, tickles, and fancies, along with everyday sounds and smells. The impact of Edward Ruscha's *anti-conceptual Chocolate Room*, originally made for the 1970 Venice Biennale, depends on all our senses: Here, it exudes the sweet smell of chocolate and



they suggest that even the most humorous and inventive works by the 55 artists and collectives included simply critique the production of meaning extant elsewhere in the culture. Yet when John Baldessari designed *A Painting That Is Its Own Documentation* (1968-present), he provided a means for his conceptual sally to survive institutional embalming. Consisting merely of a list of the work's own exhibition history painted onto canvas, the painting has been altered again by the addition of a line of text documenting its most recent presentation, which attempts to historically reexamine the period of its creation. Baldessari ensures that no institution will ever drain life from his work. This wry upending of our expectations concerning what an art object is, when it is complete, and how it functions has been repeatedly played at the price of major art institutions, which for so long shunned conceptual art. (Now, perhaps, they rightly recognize it is a challenge to their connoisseurship, scholarship, and emasculating aims.)

Likewise, when Allen Ruppertsberg transcribed the entire text of Oscar Wilde's

attracts buzzing, hungry flies. In Venice, ants walked across the silkscreened chocolate and visitors moistened their fingers and drew into its silky surface. Ruscha puts the canonical, meditative space of visual contemplation on sensory overload: It's Rothko's Chapel, as seen by Hershey's.

Yet another tour de force is James Coleman's *Slide Piece* (1972-73), which comprises a single image of an ordinary street scene projected onto the wall of a darkened room; meanwhile, a deadpan, scholarly voice examines the picture's pedestrian composition in minute detail. Although the exhibition brochure declares that Coleman is exploring the subjectivity of perception, it's obvious to any viewer with a sense of humor that his piece is actually a send-up of that academic concern, as is William Leavitt's *California Patio* (1972), a curtained glass door leading out onto a shrub-lined walk and affixed with a label describing the Hollywood party now (or then) taking place. But the patio is only a stage-set inside the gallery, and the party occurs only in our thoughts; Leavitt explicitly equates imagination with entertainment.

The heretofore unknown (to me, at least) Stanley Brouwn is represented by a wonderfully funny series of four drawings made in response to his asking directions of folks on the street: "This Way Brouwn," each one reads, as the artist bumbles his way around a European city in the early nineteen sixties. From Eleanor Antin's documentation of her body's slimming down (from portly to almost svelte) in *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) and William Wegman's playful videos to Bruce Nauman's photographic puns, Michael Asher's sub-



tle gallery intervention, and Tom Marioni's beer-drinking installation, conceptual art cannot begin to be understood without first acknowledging its sense of humor. (Gilbert & George's hilarious *The Singing Sculpture* of 1970 is at the forefront of this canon, though it is not included in the exhibition.)

Most of the art exhibited shares a healthy, anti-institutional bias. This is a joy to see when that bias is infected with a wit recognizing that any real challenge to institutions quickly becomes institutionalized itself. But some of the more unself-critical work is preachy, even schoolmasterish. A case in point is Hans Haacke, who objected to the exhibition being funded by Philip Morris, Inc., a long-standing arch-enemy of art, health, and decency. Haacke has written and appended a letter to his installation, signed onto by a number of the participating artists, which in effect chastises the museum for selling out—something that both John Baldessari and The Who informed us twenty-five years ago can be a good thing, if done in an intelligent, self-conscious way. (Note that in 1969 Philip Morris sponsored "When Attitudes Become

Form," a groundbreaking conceptual-art exhibition that also included work by Haacke.) Adrian Piper at least showed more integrity than Haacke and his friends, by removing her work from the exhibition entirely upon learning of Philip Morris' involvement a few weeks later. The whole droll escapade only exposes some artists' naïvité in dealing with the complicated relationships between pleasure, commerce, and social responsibility, which other artists in the show address seriously as the messy and interesting predicament it is. (See Nauman's 1967-70 photograph *Eating My Words*.)

It's not surprising that much of the art in the exhibition which still holds up was made by artists who worked in southern California (Antin and Baldessari in San Diego; Asher, Leavitt, Nauman, Ruppersberg, Ruscha, and Wegman in Los Angeles), for here creativity is primarily the domain of the popular, not fine arts. In the late nineteen sixties, some artists began to accept the fact that art is a part of leisure culture—that



high art as a distinct enterprise hardly exists in America, except in institutions which depend upon the deception, and in the minds of those who fail to see any other way to defend the value of their enterprise. To those who have made conceptual art one of the most rarefied of all art forms, this notion is a threat; but to the inventive artists of the period it is a great promise. Despite its intentions, this exhibition begins to clarify how the tricks of the conceptual art trade were not learned in a textbook, but experienced by all of us first outside of art—in the often absurd, profound humor of a fledging, democratic civilization.

Gary Kornblau is editor of *Art issues*.

Background image:

Allen Ruppersberg
The Picture of Dorian Gray, 1974
(detail)
Pentel on canvas
20 panels, 72" x 72" each



Bruce Nauman
Eating My Words, 1966-7/70
Color photograph
19 1/2" x 23 1/2"
Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery

John Baldessari
A Painting That Is Its Own
Documentation, 1968-present
Acrylic on canvas
102" x 56 1/2"

William Leavitt
California Patio, 1972
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

Eleanor Antin
Carving: A Traditional Sculpture, 1970
(detail)
148 black-and-white photographs and text panel
Each photo: 7" x 5"

William Wegman
The Kiss, 1972
Still from 14-minute, 9-second
black-and-white sound video

Daniel Buren
Bus Bench, 1970/82/95
As installed on Hollywood Boulevard
at Gardner Avenue